

Traumatic Exploitation and Women's Survival Strategies in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

Chibuzo Onunkwo¹ & Edeh, Chisom Paschaline²

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1. Associate Professor, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Email: chibuzo.onunkwo@unn.edu.ng
 2. Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Abstract

This study investigates trauma and survival strategies in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. The purpose is to identify the traumatic experiences of the female characters, examine the recovery process, and explore the survival strategies that help them recover and rebuild their lives. To achieve this purpose, Judith Herman's trauma theory is used as a guiding framework. A qualitative research method was used in analysing the primary texts. The analysis focused on the representation of trauma through sexual exploitation, physical abuse, psychological breakdown, and loss of identity. It also examined the stages of the characters's recovery using Herman's stages of recovery namely; safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. The findings reveals that the female characters in the two novels experience severe trauma caused by violence and betrayal but they also show signs of resilience. Also, survival strategies like making friendships, mutual support and building trust are crucial in mental recovery of a traumatised person. In addition, the study finds out that solidarity and emotional support among women are essential in coping with trauma and retaining independence. Consequently, the study implies that literature can give voice to victims of trafficking and encourage social awareness about women's suffering. It recommends stronger support and rehabilitation systems for victims and further literary studies on trauma and recovery among African women.

Keywords: *Identity, Recovery, Sexual Exploitation, Survival strategies, Trauma, Trauma Theory.*

REVIEW OF CRITICAL STUDIES ON CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* has attracted significant scholarly attention for its exploration of migration, trauma and gender. The novel portrays African women trafficked into sex work in Europe and address not only the harsh realities of the exploitation but also the psychological and emotional toll on the women. Critical studies have examined the issues from various angles including the intersections of migration, identity, sexuality and the quest for empowerment within oppressive systems. One of the primary concerns in the critical scholarship on *On Black Sisters' Street* is **migration and identity**. Scholars such as Ladele and Omotayo argue that migration is both a literal and metaphorical journey for the women in Unigwe's novel, one that reshapes their identities in complex ways. They assert:

The novel dramatizes the traumas of migration, showing how the characters are forced to negotiate between their pre-migration selves and the identities they assume as they endure exploitation. (254).

The negotiation is not only between physical spaces but also between the women's previous identities and the harsh realities they face in Europe. Migration, thus, serves as a central theme that frames their experiences of subjection and survival. However, the current study differs from that of Ladele and Omotayo by examining **how trauma**, according to **Judith Herman's Trauma Theory**, alters their identity not just through migration but also as a result of the sustained psychological impacts of trafficking. Rather than focusing solely on identity negotiation, this study analyzes the psychological transformations that result from prolonged trauma and how the women, despite their suffering, employ **survival strategies** to cope.

The portrayal of **trauma** is another focal point of scholarly inquiry. In "The Plight of Migrant Women in Selected Novels of Adimora-Ezeigbo and Unigwe," C. O. Egbuta and I. A. Lekwa explore the psychological scars left by trafficking which transcend the immediate physical abuse experienced by the women in the novel. They observe that "the mental and psychological trauma of the women in *On Black Sisters' Street* transcends their bodily suffering, as the trauma of being trafficked has a lasting effect on their psyche" (131). Hence, Unigwe's depiction of trauma involves both physical suffering and the emotional disintegration that follows. While their study emphasizes trauma, this undergraduate's approach brings **Judith Herman's Trauma Theory** into focus, particularly her concepts of **recovery, the effects of prolonged exposure to trauma, and the role of personal and collective resilience**. This investigates how the survivors in Unigwe's novel move through the three stages of trauma recovery as outlined by Herman, **safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with the community**, and how these stages manifest in their survival strategies.

Alongside trauma, **silence** and **memory** are central to the women's coping mechanisms as studied in . Villanova discusses how silence becomes a form of resistance and survival for the women, stating that "silence" is not merely an absence of voice but a deliberate strategy of resistance; it reflects both the inability to speak and the refusal to reveal the full extent of their suffering (67). The study reveals that silence in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* is not simply the absence of speech but an emotional barrier that helps the characters protect themselves from further mental damage. Silence serves as a tool for survival in a world that silences their pain and trauma, yet it also prevents them from fully reclaiming their identities. In contrast, the present study uses Herman's **Trauma Theory** to explore how **silence** and **repression** are not only strategies of emotional survival but also how they hinder the recovery process as seen in the **second stage of trauma recovery** (remembrance and mourning). It investigates whether silence inhibits their ability to process trauma and if breaking the silence is necessary for their **psychological healing**.

