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Religion, gender-based violence and silence: A radical feminist reading of women's agency in Chika Unigwe's novel

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The intersection of religion, culture and gender-based violence (GBV) continues to provoke critical debates in feminist scholarship and activism. Although substantial steps are noticeable in terms of addressing numerous forms of violence against women, religion and culture in the African context continue to promulgate harmful practices. Chika Unigwe's novel, *The Middle Daughter,* highlights a world where religion, GBV, social norms, rape myths, silence and agency intersect, shaping women's lived experiences. Nani, the protagonist, overwhelmed by the loss of her sister and father merely 2 years apart, is lured by a preacher – a wolf in sheep's clothing – who shoves her into an abusive marriage. Raped but determined to keep the assault *under the tongue,* Nani further drifts away from her family, friends and community. Imprisoned and battered, yet, Nani's silent resilience emerges – a quiet but radical strength that defies religio-sociocultural norms. This study is a review of African feminism in eradicating GBV. It discusses how Unigwe's radical feminist lens unveils the competing female strength and the limits of silence as a form of women's agency, thereby critiquing the dominant 'soft' African feminist approaches.

Contribution: This study adopts a radical feminist theory to critique the 'soft' African feminisms which fail to serve women facing the intersectional forces of religion, culture and GBV. It argues that feminist activism in Africa has been going on for a lengthy period, yet the double standards embedded in religio-sociocultural beliefs and practices sustain women's oppression.

Keywords: culture; gender-based violence; female agency; radical feminism; rape myths; religion; silence.

Introduction

The connection between religion, sociocultural norms and gender-based violence (GBV) has long been a focal point of (African) feminist discussions. In these discourses, violence against women is instrumental in the execution of patriarchal power. This realisation has prompted feminists to incessantly address this issue from different spheres. Despite these reflective energies, rates of violence against women including sexual assaults, wife battering and humiliation among others, remain alarmingly present and predominantly within religious and sociocultural domains. At the core of this study is an evaluation of African feminisms in eliminating GBV, which seems to be a perpetual problem in African communities. In other words, this study comments on what could be perceived as 'soft' African feminism – a brand of feminism that is more inclined towards cultural feminism that emphasises maintaining the status quo of a patriarchal society while trying to redress some of the patriarchal injustices. The primary argument submitted in this study is that religion is rarely taken as an explicit starting point for feminist scrutiny of GBV, perhaps because of the focus on its progressive attributes. However, the African feminist literary landscape interjects this perception. African feminist authors expose religio-sociocultural beliefs, practices and teachings, which sanction women's subjugation and GBV. Chika Unigwe's (2023) novel, *The Middle Daughter,* provides a lens through which to probe these penetrating thematic concerns.

Chika Unigwe's (2023) novel, *The Middle Daughter*

Set in Enugu city, Nigeria, the plot of *The Middle Daughter* follows the gendered experiences of the main character, Nani. Born into an upper-middle-class family, Nani enjoys laughter and love from her family. Growing up in such a protected family and surrounded by luxuries of her social status, she is unconscious of what it means to be a woman – a gendered and brutalised other, existing in the underclass of her society. Nani's beautiful world suddenly ends with the deaths of

her elder sister, Udodi and their father, Doda. Ephraim – a man with 'a careful but ridiculously grandiose grammar who substitutes 'R' for 'L' so that his 'please'' and 'long' come out as 'prease' and 'rong' (Unigwe 2023:41), deceivingly presents himself as a spiritual guide and protector. Nani is abruptly pushed into an unfamiliar slum environment by a self-styled religious charlatan – an extreme doppelgänger of the character, brother Jero in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero.* Nani's 7-year marriage with Ephraim is fraught with violence, hypocrisy and dehumanisation.

