

NARRATIVIZING VIOLENCE IN THE SELECTED WORKS BY

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Submitted

in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

of Mizoram University, Aizawl

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

MIZORAM UNIVERSITY

AIZAWL: 796004

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Narrativizing Violence in the Selected Works by Chris Abani” written by Z.D. Lalmangaihzaiva has been written under my supervision.

He has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the Ph.D regulations of Mizoram University. The thesis is the result of his own investigation. Neither the thesis as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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DECLARATION

I, Z.D. Lalmangaihzauva, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institute.

This thesis is being submitted to Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank God for granting me good health and all the guidance I need during the course of my study.

I thank my supervisor Prof. Sarangadhar Baral for his sincere guidance, patience, and dedication. I express my sincere gratitude not only towards his invaluable advice and input as the thesis supervisor, but also for his consideration in granting me the flexibility to continue my research work along with my teaching job. This thesis would not have materialized without his constant encouragement and motivation.

I thank the faculty and office staff in the Department of English, Mizoram University for their help and support. I also thank all the libraries across the country that I have utilized for this research.

I express my sincere gratitude towards my colleagues, fellow research scholars and friends who have rendered help and support during this research work.

Lastly, I thank my family for their never ending love and prayer. Their support and belief in me have always been the source of my strength. I am happy to share this journey with them.

(Z.D. LALHMANGAIHZAUVA)

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<u>APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL</u>	:
1. BOS	: 20.04.2012
2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 15.05.2012
<u>REGISTRATION NO. & DATE</u>	: MZU/Ph.D/467 of 15.05.2012
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Other relevant information:**List of Publications:**

Sl. No	Year	Title of Chapter/Research Paper	Name of book/journal	Publication details (Place/Publishers) with ISBN/ISSN
1	2014	“Situating the Impact of Globalization on the Ethnic Identity of the Igbos in Chris Abani’s <i>GraceLand</i> ”	Globalization and Ethnic Identity. Pp. 210-218	Place: Guwahati Pub: Scientific Book Centre ISBN: 978-81-287-0004-0
2	2014	“ <i>Lengkhawm Zai: An Articulation of the Indigenous Cultural Memory of the Mizos</i> ” (joint paper with Lalmalsawmi Ralte)	Journal of MIELS. May 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1. Pp. 74-84	Place: Aizawl Pub: Mizoram English Literary Society ISSN: 2348- 8611
3	2014	“ <i>Song for Night as Trauma Narrative</i> ”	Textualizing Trauma: Narratives from North-East India and Beyond. Pp. 263-274	Place: New Delhi Pub: Authors Press ISBN: 978-81-7273-821-1
4	2017	“Devastated Dreams” by Mafaa Hahnar. (Translated into English from the Mizo)	Contemporary Short Stories from Mizoram. Pp. 18-27	Place: New Delhi Pub: Sahitya Akademi ISBN: 978-93-86771-45-2
5	2018	“Globalization and Cultural Identity: A Study of Violence in Chris Abani’s <i>GraceLand</i> ”	The Criterion: An International Journal in English. October 2018, Vol.9, Issue-V. Pp. 76-84	Open Access E-Journal, www.the-criterion.com/archive ISSN: 2278-9529

List of papers presented in Seminars/Conferences:

Sl. No	Year	Title of Paper	Title of Seminar/Conference	Organizers and Place
1	2013	“Situating the Impact of Globalization on the Ethnic Identity of the Igbos in Chris Abani’s <i>GraceLand</i> ”	National Seminar on “Globalization and Ethnic Identity”	Pachhunga University College, Aizawl
2	2013	“ <i>Lengkhawm Zai: An Articulation of the Indigenous Cultural Memory of the Mizos</i> ” (joint paper with Lalmalsawmi Ralte)	International Seminar on “Cultures of Memory: Mnemocultural Praxis in South, Southeast and Other Asian Countries”	English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong

3	2013	“The Politics of Representation in Literature”	UGC-Sponsored National Level “Interaction Programme for Ph.D Scholars”	Mizoram University, Aizawl
4	2018	“Systemic Violence and its Impact in Chris Abani’s Narrative”	International Seminar on “English Learning and Teaching Skills”	Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata
5	2018	“The Crisis of Cultural Identity: A Study of Violence in Chris Abani’s <i>GraceLand</i> ”	International Seminar on “Indigenous Languages and Culture: Its Preservation and Dissemination”	Guwahati University, Guwahati

Chapter I

Introduction

Violence remains a predominant and recurring theme in most of Chris Abani's works. The manifestation of violence in Abani's narrative is deeply connected with his personal experiences of violence. Abani is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Nigerian writers. He was born on 27th December, 1966 in Afikpo, Nigeria to an Igbo father and an English mother. His parents met while studying at Oxford, and settled in Nigeria to raise their children. Abani and his writings belong to the new generation of Nigerian writers who are often referred to as the third generation writers and "children of the post colony" (Adesanmi and Dunton 7).

Abani began writing at a very young age and published his first novel *Masters of the Board* (1985), while he was still a teenager. Two years after the publication of his first novel, he was arrested and imprisoned for six months on the allegation that his novel was a blueprint for the failed coup carried out by General Mamman Vatsa against Ibrahim Babangida. Soon after he was released, he was arrested for a second time due to his involvement in an anti-government guerrilla theatre while he was a university student. He was imprisoned at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison and was detained for one year. He was imprisoned for the third time in 1990 for writing a play *Song of a Broken Flute* for his university convocation that year. After eighteen months of imprisonment, out of which six months were spent in solitary confinement, Abani was able to escape with the help of bribes paid to prison officials by his friends. The writer immediately went into exile and settled in England for several years. He moved to the United States in 1999 and was a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California from 2007 to 2012. He is currently Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University, Illinois. Abani holds a B.A in English from Imo State University,

Nigeria, an M.A in Gender and Culture from Birkbeck College, University of London, an M.A in English and a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. He is the recipient of PEN USA Freedom-To-Write Award, the Prince Claus Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a California Book Award, a Hurston-Wright Legacy Award, a PEN Beyond the Margins Award, the PEN Hemingway Book Prize and a Guggenheim Award.