Moreover, **female solidarity is another area of** Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* *that has been studied*. O. O. Alao emphasizes the importance of sisterhood among the women in the novel in her "Migration and Identity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*." She states that "sisterhood among the women" despite the harshness of their shared experience, becomes a "support system" that helps them survive not only the trauma of trafficking but the alienation of being in a foreign land" (175). The women's relationships with one another give them emotional support and a sense of belonging which enable them to endure the isolation and suffering imposed by their circumstances. Alao highlights the strength of these bonds as a form of resistance to the exploitation they face. The current study builds on this by analyzing **how female solidarity** becomes a mechanism for **collective healing** in the context of trauma recovery according to **Herman's theory**. Rather than merely depicting sisterhood as a source

of emotional support, I explore how the relationships together with other strategies might facilitate **healing** and **resilience**.

Another compelling area of scholarship focuses on **sexuality and subjectivity** in the novel. Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike argues that Unigwe criticizes the socio-cultural practices that “objectify and exploit” women especially in a globalized context (1). Umezurike suggests that the women in *On Black Sisters' Street* are portrayed as subjects whose agency is undermined by their participation in sex work, as the dominant ideology of prostitution influences their participation in the trade. He maintains that the text is replete with female subjects whose agency is being impinged on, and even “destabilised, by their participation in the ideological practice of sex slavery” (19). This exploration of the women’s sexual subjectivity points out the ideological forces at play and the limitations imposed on their well-being within patriarchal structures. In contrast to this, this current study applies Herman’s **Trauma Theory** to explore how **the trauma of sexual exploitation** leads to **depersonalization** and **self-objectification** in the women. It looks at how the women’s subjectivity is shaped by trauma and how **self-reclamation** can occur through **recognition of their trauma** and the **development of personal agency** which **Herman’s theory** identifies as part of trauma recovery.

In addition, a study by Daria Tunca explores how the characters' subjectivity is caught between **subjection** and **aspiration**, as the women are trapped by socio-economic pressures but also driven by a desire for autonomy. Tunca notes that the novel "explores the tension between these poles in at least four different ways: by using cultural stereotypes, developing themes of renaming and objectification, and hinting at the role of storytelling in restoring the characters’ identity" (91). This tension shows the complex nature of the women’s subjectivity, as they go through a world that seeks to define them through the lens of exploitation while simultaneously expressing their own desires for empowerment and self-definition. Tunca's study highlights the tension in the characters' subjectivity while my study focuses on how **reclaiming subjectivity** and **reasserting control** over their lives is tied to their ability to confront and process their trauma. I use **Judith Herman’s stages of recovery** to frame this journey and examine how their mental **healing** allows them to reclaim their voices and their identities.

In contrast, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo in "Unsettled Subjects: Sex Work in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters' Street*" highlights Unigwe’s ambivalence about **migration for sex work and** suggests that the novel both acknowledges the abuses the characters face and grants them an “emphatic sense of worth” (117). She asserts that Unigwe's portrayal of the women is not one-dimensional; rather, depiction is complex, where their suffering is interwoven with a sense of dignity and resilience. Okolo notes that Unigwe “humanizes her female protagonists, inviting readers to respond to the women’s moving circumstances, rather than pre-judge them according to their profession” (118). This dual perspective allows the novel to resist simplistic narratives about sex work and trafficking. This present study, while acknowledging the **ambivalence** of migration, uses **Judith Herman's framework of trauma** to explore how the **inner conflict** experienced by the women between **survival** and **self-worth** affects their **emotional recovery**.

Furthermore, **Unigwe’s engagement with feminism** has also been a subject of critical exploration. In "Feminism with a Big 'F': Ethics and the Rebirth of African Feminism in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*," Chielozone Eze argues that *On Black Sisters' Street* is part of a new wave of African women's literature that redefines feminism as a moral and ethical

issue. She contends that the novel addresses core feminist concerns such as “the rights and dignity of women’s bodies” which emphasizes that women’s rights are fundamental human rights that must be acknowledged and addressed in Africa (92). The feminist reading of the novel positions it as part of the movement to challenge patriarchal systems and affirm the humanity of African women in the face of exploitation. This undergraduate study takes this feminist criticism further by applying **Trauma Theory** to understand how **gender-based violence** and **sexual exploitation** influence the women’s **psychological healing** and **reclamation of agency**. It argues that the feminist concerns intersect with trauma recovery, and the research examines how **resilience** in the women is both an act of **survival** and a **reassertion of their identities**.