A radical feminist thought

This study adopts radical feminism as its hypothetical foundation but is cautious of Adak and Çağatay's (2023:725) critical warning that 'recent contributions in feminist historiography challenge the reading of women's movements through the waves metaphor and destabilise rigid periodisations' or race and geopolitics which only weaken the feminist agenda in present times – my emphasis. What then is feminism and how is it received in African contexts? In her notable text, *Feminism Is for Everybody*: *Passionate Politics*, bell hooks (2000:viii) explains that 'feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression'. Eze (2015:312) illuminates that '[f]or many Africans, feminism is a curse word', it is associated with the negation of African cosmology and power structures. There are numerous feminist frameworks, but they evolve, collide and overlap, hence rigid categorisations in their application will not be very productive. It is thus necessary to define a central tenet in African feminism(s). Olomojobi (2013 posits that:

> African feminism rests on the notion that women in Africa are socially constructed by different cultural components … The theory attempts to shift away from misleading notions of equating western values with non-western societies. The point to bear in mind is that African women have different identities and primordial attachment to region and cultural determinants than women from western societies. (p. 16)

One of the chief problems in African feminism is linked to the emphasis, which is placed on the rootedness of African womanhood or ideas of femininity prescribed by sociocultural settings. This prominence appears to reinstate the troubled primordial claims about African social and religio-cultural worldviews. This is a naïve perception of life on the continent because a lot has changed and such changes influence African women's imaginings, as well as their lived experiences. It is certainly unrealistic to divorce the alleged Western values from present African experiences and lifestyles because of the existing linkages in domains of culture, education and language among others. This brings to the fore the relevance of radical feminism in addressing challenges encountered by African women. Rowland and Klein (1990:271) state that 'radical feminism creates a new political and social theory of women's oppression, and strategies for the end of that oppression, which comes from women's lived experiences'. It views all women across social, racial and geographical divides as part of an oppressed group (Rowland & Klein 1990). Radical feminists have a common view, women suffer because of the long-established social structures that preserve the male rule or patriarchy (Beauvoir 1949). According to Mary Daly (1978, 1984), radical feminism's main focus is on reclaiming female selfhood and remaking a new language that restores women's dignity and voice. Daly (1978:1) describes the radical feminist struggle as 'a journey of women becoming' or re-membering womanhood and shifting gender consciousness through a radical otherness. Kate Millet's (1970) *Sexual Politics* is among the popular radical feminist works whose primary ideas stress the centrality of patriarchy and its repressive social edifices such as marriage and religion that connive against women's liberation. Millet contends that womenfolk should strive to eliminate the pervasive patriarchal ideology.

Definitions of terms: Patriarchy, gender, gender-based violence and culture

Commenting on feminist literature in the context of Nigeria, Ajidahun (2020) inscribes:

> [*T*]he position of women in society has been a frequent focus of Nigerian female writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Flora Nwapa, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Catherine Acholonu, who have engaged in literary polemics, using their arts to defend the positions of women in society. These writers present women as victims of gender discrimination, societal oppression and spousal abuse. (p. 42)

Earlier on, Dogo (2014:263) has expounded, 'the present Nigerian society, like most of Africa, is patriarchal in nature, with attendant unequal gender relations which cast women in a subordinate position'. Perhaps it is more productive to first define the notion, patriarchy. Walby (1990:35) describes patriarchy as a 'system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women'. The patriarchal model is deeply implicated in the conceptualisation of gender in radical feminist philosophy. As Ward (1995:871) further states, the concept of gender from a radical feminist theorisation is 'preeminently a disease produced by social domination, of which the legal and economic inequality of women are merely symptoms'. Gender is a concept that denotes socially prescribed roles of males and females in a specific cultural setting (Millet 1970).

Deborah Cameron (2020) provides a useful definition of GBV. It includes physical violence inflicting bodily injury, non-consensual sexual assaults such as rape, psychological abuse and discrimination against women. Whereas GBV affects all genders, research shows that women and girls are disproportionately impacted (Mudimeli & Khosa-Nkatini 2024; Stanley & Devaney 2017). Unigwe's writing highlights that GBV affects individuals from diverse backgrounds and transcends socio-economic boundaries.

Ashis Kumar Chowdhury (2018) writes:

> [*C*]ulture encompasses the shared beliefs, values, customs, traditions, and practices of a society. It shapes individuals'

> worldview, behaviors, and interactions, including attitudes towards gender roles, family dynamics, and sexuality. (p. 1)

In other words, culture preserves GBV through misogyny, normalising male abuse and thereby endorsing toxic masculinity as epitomised by Ephraim in the novel. This is a ubiquitous problem in most African patriarchal societies such as Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. African feminist literature including Zoë Wicomb in her novel, *David's Story,* Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut,* Nadine Gordimer's short story, *Six Feet of the Country*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, Stella Nyanzi's collection, *No Roses from My Mouth*, Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister Street* and *The middle daughter*, serves as a conduit for appraising African culture and its influence on gender perceptions. The experiences of female characters in these literary works draw our attention to sociocultural factors instigating male domination and violence against women.