Due to his personal experiences of violence, it is not surprising that the theme of violence occupies a significant place in most of his works. Though personal experience of violence is not a pre-requisite for a critically engaging and nuanced representation of violence, it is a general expectation that a writer who was a victim of violence would be a vocal critic of violence who uses his art as a medium to eschew violence. But, whether the narrative offers a nuanced representation of violence that explores the multi-faceted nature and manifestation of violence, and creates a counter discourse on violence would ultimately depend on the author's art of narrativization. Scholars and critics on trauma studies have become increasingly concerned about stories of violence and trauma being reduced to mere sensation or spectacle that evokes the reader's pleasure. Miller and Tougaw have observed how accounts of extreme situations attract readership and state that "Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion" (2). At the outset, Abani's representation of violence often seems ambiguous, and is mostly devoid of categorical binaries of sensationalizing or moralizing. As distinct from entertainers and propagandists, a serious writer represents the complexity of the world and "bears witness" (Oates 35). This thesis examines Abani's narrativization of violence with an attempt to situate the complexities involved with the nature and manifestation of violence.

As a writer who has been imprisoned and witnessed violence at the hands of the military dictatorships in Nigeria, one cannot help but notice the author's deep personal intimacy with violence. As an emerging Nigerian writer he compels our attention to fresh perspectives on the socio-political life, and its un-talked of but all-pervasive lurking facets of violence besides other values and ideas. This thesis attempts to study four novels by Chris Abani, *GraceLand* (2004), *Becoming Abigail* (2006), *Song for Night* (2008), *The Virgin of Flames* (2008) and a poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic* (2007).

Many of Abani's narratives are situated in the socio-political unrest in Nigeria's national history. Though not all of his works deal with the nation's turbulent past or allude to it, violence still remains a pervasive theme in almost all of his works, and wields a significant influence on the lives of Abani's characters. *GraceLand* (2004) is the most widely read novel of Chris Abani. It is a novel that deals with the life of an Igbo teenager named Elvis and the hardships he faced growing up in poverty. Set against the backdrop of the military dictatorship in Nigeria, the novel moves back and forth between 1972 and 1983 as it chronicles the lives of Elvis and his family in their ancestral village in Afikpo to their lives after they relocated to Lagos. Living in the slums of Lagos and trying to eke out a living, life in the city seems even harder than in the village. Living with his drunkard father and his step-mother and her children, Elvis tries to earn a living by impersonating the rock and roll legend Elvis Presley by dancing for the wealthy white tourists. After failing to make good money from his impersonation, Elvis met Redemption who engages him for various odd jobs that include escorting wealthy women and transportation of certain undisclosed items, which they later discover to be trafficked children and human organs. The novel interweaves narrative of personal and domestic life of Elvis and his family both in the village and Lagos along with narrative that offers a glimpse of the society and political situation of the nation. Violence remains pervasive both in the traditional social structure represented by life in Afikpo and the

globalized and cosmopolitan, neoliberal social structure that Elvis witnesses in Lagos. Elvis and the characters bear the burden of violence in various facets and are either directly or indirectly affected by violence. The military dictatorship in Nigeria which aligns with the historical time in which the novel is set forms an important part of the plot, as the narrative portrays violence and oppression from the military as well as an attempt for a revolution to overthrow the military regime that builds up throughout the larger part of the narrative. Abuse of power, lack of law and order and proper enforcements give way to crimes and illegal activities in the streets of Lagos, and Elvis's ordeal shows the pervasive and almost casual nature of violence in Lagos. The new era of neo liberalism seem to open more doors for illegal trade, creating more violence and increases the gap between the rich and the poor. Apart from violence associated with the political conflict of the nation and the underbelly of the new neo-liberal economy, the narrative also portrays violence which is deeply connected with the traditional societal values rooted in patriarchy. Elvis and his cousin Efua are both raped by their uncle Joseph during their childhood, and Elvis develops a complex relationship with the patriarchal social values as the narrative offers the complex relations between violence and structures of power in the novel. The novel moves back and forth between two settings, Afikpo from 1972 to 1981 which shows the traditional social set up, and Lagos from 1983 onwards which depicts a globalized urban society. The book offers a brilliant insight into the life and culture of migrants and working class in Lagos, particularly the influence of American culture through music, film, and books. Apart from impersonating Elvis Presley, Elvis and his friends are quite well acquainted with James Baldwin, John Wayne, and the Everly Brothers, among several others. The novel achieves a beautiful blending of the life of Elvis Oke and the politics of his country.

In *Becoming Abigail* (2006), Abani tells the story of a girl who is a victim of sexual trafficking. It is a very tragic tale that details horrific accounts of physical and sexual violence

and the ensuing trauma of sexual abuse. But the novella is also a complex delineation of the protagonist Abigail's "becoming", her quest for a sense of identity that involves rituals and the narrative balances Abigail's physical victimhood and her struggle for inner transformation. Abigail, an only child raised by her father lives and grows up with stories and memories of her mother who died while giving birth to her. She was named after her mother Abigail by her grieving father, probably as an attempt to keep the memory of his late wife alive. Abigail's father attempts to quench his pain and grief by drinking as the narrative chronicles how Abigail is suffocated and troubled by her father's grief that led to a certain kind of obsession in which her father perpetually expects her to grow up to be like her late mother. Abigail is prevented from becoming her own woman not just by her father, but by the patriarchal society with its socially constructed notion of who a woman is supposed to be. The narrative centres on this complex attempt to live life in her own terms in a world where her whole life has been dictated by men. Not only did Abigail feel the pinch of societal normative on gender that assigns her specific roles and limits her as a girl, she understood sexual violence from men at a young age when she was raped by her cousin at the age of ten. Her father made arrangement for her to go to London with her cousin Peter who promises them to find a good job for her in London, after which her father committed suicide. Left with no immediate relative, Abigail follows Peter to London but found out that Peter actually took girls from her hometown for prostitution. Peter tortured her and chained her like a dog after she refused to sleep with a customer and fought back. She escaped and was found by the police, but she has no identity in London as she was smuggled into the country by Peter illegally. The traumatised Abigail found comfort and love in the hands of a social worker named Derek who was put in-charge of handling her case. Abigail's final break down came when Derek's wife discovered the two making love and Derek was fired from his job and charged for abusing a minor.

Song for Night (2008) deals with the story of a fifteen-year-old child soldier named My Luck. My Luck belongs to a platoon of child soldiers recruited to diffuse land mines during war. Their vocal chords have been cut off and they communicate using sign language. Though the war in the novella is suggestive of the Biafran war, the author refuses to situate the narrative in a specific historical context and presents a more allegorical representation of the impact of war and violence. It deals with the theme of victimhood of children forced to commit atrocities and how the political violence of war robs the children of their childhood. At the same time, it is also a deeply personal narrative that deals with the question of My Luck's innocence and guilt. Like Abani's other works the novella deals with the complex issue of the protagonist's attempt to come to terms with the guilt and scar of violence and find peace in death. The narrative, which has a dream-like quality, lacks temporality due to repetition and anachronism, as it attempts to represent and narrate the protagonist's deeply traumatic experiences. The first person narrative begins with My Luck regaining consciousness and recovering from a bomb blast, and his discovery that all his friends were killed in the explosion. The narrative deals with recollections of the circumstances that led to the blast and his witness of the violence of war, while he also struggles to survive and escape from the enemies and find his way home. But as the story progresses, there is a gradual and increasing indication that My Luck has already died and his narrative is an attempt to deal with his trauma and find peace in death. Abani's rendition of war in the novella distances itself from the conventional narratives on war that primarily focuses on horrific physical violence, but centers on complex issues of trauma and guilt that child soldiers and victims of violence often grapple with.