In terms of **identity and social construction**, De Mul’s “Becoming Black in Belgium: The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe’s Authorial Self-Representation and On Black Sisters’ Street” explores how the text portrays the social construction of blackness in Europe. De Mul posits that the characters in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are constantly negotiating their identities in a society that categorizes them as “black” and dehumanizes them based on their racial and immigrant status (119). According to her, the novel’s African sex workers in Antwerp must negotiate a sense of self in a context where their bodies and identities are already shaped by dominant social imaginaries (120). Her analysis highlights the intersection of race, migration and gender in the way the women’s self-representations are affected by external forces. Our study differs by focusing on **how trauma is central** to these women’s **struggle for self-identification** in the face of exploitation.

Review of Critical Studies on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* has generated considerable scholarly attention due to its depiction of the devastating impact of human trafficking on Nigerian women. The novel looks into the moral, social and mental consequences of trafficking, pointing out how women are lured into exploitative situations under false pretenses. Scholars have explored issues such as migration, exploitation, identity, and trauma, with a focus on the psychological and social impacts of trafficking.

One of the key issues explored in the critical studies is the **psychological and social impact of human trafficking**. Grace Itoro Ibanga’s “Human Trafficking in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* (2008)” emphasizes that *Trafficked* exposes the reality of human trafficking focusing on how young women are manipulated and exploited by individuals seeking to amass wealth. According to Ibanga, Adimora-Ezeigbo has not only creatively visualized the evil of human trafficking but has also “made the reader feel the forceful involvement of the innocent youth in the exercise of human trafficking” (42). The focus on exploitation aligns with the current study’s emphasis on **psychological trauma** and **survival**. However, the current research takes this a step further by examining how the **internalized trauma** of trafficking molds the women’s identities and their strategies for coping with the exploitation they face.

In a similar vein, in “A Fictional X-ray of the Contemporary Society: A Study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*,” Uche Nnyagu and Ngozi Adunchezor argue that Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* serves as a critical mirror of contemporary society by revealing the rampant increase in female trafficking. They note that the novel satirizes social values and exposes the manipulation of young women by unscrupulous individuals. Alex Roy-Omoni’s “Sojourning in a Strange Land: Fictionalizing the Evils of Human Trafficking in Akachi

Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* extends the analysis by exploring the **psychological trauma** inflicted by trafficking including the deception faced by women who migrate to Europe only to discover that their dreams of better opportunities were lies. He asserts that most of the trafficked women are "deceived into thinking that jobs are waiting for them in Europe and so, they willingly accept to migrate only to discover later that it is all a ruse" (56). Roy-Omoni's study as well as that of Nnyagu and Adunchezor emphasizes the psychological and emotional abuse that trafficked women endure. While their analyses focus on social and emotional aspects of trafficking, the present study incorporates **Herman's Trauma Theory** to investigate how the women's trauma is not just a social or mental issue but how trauma **distorts their sense of self** and how their survival strategies evolve as they seek to regain psychological balance.

In addition, Ifeoma Ezinne Odinye's "'Girl-Child' Trafficking and Sex Slavery in African Fiction: An Analysis of Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*" focuses on the impact of **trafficking on the girl-child**, specifically looking at the **mental** and **emotional** implications of trafficking and sexual exploitation. She states:

Sexual exploitation of the girl-child for commercial purposes is both a domestic and international problem. Human trafficking and sex slavery require serious attention because they affect the physical and mental health of their victims. (105)

Her research focus on **trauma** is similar to Ebele Peace Okpala's focus in her "Trafficked and the Traffickers in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked: An Intra-Gendered Discourse*." Like Odinye, Okpala discusses how trafficking often involves both "**external and internal abuse**" where the trafficked women experience not only the brutality of men but also the complicity of women in perpetuating the cycle of exploitation (72). According to Okpala, the oppression of women in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is both "inter-gender and intragender" (72). This perspective is important, but my study differs in that it emphasizes how the women navigate **emotional healing** even in the face of continued exploitation, and how **female solidarity** becomes a vital part of their **resilience** and recovery.

The concept of **migration** and **displacement** has also been studied in *Trafficked*. Olisa Felix Ewuzie's "Displacement and Migration: A Post-Colonial Reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*" examines the post-colonial conditions that drive migration focusing on economic hardship and violence as the "push factors" (40). He maintains that most migration cases are forced ones and the situation may worsen if the "leadership failures, corrupt practices, high unemployment rate and poor living conditions" in the migrants' country of origin are not checked (40). While Ewuzie discusses the external factors of migration, the present study uses to investigate **how these external push factors** lead to **internal trauma** in the women.