Religious hypocrisy, rape, myths and silence

In *The Middle Daughter*, the influence of religion on Nani's life remarkably stands out. Chowdhury (2018) outlines:

> Religion refers to organized systems of beliefs, rituals, and practices that provide individuals with a framework for understanding the world, morality, and spirituality. Religious teachings often influence social norms, ethical principles, and laws, impacting various aspects of individuals' lives, including their views on gender and sexuality. (p. 2)

Chowdhury (2018:2) adds that '[*w*]hile religious traditions may espouse principles of justice, compassion and equality, patriarchal interpretations of scriptures or religious laws can perpetuate gender inequality and restrict women's rights'. Likewise, Togarasei (2024) notes that:

> [*T*]he Bible forms the basis upon which Christians think about and practice their religion. Thus, even their thinking of and (unfortunately) practice of gender-based violence (GBV) is to some extent influenced by their reading of the Bible. (p. 127)

Togarasei (2024) also accurately points out the creation narrative offered in Jewish and Christian traditions to be problematic because it is among the foundational accounts used to subordinate women. Yet, it is an error of interpretation that sidelines the version offered in Genesis 1:26–27 where both a man and a woman are created together by God (Togarasei 2024). Mavengano (2023) discusses how the Bible is manipulated to serve patriarchal interests. This brings to the fore the relevance of reading against the Bible's 'texts of terror' to borrow from Phyllis Trible's (1984:11) lingo. Trible in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of the Biblical Narratives* makes reference to a number of tormenting stories including Tamar's who is sexually violated by Amnon, her half-brother in 2 Samuel 13:1–22. Tilton's (2022) article on 'Rape myths, catastrophe, and credibility' offers a vital entry point for the discussion here. Tilton writes:

> [*T*]here are minimising rape myths that encourage dismissive responses to rape. Such myths suggest that women routinely lie about rape, or that rape victims somehow deserved what happened to them, or that they were asking for it anyway.

The implied literary trope of wolves in sheep's clothing, within Unigwe's work foregrounds sexual abuse and two facedness. The biblical phrase is derived from Matthew 7:15 when Jesus cautions against dishonest prophets who appear harmless superficially but harbour harmful intents. When Ephraim persuades Nani to sleep in his house after a late-night church vigil, she naively trusts him. Against her instinct, she tells herself that Ephraim was 'a man of God, and a friend who had never given me cause to doubt him' (Unigwe 2023:79). She follows him to Obiagu, an infamous slum and 'the centre of crime' in Enugu city. It is sarcastic that Ephraim even reassures Nani that 'this place is as safe as your area. Whatever you've heard it's not true', but soon after he rapes her (Unigwe 2023:80). Pitifully, the vigil becomes a night of ineffable terror for Nani whose incoherent rape narrative illuminates physical and emotive distress (Unigwe 2023):

> He lunged at me in one swift … pinned me down and he was a mountain – and he took … he took and … he took. He let out an almighty shudder and collapsed ... I heard him from far away ... My body dissolved and split into two one, far away … telling the one lying on in the bed that nothing had happened… that it was just a bad dream, Ephraim was Christian …. (p. 85)

After the rape, Ephraim blames the devil for the act. 'It's the Devil! The Devil pushed me. God' (Unigwe 2023:85). Yet, it was during their first meeting; Nani had observed that, 'Ephraim had taken in the magnificence of the house, and decided that I was too close in proximity to wealth' (Unigwe 2023). Furthermore, Ephraim earlier on, secretly plans:

> [*H*]ow will I acquire her? The voice of doubt whispers to me. I barricade it with alacrity…I shall remain assiduous until I have conquered her and we have made connubial vows. (pp. 42–43)

