Female Sexual Abuse and the Violation of Human Rights in African Fiction: An Example of Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*

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**Abstract**

Sexual abuse is a persistent and universal problem which occurs in many societies today. It is a form of exploitation which violates fundamental human rights. In different cultural milieus, women and girls have been coerced into sex or abused in one way or the other. Currently, news of sexual abuse is so frequent in society that one seems to become inured to them. Hence, the rate of sexual violence against the female gender is becoming worrisome and unbearable. This paper examines sexual abuse and the portrayal of various aspects of human right violations such as rape, forced prostitution, sexual objectification and human trafficking. Through the experiences of the female characters, the novelist criticizes the violation of human rights and the consequences of such violations. To examine the problem, this paper adopts the feminism and psychoanalysis in order to clearly analyze the negative effects of sexual abuse on the female gender. However, in exploring the experiences of the female characters, it is discovered that there are social, psychological, physical and health consequences of sexual abuse. Therefore, this paper recommends massive education,
awareness and reorientation of citizens on the subject of sexual abuse and human rights violation. It also recommends strict punishments for offenders as a step to curbing violence. **Key words:** Female subjugation, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Human Rights Abuse, Sexual Exploitation

**Introduction**
African literature has witnessed a doubtless prevalence of female voice and writers who critique socio-cultural practices such as sexual abuse, objectification, human trafficking and prostitution which hinder female growth and self-actualization. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the female gender in African fiction thus gender discourse has dominated the literary scene debunking the representation of female image and portrayal in male authored novels. However, D’Almedia agrees with the above postulations that “writing by women is a weapon to destroy the ideas that perpetuate subjugation and inequality” (94). Consequently, many women scholars and activists have pioneered a literary canon hinged on human rights abuse and feminism in order to create massive awareness on the bizarre experiences of women and girls in society. Writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Kaine Agary, Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye and Chika Unigwe have dedicated their literary energies towards achieving female liberation.

Indeed, the violation of human rights is a global problem. Human rights violation is popular in recent African fiction as a result of the rising cases of violence in society. Many contemporary African writers have noted with dismay the ugly phenomenon of sexual abuse and exploitation devastating the African society today which violates
fundamental human rights. Beitz defines human rights as “inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because he or she is a human being” (17). The international moral code prescribes certain treatments, fundamental rights and privileges for every individual in society in order to curb violence, marginalization and impunity. Fundamentally, human rights are universal rights that accrue to every human being irrespective of his/her sex, public status, nationality, colour, origin, religion, and language. Such rights according to Steiner & Alston “may exist as natural rights or as legal rights, in local, regional, national and international law. Hence, the doctrine of human rights in international practice, within international law, global or regional institutions, in the policies of states and in the activities of non-governmental organizations has been a cornerstone of public policy around the world” (35). Hannum further explains that “human rights are conceived as universal, inalienable, egalitarian, interdependent, indivisible, equal and non-discriminatory” (33).

The human rights as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are rights to life, freedom (speech, thought, religion, conscience, and movement), fair trial, sexual orientation, national security, gender equality, identity and reproduction etc. However, human rights violations can occur when individuals in a given cultural milieu abuse or deny others their basic human rights which might be social, political, personal, cultural and civil in nature. In essence, torture, rape, forced marriage, child marriage/labour, sexual exploitation, trafficking and slavery are all forms of human rights abuse. Recently, there have been major arguments and growing concerns over the denial and violation of these rights because people are exploited, molested, trafficked, killed and
treated unjustly. It is important to note that the above stipulated violations are categorized as Gender-based-violence.

