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## **Surviving Silence: Trauma and Healing in Chika Unigwe's *The Middle Daughter***

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### Abstract

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe (2023) is an interesting story of trauma, silence, and healing in the environment of Nigerian patriarchy and cultural norms. This paper examines the way in which Unigwe illustrates the psychological and social aspect of gendered suffering through her trauma theory and feminist ideology perspectives. It is also an exploration of silence as a symptom of trauma and survival strategy in a patriarchal world and the role of memory, narratives, and sisterhood in the process of healing. Based on the works of Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, and Bessel van der Kolk, the analysis situates the story of Unigwe in the context of post-traumatic literature, showing how the novel transforms the personal trauma into the strength of the community. Finally, *The Middle Daughter* makes it clear that silence breaking is a form of empowerment and a path to healing.

**Keywords:** Trauma; Resilience; Healing; Silence; Patriarchy; Recovery; Post-traumatic narrative.

Chika Unigwe is a renowned Nigerian writer and writes on the issues surrounding womanhood, migration, identity as well as cultural expectation both in Africa and the diaspora. In her writing of fiction and nonfiction, Unigwe, born in 1974, to parents in Enugu, Nigeria, is deeply determined to present the realities of the lives of African women. Her best-known work is her critically acclaimed book *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), which traces the lives of Nigerian sex workers in Belgium as it explores the idea of exploitation, migration, and female freedom. The style of writing used by Unigwe often serves as a mixture of personal grief and social commentary in which he speaks on behalf of the oppressed by patriarchy and custom. Her poetic but intellectually insightful style of writing provokes the readers into reflecting on emotional and cultural traumas which form African femininity.

In 2023, Unigwe returned to Nigerian environments with her first work in a diasporic after setting in her earlier work *The Middle Daughter*. The novel-retells the myth of Hades and Persephone within the framework of modern Igbo culture and, in that order, the lives of Nani, the middle child of the orthodox Christian family in Enugu. The story starts with the tragic event of the death of her beloved sister Udodi and the emotional breakdown of her father who is the first character Nani meets

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in this story. Nani gets married in order to stabilize herself but soon it turns into a trap of mistreatment, silence and mental torture. At the expense of Nani as she struggles to be free, Unigwe explores the way women grieve and preserve the memoirs of the unfamiliar as a survival tactic.

*The Middle Daughter* is not just a personal narrative, but a social commentary on gender inequality, hypocrisy in religion and the perseverance of African women. The fact that Nani is not merely a victim but a survivor as portrayed by Unigwe is an indication of the larger truth of women who have come out of their trauma in patriarchal nations. The exploration of silence, perseverance, and rehabilitation in the novel contributes a lot of value to contemporary feminist works of Africa and the study of trauma.

**Silence:** Silence in the conceptual framework of the trauma studies and feminist theory is both a source of oppression and a survival tactic. Women are oppressed by not letting them speak in society as the patriarchal society, religion, and family norms equate submissiveness to virtue. Nani perceives a silence as the state of being in the society where feminine complaint or disobedience is non-existent. Nevertheless, Unigwe describes silence as a contradictory sanctuary, a balancing sheet that gives Nani the opportunity to endure immense pain until she is robust enough to confront it. Therefore, silence in *The Middle Daughter* is destructive yet protective, which is the contradiction of the traumatized lives.

**Healing:** Researcher Judith Herman, a psychiatrist who wrote an excellent book titled *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), has pinpointed three essential phases in the process of trauma recovery: safety, remembering, and reconnection. Safety-building involves abandoning the abusive environment and restoring the feeling of physical and emotional security. Remembrance involves re-experiencing and telling the atrocious event, integrating bits and pieces of the memory into a unified narrative. The reconnection is the way the survivor would be reintegrated into the society with a feeling of renewed identity and empowerment. Such stages are marked in the process of Nani in *The Middle Daughter*: first, Nani runs away in order to be secure, then she starts remembering and understanding her sufferings, and finally she restores her relation to the world and to herself as an independent woman.