His vocabulary is quite telling; Ephraim does not seek love from Nani but to conquer and acquire her as one does with some piece of property. Nani becomes a dehumanised object. Ephraim embodies the metaphor of a wolf in sheep's clothing because he manipulates Nani, who is evidently emotionally vulnerable because of the deaths of her family members. As part of his strategies before the rape, he offers Nani gifts like boiled groundnuts, oranges, bananas – a gesture that appears to be thoughtfulness. He is calculative and deliberately presents himself as a devout Christian, but his actions reveal hypocrisy. Ephraim wants to go to America through his marriage to Nani who has dual citizenship because she was born in America before her parents returned to Nigeria. He also sees an opportunity in fathering a 'pioneer grandchild' for Nani's mother – a rich widow with no male child (Unigwe 2023:145). Unigwe critiques religious hypocrisy by highlighting the gap between Ephraim's professed beliefs and actual conduct. People may attend church services, recite

prayers and follow rituals, yet their hearts remain corrupt and evil. The novel invites readers to question whether religio-cultural practices truly align with genuine compassion, justice and love.

The novel also demonstrates that rape victims find it difficult to report the cases because of interrelated myths. For instance, Daly (1978) and Copley (2021) argue that Eve's myth popularised in Adam's fall is both a prototypical case of false naming and the very foundation of false Christian theology that is used against women. Ephraim employs theological and sexist language to silence his rape victim. He unbelievably says, 'Nani, why don't you forgive? I forgive you for seducing me' (Unigwe 2023:101). Daly (1975) calls this mind and spiritual rape backed by deceptive faith. In her commendable text, *The Church and the Second Sex*, Daly (1975) talks about how the victims of 'mind rape' suffer from internal suppression and experience 'self-hate, self-isolation, anxiety and feebleness'. Unfortunately, this victim-blaming narrative is effective because Nani also feels ashamed and responsible. She knows that the community will point an accusatory finger at her. She remembers '[w]hen Chinelo from the estate was raped in a male student's room, and mother said she asked for it' (Unigwe 2023:85). This myth is common in many African nations and it suggests that a victim's conduct, dress or actions somehow justify sexual assault. But, in reality, no rape victim 'asks' to be assaulted, and consent is crucial irrespective of circumstances. Nani's rape account is used to hint at the urgent need to disrupt victim-blaming narratives.

Another myth that Unigwe disagrees with is the notion of strangers as perpetrators of rape. It is not always true that sexual assaults are committed by strangers because Ephraim first earns Nani's trust by establishing a friendship. When Nani trustingly begins to see Ephraim as a gentle friend, he rapes her in his house where she could not defend herself. This puts Nani at a disadvantage because her case could be easily dismissed as a lie against the prophet. She was taught by her mother and community that no decent woman would visit a man's house. On the contrary, research has consistently indicated that false reporting rates for sexual assault are low (Tilton 2022). A rape victim suffers in silence, after the rape Nani keeps on praying not to get pregnant because that would lead her to hell – Ephraim's home. Ephraim's face breaks into a diabolical smile when he eventually discovers that she is pregnant. His insensitivity is revealed, '[m]y God is a faithful one and I knew He'd bring you here' (Unigwe 2023:109). Through the dreadful experience of her protagonist, Nani, the author builds a compelling radical case against sexual assault. The text accentuates the need to contest religious hypocrisy, debunk rape misconceptions and create gender-sensitive interventions to support survivors.

Gaslighting and gender-based violence within the marriage

In medias res is a forceful literary device that marks the exposition of the text, *The Middle Daughter.* In the opening statement of the novel, Nani, the protagonist announces, 'I fear the man who is my husband' (Unigwe 2023:5). This statement foretells her woes in the hands of the preacher husband. Cameron (2020) contends that feminists examine how language use reflects and perpetuates GBV and gender differences. Sweet (2019) submits that:

> [G]aslighting – a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel 'crazy', creating a 'surreal' interpersonal environment has captured public attention. Gaslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships. (p. 851)

Essentially, gaslighting functions to confuse the victim and distort their reality (Sweet 2019). In gendered power dynamics as Sweet (2019:852) further elaborates, gaslighting tactics 'rely on the association of femininity with irrationality'. The writer interjects this phallocentric view by showing - that it is Ephraim, a male character who is impulsive, temperamental and unreasonable. After each beating, Ephraim would profess his peculiar love, 'I love you Nani, but you make me angry sometimes….my beautiful wife, but you must be taught to be a good wife too as the Bible wants' (Unigwe 2023:139). Because of regular beatings, when Nani who is only 24, looks in the mirror, she sees an aged woman 'with dry scaly skin and a scarf covering her head' (Unigwe 2023). She has a huge scar on her 'left cheek from a pressing iron' because 'a brother at the church' had looked at her, and some deep bites mark all over her body. During the scorching of the face with a hot iron, Ephraim hypocritically tells Nani that it was for her own good to serve her and 'the brother from lust' (Unigwe 2023:237). Nani had a dream to study medicine and become a doctor but Ephraim ruined it. He imposed a wedding with the aim to trap Nani for a lifetime as his legal wife (Unigwe 2023):