Finally, Johnson Ocan, Charles Nelson Okumu, and Denis Sekiwu's "Depictions of Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Contemporary Africa Using Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Apio Eunice Otuku's *Zura Maids*" broadens the discussion by comparing the depictions of trafficking in *Trafficked* and other novels, and assert that human trafficking leads to "**identity crises**" and "**cultural erosion**" (10). The study engages critical discourse of postcolonial tenets to understand the "creation of inferiority complex, identity crisis, and cultural erosion among the colonized" (16). The current research goes further by focusing on **how the identity crisis caused by trafficking** can be **healed** through **psychological trauma recovery**. Using **Trauma Theory**, it explores how the characters in

Trafficked move beyond cultural dislocation and trauma to **reclaim their identities** and **develop survival strategies** based on their **emotional and mental healing**.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of critical studies on *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Trafficked* reveals a body of scholarship has explored the texts in relation to such as migration, identity, sexual exploitation, female solidarity and gender-based trauma. Scholars like Ladele, Egbuta, Umezurike, and Okolo have examined how the characters navigate oppressive structures, social exclusion, and psychological trauma within a globalized world. The critical consensus acknowledges the women's victimhood and resilience while addressing their socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities. Studies on *Trafficked* similarly focus on the psychological impact of trafficking, gender-based violence, and the moral degeneration of society. Despite the depth of existing studies, few have systematically applied a trauma-specific theoretical lens (Judith Herman's trauma model in particular) to analyze how the women internalize trauma and pursue recovery. This current study addresses that gap by offering a **trauma-centered reading** of both novels with focus not only on how trauma is depicted but also on **how the women survive it**. Through Judith Herman's three-phase recovery model: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection, the research investigates how the characters navigate the aftermath of trafficking and how their survival strategies reflect broader psychological processes of healing.

Judith Herman's Trauma Theory

Trauma theory originated in the field of psychiatry and psychology through clinical work in particular with survivors of war and sexual violence in the late twentieth century. One of the foundational voices in trauma studies, Judith Herman, defines psychological trauma as "an affliction of the powerless" that results from events which overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope and create a lasting disruption in their sense of control, connection and meaning (33). Literary trauma theory gained momentum in the 1990s through the work of scholars like Cathy Caruth, who emphasised the belated and fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Caruth describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). For Kai Erikson, trauma is not only personal but collective, affecting communities and cultures; he defines it as "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such force that one cannot react to it effectively" (153). Across these perspectives, trauma theory focuses on how individuals and societies struggle to represent, narrate, and recover from deeply distressing events.

This study adopts **Judith Herman's Trauma Theory** to explore the psychological effects of human trafficking and the survival strategies of women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. Judith Herman (a psychiatrist and feminist scholar) developed her theory of trauma from her work with victims of sexual violence and war. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman explains that psychological trauma is "an affliction of the powerless" and that its core experience is the loss of control, connection and meaning (33). Although her trauma theory was developed in clinical psychology, it can be adopted and employed to analyse literary texts. This makes her theory a useful framework that helps in the understanding of how women in the novels, who are trafficked, abused, and emotionally broken, begin to rebuild their lives.

According to Herman, trauma recovery takes place in **three stages**: (1) **safety**, (2) **remembrance and mourning**, and (3) **reconnection**. In the first stage of trauma recovery (**safety**), the survivor must begin to regain control over their body, thoughts, and surroundings. Judith Herman explains that “the first task of recovery is to establish the survivor’s safety” (159). To Herman, trauma shatters the survivor’s sense of security, and without a restored sense of safety, healing cannot begin. This safety is both physical and psychological. Physically, the survivor must be removed from environments or individuals that pose harm; psychologically, they must begin to feel in control of their responses and boundaries. Herman emphasises that the creation of safety also includes developing emotional regulation skills and building supportive relationships. Only when a stable sense of safety is achieved can the individual proceed to confront the traumatic memory without being re-traumatised.

The stage of **remembrance and mourning** involves the survivor confronting the traumatic experience and giving it meaning. This stage is emotionally demanding because it requires revisiting painful memories often through storytelling or internal reflection. Herman asserts that “traumatic memories become more accessible and can be integrated into the survivor’s life narrative” only after safety is established (175). Herman stresses that survivors often experience trauma as unspeakable or fragmented, and thus, part of the healing process involves finding the language to articulate the experience. This articulation may occur through talk therapy, writing, or other forms of expression, but the goal is always to give structure and meaning to what previously felt chaotic and overwhelming. Mourning is a crucial component of this phase, as survivors often grieve the losses such as innocence, safety, relationships, or opportunities, that trauma has caused. Importantly, this stage is not simply about remembering but about processing and assigning significance to the experience in a way that allows movement toward healing.