The Virgin of Flames (2008) deals with the story of a mural artist in Los Angeles named Black. Son of a migrant Nigerian father and a Salvadoran mother, Black's story and his art raise complex questions regarding race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion. Set

in the crumbling, beautiful parts of East L.A where Hispanic and African Americans live, the novel gives an insight into the life of the protagonist Black, a mural artist trying to make a living and also attempt to come to terms with his gender, sexuality, race and faith through his art. A great deal of Black's confusion comes from the clash between his orthodox upbringing and his quest for artistic liberation. Tensions between the desires of the body- its self-destructive urges, and the spirit as mediated by ritual, sex, and art features prominently in the novel. Born of an atheist Nigerian father who was a NASA scientist and a devout Catholic Salvadoran mother who raised him after his father died, Black's quest for the meaning of faith and spirituality continues to the end of the novel. Black uses his art as an attempt to come to terms with his internal struggles, and the narrative employs several symbols and images to dramatize Black's encounter with the dominant ideas and identities of race, gender, sexuality, and faith which often limit and position Black as a marginalized subject in the society. Set in East L.A in an area predominantly inhabited by Hispanics and African Americans, Black struggles for a sense of identity and the narrative portrays the tension between his orthodox upbringing and his quest for liberation. The novel begins with Black painting his face white and wearing a dress for his artistic experiment to paint the Virgin Mary. Black is also obsessed with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl. After Black's father died, his mother, a devout Christian took to beating him and forces him to confess before the Virgin and pray for a miracle. Probably haunted by this complex childhood relationship with religion and spirituality, Black is haunted by angel Gabriel who often appears before Black. Black's attempt to paint a mural of the Virgin results in a disturbing image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding an AK-47 rifle. The title *The Virgin of Flames* has been taken from Black's childhood incident where he set the Virgin Mary on fire at church during prayer. Black, who appears from a rooftop wearing makeup and a dress is mistaken for a miracle by the crowd who witness from a distance below. The novel which

ends with Black violently attacking Sweet Girl after a ritual-like incident in which she taught him how to conceal his penis with a tape in order to look like a girl invites a close observation of the complex nature of violence in the novel. Unlike Abani's other works selected for study, *The Virgin of Flames* is set in America, and the narrative is removed from the political violence in Nigeria which often gets reflected in his works. Nonetheless, violence is very much present in the novel, but is more pervasive and woven into the power structures of the society.

Kalakuta Republic (2007) is a book of poetry collection that is based around Abani's experience of political imprisonment in Nigeria. He faced imprisonment three times between 1985 and 1991 in Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison. Dedicated to the inmates who did not make it out of the prison alive, Abani narrativizes their suffering and violence committed against the prisoners with an attempt to refrain from idealizing anyone. Unlike the fictional narrative of his novels, his poems are more personal as they are witness narratives from his real life experiences. Though these poems deal with horrific and brutal accounts of violence and torture, there is an underlying sense of hope that runs through his poems that transcends these prison accounts from being cheap sensation.

African literature as a whole and Nigerian literature had their origins in myths, folktales, and legends centuries before the advent of colonialism. Modern African writing is generally regarded as literature that emerged out of the contact between Africa and the West. According to Mala Pandurang, "The modern African novel is a genre developed as a particular body of imaginative discourse primarily occupied with modes of resisting the role of the Western cultural hegemony in determining African states of consciousness" (2). Similarly, the origin of Nigerian literature in English "is largely due to a period in the history of Nigeria when she was occupied by the colonial powers who deemed it fit to institutionalize their language and culture by super-imposing these on the natives of an entity they decided to

call Nigeria” (Awoyemi-Arayela 30). For more than five decades, Nigerian Literature in English has addressed the struggle of a nation and its people, who experiences a painful transformation from colonisation, through independence to civil wars, coups, counter-coups and political instability.

The publication of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) by Amos Tutuola has been considered to be the first novel from Africa that gain recognition among Western literary audiences. However, Tituola was not strictly the first novelist from Africa to be published by a European publishing house. In 1906, Thomas Mofolo, the South African writer had published a novel in his native language which was later translated and published under the title *The Traveller of the East* in 1934 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London. In 1911, E. Casey-Hayford from Ghana published a novel which got translated into English under the title *Ethiopia Unbound*. In 1943, R. E. Obeng’s novel *Eighteenpence* written in English was published by Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd. in London. These three earlier African novelists share one common feature which is a certain reverence and awe for Christianity. This is not strange considering the role of Western education in their lives and some of these works were published by the church mission. But, Tituola’s writing marks a striking shift that broke away from Christianity. According to Charles R. Larson, “his use of the English language was notably original. Purists were shocked by Tituola’s irreverent use of the English language, and, as we shall see, the novel as a genre took on a slightly different shape because of Tituola’s imaginative use of Yoruba folk materials” (4). This tradition of breaking away from a Eurocentric model of writing while using form and language that is foreign continues to be a significant issue taken up by the first generation Nigerian writers. Resistance to colonialism, and reassertion of cultural identity through the novel soon became the distinct hallmark of literatures from Nigeria, as well as Africa at large.

Third generation Nigerian writing is a corpus in the making with a number of challenges posed by the question of what constitute this generation and this corpus. Along with writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Okey Ndibe, Ike Oguine and Uzodinma Iweala, the third generation writers largely focus their writings to an English-speaking audience with an attempt to represent the experience of those born and raised in a country marked by long historical conflicts. Scholars such as Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton attempt to loosely ascribe the label to those writers who were born after 1960, but also expressed how factors such as ideological leanings, responses to socio-political context, distinctive textual strategies, personal politics, self-definition et al need to be considered when ascribing literary schools, ages or generations. The first generation is concerned with “the cultural nationalist project of reaffirmation, self-assertion and delinking from centuries of Euromodernist misrepresentation” which “occasioned certain recourse to a politicized ritualism as the core of the textual response” (Adesanmi and Dunton 7). It comprises of writers from Wole Soyinka to Chinua Achebe, from JP Clark to Christopher Okigbo, from Wale Wagunyemi to Mabel Segun, to name a few. The second generation writings are often referred to as recognized for their revolutionary aesthetics. Writers such as Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Zainab Alkali, Tess Onwueme and Bode Sowande are regarded as the second generation writers. Contrary to the earlier generations, the third generation writing is characterised by an overarching absence of an ideological/discursive core, decentralization of narratives and dispersal in terms of thematic content. And there is also an attempt to create narratives that are more complex and hybrid. Within the third generation, writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta and Chris Abani are currently at the forefront with their novels. These authors enjoyed recognition outside Nigeria, and their works were published first in the USA or UK, with Nigerian and South African editions published subsequently. But equally significant in the