> I did not expect it that going to Ephraim for help would culminate in a marriage ten days later. He trapped me and left me with no energy to fight when he said we were going to the registry. (p. 117)

It is only Ephraim who plans the wedding date and witnesses. Nani's mother and her only sister are not even aware of this wedding. This information speaks about Nani's loss of humanity under the clutches of male domination and abuse.

Ephraim's patriarchal ideology is also shown in the way he defines Nani's duties as a woman and a wife. We are reminded of Millet's (1970) and Daly's (1978, 1984) arguments about how women are relegated to the domestic domains. Having been raised in a middle-class family where they had domestic staff, Nani could not cook. For Ephraim, this is an inexcusable sin because no 'real woman and wife' should have such faults. Nani is repetitively ridiculed, chastened and beaten up in the presence of neighbours and children. Ephraim outrageously claims that the beatings and verbal assaults will undo the damage caused by Nani's elitist lifestyle. He uses offensive language and calls Nani (Unigwe 2023):

> [*A*] stupid and spoiled daughter of parents who had money but very little sense if they couldn't even teach you that egg is not deep fried! When words alone would not do, they would be accompanied with a slap on my back. Ephraim did not slap with his palm. When he slapped my face he used the back of his hand, and when he slapped my back or my neck he used the edge of his hand, deliberate attempts to inflict maximum pain. (p. 137)

Hoskin and Blair (2022) state that radical feminists aim to dismantle persistent age-old ideologies and intersectional foundational notions that describe femininity and impose gender roles. This standpoint counters the unidimensional hold on the 'soft' African feminisms, which propose negotiation instead of radical approaches to power structures that prolong patriarchy. The marriage between Ephraim and Nani reinforces traditional gender roles and power dynamics. The narrator describes Ephraim's home as a 'stifling parlor' – a rundown decorated with images of 'Jesus and the chief pastor of the Apostolic Church of Jesus and His Twelve Disciples Keeping Us Safe in the Ark along the wall' (Unigwe 2023:80). Nani finds it difficult to breath because of heat and the room smells of poverty – a figurative foreshadowing Ephraim's oppressive nature. The male pictures speak about the ubiquity of masculinity in his household. Ephraim's marriage is not based on partnership because he makes all decisions and imposes them on his wife and children. As an illustration, Ephraim names all their three children – Holy, Godsown and PraiseHim without the approval of Nani. Interestingly, the author deploys onomastic strategy to create satire that conveys and interpolates Ephraim's two-faced character. He cannot even properly pronounce the name Holy that he mispronounces, Hory – revealing his underprivileged educational background. This interpretation is also further endorsed when Ephraim complains about his upbringing, '[d]id not my English teacher in *ecole secondaire* lament when my papa died and my education was perforce amputated?' (Unigwe 2023:49). The meanings of the given names mask his abusive behaviour from the church community. The women in the church see him as 'a devoted man who loves his children with a maternal passion' (Unigwe 2023:167). To Ephraim, Nani is a mere sexual and reproductive object. Lerner's (1986) work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, talks about how women are treated as men's property possessed by the husband or the father within the family sphere. Nani engages in some kind of patriarchal bargain by not contesting Ephraim's unreasonable decisions like not allowing their daughter, Holy to go to school and ban educational lessons at home which Nani was determined to offer her child. Instead of getting formal education, Ephraim declares that Holy needed to be prepared for her future wifely roles. 'She was sent to their church's bible school to be trained well in her duties as a woman – to be a competent cook and a good housekeeper' (Unigwe 2023:169). In addition, Nani, during her marriage, surrenders her body and lets her husband have sex whenever he feels like it. However, she is secretly nurturing a radical stance against Ephraim's intoxicating indoctrination – she prepares to take her children out of Obiagu Road and give Holy 'tools to decide what her duties would be' (Unigwe 2023)

Nonetheless, Unigwe's text suggests that regardless of their silence, mistreated women like Nani are not inert sufferers. Daly (1978) positions the processes of unnaming and renaming as practices whereby women exorcise internalised demons of patriarchy and self-hate that originate from false naming. It is, thus, gripping to note Nani's three children are renamed when she finally escapes from Ephraim's imprisonment.