The stage of **reconnection** marks the survivor’s effort to rebuild a meaningful life beyond the trauma. It involves reconnecting with others, forming healthy relationships, and re-establishing a sense of identity and purpose. According to Herman, this stage enables survivors to move “from a victim identity to a survivor identity” and re-enter the social world with a sense of empowerment (207). It is here that survivors may reclaim their roles in family, community, or work, and begin to pursue personal goals and relationships that affirm their worth and autonomy. Reconnection also includes a reestablishment of trust in oneself and in others. While the scars of trauma may remain, Herman underscores that healing becomes evident when survivors transition from seeing themselves as victims to embracing a survivor identity. In this stage, they are no longer defined by their wounds but by their resilience. As Herman maintains, the goal is not simply recovery but “a renewed engagement with life” (207), in which the trauma has been acknowledged, mourned, and ultimately overcome.

A distinctive strength of Herman’s framework is its **focus on self-determination**. Rather than positioning individuals as passive victims of their experience, her theory encourages the recognition significant acts of resistance, self-preservation and healing. Recovery is portrayed as a gradual, often non-linear journey where even setbacks are part of the process. Herman also frames trauma recovery as “fundamentally a social process” (Herman 61), stressing that healing is more likely to occur in supportive relationships and communities. The emphasis on social context aligns her theory with concerns about justice, empathy, and collective responsibility in the aftermath of trauma.

Another critical element of Herman’s trauma theory is its **connection between the personal and the political**. She argues that trauma does not happen in a vacuum and is often

compounded by silence or denial. Traumatic events such as sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and exploitation are frequently ignored or even blamed on the victims. Herman insists that “to study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events” (7). The horrible events include the social and political events that affect the victims of trauma. Her work calls for confrontation with these realities directly and advocating for spaces where survivors can be believed, validated, and supported in their healing.

Herman also gives considerable attention to the **tension between silence and speech** in trauma recovery. Survivors may struggle to articulate their experiences due to shame, fear or emotional distress. At the same time, remaining silent can offer a form of temporary protection. Herman recognises that some survivors “cannot speak about the trauma” until they feel sufficiently safe and emotionally grounded (155). The complex nature of recovery can be deduced here where both silence and storytelling serve adaptive functions depending on the survivor’s psychological readiness. Her theory foregrounds the importance of timing, trust, and therapeutic alliance in facilitating this movement from silence to voice.

Finally, **Judith Herman’s trauma theory is feminist** in orientation. It foregrounds the gendered dimensions of trauma, particularly how women’s experiences are often influenced by patriarchal systems of dominance, coercion and erasure. For Herman, recovery is not only a psychological necessity but also a political and ethical act, restoring autonomy, voice, and value to those who have been marginalised or silenced. Her model affirms the dignity and resilience of survivors while insisting on societal accountability and structural change. In this way, trauma theory becomes not just a method of analysis, but also a framework for imagining justice, healing and transformation.

In summary, Judith Herman’s trauma theory, developed through her work with survivors of war, sexual violence, and political terror, is a theoretical framework for understanding the psychological impact of trauma and the path to recovery. Central to her theory is the idea that trauma results from an overwhelming experience that shatters a person’s sense of control, connection and meaning. She outlines three stages of recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection each representing a crucial step in restoring psychological stability and personal autonomy. Herman emphasises that trauma recovery is both a personal and social process that requires supportive relationships, safe environments and the re-establishment of trust and voice. Her theory is also feminist in orientation as it highlights the gendered nature of trauma and calling for social accountability. In all, Herman’s model not only explains how trauma disrupts identity but also how survivors can rebuild their lives through resilience, empowerment and social healing.

Traumatic Experiences of the Female Characters in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Trafficked*

The women in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* endure a wide range of traumatic experiences that have influence over their lives and their choices. Both novels depict the journey from Nigeria to Europe as a passage into danger rather than a path to freedom. Poverty, family pressure, and the promise of work lure the characters into the control of traffickers. Judith Herman describes psychological trauma as an affliction of the powerless that destroys a person’s sense of control and meaning (33). This definition captures the situation of the women in both novels for their movement across borders is followed by exploitation, violence and lasting emotional injury.

Sexual exploitation is the most visible form of trauma in the two novels. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce are forced into prostitution in Antwerp after being deceived by promises of legitimate jobs. They are made to sleep with several men each night and to hand over their earnings to their traffickers. When Ama resists a violent client, she is warned that disobedience will bring harsher punishment (Unigwe 45). In *Trafficked*, Nneoma is raped repeatedly during her journey and later compelled to serve customers in a brothel. The novel depicts that this repeated violation robs her of bodily autonomy and leaves memories that haunt her dreams. The constant threat of rape or forced sex keeps the women in a state of fear and underlines Herman's claim that trauma involves a deep loss of safety (159).