corpus are novelists such as Akin Adesokan, Jude Dibia, and Maik Nwosu whose works are not widely disseminated or enjoyed much recognition worldwide. Though they acknowledge the significance of the earlier generations in creating a literary tradition, there is also a conscious attempt to create art that goes beyond the confines of the existing traditions. Most of the third generation writers were born after colonialism, and hence concerned with “nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination” rather than the themes of resistance of colonialism and radical social changes that mark the earlier generations’ writings (Adesanmi and Dunton 16). According to Hamish Dalley:

A narrative of disaffiliation from generational precursors is thus connected to a politics of spatial detachment. The implied break from the past leads to a cosmopolitan future in which ethico-political belonging is disconnected from the nation-state. (Dalley 17)

This analysis is true especially in the writings of Chris Abani, and the texts selected for study in this thesis, with the exception of *GraceLand* are indicative of the author’s concern that goes beyond issues of nationhood and cultural identity. But, it is important to note that this kind of classification relies heavily on territorial and historical registers, and is important to explore the “more multilayered methods of historicization beyond the nation-generational approach” (Dalley 15).

Contrary to the view that the third generation writing moves away from concerns of the nation, there are also a number of critics who see continuity of the earlier tradition in the writings of the third generation Nigerian writers, and that their writings bear close resemblance with Achebe’s works which are primarily local and territorially demarcated. This argument has validity if one considers the surge in writings that deal with the Nigerian civil war, an important event in the nation’s history that has been revisited by several writers.

Madhu Krishnan argues that contemporary Nigerian civil war narratives are marked by the unfinished business of national reconciliation, and Obi Nwakanma observes that writings by Igbo authors reflect not only about the pain of the Biafran war but of the ethnic group's ambivalent attitude towards the Nigerian federation. Adeleke Adeeko considers that the predominant theme of transnational migration and displacement not as cynicism towards the idea of nation, but rather as a desire to redeem the nation by showing successful models from abroad that could be incorporated in governance and social life. Thus, though the main focus of their works is no longer just nation centric or postcolonial like the first generation writings which centre on building and claiming a national and cultural identity, political unrest and chaos destabilizing the nation still form a significant theme in many of their works. Timothy Brennan opines that the postcolonial novel is largely defined by "obsessive nation-centeredness" and a number of them "thematize the centrality of nation-forming while at the same time demystifying it from a European perch" (Brennan 64). According to Homi Bhabha, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" and the modern postcolonial novel deals with the dispersal or migration of memory by voicing the experiences of "the scattered people, their myths and fantasies" in an attempt to reshape the meaning of home (Bhabha 291). Literature in postcolonial Nigeria is closely connected to the idea of nationhood, and though the concerns of the third generation have definitely gone beyond those of the earlier generations, a certain strand of continuity could always be found.

Nigeria is, in its current formation, a hybrid state; a nation of multiple nations coalescing to form the basis of nationness and national belonging. One of the fundamental sources of its evolution is to be found in its literature, particularly in poetry, that most nationalist of genres, but significantly also, in the form of the novel, which constitutes much of the narrative of nation. (Nwakanma 1)

An attempt to study the third generation Nigerian writers and their works, majority of them who now reside in the western countries and whose body of work form part of a borderless, global, textual topography often raises questions on the relationship between the text and the nation space, and their “writings encompass the new attitudes, desires, values, and anxieties of the postcolonial nation” (Nwakanma 1). Though some critics maintain that writing that deal with the history of Nigeria is the hallmark of the third- generation novel, it is true that the idea of the nation and its centrality also took gradual changes with the third generation writers. The older narratives of nationalism are being replaced by a world which is more globalized, more uneven and more confused. Their works bear issues beyond the issue of the nation and confrontation with the colonial past. In an interview with Yogita Goyal, Abani said “About my work, it is in many ways post-national and global not only in its reach, but in its attempts to locate a very specific African sensibility without attempting to limit it with certain kinds of arguments about essentiality and so forth” (Goyal 229-230).

Hamish Dalley argues that the third generation writings need to be viewed keeping in mind “how fictional narratives are shaped by ambivalent spatio-temporal constructs that *encompass* and *exceed* the generational-national framework” (18). Many critics agree that *GraceLand* announces a new direction in African literature by replacing the old narratives of nationalism with a world that is more globalized, more uneven, and more confused. But Abani acknowledges the foundations laid by the earlier generations and expresses, “the sense that they were writing about ontological moments, leaning into history, and remaking the present is so strong in this third generation that it makes me happy to be part of it” (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 229). He also asserts that the transnational nature of his generation does not mean a complete turn away from the local. He acknowledges that the idea of a nation in the context of Africa is still in formation. At the same time, Abani also holds the view that Nigerian literature should widen its thematic concern from its focus on confrontation of the

West and opposition to colonialism. He states that “the time has come to begin to imagine and deal with more homegrown (albeit universal) concerns- gender, sexuality, family tyranny, history, and even hybridism” (Abani, “Of Ancestors” 25). Abani acknowledges the significance and powerful influence of writers such as Chinua Achebe as he expresses, “There is no living African writer who has not had to, or will not have to, contend with Achebe’s work. We are either resisting him- stylistically, politically, or culturally- or we are writing toward him” (Abani, “Our Living Ancestor”). But he is also aware of the ways in which African literature tends to be read representationally or anthropologically in the West, largely due to the success of Achebe. While his contemporary like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie bears closer resemblance to Achebe and his creation of an Igbo aesthetic nationality, Abani attempts to deal with more universal issues as he states his relationship with Achebe’s works, “It wasn’t until his death that I realized how much of my work was shaped by my relationship to his not as influence, but as rejection of influence, which can be argued to be a certain kind of influence” (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 233). Though Abani acknowledges that he would not be able to write if Achebe had not written, he resisted comparison with the likes of Achebe and believes that his generation’s concern is starkly different from that of the first generation. As much as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has been able to debunk myths and misconception of Africa and successfully offer an insider’s perspective of African cultures, it also becomes the yardstick for measurement of almost all literatures from Africa. Much of African literature is read in the West as anthropological representation of Africa and a lot of this has to do with Achebe’s immense success in creating an Igbo aesthetic nationality in most of his works.