Elsewhere, Laye (2023) has condemned the image of a strong black woman who endures suffering in silence that has been sadly internalised by women but with undesirable effects on their mental health. Laye (2023) cites Walker-Barnes's observation that:

> … the idea of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) was birthed in myths about the black women's strength during slavery, when they were seen to possess an extraordinary capacity to withstand extreme levels of work and stress. (p. 14)

Unigwe refutes this misconstrued representation of women that has been faultily understood as cherished values of African womanhood. Nani silently plans her revenge and stabs Ephraim with a knife. Her resolve to stab Ephraim during the night speaks about the negative impact of the domestic abuse on her mental health. At the same time, Nani's daring audacity against Ephraim's insensitivity and abuse conveys the novel's proposition for a radical stance against GBV. Ward (1995) points out the shortfalls of liberal feminist approaches and concedes that negotiation with patriarchy does not yield the expected results. Nani is pushed to the wall and wants to end it all. She also prioritises her children's safety and carefully considers ways to serve herself from Ephraim's callous treatment. Heise, Ellsberg and Gottemoeller (1999) accurately reason that what could be construed as a woman's passivity may in fact be an outcome of a premeditated assessment of how to protect herself and her children. Nani's nerve to break free from her abusive marriage defies the silence perpetuated by soft African feminism.

In essence, Unigwe's novel does not cast all men as domineering and cruel because Nani's father represents a rare breed of masculinity in a man's world like Nigeria. Nani shares beautiful memories of her father (Unigwe 2023):

> When I think of Doda, my father, this is the memory that comes to the fore. Doda sitting at the edge of his bed, my two sisters and me huddled joyfully together in it, his voice washing over us as he tells us a folktale. He smells of Lux soap and Marlboros. In this memory. I am nearly eight. Ugo is six. Udodi is twelve … Our mother is somewhere in the house but it is Doda that we seek out. It was always Doda. It was with him that I felt the safest. (p. 5)

Doda's unique philosophies are further comparatively highlighted at the beginning of the novel when he reprimands his friend – Ade who argues that, '[*t*]oo much book is not good for girls ooo'. In response, Dodi firmly states, '[t]here is nothing like too much book… my children will have as much education as there is to be had!' (Unigwe 2023:6). Evidently,

Ade subscribes to patriarchal dogma. Both Ephraim and Ade share an absurd view that education is not good for the girl child because it makes her unsuitable for marriage. Comparably, Ade, uses sexist lingo, 'let me hear you say that again when your three girls are old maids!' (Unigwe 2023:6). Nigeria's patriarchal insolences are discernably captured. We hear Nani's mother commenting that (Unigwe 2023):

> Ade carries himself with the smugness of a man with many sons … There are people who think sons are more important than daughters. Thank God your Doda isn't like that. Not to the sort to kick his wife out for giving him only girls! (p. 7)

What the writer also seems to encourage is that the girl child and women in general should make concerted efforts to protect themselves. Nani's commendable upbringing, social exposure in her upper-middle class family and access to good education in Nigeria could have empowered her against Ephraim's exploitative character.

Women solidarity, support services for the victims of trauma and gender-based violence