Another aspect worth noting is the methodical way traffickers use sexual violence to control their victims. In both novels, women are beaten, starved, or shamed if they refuse to sleep with clients. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Madam Dele and her associates ensure obedience by reminding the women of the debts they owe, a debt system that ties sexual servitude to survival. For Sisi, every encounter with a client is a reminder of her powerlessness in a foreign land. Likewise, in *Trafficked*, the traffickers use rape as a weapon of intimidation. The women are assaulted to weaken their spirit.

The painful aspect of sexual violence on women in the narratives is that they (women) are often blamed for the violence. A bus scene in *On Black Sisters' Street* is a clear evidence of such. The narrator describes it thus:

A woman with a broad face and a huge pimple on her chin, across the aisle from Ama, told of her neighbor's daughter who was raped. "When they said she was raped, me, I was not surprised. 'Why would she not be raped?' I asked the mother. The things she allowed the girl to wear. Tufi a! Dresses that showed her thighs. Blouses that stuck to her, hugging her everywhere so you could see her breasts standing at attention, saluting everything that passed by. Why would she not be raped? Biko, let me hear word." Voices rose in support ... Ama made some noncommittal murmurs that she hoped would satisfy the woman and at the same time stop her from trying to engage Ama in conversation. (117)

This bus scene illustrates how sexual violence is perceived in the society. As passengers argue about rape, one woman insists that men "could not control themselves" by calling them dogs and claiming that it is a woman's duty to avoid "putting herself in a position where [she] would be used" (Unigwe 117). Another woman supports this view by blaming a neighbour's daughter for wearing short dresses and tight blouses, saying, "why would she not be raped?" (117). Their words reveal a culture where male aggression is treated as natural and women are held responsible for the violence done to them. Ama's quiet withdrawal from the conversation indicates the harm such thinking causes. She refuses to speak as she remembers her own painful history of sexual abuse by the man she once called father. The fact that she cannot get herself to join the discussion tells the trauma hearing the word "rape" causes to her. The passage makes clear that women like Ama suffer twice: first through the assault itself and then through a society that shifts blame away from the abuser.

Physical abuse and brutality are another traumatic experiences of the female characters. The traffickers use beatings, starvation and confinement as tools of control. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women are often locked inside small rooms until they agree to work, and any attempt to keep part of their earnings invites physical attack (194). Nneoma also faces similar experience; she is slapped and kicked when she questions the house rules or hesitates

to accept a client (103). Even basic medical care is denied which leaves the women to suffer untreated illnesses and injuries. The physical harm is used as a method of breaking their will and ensures obedience through pain.

The brutality of their daily lives leads to psychological trauma. Many of the women develop symptoms that match Herman's description of intrusive memories and emotional numbing (175). Nightmares, sudden flashbacks, and overwhelming fear disturb their sleep and cloud their thoughts. Sisi in *On Black Sisters' Street* lives with constant anxiety, often recalling the moment she was first coerced into sex work (132). Nneoma in *Trafficked* feels shame and guilt with a belief that her dignity has been permanently destroyed (150). The silence that follows such experiences is a reflection of Herman's observation that survivors may find their suffering "unspeakable" until they feel secure enough to confront it (155).

Socio-economic exploitation is another form of trauma that binds the characters to their oppressors. Both novels show that poverty at home is the initial reason for migration. Families expect the women to send money, unaware of the true nature of their work. In Europe, every naira or euro earned is taken by the traffickers under the excuse of paying off an ever-growing debt. Sisi and her companions must pay for food, rent, and even air travel at inflated rates, making it impossible to regain financial independence (Unigwe 61). Nneoma faces similar exploitation, as her madam keeps her in bondage by adding false charges to her account (118). This economic control keeps the women powerless and reflects what Herman calls the "systematic stripping of autonomy" in situations of captivity (61).

Furthermore, loss of identity and displacement are other traumatic experiences of the women. Traffickers often give the women new names and forbid contact with their families. For example, Joyce reveals her real captures the extent of identity loss and displacement that the young women Alek, carry within them. She has taken on a false name and nationality to survive in Madam's brothel but the memory of her origin clings to her "like the juice from a cashew... it stains for good" (Unigwe 149). Her frantic cleaning of the walls and table represents an inner struggle to scrub away a past that will not disappear. The revelation, "I was not named Joyce... and I am not even Nigerian," signals the way migration and exploitation have forced her to abandon her real self (149). By voicing her birth name (Alek), she experiences a brief "homecoming," yet the quiet, childlike tone of her confession suggests both vulnerability and the pain of a life lived behind another identity. The novel uses this moment to show that trafficking erodes personal history by leaving women like Alek suspended between lost homelands and the uncertain situation they now find themselves.