In essence, this paper analyses and examines the depiction of human rights violation in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. It also explores the major factors responsible for the violation and the consequences of these violations to the female gender and the society. However, this paper goes beyond depicting female experiences to suggest a broadening perspective of curbing sexual and human rights abuse. Psychoanalysis (Trauma Theory) and Feminism are employed to further analyze and interpret the female characters’ traumatic experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

Consequently, feminism and psychoanalysis fuel this research. Feminism seeks to highlight and fight oppression against the feminine gender. As a theory and movement, it empowers women everywhere; it also presents convictions about the conditions of women in different societies and the reasons for their oppression. Feminism is a movement, ideology, critical theory or an offshoot of debasing assumptions about the female gender, their experiences and personalities. Justina Okoye as quoted in “The Woman Today: Viewing Her in African Literature in French” explains feminism as an “outlook that transcends the accepted value system of the time by expressing and opposing the prejudice and narrowness, a desire for a truly general conception of humanity” (7-8). In Quayson’s view, “feminism has been about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better conditions for them” (586). Feminism thus exposes and criticizes oppression against the feminine gender. The term, psychoanalysis is
perceived as a set of theories and therapeutic techniques related to the study of the unconscious mind which forms a method of treatment for mental-health disorders. Hence, it is commonly used in treating depression and anxiety disorders. In essence, psychoanalysis refers both to a theory of how the mind works and a treatment modality. This field of study was established in the early 1890s by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. The main concepts of psychoanalysis as developed by Freud are: trauma, repression, the unconscious, the sexual and death drives, the ego and unconscious fantasy, etc. According to Eagleton, “Sigmund Freud had made publications affirming and reaffirming the workings of the conscious and unconscious human mind and the interpretation and criticism of literature; the interpretation of the motivation and the intention of the author; the psychological and emotional outburst, instinctual drive, desires, and tensions underlying the texts. The mental is the unconscious and the unconscious is the psyche” (97). Fromm, Erich in The Revision of Psychoanalysis, suggests that a person's development is often determined by forgotten events rather than by inherited traits alone: He further explains that:

Human behaviour and cognition is largely determined by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious; therefore any attempts to bring those drives into awareness triggers resistance in the form of defense mechanisms, particularly repression. He stipulates that conflicts between conscious and unconscious material can result in mental disturbances such as neurosis, neurotic traits, anxiety and depression. Hence, unconscious material can be found in dreams and unintentional acts, including mannerisms and slips of the tongue. Liberation from the effects of the
unconscious is achieved by bringing this material into the conscious mind through therapeutic intervention. The “centerpiece of the psychoanalytic process” is the transference, whereby patients relive their infantile conflicts by projecting onto the analyst feelings of love, dependence and anger. (12-13)

The development of psychoanalytic theory from the work of Sigmund Freud has a major influence on literary criticism. It helps in exploring the relationship between the writer and text, analysis of characters in psychological terms, family and parent-child relationships, relationship between the reader and the text, and construction of identity in relation to the social structure. It is imperative to note that Freud built much of psychoanalysis on his reinterpretation of his patients’ trauma; hence traumatic experiences are analyzed in the selected novel to see the extent human rights have been violated and the consequences of such violations. In essence, a given fictional work has great influence on human beings. It exposes the inner world of man and depicts experiences that are coloured by pain, hatred, emotional wound or trauma often triggered by memories and constant occurrence of violent events. Chika Unigwe, a distinguished feminist writer criticizes the violation of the rights of the female characters in her novel in order to illustrate their pains and sufferings. She uses her characters’ experiences to emphasize on the negative consequences of trauma hence, stipulating the effects of violent actions and language on the developing identity of those characters. Unigwe employs Sigmund Freud’s view on psychoanalysis to explore how violent acts like rape, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation can cause deep wounds in female characters’ mind. Psychoanalysis and fictional works are intimately connected since psychoanalysis is overly concerned with the psyche of people while fictional works depict the
experiences of individuals in a given society. Therefore we cannot limit psychoanalysis to only psychological studies since it can influence different fields of the studies in order to show its interdisciplinary role and relevance. In essence, literary texts illustrate the mental trauma depicted by a literary artist in the field of literature. This is to say that trauma is a social challenge that has ethical, social, political and historical dimension.