This study maintains that until very recently, domestic abuse of women especially in marriage was imperceptible in the human rights discourse in Africa. Certainly, supporting GBV victims is one of the fundamental aspects that Unigwe's novel proposes. This encompasses a collaborative effort from various sectors. Nani receives significant support from her young sister, Ugo and Enuka. Women solidarity projected in the novel transcends the borders of the immediate family because Nani seeks solace from Enuka – a gentle and helpful family friend whom Nani's mother describes as 'closer than blood a sister' (Unigwe 2023:20). The 'soft' African feminisms sometimes focus on the filial sphere and cultural specificity, but by assigning Enuka a critical role in serving Nani out of the abusive marriage, Unigwe stresses universal sisterhood and shared struggles. Basically, GBV is located in the transnational site through Ephraim who is a Cameroonian living in Nigeria and by connecting Africa and America in the plot. Nani feels loved and protected by Enuka. Her lost humanity is restored, and this is conveyed through olfactory imagery. Nani, after being cuddled by Enuka, recalls the aromatic scent of Lux – this connects her to the beautiful childhood memories. Enuka also symbolises female self-sufficiency because she is not only a contented educated unmarried woman but she is also self-employed and owns an exquisitely furnished house with a garden and a swimming pool in Enugu, Nigeria. In addition, she has an American citizenship that allows her to journey across the continents. Dodi, Nani's father tells his chauvinistic friend, Ade that he would not mind if his three daughters never marry because 'their Aunty Enuka is perfectly happy without a husband' (Unigwe 2023:6). An idea that contradicts Ephraim who declares that Enuka is possessed with the spirit of lesbianism because she has no husband, a patriarchal language of shaming women according to Daly (1984).

Nani's mother is a well-known nurse who could have helped her two surviving daughters deal with the signs of trauma and grief. Nani' distressed state is captured through the use of intertextual reference to a distinguished Nigerian-born African literature's founding father – Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (Unigwe 2023):

> [*A*]fter Udodi's died things fell apart. Everything took longer to do; it was as if my body moved in slow motion. I conserved my breath by hardly speaking to anyone. (p. 22)

This initial loss of Udodi is followed by the death of Nani's loving father: merely 2 years later: Nani describes her tear-jerking sorrow '[*t*]he day he died we were not there … Mother had a wild look in her eyes. But I was the one that ran mad' (Unigwe 2023:27). Awkwardly, Nani's mother seems to be oblivious to her daughter's pain. After the death of her husband, she is in fact anxious about projecting a strong woman image to her bothersome male in-laws whose eyes are on the family estate. The in-laws predict doom because of the alleged cultural violations – failure to accord the late husband's brothers access to the deceased's estate. Nani's mother irritably scolds her daughter (Unigwe 2023):

> We all lost him, she said, but life goes on. Do you know how many people are betting on me to fail? A widow with two girls? They are waiting for me to give up. For my daughters to fall pregnant, for us to completely break. The 'they' she referred to were some of Doda's male relatives who felt cheated by modernity and mother's strength, both of which prevented them from inheriting their brother's property. (p. 33)

In this sense, Nani's mother is engaged in her own feminist battle, and sadly, the family ceases to be a safe space where Nani could vent out emotions without being misunderstood. Consequently, this lack of emotional support for Nani and an absent conscious help-seeking effort causes self-inflicted injury crippling both Nani and her mother. Parental negligence or rather what appears to be a strained familial bond between the mother and daughter exposed Nani to dangers. It created space for predators like Ephraim to manipulate her (Unigwe 2023):

> Later, Nani says, [*w*]here I could not talk to mother or to Ugo about my fears. I found an ear in Ephraim. He asked questions and held my hands in his soft ones so that I found it easy to ignore the way he spoke and the way he smelled and talk to him. (p. 45)

She is unable to report the rape or the subsequent beatings to her mother because there is no trust. While Nani is enslaved by Ephraim, her mother despite being financially stable, turns into activities that could be considered to be an extreme radical resolve to save women and girls from the shame of having unwanted pregnancies. She runs her private clinic named Rejoice Maternity Clinic. She collects the unwanted babies of poor young women who appear to have kwashiorkor and illegally 'sells them' to rich families desperate to have children. Society is mean because these young women are called 'Jezebels', and their babies are labelled 'fruits of sin'. It is this shaming that compels the rejected teenagers to sell their babies, which attains a symbolical meaning – a rejection

of motherhood imposed by patriarchy – as argued within the radical feminist agenda (Millet 1970). This interpretation is also endorsed through Nani who calls her unborn baby, a product of rape an evil child although she later loves all her children. It is self-contradictory for African feminists to embrace motherhood prearranged by patriarchy or religious dictates. Although Nani's mother's radical action is criminalised in the novel, it is effectively used to critique both men's reckless behaviour when taking advantage of teenagers and the Nigerian government that fails to provide public health services and jobs to 'even graduates with medical degrees' (Unigwe 2023:61):