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe is a special effort in relating trauma and silence by showing that silence is not only a symptom but also a structural element of trauma. Unigwe portrays the personal and social pain through the experiences of Nani and how it is normally manifested through absence, withdrawal and silence and not through voice. Nani is a person with a tragic experience as she loses her sister Udodi unexpectedly and this loss divides her family emotionally. The reaction of the family members is not overt grief, but muted suffering: her father severs into mourning, her mother turns emotionally distant and Nani learns that the only proper way of dealing with grief is being silent.

The earliest lesson she was taught was silence, which made Nani ready to face her further experience of domestic abuse at the hands of Ephraim. Her imposed silence is connected to the psychological manipulation and physical violence she has to endure because she cannot even express her feelings of anxiety or to seek help because of the cultural and religious traditions of acting in compliance. Unigwe therefore describes silence as a cultural means of control which magnifies pain through denying the expression. Trauma according to Cathy Caruth is an unclaimed experience, which is immeasurable and undefinable. The silence of Nani demonstrates her inability to cope with tragedy; her suffering passes through memory and emotions but not words.

Meanwhile, the story by Unigwe states that silence is not entirely passive. It is also a defense mechanism, a psychic refuge where Nani tends to protect the pieces of herself against total destruction. Her silence only carries with it a certain strength--a hesitation on the lips. The traumatic memory form is manifested in the elliptical language that Unigwe uses, the internal monologue, and fragmentary narration. Accordingly, the silence is used in the work as literary representation of the trauma, and what is not said is even stronger than what is said. The experience of Nani of being subjected to

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becoming herself again is the three phases of trauma recovery suggested by Judith Herman: safety, remembering, and reconnection.

Nani starts the first phase, safeguarding, by abandoning the unfriendly environment that characterizes her marriage. She leaves Ephraim and this is her initial claim to agency and a denial of cultural enslavement which links perseverance to virtue. This is the first step towards recovery when the physical and emotional bonds of Patriarchal oppression are broken, and the second stage recollecting happens when Nani attempts to recall her past when her sister dies, her father has disappeared, and she has suffered in silence. It is a process of introspection and recollection that helps her to avert the fractured memories that she has been shattered by tragedy into. This is what makes her an active participant of the story, rather than a victim of that story. During this stage, Unigwe stresses the therapeutic importance of narrating stories, by giving voice to the tragedy of Nani, she takes back the narration of her story.

Finally, during the reconnection phase, Nani comes out as a woman who has rediscovered herself following her tragedy. This process of healing is described as one of ongoing self-awareness, sustenance, and resurrection as opposed to being a perfect or perfect process. She finds her life, her community and above all, her voice. Silence, the symbol of repression, has now become a voluntary decision- a period of self-concentration and self-control. Reintegration of Nani as portrayed by Unigwe is a process of passing through silence and speech, fragmentation and wholeness. The narrative turns trauma into a female empowering territory, proving that the experience of pain may be a way of liberation. The healing process of Nani is not only a personal story but also the struggle of all women in the patriarchal world who have to discover the power to survive and the strength to tell the story.

Trauma as a concept in literature is frequently extended beyond personal suffering to demonstrate the social and cultural circumstances that cause and perpetuate pain. *The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe (2023) explores the theme of pain in the household and spiritual spheres of Nigerian womanhood revealing the combined forces of personal loss and patriarchal power that suppress women. In order to learn about the combination of trauma and silence in the novel, research the work of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, and the work of African feminist theorists Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Obioma Nnaemeka.

The primary concept of Cathy Caruth is that trauma is a belated experience which, as per her view, is so overwhelming that it cannot be fully understood at the moment but comes back later in flashback, nightmares, or repetition. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth explains that the trauma represents an unending repetition of the phenomenon, showing that the survivor cannot get rid of the past and that there is a desire to repeat it over and over in search of clarity. This is reflected in the trauma of Nani. The fact that her sister Udodi died, the first betrayal of the emotional space, is not a simple tragedy, but it is the psychic foundation of further pain. The grief of this loss is rekindled by her personal experiences of being deserted and abused, and she has never been able to process or speak of it before. Every moment of violence in her marriage is the imitation of the initial empty space, which confirms the idea that trauma is the revival of the wound by Caruth.