Traumatic experiences are replete in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. These experiences are as a result of the stress that may cause disordered feelings or behaviours as exhibited by the female characters in the selected novel. The term, ‘trauma’ refers to an individual’s state of mind after repeated occurrence of violence, emotional or physical injury. These experiences are often times damaging and very devastating as a result of the fear and anxiety that overwhelm the individual’s life. In the novel, psychoanalysis explores the textual anxieties surrounding the depiction of traumatic experiences of the female characters at the level of its unspeakable truth as seen in psychoanalytic theory. Negin Heidarizadeh explains that:

> Trauma or traumatize means a traumatic event which involves a single event or experience; it involves the feelings and emotions. Moreover, psychoanalysis trauma engages serious long-term negative consequences. Essentially, past trauma and traumatic memories affect the mind of the characters. Confusion and insecurity cause trauma; typical causes of psychoanalysis trauma are sexual abuse, employment discrimination, police brutality, bullying, domestic violence, and particularly childhood experiences. Significantly, childhood trauma can lead to violent
behaviour. Psychoanalysis trauma are caused by catastrophic events, war, treachery, betray and sexual abuse. However, the main point is that different people will react differently to similar events. In other words, not all people who experience the same traumatic event will become psychoanalysis traumatized. Interdisciplinary, trauma has a close relationship with the other field such as psychology, sociology, history, war, politic, and significantly literature. (789)

Feminist criticism concentrates on how the female gender is subjugated and oppressed in different societies as well as their fears, anxieties or trauma. Female identity is Unigwe’s main thematic factor because she realizes that girls and women are humiliated and exploited all over the world. Hence, she proves herself to be a passionate advocate of the rights of girls and women. However, the connection between psychoanalysis and feminism creates an interesting epistemology for feminists. This helps them to explore the psychological consequences of traumatic experiences of the female gender in fictional works tracing their experiences from exploitation to self awareness or assertiveness. To achieve this, Unigwe inserts her female characters in the center of her novel while detailing their traumatic stories. Trauma in psychoanalysis pictures a changing movement in the experiences of a given character from continuous pain or suffering to the point of self assertion or awareness. Therefore in detailing violent experiences, Unigwe skillfully chooses her female characters and their psyches in order to dive deeper into ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis’. Chika Unigwe as a novelist criticizes the Nigerian and European societies by depicting various factors that contribute to female exploitation and human rights abuse. She achieves this by placing the traumatized female in the
center of her novel in order to represent a movement from self-consciousness to self actualization. In this paper, Unigwe’s selected novel depicts the traumatized past of her female characters in childhood and early stages of adulthood to further demonstrate the close relationship between psychoanalysis and literature.

Analysis of Female Sexual Abuse and Human Rights Violation in Chika Unigwe’s On Black Sisters’ Street

Sexual exploitation in the form of forced prostitution is a violation of human rights to freedom of choice and liberty. This form of violation denigrates the value, personality and dignity of an individual in any given society. According to Pisani, “forced prostitution is a condition of control over a person who is coerced by another to engage in sexual activity” (213). In identifying current means of encouraging prostitution, Wohlwend explains that human trafficking is the most lucrative form of business and it involves “any legal or illegal transporting of women with or without their initial consent of forced sexual exploitation .The use of force may be physical, sexual or psychological and includes intimidation, abuse of authority or a situation of dependence” (5). In different parts of Africa, young girls have been raped, deceived and coerced into prostitution in their pursuit for a better life. As such, they have become unsuspecting victims of human trafficking and are thus manipulated, forcefully imprisoned (suppressed) and sexually molested. It is worthy to note that individuals who are sexually abused often encounter physical, social, psychological or emotional problems as a result of their past bizarre and traumatic experiences. Hence, the selected novel under study is explored to ascertain the above postulations.
Rape is also a crime of violence and control against the female gender. Ebony explains that “rape is an expression of sexual aggression rather than an expression of sexuality. Rape is rooted in non-sexual motivation in the psychology of the offender; it is tied to hostility and anger and the need to exert power and control” (16). In Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, there is a detailed depiction of sexual violence and rape of the female characters. Unigwe’s description suggests that the female gender abuse is a precursor to forced prostitution, human trafficking and other nefarious activities. *On Black Sisters’ Street* captures the traumatic story of four major female characters: Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce who left their homes in Africa (Nigeria) in search of good opportunities in Europe. The above mentioned four fictional characters are victims of human trafficking, rape, sexual abuse and forced prostitution as a result of many factors such as past history of sexual abuse, poverty, excessive materialism, lack of good parental background, peer group influence, lack of employment opportunities and quest for freedom. Characters like Ama, Efe, and Joyce become victims of forced prostitution because they were sexually molested in the past at a very tender age. Efe is a single mother who struggles to take care of her child in Nigeria. At sixteen, Efe is sexually molested by Titus, a forty-five year old man who manipulates her with material wealth. Titus flatters and promises Efe in order to have sex with her. “He had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth. And everything else she fancied between the two as long as she let him have his way”(49). “After the wriggling and moaning had ended, but with the pain still raw between her thighs, Titus gave Efe the money she needed for her trousers and the blue T-shirts” (35). He disappears when Efe becomes pregnant.
Ama is a young girl who also becomes sexually abused. She has carnal knowledge of a man at the age of eight. Her foster father, Cyril, a pastor and founder of Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh rapes and defiles her. Her agonizing sexual experience forces her to complain to her mother:

Mama, do you know what he did to me when I was little? He (Brother Cyril) raped me. Night after night. He would come into my room and forced me to spread my legs for him. Remember when you would always thought I had Apollo? Mother, you have to believe me. I’m not lying…He raped me. Papa raped me.(147-148)

One of the reasons why Ama becomes a victim of rape and sexual abuse is because of her background and origin. Cyril’s actions show that he has no conscience and morals. His actions are simply motivated by his selfish desires and sex drives. He also confesses to Ama that he is not her biological father; he only married her mother to save her from public shame. Cyril said to Ama:

I’m not your father. You hear that? I took in your mother and this is all the thanks I get. All the thanks I get for saving you from being a bastard. All the years I raised you, fed you, this is all the thanks I get. (148)

In essence, Ama’s early exposure to sexual experiences pushes them to succumb to a life of prostitution since Cyril ordered her to leave his house after revealing her painful experiences to her mother. “I want you out of my house. I want you out… Today! You shall leave my house today”(149). She later settles in Mama Eko’s house in Lagos where she becomes an unsuspecting victim of trafficking.
Joyce (Alek) is another character whose sexual experiences provoke public sympathy. The exploitation and violation of her rights by people who should have protected her is disheartening. At sixteen, Joyce is gang-raped by Janjaweed soldiers. She narrates her ordeal:

‘He tore my dress. I fought, but he tore my dress. And threw me on the bed’… He slapped her. He pinned her hands in her shoulders. One of the soldiers had hit her with the butt of a riffle. She could not stop it. A scream…Alek tried to scream but could not. Her voice failed her. And then her body followed suit…No energy to fight back as he spread her legs. He tore off her underwear…When he thrust his manhood inside her, when he touched her, Alek (Joyce) felt a grief so incomprehensible that she could not articulate it beyond chanting … One by one the other men came and thrust themselves into her, pulling not to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was a protein. Alek let out a shout that dried her mouth. She groaned, scratched her hands and screamed again. Aiiiiiii. Aiiiiiiiiii. A scream that made her hoarse. And heralded a stampede of tears. (190-192)

The above depicted scene of rape is so traumatic and capable of causing psychological trauma or mental disorder on the victim. The abuse continues immediately after the gang-rape because Polycarp took advantage of her vulnerability in order to sexual exploit her. Polycarp is a Nigerian soldier who claims to help Joyce after the rape but sexually molested her after offering her shelter. According to the narrator:
Polycarp led her to his bed. He undressed her…He lifted her dress over her head. Bent down and plucked her nipples with his mouth. He threw off his shirt. Guided her hand to unzip his trousers. Gently pushed her down onto the bed. The tick green army blanket scratched her back but she did not mind. She was floating…She felt Polycarp between her thighs. There was no pain. No ache. Just a long, long sight and happiness that filled in the hollowness of her chest. (199)