Similarly, Nneoma experiences the same alienation as struggles to remember who she was before the journey (Adimora-Ezeigbo 184). When some survivors finally return to Nigeria, they face stigma and rejection from neighbours who suspect or know the truth about their time abroad. The feeling of being "neither here nor there" matches Herman's idea that trauma can destroy a person's sense of belonging and continuity (7).

The combined experiences of sexual violence, physical abuse, psychological harm, economic exploitation and identity loss is an indication of the depth of trauma the female characters suffer in the two novels. The traumatic experiences are beyond individual cruelty; they suffer within systems of gender inequality, poverty and global demand for cheap labour. Their stories reveal that trauma is both personal and collective. In conclusion, the traumatic experiences of the female characters illustrate the core ideas of Judith Herman's trauma theory. Each woman first loses safety, then struggles to remember and make sense of her ordeal, and

finally seeks reconnection and healing. These stages are discussed in the next subsection to reveal the processes of the characters' traumatic journeys.

Three-Stages of Trauma Recovery in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Trafficked*

Judith Herman states that “the first task of recovery is to establish the survivor’s safety” (159). This idea is portrayed in both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Trafficked* where the female characters must first regain a sense of control over their bodies and surroundings before any healing can begin. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women’s initial environment in Antwerp is defined by threat: locked rooms, violent clients and traffickers who hold their passports. Sisi and her companions can only begin to think of the future when they find small moments of security such as the quiet solidarity they share in their apartment and the rare nights when they are free from the brothel’s demands. Their whispered conversations and careful sharing of food are acts of protection that counter the daily danger. Herman explains that creating safety is both physical and psychological as it requires a place “where the survivor feels secure enough to take the next step” (162).

In *Trafficked*, Nneoma’s journey toward safety begins when she escapes the brothel and finds temporary refuge with sympathetic strangers. Although she still fears capture, the physical distance from her traffickers gives her the opportunity to start reclaiming independence over her choices. In addition, Nneoma’s first need after deportation is also safety. At first she hides in shame and refuses to visits from her family or old lover Ofomata. Only when she enters the rehabilitation centre, where staff offer counselling and shelter, does she begin to feel secure enough to sleep without fear and to speak about her past. The calm and order of this setting match Herman’s insistence that survivors require a stable base before they can confront their memories.

The process of establishing safety also includes emotional stability and supportive relationships. Herman emphasises that survivors need “a sense of control over their bodies and their environment” before they can revisit the past (164). For the characters in both novels, safety involves rebuilding trust in small, tentative steps. Sisi begins to confide in her housemates as she realises that their shared experience creates a fragile but real community. Nneoma begins friendship with Efe. The moments place the women in safe places where they can start to believe they deserve protection.

After safety is secured, Herman identifies remembrance and mourning as the next stage of recovery where survivors reconstruct and give meaning to their experiences (175). In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women share their personal histories. Each person's narrative is an attempt to speak the unspeakable. Ama recounts the abuse she suffered as a child, Sisi describes the deception that led her to Europe, and Efe remembers the poverty that forced her to leave Nigeria. Their late-night conversations act as a form of collective testimony. Herman posits that “the reconstruction of the trauma story must be a collaborative process” (175), and these moments capture that spirit of mutual witnessing. For Nneoma and Efe in *Trafficked*, remembrance occurs through inner reflection and hesitant storytelling after she finds a safer environment. On a certain night, they tell the stories of their lives with each listening to the other with sympathy and care. The telling of what happened moves their mental state from silence to understanding.

The second element of this stage is mourning. It involves grieving the losses that trauma has caused. Herman notes that survivors must “grieve the old self and the old world” to move forward (181). The women in both novels mourn lost innocence, broken family ties and the

opportunities stolen by traffickers. Sisi struggles with the knowledge that she can never return to her earlier life unmarked, while Nneoma grieves not only for her own suffering but for the trust her family and Ofomata once placed on her. Their grief is an ongoing recognition that parts of their past cannot be recovered. Through the process of memory and mourning, they slowly reclaim their voices and begin to integrate the trauma into their life stories.