The book of Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) explains three phases of the healing process, which are safety level, remembering and reconnection. Survivors have to have a sense of safety before they can start the process of healing. The trauma experienced by Nani remains unresolved in *The Middle Daughter* as her social and family life puts her at risk. The lack of emotion of her father after Udodi's death makes her vulnerable and her marriage to Ephraim only adds to the vulnerability that she has, which includes not only the moral imperative, but also the emotional constraint placed on her by the society. Nani is not merely passive, as Herman in his thesis calls him, but it is the outcome of the circumstance whereby survival means to be submissive.

The psychoanalytic perspective of Bessel van der Kolk builds up on this concept by postulating that the body continues to keep the score. Van der Kolk argues that there is not only a memory but a physical manifestation of the trauma in the body tightness, fear, and paralysis. This emotional memory is transferred in the narrative of Unigwe. The fear of Ephraim that Nani develops is not simply implied, but also demonstrated by her actions: trembling hands, throbbing heart, and a constant feeling of fear. In one instance, she recalls how she felt as though her breath had solidified in her chest which is the occurrence of psychological misery. An organism is a chronicle of pain, and this is articulated in such a manner that is not verbally represented.

Unigwe, however, approaches trauma in a notable African feminist approach. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie claims that African women are oppressed in various ways such as gender inequity, cultural, economic, and religious subordination. On the same note, the idea of nego-feminist as proposed by Obioma Nnaemeka, which is the feminism of negotiations, insists on veiled resistance within the patriarchal structures as opposed to open opposition. In the case of Nani, the word silence can be seen as a form of negotiation. Though silence, in the first place, is the expression of submission, at some point it is also the way to preserve dignity and endure. Her quietness conceals a kind of inner opposition -waiting and watching till she can regain her freedom.

The role of the society in perpetuating trauma is also revealed in this story by Unigwe. The teachings of the church regarding being obedient in marriage, the way the mother preaches to her daughter to pray more and the gossip in society that accuses women of failing marriages all lead to the continuum of silence. The images that Unigwe portrays bring out the social perpetuation and acceptance of suffering. The self-blame of Nani, who thinks that she should have prayed more and Ephraim could have been kind, is the expression of the patriarchal ideology that turns misery into the failure of morals.

The imagery of silence prevails in the story. She says, silence was her legacy, her mother gave it and her curse. This quote summarizes the passing of perseverance through generations, which is denounced by African feminist theorists. The reason for Nani being silent is never the peculiar illness of her unique personality, but it is a culturally approved method of survival, which mother transfers to daughter. But in the last pages of the novel, silence has become a place to think, a precursor of the recovery of speech.

Therefore, *The Middle Daughter* shows how trauma and silence reinforce each other instead of being co-present conditions with the help of the trauma theory and African feminism. Trauma is silent and silence makes trauma worse such that the breaking of the trauma is the initial step towards healing. The way Unigwe depicts the perseverance of Nani herself, her fear and, finally, the awakening is a potent truth since it is not only a psychological process, but also one of politics.

### **The Dynamics of Patriarchal Trauma**

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe is an example of the way trauma is not an individual problem, but a systematic outcome of patriarchal dominance supported by religion, family, and social norms. The personality of Ephraim by Unigwe, shows how men can suppress other individuals through the control of patriarchy, whereby violence is hidden under the guise of love, morality and divine order. The manifestations of the patriarch pollution of the body, heart, and soul of Nani show the continuation of the traumatic experience of a woman by the system of ideas about the importance of male dominance and the sanctity of female submission.

The abuse by Ephraim is holistic, it goes to the extent of violating the body, mind and faith of Nani. His brutality is not spontaneous but progressive in nature, starting with possessive attitude and emotional control. He secludes her with her friends, controls her movements and dictates on how she acts in the name of righteousness. He demands unquestioning compliance and more often than not

refers to religion to support his point: A woman should obey her husband as she obeys God, he reminds her- a dreadful misunderstanding of Ephesians 5:22. Such a sentence is a perfect example of how the religion of patriarchy supports the control over female bodies and souls. The house that is supposed to be the place of refuge turns into a spiritual jail where cruelty is disguised as religiosity. Unigwe reveals that this manipulation not only adversely affects the physical life of Nani, but also her spiritual belonging; she gets to learn to tie the silence of God to participation.