> After Doda dies, mother quits her nursing job and goes into private business … I enjoy being a midwife but I am done with government work. They pay rubbish, the clinic is understaffed, equipment as old as Methuselah. She hisses. (Unigwe 2023:57)

Another problem that Nani faces is the absence of peer support. Her marriage to Ephraim successfully isolates her from family members, friends and the surrounding community. This gives Ephraim a further advantage because there are no early interventions that could have stopped his abuse. A few of Nani's female neighbours notice Ephraim's sinister behaviour but choose to watch from a distance. There are instances when they seem to be (un) consciously co-opted into Ephraim's violence against Nani (Unigwe 2023):

> [*S*]ometimes other women gathered to view the unusual spectacle of this new wife being taught to cook by her husband. They giggled, they called me 'ajebutter', mocking my wealthy background for not preparing me well for a life of marriage. They never offered a hand in friendship. They did not plead with Ephraim not to humiliate me. (p. 137)

Before this incident, Nani had defied a female teacher, Miss Oyibo who called her names – a small *ashawo* (prostitute) for wearing a skirt showing her *nyash* – buttocks. This episode saw Nani dropping out of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) class – a course she needed to pass for the planned enrolment in America. It is only the female neighbour, Philo who empathises with Nani but a close reading suggests that she comes from a different social class because her dress and choice of colour are approved by Nani. Through these female characters, Unigwe points a finger at class-based conflicts that obviously derail the fight against oppression in feminist conversations. The novel encourages women to support each other and offer a listening ear. In the context of the novel, the Apostolic Church of Jesus and His Twelve Disciples Keeping Us Safe in the Ark is distanced from rendering support perhaps because of the tainted roles epitomised by both Ephraim and the overseer pastor. However, under ideal circumstances, religious spaces can serve as safe havens for GBV survivors – a common situation during wartime, where sexually violated women seek refuge from religious institutions like the church (Parsitau & Aura 2020). In addition, sermons and religious gatherings should address GBV, denounce toxic theological and sociocultural teachings and promote compassion among congregants and beyond.

Unigwe also appraises the Nigerian legal system, which is corrupt to the extent that one is required to be 'well-connected' to the police commissioner to have access to a fair legal procedure. This is condemnable because what is then the fate of GBV victims who are not connected? The legal system should offer assistance to survivors, regardless of their social standing, helping them to navigate legal processes such as obtaining protection orders or pursuing justice. Victim protection, accountability and transparency are essential aspects because they inspire survivors to report such cases. In the novel, a poor woman from Obiagu reports her abusive husband to the police, but she is astonishingly instructed to go back and obey the husband. Unigwe reproaches this corruption in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa or beyond. It is disheartening to note that cases of GBV affect the poor more than the rich. Ephraim gets arrested and punished because Enuka is rich and has direct access to the police commissioner. However, Ephraim's ultimate arrest aligns with the tenets of radical feminism. Mackinnon (1987) and Ward (1995) argue that radical feminism goes beyond merely criticising male domination; it constructs an affirmative vision of the state and society that enables female liberty.

Conclusion

The novel, *The Middle Daughter*, sheds light on religious practices, emphasising how faith can be tangled in GBV cases. It also critiques the influence of charismatic religious figures like Ephraim. Nani's painful journey involves escaping an abusive marriage. Her resilience leads her to self-discovery and empowerment. Unigwe skillfully portrays the struggle for autonomy that involves radical decisions in order to effectively subvert longstanding norms that curtail women's choices and agency. Thus, it is apt to posit that Unigwe's fictional narrative disrupts the silence surrounding GBV. Her writing intensifies women's voices and unveils the masked sorrow. By portraying characters who defy pretense, she encourages readers to question norms and dismantle religio-cultural and patriarchal structures. Unigwe's portrayal of Nani's struggle aligns with the radical feminist belief that women should have control over their bodies and lives. The novel successfully critiques patriarchal structures that sanction GBV. Nani's silence mirrors the muzzling of GBV victims. Radical feminists such as Daly and Millet emphasise the importance of amplifying women's voices and flouting the cycle of silence. Nani's transformation from a mute GBV victim to an authorised speaker typifies a recovery of voice. In the final analysis, while African feminisms have a tendency to undermine the role of radical feminism, these models could effectively complement each other in the struggle against sociocultural and religious oppressions.

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