War and violence form an important theme of many of the writings from Nigeria, as writers represent their social reality of conflict and instability. *Waiting for an Angel* by Helon Habila is a recipient of the Caine Prize in 2001. It is a novel that deals with the political

situation in Nigeria in the 1990s under the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. It deals with the story of a young man named Lomba who aspires to be a novelist, writing his book in his shabby tenement on Morgan Street which is often referred to as Poverty Street in Lagos. Lomba also works for a newspaper called the Dial but the free press is under attack and the Dial offices have been burnt down. Lomba is arrested due to his involvement in a demonstration for democracy and imprisoned for three years. The novel takes its readers on a journey into the poverty, corruption and violence rampant in the streets of Lagos, and brings out the sounds, sights and smells of the place and the people who inhabit it. The narrative that moves back and forth in time lends perspective into the political situation of the country and the chaos that afflicts its postcolonial history. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) is a novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers from Nigeria and winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The novel which won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2007 is set in Nigeria during the Biafran War, and the impact of the war is portrayed through the lives of five characters that include a professor, twin daughters of a wealthy businessman, a British citizen, and a male domestic help. The novel, which is quite faithful in its portrayal of the nation's history, shows the politics and issues of identity in post-colonial Africa. It is a narrative that tells of the past, especially of the Igbos, their pain, shame, and defeat in the Biafran War, and Adichie expresses that some of the issues that led to the war still remain pertinent in the present. The novel garners unstinted praise from Chinua Achebe, Joyce Carol Oates and Edmund White. It is considered to be the richest creative work to appear on the subject of the Biafran war. *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala and *War Games* by Dulue Mbachu which both came out in 2005 deal with the lives of boy soldiers in the war. Although Abani did not write specifically on the Biafran War, a reading of his works and his own life shows his deep connection with the Biafran War and the ensuing violence in Nigeria. *Kalakuta Republic*, his poetry collection is based on his

prison experiences under military dictatorship. His most well-known work *GraceLand* has the Nigerian Civil War as its backdrop, although the main focus of the novel is not about the war. *In Song for Night*, Abani deals with the story of a child soldier but abstains from naming the war because the story of the child soldier is intended to be allegorical. The devastating effect of the war and trauma associated with it have been revisited and narrativized by many writers because trauma associated with the war constitutes a significant aspect of the nation's collective memory and have a strong impact on issues of identity and history. Especially for the Igbos who were its worst victims, their shared trauma constitutes not just knowledge of past incidents but plays an active role as a part of their cultural memory which shapes and constructs their identity in the present time. This shows that despite diversity in theme and subject of writing, the question of national identity remains a pertinent subject for a number of writers. Abani's narrative and his quest as a writer have been deeply influenced by the historical and political changes of the country. His writing, especially his poetry is heavily influenced by his own personal experiences of violence and brutality during his days in Nigeria. With regard to the close connection between the new African writer and narrative of nationhood, Adesokan stated that "in the larger context of political decolonization, the fictional voice (or perspective) also functions as a mode of testimony, bearing witness to issues thematized as political or humanitarian emergency" (3). Similar view has been expressed by Spivak, who wrote "Testimony is the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other." (7)

Violence as a concept has undergone tremendous changes throughout the ages. It is a disturbing phenomenon that often inflicts lasting physical and mental trauma on its victims. Violence is not just an overt physical manifestation of force by the powerful towards the powerless. Its definition has been continually evolving with an increasing philosophical

interest that goes beyond its overtly physical manifestations to more covert psychological and institutional practices. According to James Gilligan:

Violence can be analyzed as the destruction of our physical and bodily existence, as well as its symbolic representations in language and other institutions. Violence, however, can also be analyzed at a more fundamental level. Phenomenologically viewed, it is not only destructive of pre-given sense, but also affects our being-in-the-world, i.e. our basic capacities for making sense. (Quoted in Staudigl 235)

Violence is a complex phenomenon that has been present in human society throughout the ages, and it operates within the structures of power in society and the complex cultural networks that fashion human relationships. Due to its significant role and presence in human society throughout history, literature is riddled with narratives of violence in various degrees and often portrays the relationship between power and violence that often intersect and overlap with each other. According to Michel Foucault:

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Foucault 93)

Narrativizing or narrative itself is as old as the history of mankind. It exists in a variety of forms throughout all places and societies. Narrative is present in all forms of representations such as myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, newspapers as well as other audio and visual mediums. Roland Barthes stated that narrative is a part and parcel of human society and is present in multiple forms:

...it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any

people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories... (Barthes 237)

Within the domain of literary representation, narratology occupies a significant area of study as it “both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects” (Culler 83). In representation, narrative becomes a crucial site of contestation and debate as it is a significant defining factor through which the human subject makes meaning out of the experiences. Experience and memory of incidents are organized by the human subject through narrative. Therefore, narrative is not generated by logical and scientific procedures but is subject to the human subject, which in turn is subject to various cultural and ideological influences. According to Bruner, “Cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (Bruner 3). The process of storytelling is often narrative constructions of identity that involves tensions and contradictions in its attempt to represent the subject in relation to the larger human society. Narrativizing produces gaps, fissures, and boundary trouble, and the subject’s position is never fixed or stable. The act of narrativizing is a process of identity construction because there is no single unified self that is capable of representing past experiences in its totality. In fact, narratives are positions or perspectives taken in the present from stories of the past.

Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although we have no compunction about calling stories true or false. (Bruner 4-5)

Even autobiographical narratives cannot claim to be representation of one absolute reality. “Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical,

subjective, political, and embodied” (Smith 375), and there cannot be life stories that articulate unified coherent selves. Further, the concept of an absolute reality as well as of a unified coherent self has been increasingly subjected to doubt in the contemporary time.

Narrative about violence has always been a significant part of literary representations of not just contemporary literature, but is overwhelmingly present throughout the ages from folklore and myth to lullabies and nursery rhymes. Abani’s narratives on violence, though not all strictly autobiographical are to a great extent self-representations as they are deeply influenced by his personal experiences of violence and more by manifestations of violence in socio-political environments of his time. The study proposes to probe not only varied vistas of violence in the Nigerian society but also the demystification of violence and its diverse modes in general. In Abani, violence is palpable, not exoticized, not exorcistically put under careful carpets but exposed to a degree that would shake humanity to its deep roots with self-doubt and uncertain self-awareness. Due to Nigeria’s troubled past as well as the chaos that continue, any creative writer in Nigeria would normally share and negotiate the cultural memory and contemporary challenges of life, as it seems with respect to the new generation of writers. As Nigeria has a troubled past and experiences still a troubled present, a number of influential factors may be kept in mind for the critical assessment of Abani, such as ethnic history and memory, colonial period, and postcolonial globalized era.