The emotional and spiritual abuse of Nani illustrates that according to trauma theorist Judith Herman, this is what she calls a captivity trauma, when the victim is psychologically dependent on the abuser. Nani takes the blame of Ephraim abusing her because she feels that she is not a good wife: If I prayed more, maybe he would be nice once again. This self-blame as the feature of patriarchal training is the indication of the societal tendency in general to attribute the suffering of women to the lack of morals, instead of the systematic oppression. Unigwe exploits the internalized guilt of Nani to show the colonization of the female mind by patriarchy which makes patience a virtue and silence a virtue.

The silence of the mother continues to victimize. Instead of protecting Nani, she tells her not to give up: marriage is not a bed of roses. Pray and God would make his heart soft. This remark points to the fact that patriarchal conditioning is intergenerational. According to Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, the African women are often co-opted into self-oppression as they act as bearers of cultural standards that obstruct them. The mother also complies because she has been socialized, rather than becoming mean; in fact, she believes that it is the sacred duty of a woman to save marriage. Unigwe is not only criticizing the supremacy of the male, but also the social structures that bring in women to be taught to value the marriage institution at the expense of their lives.

The diction of cruelty that Unigwe uses is delicate and yet very touching. She does not sensationalize abuse much, showing its psychological nature in fragmentary narration and interior monologue, which is reminiscent of confusion of trauma. Though Nani thinks of the past and present at once, which shows that her mind is disintegrated by fear. In a certain instance, Unigwe explains: His voice was a knife and it cut through her head and made no noise. The metaphor of the blade makes the language a weapon of violence, which means that words are a weapon as harmful as strikes. The alternation of the first-person reflection and the third-person narration in the narrative also contributes to the explanation of the dissociation of Nani, a typical reaction to stress, told by Bessel van der Kolk and stating that the body and the mind part to survive.

Societal complicity in the abuse of Nani is also a form of patriarchal trauma as depicted by Unigwe in the novel. Neighbours gossip and do not take action; the church, preaching patience and not righteousness; and the community does not want the husband to be weak. At the point when Nani finally leaves Ephraim, she is the one who is gossiped about and becomes a source of disgrace as a failed wife but not a survivor. Unigwe thus shows how the culture of patriarchy keeps silence of willful silence on the plight of women. This silence is a shared trauma, what theorists like Cathy Caruth call the crisis of witnessing, where the society too wants not to acknowledge the existence of pain. In *The Middle Daughter*, this denial becomes an individual suffering made into a cultural norm.

In the account of Nani, Unigwe underlines that the trauma of patriarchy is caused not only by direct violence, but also by the cultural silence rule. It is perpetuated by all institutions, family and church, and the community. Unigwe is planting the seeds of resistance, despite this repressive system. The final move when Nani decides to move away from Ephraim is an enormous rebellion: the cessation of hereditary silence. It is a rejection of what Obioma Nnaemeka has called Nego-feminism, what she terms the negotiation of endurance and announcement of womanhood in her own terms.

Finally, *The Middle Daughter* presents the household as a mini world of patriarchal Nigeria whereby the bodies and voices of women fall under the cultural and spiritual narratives of subjugation. The subtle and poetic way in which Unigwe tells the story shows the violence behind such moral fronts.

She combines physical, mental, and spiritual abuse as they are deeply rooted and as such, the trauma within the patriarchal systems becomes a societal scar and never an individual injury. Unigwe wants people to rethink quietness in the way that Nani finds her way to resistance by first becoming submissive and then becoming self-affirming not as endurance but as the first seed of rebellion against centuries of gender-based oppression.

### **Journey Toward Healing and Recovery**

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe makes the trauma a witness by following the experience of Nani through silence and speech, prison and freedom. In the novel, recovery is depicted as a slow, difficult, and painful process of acknowledging, reminiscence and reconnecting as opposed to escape. Unigwe reformulates the healing process as an individual and social process through the self discovery of Nani. Based on three phases of trauma recovery presented by Judith Herman (safety, remembering, and reconnection), the story shows a complex emotional and spiritual work needed to recover the voice after experiencing patriarchal trauma.