The final stage in Herman's model is reconnection, when survivors rebuild a meaningful life beyond the trauma and develop a new sense of self (207). In Unigwe's novel, reconnection appears when the women begin to imagine futures outside prostitution. Efe starts to plan for a small business in Nigeria, and Joyce finds purpose in helping other migrants avoid similar traps. Even when escape is not immediate, the plans indicate a shift from victimhood to self-actualisation. Herman explains that recovery is complete when survivors can "re-establish ordinary relationships" and pursue personal goals (207). Nneoma's journey in *Trafficked* gives a clear picture of this stage. After months of isolation, she forms a strong friendship with Efe at the centre, learns tailoring and gains confidence through her new skill. In time, she reaches out to her family and welcomes the possibility of a renewed relationship with Ofomata. She also nurtures a plan to continue her education. Herman describes this step as "a renewed engagement with life" (207), and Nneoma's actions fit this description. The women of both novels carry scars, but they are no longer defined by them.

Reconnection also means accepting that the trauma will always be part of their history without allowing it to define their future. Sisi and her companions carry emotional scars, yet they refuse to be reduced to their suffering. They find strength in each other and, in different ways, reclaim their right to joy and purpose. Nneoma's later involvement in community work shows a commitment to help other young women avoid the same fate, a step that reflects Herman's idea of "a renewed engagement with life" (207). Through these portrayals, both novels affirm that while trauma leaves lasting marks, the journey toward healing is possible. The women's gradual movement from fear to empowerment illustrates the enduring relevance of Herman's three-stage model in understanding the psychological recovery of survivors of trafficking.

Survival Strategies of the Women in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Trafficked*

The women in the novels endure harsh experiences, yet they refuse to remain passive victims. One important way they survive is through mutual support and friendship. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sisi, Ama, Joyce and Efe create a small family in a foreign land. They share food, stories and small moments of laughter to soften the pain of prostitution. When one is sick or frightened, the others comfort and help her. They are able to endure daily violence and humiliation through such solidarity and support. In *Trafficked*, a similar bond grows between Nneoma and Efe after their return to Nigeria. At first, Nneoma keeps to herself, burdened by shame, but friendship with Efe draws her out of isolation and gives her the courage to imagine a future beyond her past. Such companionship is a reflection of the first stage of Judith Herman's model, where the survivor seeks safety and a stable environment.

Economic independence is another key strategy. While in Europe, the women are subjected to inhumanity because they lack financial power. They have to work to buy out their freedom. On the other hand, during her stay at the rehabilitation centre in Nigeria, Nneoma learns tailoring and begins to earn an honest income. Work gives her confidence and a sense of purpose. It helps her to rebuild her life and avoid returning to exploitative relationships. Earning their own living allows women to recover a measure of power over their futures.

Strategic silence and careful planning also help them survive. In Unigwe's story, the women often pretend obedience to their trafficker while privately seeking chances to leave. They withhold their true feelings and make small preparations without drawing attention. Nneoma too keeps her plans private as she considers how to face her family after deportation. This quiet strategy protects them from immediate danger and buys time for escape. The women also rely on emotional and spiritual strength. Several characters hold to memories of home, childhood songs, and prayer as a private source of comfort. This inner life cannot be taken by traffickers. Nneoma, though slow to trust others, finds peace in the simple routines of the rehabilitation centre and in her growing skill with the sewing machine. Such inward resilience supports the slow work of healing.

Finally, rebuilding relationships is a crucial survival strategy. After a period of withdrawal, Nneoma chooses to reconnect with her parents and with Ofomata, her former lover. This choice marks her entry into Herman's third stage of recovery, where survivors seek reconnection and a renewed sense of self. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women who return home also attempt to restore family ties, even when society greets them with suspicion. The formation of new friendships, gaining of practical skills, and acceptance of supportive relationships suggest that survival involves reclaiming identity and dignity.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully achieves its aim and objectives by examining the traumatic experiences of female characters in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* through the framework of Judith Herman's trauma theory. It identifies the specific traumas the women endure, including sexual exploitation, physical abuse, emotional suffering, socio-economic deprivation and loss of identity. The research applies Herman's framework to show the characters progress from safety, to remembrance and mourning, and finally to reconnection with themselves, others, and their communities. The use of trauma theory indicates that prolonged exposure to exploitation affects the women psychologically, emotionally and socially, and that recovery involves both individual effort and collective support.

The study also highlights several key findings. Firstly, it shows that survival strategies such as forming friendships, mutual support, skill acquisition, and selective trust are crucial in psychological recovery. Secondly, it demonstrates that female solidarity and emotional support networks are essential in order to cope with trauma and to regain independence. Thirdly, the study finds that trauma recovery is a gradual process. Hence, it requires time, reflection, and safe environments. Lastly, it reveals that despite enduring severe hardships, the women in both novels are able to reclaim their identities, rebuild relationships, and imagine meaningful futures which confirms the relevance of Herman's model in the discussion of psychological healing of trafficked and exploited women.

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