Another character, Sisi has a different story; she succumbs to prostitution simply because of lack of employment opportunities after getting a degree in Banking and Finance in a Nigerian University. The above mentioned characters are prostitutes working in Antwerp’s red-light district. They become prostitutes in Belgium through the backing of Dele, a Lagos pimp who specializes in organizing illegal entry into Europe for young girls who are desperate in return for monetary gains. It is important to note that these girls are trafficked and deceived with offers of foreign employment; hence the nature of their job is kept hidden from them. Joyce, one of the characters realizes that she had been trafficked “as soon as she stepped into the house in the Zwartezusterstraat and saw the long thin mirror, she started to have doubts about the sorts of job she has been brought to do” (233). Again, Sis, another character recognizes that she has been deceived and tricked into trafficking through a woman called ‘Madam who emphatically introduces herself by saying: “I am Madam…I heard you arrived safely. I trust you have rested well. Today you start work. We haven’t any time to lose” (116).
One reality about trafficking and prostitution is that the victims are denied their basic rights of freedom and ownership of body. Their passports or identification papers are confiscated and they are subjected to inhuman sexual abuses until they are liberated after paying huge sums of money as stipulated by their agents. In the novel, Madam commands Sisi and others: “Ah, hand over your passports. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it” (119). Madam goes further to warn Sisi about her job: “Now, until you have paid up every single kobo…every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back…Every month, you go to western union and transfer the money to Dele”…(183).

In many cases, girls’ movements are restricted and their bodies are controlled by the Madam. Madam addresses Sisi:

My dear dear Sisi, it’s not in your place to ask questions here. You just do as you’re told and you’ll have an easy ride. I talk you listen…three days ago I gave Joyce the same instructions. She did not ask me questions. She just listened and did as she was told. I expect the same of you. Silence and total obedience. That’s the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard…(120)

The above quotation pictures a life of bondage and slavery which indicates that girls who fall victims of human trafficking are denied their fundamental basic rights of movement, freedom of choice and freedom of expression. One humiliating aspect of sexual abuse or prostitution is that victims are forced to have sex continuously without taking into consideration their emotional dispositions, likes/ dislikes, choice of person or place of action. Sisi is forced to have sex at Thee Porte in a toilet cubicle with Dieter:
Raising his head, he stuck his tongue into her ear. In. Out. In. Out. Eyes shut still she tries to wriggle out of his embrace. She did not want to do this anymore. ‘I don’t need this. Stop! He held her close. Pushed her against the wall, his hand cupping her buttocks, and buried his head in her breast. ‘Stop! , she shouted again…Stop!’ His moans swallowed her voice. His penis searched for a gap between her legs. (212-213)

The life of victims of trafficking and prostitution is saddled with fear of deportation/repatriation, molestation, brutality, sexually transmitted diseases or even death. In the novel, Sisi is molested and brutally murdered by a Nigerian called Segun for committing no crime against anybody. Her tragic death depicts forced prostitution as a dangerous adventure which offers no security to life. Thus the lives of the girls are constantly in danger without any form of protection or insurance. The most annoying part of Sisi’s death is the nonchalant attitude of Madam who behaved as if nothing happened. Despite hearing of Sisi’s death, she treats her death with frivolity and orders the other girls to work: “No need for any of you to worry. Tomorrow I want all of you back at work. I have to find a replacement for Sisi” (289). Just like Sisi, Efe’s right to freedom of choice is violated and denied. She is forced to have sex anywhere with any individual without considering her emotional feelings. According to the narrator, “Efe had been forced to work in bars-when she could agree on a fee with the owner or barman-having sex with men in dingy hotel rooms if she was lucky or servicing those on tight budgets in bar rooms”(8). Joyce, a victim of Madam’s insensitive mannerism becomes controlled days after arrival. Madam harshly commands Joyce: “Oya, time to open a shop! Time to work! Chop-chop!” (233) She succumbs to
prostitution and is forced to have sex with “the man with a limp, whose face she refused to look at …” (234) One fact is clear, the female victims’ lives change as a result of their past experiences. Ama would not have been trafficked if her foster father did not molest her sexually. This very act affected her education and precipitated her decision of leaving Nigeria for employment opportunities in Europe. Joyce’s experiences are also pathetic; the gang rape of Joyce by soldiers becomes a stepping stone in exposing her to sexual exploitations. Also through her lover, Polycarp who introduced her to the pimp, Dele, she was manipulated and trafficked for prostitution. All these traumatic experiences shaped her mentality and pushed her to take critical stance about life. The narrator explains that “the soldier that raped her that night in Daru had taken her strength, and Polycarp’s betrayal had left her unwilling to seek it back. From now on, she resolved, she would never let her happiness depend on another’s. She would never let anyone hurt her” (231).