Right from the moment of the country’s independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, conflicts and socio-political disorders envelop Nigeria as the colonial administration had initiated the formation of the country “without taking into consideration religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences”(Tariq 10). The three largest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. In 1967, the Nigerian Civil War also known as the Biafran War broke out due to the attempted secession of the south eastern provinces of Nigeria as the self-proclaimed republic of Biafra. During this civil war which

lasted for three years, the number of death is estimated to be between one and three million. Except for a few years of the Second Republic between 1979 and 1983, military dictatorships, characterized by coups d'état and counter-coups continue in Nigeria till 1998. Due to this long history of war and violence, it is no wonder that many of the writers' works centre on the Nigerian Civil War. In addition to the problem of colonial legacy, coupled with political turmoil within the country is the impact of globalization, a global phenomenon for which ethnicities in Nigeria are apparently not ready. But, this is not to say that the problem of Nigeria is a recent phenomenon that occurs solely due to the negative impacts of globalization. In fact, the problem of establishing a national identity is an issue that has continued within the country for ages.

Contrary to normative wisdom in postcolonial literary and cultural studies, the rise of diffused production, or the formal organization of globalized capitalism in late 20th century, could not result in the fragmentation of the Nigerian national imaginary because the work of inventing that nation, which started during the independence struggle, was never completed. The nation to be fragmented is yet to be created. (Adeeko 12)

The theme of violence plays a dominant role in many of Abani's works. Growing up under military dictatorships in Nigeria and witnessing terror at first hand, Abani's depiction of violence are deeply rooted in his own personal experiences. Having been imprisoned several times, put on a death row and having witnessed brutal tortures in prison himself, memories of war, violence and the unfathomable sense of terror and wound that war inflicted on people motivate his writings. In the introductory note to Abani's poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic* (2002), Kwame Dawes writes:

Always below the surface is the pain of the political situation in Nigeria, the memory of the deaths, the memory of his own fear, the residual nightmares of his life-they are all there, brimming beneath the surface like tears held in. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 18)

With regard to the impact of war Abani said in an interview to Hope Wabuke, “When a war is over, it takes another ten years for a war to be really over”(Abani, “The Middle-Class”). It is indeed true that the ensuing trauma that comes with acts of violence have long lasting, deep impacts on the victims. And Abani’s stories bear testimony to the traumatic effects of violence on human beings. Yet, as observed by poet Kwame Dawes, he is careful not to do a pornographic representation of pain or suffering. His art is an attempt to convey his experiences and allow himself to be vulnerable without sensationalizing violence. “This is what the art I make requires of me; that in order to have an honest conversation with a reader, I must reveal myself in all my vulnerability. Reveal myself, not in the sense of my autobiography, but in the sense of the deeper self, the one we keep too often hidden even from ourselves” (Abani, “Ethics and Narrative”).

Abani was arrested in 1985 because his first novel *Masters of the Board*, which he first published when he was sixteen, was considered to be the blueprint for the failed coup carried out by General Mamman Vatsa. He was detained for about six months and was released. He was again arrested for the second time in 1987 when he was in university because of his involvement in a guerrilla theatre group. He was imprisoned for a year in Kiri Kiri maximum security prison. On his experience, he wrote:

In that year, I came to question everything I had believed in before. The only thing I never gave up on was the conviction that there can be no concession in the face of

tyranny and oppression. I also learnt how truly ephemeral our mortality is.
(Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 9)

He was arrested for the third time in 1990 for writing a play called *Song of a Broken Flute* for the convocation ceremony of Imo State University. He was incarcerated for eighteen months, out of which six months were spent in solitary confinement. His experience of violence and brutality in prison, and events leading to his imprisonment forms the basis of the deep personal and painful poems in this collection. However, in his attempt to represent pain and brutality of prison experience the author made conscious effort not to idealise anyone. These horrifying experiences made the author reflect and question humanity as he wrote:

And now? Every day is a careful balance fought between the despondency that threatens to swamp me and the incredible joy of living. I think that my art, my poetry, prose and music come from these cracks in my being, these ley lines where spirit is said to reside. I have come out of the horror of that experience having lost my faith in the inherent goodness of humanity, yet curiously appreciating even more the effort it takes to be good. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic*10)

Great art has the ability of transforming pain and suffering into something beautiful. Abani's poetry, despite being ridden with memories of prison experiences has the ability to take its readers beyond pain and suffering. His narrative renders his deep personal experiences in raw and simple manner without any discourse on ideologies. In the poem "Portal", the author chronicles his romantic notion about being arrested for his art, admitting his own naivety as well as a certain sense of self-indulgence.

When first arrested

18.

Excited by the possibilities of fame;

Inflamed by

Legends of political prisoners: sure that

Amnesty would free me. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 22)

But life in prison is nothing as imagined by the young poet. The reality of price that one has to pay for truth and freedom comes in the form of extreme brutality of prison life. But the poems in this collection are attempts to stand up for humanity and for one's beliefs despite dangers and sufferings. It is a deep belief and hope in the essential goodness of humanity, despite all the circumstances around the poet telling him otherwise. It chronicles a voice that refuses to be silenced despite the difficulties and hardships because the poet sees no other alternative. Despite the horrific accounts of prison experiences, one can find traces of the poet's quest for hope because he knows no other way and he is horrified of the alternative. The poem aptly ends with a quote from Fela Anikulapo Kuti "Truth, my young friend is a risky business" (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 24). The poem "Rasa" is also dedicated to Fela Kuti, the Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, musician, composer and human rights activist. The title of the poetry collection "Kalakuta Republic" has also been used by Abani in reference to Kuti's personal compound that housed his family, band members, and recording studio where he created music that opposed the Nigerian military regime. The poem "Rasa" which has a note "For Fela Anikulapo Kuti" reads:

A regular. Nicknamed 'Customer',

he even renamed his house Kalakuta Republic,

to honour the death

of conscience, (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 27)

Despite the accounts of horror about prison life, Abani chooses to use titles that resonate hope, even when the content and subject of these poems are that of pain and suffering. Apart from “Rasa” titles such as “Ahimsa”, “Passion Fruit”, “Boddhisatva”, “Ode to Joy”, “Heavensgate” et al are chosen although mostly in a subversive manner.

In its attempt to analyse and examine Abani’s representation of violence in his narrative, this thesis incorporates theoretical frameworks ranging from the field of social sciences, trauma theory, to narrative theory. The works of Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Zizek, Cathy Caruth as well as several other seminal ideas on violence and narrative theory have been utilized for this study. The thesis analyses Abani’s narrative based on these theoretical frameworks in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of Abani’s representation of violence in his works.