Nani starts at the stage of denial, the coping mechanism that had been developed throughout her trauma and cultural education. Silence is the shield that encloses her and is a prison. She convinces herself that Ephraim is angry with her and that only yielding will make him quiet down. Nonetheless, according to Bessel van der Kolk, the body does the score keeping; the body of Nani remembers things that her mind is unable to articulate. Her insomnia, nervous stomach, and shaky hands are a symbol of a horror in her that is not yet captured by language. Unigwe is as immobile as Nani and her style is as short and repetitive and nearly breathless lines, which symbolize her enslavement in the wordless.

The turning point comes when Nani acknowledges that she is suffering and this discontinues the denial process. Her healing occurs once the first phase of Herman, which is a safety establishment, finally makes the decision to abandon Ephraim. This choice, horrible as it is, constitutes the initial claim of agency. The departure of Nani is a break of the script of the society which links the value of a woman with perseverance. The flight is a flight of reclamation, too: she starts to feel that her body is hers once again. According to Unigwe: every move out of the house represented breath to her lungs. The breathing image is the imagery of self-reanimation - of the re-awakening of a woman who has learned to live in suffocating circumstances.

Once she is physically safe, Nani passes through the second stage of recovery, recollection and grieving. Unigwe puts a strong stress on the role of memory and storytelling as healing powers. Nani starts to reassemble the pieces of her past, the loss of her sister Udodi, her father being cold, her mother being silent, and she wonders how, it was not Ephraim who was the source of her grief, but the repressive society that formed her family. It is painful, and purgative to remember. She is narrating her tragedy making it a personal injustice into a shared reality. This can be the same as the definition of trauma given by Cathy Caruth as a late experience, which has to be narrated to be comprehended. Nani views language as remembrance and release, through narration, she is reinstating back her being.

This self-realization is evident in the style of narration that Unigwe uses. This first broken and disoriented text turns to be more flowing as Nani gains an inner voice. She starts explaining how she felt, angry, sad, betrayed, and this naming turns out to be both dramatic and an empowering act. According to the feminist terms of the African context, it is an expression of Nego-feminism of Obioma Nnaemeka whereby the healing process involves taking care of individualism and belonging to groups. The storytelling process of Nani does not only heal her, but it also subverts the social norms of silence about the sufferings of women.

The third phase of the Herman concept of reconnection is the restoration of identity and re-integration of Nani into supporting communities. Female solidarity empowers her after years of being lonely. Other women, friends, neighbors and sympathetic listeners become observers of her plight and

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accomplices of her re-birth. Their collective accounts make up a system of nurturing, which defeats the isolation of trauma. Communal witnessing in a society where women are taught to be silent victims is a revolution. With these times, Unigwe points out that one can never heal in solitude, but through the existence of other people who listen to his or her voice.

The transformation of Nani is represented to a great extent symbolically. Unigwe employs light and dark images frequently to describe her state of mind. In her marriage, there is darkness: Nights were solid, heavy with his rage. The vision also alters as she begins to heal: "The morning sun fell upon her face as a promise. Light is referred to as a representation of regeneration and the subsequent enlightenment of self awareness. Equally, the rebirth imagery (water, breath, open spaces) signifies that she is over with the trauma. One scene shows Nani diving into the rain to be cleansed by the rain as a sort of baptism ridding her of shame and fear. This gesture is symbolic bodily reclaiming and this resonates with the role of the body in healing as emphasized by van der Kolk.

The best sign of healing is the restored voice of Nani. When she is young, she is represented by her husband, her mother and the society. At the very conclusion of the novel, she was able to speak on her behalf. Quiet is turned into testimony and anguish is turned into power. This procedure is an example of how Unigwe saw a female poetics of survival: a language of resistance and resurrection. The story of Nani does not only heal her, but also indicates a larger healing process, making the voices of many women caught in such loops of violence perpetrated by the patriarchy.

*The Middle Daughter* by Unigwe transforms the pain and that it is the crucible of making of the self and it is not the end of identity. The path of denial to liberation of Nani is a demonstration of the principle of Herman that the process of healing is the process of control, reconstruction of trust and reconnection. The silence that used to signify the state of imprisonment now appears as the basis of a new voice to speak. The message that Unigwe gives in her story is that it is not only endurance, but transformation, a new entry into the world as a new woman, one who has survived, bringing not only the scars, but the power of her own experience.