Forced prostitution is risky and oftentimes traumatic experiences invoke an emotional reaction which pushes the victims to revolt or seek routes of escape. In the novel, the girl victims are embittered as a result of the dehumanizing experiences they encountered as prostitutes. They emphatically express their feelings: “we’re not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals” (290). The trafficked girls revolt against their pimps by reporting their bizarre experiences to the police and human rights organizations but become very disappointed as a result of the nonchalant attitude exhibited in investigating their story. However, this adds to the psychological trauma experienced by helpless
victims whose sense of self-worth; freedom and dignity have been impinged on.

Generally, Chika Unigwe criticizes the Nigerian society and government for providing a fertile land on which abject poverty, unemployment, human trafficking and corruption grow. People like Dele Senghor and Madam succeed in the business because they are backed in one way or the other by security agents. This explains why Efe, one of the girls wishes to engage in human trafficking in future because she intends having some police officers on her payroll to ensure the security of her girls and her business”(279).

However, it is worthy to note that the four female characters in the novel are deceived or lured into trafficking and prostitution as a result of poverty and unfavourable social circumstances that spurred them into exploring new environment for better opportunities. Therefore, it is right to say that forced prostitution and human trafficking are modes of oppression perpetrated by both men and women against the female gender in society. It is also important to point out that by portraying sexual abuses and human rights violations in the novel, Unigwe equally expresses a critical and universal concern for the plights of the female gender and the protection of their basic human rights.

**Conclusion**

In exploring Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Streets*, it is deduced that sexual abuse, human trafficking and forced prostitution are the most common and current forms of violation of human rights as seen in the experiences of the female characters. In discussing these experiences, this paper postulates that trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced prostitution are not
devoid of violence; hence, they are viewed as acts that inflict emotional and physical pains. They also violate the human body with huge consequences on victims and the society. However, such consequences may be social, physical, psychological and emotional or health related. It is important to note that the above stipulated consequences may be long term or short term depending on the magnitude of the experiences. In most cases, victims often times are associated with psychological or emotional problems which trigger off reactions in the form of aggression, depression, hopelessness, anxiety, constant shock, hatred for sex, low self-esteem or self-blame or other mental disorders. Also, the physical consequence may result in unwanted pregnancy which becomes a constant reminder of the act of violence or diseases which may be so chronic or difficult to handle. It can also cause physical deformation or eventual death depending on many factors. In the novel, Ama experiences psychological trauma because her foster father sexually abused her at a tender age. The narrator explains that: “even though it has been years since he (Brother Cyril) stole into her room, searching in the dark for her breast that were not yet fully formed then, the image still tormented her” (145). The above depicted experience has a negative effect on Ama who resolves to engage in the act of prostitution. Ama openly confesses her decision to Joyce: “you know what Joyce? I made this choice…I came here with my eyes wide open. One thing is very clear, girls who fall victims to sexual abuse and other forms of violations are not totally helpless because the government, individuals, literary artists and non-governmental organizations have dedicated their energies in creating public awareness and protecting the rights of the victims. To curb the above mentioned problems, this paper recommends reorientation of citizens, provision of employment
opportunities for the youth, massive awareness and punishment of offenders as major keys. Most importantly, this paper shuns quest for excessive materialism which has crippled the growth and self-development of many young people in Nigeria. This quest for materialism is very destructive since many young people make hasty and wrong decisions which expose them to trafficking and forced prostitution.

Works Cited