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Chapter II

Power Structures and Violence

This chapter proposes to look into the relationship between violence and power in the narrative of Chris Abani. Some relevant existing definitions and perspectives on the concept of violence as well as power would help manoeuvre the focus and mould the logic of this chapter. The chapter attempts to situate violence in the selected texts for study within the prevailing power structures and look into the significance of power and its role in the narrative.

Violence remains a disturbing subject whose nature and manifestation lies within the complex cultural network within the human society. Due to its omnipresence in the human society throughout the ages, it gets represented in various art forms, and literature has often attempted to represent violence as a trope for relationships of power and domination. There are various definitions and conceptions of violence, and the concept of power is often related and linked to violence and its manifestations. According to James Gilligan:

Violence can be analyzed as the destruction of our physical and bodily existence, as well as its symbolic representations in language and other institutions. Violence, however, can also be analyzed at a more fundamental level. Phenomenologically viewed, it is not only destructive of pre-given sense, but also affects our being-in-the-world, i.e. our basic capacities for making sense. (Qtd. in Staudigl 235)

Michel Foucault conceives of power as dispersed and pervasive, rather than the general conception of power as coercion, domination and an authoritarian force. Power in the Foucauldian sense is neither an agency nor a structure. It is not concentrated or possessed, but constituted through accepted forms of knowledge that pervades human society and is in

constant flux and negotiation. Foucault's concept of power is thus not just coercive or repressive.

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 93)

There are some political theorists who draw a parallel between violence and power, and hold the view that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power. C. Wright Mills opines that all politics is a struggle for power, and the ultimate kind of power is violence. On the contrary, Hannah Arendt, an established scholar on the subject of violence offers a clear distinction between violence and power. Similar to Foucault's idea of power, she observes that power is much more pervasive and complex than strength, force, and authority. Therefore, power is not the same with violence nor does it necessarily lead to violence. According to Arendt, "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (*On Violence* 44). She argues that power operates in the form of persuasion but violence, which is instrumental in character, has the tendency to destroy power. Power and violence usually appear together but are distinct phenomena which are actually antithetical in their nature.

Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears when power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it. (Arendt, *On Violence* 56)

She challenges the conception of power as the rule of an individual, group, or state over others, a concept which often leads to the conclusion that the ultimate form of power will necessarily lead to violence, and hence the appropriation of the term power with the term violence. Power and violence according to Arendt are not only distinguishable; they are antithetical. She conceptualizes that violence operates without reason and is therefore starkly different from power. While power is pervasive and persuasive, violence is instrumental in nature.

Violence can remain rational only if it pursues short term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and to bring them to public attention. (Arendt, *On Violence* 79)

Based on this argument, the study focuses the function of power in Abani's narrative that goes beyond the traditional concept of power as "power over" or power as an authority or instrument of coercion towards a Foucauldian concept that power is everywhere. This notion of power that pervades human inter-relationships creates structures of power in human society, though power per se is not a structure. This chapter attempts to situate how Abani's narrative on violence is interconnected with the power structures of the society which the characters inhabit. Power relations in Abani's narrative often play a significant part in the social structure that led to outbursts of manifest violence. However, this is not to consider power as inherently violent or necessarily authoritarian.

Understanding of violence as a concept has undergone tremendous progress. It can no longer be understood only in terms of overt physical manifestation of force. Its definition has been continually evolving with an increasing philosophical interest that goes beyond its overtly physical manifestations to more covert psychological and institutional practices.

There are theorists who gave broader definitions of violence other than the generally accepted notion of violence that brings about physical destruction and coercion. Theorist Johan Galtung used the notion of structural violence which remains a useful concept in peace studies and posited that “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (168). Galtung’s concept of structural violence is basically “violence that results in harm but is not caused by a clearly identifiable actor” (Vorobej 84). It is a kind of violence which is present in the structure of human society itself, rather than isolated acts of violence upon some individuals by other violent human beings. His definition of violence extends beyond the physical, beyond the individual, and beyond the intentional. Almost similar to Galtung’s concept of structural violence, philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek came up with the concept of ‘systemic’ violence in his work *Violence* (2008). Systemic violence, according to Zizek is violence which is inherent in human social structure. This systemic violence forms the normal state of things from which we perceive subjective violence -violence which is performed by a clearly identifiable agent. Systemic violence “is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent... It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence” (Zizek 2). While physical violence in the forms of bombings, terrorist attacks or mass shootings occupies news headlines and therefore easily grabs our attention, it is easy to overlook systemic violence due to its seemingly harmless nature. But people can be “negatively affected –harmed- by social institutions even if no individual person intentionally harms them” (Govier 65) and the harm done by systemic violence in many cases could be far more damaging. Thus, violence according to this conception extends beyond the physical, the individual, and the intentional.

The terms “structural violence” and “systemic violence” will both be used in the deliberation that follows.

Thus, this chapter argues that violence and power are reasonably distinct but power relations in society often contribute to violence. The existing structures of power in society constitute what Žižek calls systemic violence. This systemic violence often provides the basis for manifest physical violence in Abani’s narrative as well. Violence per se operates without reason and “rarely creates power” (Arendt, *On Violence* 89) and it is a weapon of people who lack the persuasive nature of power and knowledge. But the systemic violence that facilitates violence is often a product of power structures that exist in the society. Though violence in its manifest form appears prominent in Abani’s narrative, it is significant to look into systemic violence and the role of power which constitute the smaller narrative regarding violence. Abani’s accounts of violence in his narratives invite analysis both at the level of the individual characters and the society that constitutes their life situations. As a writer whose life has been scarred by his own personal witness of violence and torture, Abani’s writings portray man’s encounter with violence and trauma, including how experiences of violence and trauma affect his characters’ identities. At the same time, his works are also deeply situated in conflicts and political turmoil which condition the lives of the characters in his narratives. Due to his own experience of violence and terror under military dictatorships in Nigeria, Abani’s depiction of violence has an urgency of his own personal memories. As a result, in his narratives the personal and the social structures of violence get intermingled. In the introductory note to Abani’s poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic* (2007), Kwame Dawes writes:

Always below the surface is the pain of the political situation in Nigeria, the memory of the deaths, the memory of his own fear, the residual nightmares of his life—they are

all there, brimming beneath the surface like tears held in. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic*18)