### Redefining Silence and Voice

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe is a reinterpretation of the connotations of silence and voice, breaking the connection between these two concepts and the notion of vulnerability and power. At the beginning of the story, silence is a symbol of oppression, an embodiment of male superiority and inbuilt fear. As a boy Nani is taught that good women endure, that talking is defiance, and bearing is righteousness. Her silence is therefore a form of imprisonment, as it shows the need by patriarchal structures to make women invisible. The silence of Unigwe when she is young describes the emotional violence that is imposed on the women who are not allowed to speak. The silence is similar in this stage to trauma: it is discontinuous, unmentionable, and hidden behind the veil of shame and terror.

As the story unfolds, however, Unigwe turns this assumption around by showing that quiet can be tactical, a time of rebellion, a necessity of stillness into a time of reclaiming oneself. The silence of Nani changes its meaning of acquiescence to reflection as she abandons Ephraim and thinks about her life. It turns into a negotiating field where she comes to slowly have the guts to express her truth. This change is similar to Nego-feminism advanced by Obioma Nnaemeka that encourages negotiation and compromise in patriarchal organizations instead of outright confrontation. The silence of Nani is therefore more of a non-speaking, rather than a non-speaking thing, but a self-preservation and subsequent empowerment.

The cultural struggles of survival are reflected in the method adopted by Unigwe whereby he uses silence to bring out the problem. Women such as Nani are using limiting mechanisms that equate voice to disobedience. Her silence helps her to be able to survive within those boundaries until she has a chance to be able to safely declare herself. This subtle portrayal corresponds with Stiwanism by

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Molara Ogundipe-Leslie as she urges women to be socially reformed within African cultural settings and not without it. The new definition of quiet as given by Unigwe acknowledges that cultural negotiation should go hand in hand with healing and empowerment.

At the culmination of the novel, voice proves to be the best healing tool. Nani is symbolically regaining her autonomy and humanity when she begins to narrate her own story. Her speech is logical, but not loud or confrontational, and built on the well-achieved sense of self-worth. Story telling acts as a kind of personal rehabilitation and political opposition. Nani enters the process of awakening the voice of a survivor that Cathy Caruth refers to by rendering her silence into a language. Lastly, the book by Unigwe shows that voice is equivalent to empowerment. The final self-consciousness of Nani is not only the rehabilitation of Nani personally, but also the reinvention of women subjectivity in a society that has been traditionally oppressive of women. In her experience, stillness is redefined as the starting point, where new voices have just appeared: calm and confident and very free.

*The Middle Daughter* by Chika Unigwe is a deep exploration of the intersection of trauma and silence and recovery in the lives of women whose lives are circumscribed by patriarchal and cultural systems. Through the experience of Nani, Unigwe shows how silence which is normally viewed as subjugation can be a symbol of tragedy as well as endurance. That is what starts as a silence that is forced by fear, loss, and social conditioning, turns into a place of thought and, ultimately, empowerment. It is the tale of Nani as the voiceless victim that becomes the self-aware survivor and proves that to recover, a person should overcome pain and regain the means of speaking.

Unigwe reinvents silence, redefining it as a symbol of oppression and transforming it into a state of awakening. By relying on the theory of trauma and African feminism, she puts the personal healing of Nani into a greater social context where voice is the ultimate source of resistance. Unigwe confirms the experience of women by making their pain heard, but at the same time, she puts the systems that require their silence into question. Narration, as a survival technique, remembering, naming, and retelling, is a reflection of the fact that Judith Herman is convinced that rehabilitation cannot be seen outside the context of restoration of the self and society.

Finally, *The Middle Daughter* is more than just the tale of a trauma of a single woman; this is the story of an African female surviving. The tale of Nani is a symbol of the suffering of other women who are denied the right to speak, and to be silent at the same time. The story that was told by Unigwe is thus a strong example of the strength of the story-telling ability to say what cannot be told, to heal by remembering, to transform silence into power. Not only does Nani heal herself, but also reinvents the meaning of survival suggesting that actual healing lies in courage to speak, recollect, and live once again.

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