GraceLand (2004) is a novel that deals with the story of a teenager named Elvis who tries to escape from his miserable life in the slums of Lagos. Narrative about Elvis's personal struggles and growing up have been interwoven with the broader historical narratives of political violence and turmoil, civil war, and extreme socio-economic inequality that the nation witnesses. The characters' lives and their everyday struggles cannot be isolated from the broader political turmoil of the society that they inhabit, and Abani's narrative weaves together violence at various layers, as Matthew Omelsky remarks,

Echoing the state's political violence that terrorizes society, he creates spatial allegories of urban dilapidation, domestic allegories of familial violence and even bodily allegories of physical and psychological deterioration. These ubiquitous layers of violence constitute the terrain upon which the characters in *GraceLand* navigate and the core of their precarious existence. (85)

Elvis and his family relocated to Lagos from their ancestral village in Afikpo with hopes of a better life in the city that witnessed rapid development and modernization. But the new neoliberal economy and globalization created a society that is starkly divided on the basis of wealth and led to loss of several Igbo traditional practices. The vast majority of the population constituted by people like Elvis are victims of the systemic violence created by the neoliberal economy. Elvis who got his name after his mother's love for the rock and roll legend Elvis Presley and his experiences in the city reflect the hybrid culture and the emerging cosmopolitan society that Timothy Brennan terms as the "meetings and mixings of distinct national and ethnic styles" (39). But the neoliberal economy created a new class of slum dwellers like Elvis and his family. Their life and status in the city is worse than their

previous life in their ancestral village. Elvis's first impression of the city after he arrived in Lagos highlights the stark division between the rich and the poor:

[He] let his mind drift as he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? He wondered. He hadn't known about the poverty and violence of Lagos until he arrived. It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavoury parts. People who didn't live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels. (Abani, *GraceLand*7)

It is due to abject poverty that Elvis at sixteen has to struggle to earn a living by impersonating Elvis Presley in return for some money from the wealthy tourists who are mainly whites. As he jumps from one job to another and navigates the underbelly of life in Lagos, the novel chronicles Elvis's moral dilemma between his involvement in illegal acts and his attempt to uphold the moral sense in a situation that is menaced by the immediate necessity of having to earn a living. Elvis found a job as a guard for transportation of certain undisclosed items through his friend named Redemption, and subsequently discovered that they were actually involved in human organ trade and human trafficking. They fled the scene after this shocking discovery but Redemption's argument "No forget de whites who create de demand" (Abani, *GraceLand* 243) significantly uncovers the dark facet. The scenario portrays how the few men who carry out the dirty job are not the only people responsible for the inhumane act, but draws attention on the much bigger picture of the dirty, violent trade. Juxtaposed with slum dwellers like Elvis are people with "beautiful brownstones set in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ocher, elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings and cars that were new and foreign" (Abani, *GraceLand* 7-8). It is ironic that the constant construction that is taking place provides an income for the slum dwellers that are "at once in awe of its grandeur, economically invested in its continued

growth, and increasingly disconnected from its promise of a glamorous existence” (Mason 207). Much of the corruption and violence in the novel is systemic, and people like Elvis are to a great extent merely helpless partakers who are to earn in order to survive. The real perpetrators are not easy to locate because they are not necessarily individuals or even groups of people, as Zizek’s criticism of capitalism reveals:

Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions, but is purely ‘objective’, systemic, and anonymous. (11)

The narrative in *GraceLand* portrays violence that goes beyond the physical or individual intention. It results from relations of power which created social structures in which violence and exploitation is inbuilt in the way that the society functions. It created a society in which dominant groups exert power and influence in society, and people in the margins such as Elvis are tossed about and victimized. This systemic violence has been normativized in society and hence, it is not easy to locate the cause of violence and its pervasive nature. Zizek stated that while the overt perpetrators of violence such as the religious fundamentalists and the terrorists commit violent acts that occupy news headlines, the capitalists are the agents of systemic violence through their participation in upholding an economic system that causes violent acts. Although the capitalists made a number of contributions to social welfare, these seemingly benevolent actions according to Zizek do not redeem them from their complicity and co-responsibility in the humanitarian crises.

Charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation. In a superego blackmail of gigantic proportions, the developed countries ‘help’ the undeveloped with aid, credits and so on, and thereby avoid the key issue, namely their

complicity and co-responsibility for the miserable situation of the undeveloped.

(Zizek 19)

The new era of neoliberalism not only gave rise to violence, but poses a huge challenge on the traditional life and values. Commodification of the body in the forms of prostitution, human trafficking and human organ trade is evident in the novel. As Elvis impersonates the rock and roll legend Elvis Presley, whose name he has also adopted, the novel offers a panoramic view of the loss of several Igbo rituals, having been streamlined for the convenience of modern life. The novel explores the underbelly of life in Lagos, a city that progresses towards modernization and globalization by depicting the rise of violence, prostitution, human trafficking et al. After prolonged exposure to poverty and violence beginning from childhood, the traditional Igbo life seems to have nothing promising to offer to Elvis. His redemption at the end of the novel comes in the form of leaving his homeland for America, in pursuit of a better future. Elvis's departure for America by using his friend's passport whose name is Redemption symbolizes an abandonment of one's roots in search of redemption in a foreign land.

Apart from the systemic violence that pervades the narrative of *GraceLand*, there is the more manifest political violence that runs throughout the novel. The narrative that juggles between Elvis's childhood in Afikpo in 1972 and his present ordeal in Lagos in 1983 has the backdrop of military dictatorship, and chaos of the aftermath of the Biafran War. Elvis's cousin Innocent was a child soldier in the Biafran War. As his name suggests, he is robbed of his childhood and his innocence due to the political situation in his country. Two years after the war ended, Elvis noticed how Innocent would wake up in the middle of the night, screaming. His grandmother Oye told him that "Innocent screamed because the ghosts of those he had killed in the war were tormenting him" (Abani, *GraceLand* 20). Due to the political power structure, there is an obvious lack of law and order, and violence becomes a

part of life in the streets of Lagos under the military regime. On one occasion, Elvis was almost killed by a Colonel just for bumping into him while dancing at a crowded club. Had his friend Redemption not intervened, he could have been imprisoned or killed.

“Dis your friend is a lucky man. The Colonel has killed people for this kind of disrespect,” Jimoh said.

“But I did nothing,” Elvis protested.

Redemption and the soldiers laughed.

“Dis your friend is a hothead. He did not learn his lesson, I see,” Jimoh said.

“What lesson?” Elvis asked.

“Dat dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want,” Jimoh replied.
(Abani, *GraceLand* 121)

In this kind of society, violence or the threat of violence becomes a part of the social structure. A sense of fear forces people into obedience, but there is lack of persuasion or conviction to obey. The military dictatorship forms an important part of the power structure that coerces people into obedience with violence. This corroborates Arendt’s view that, “Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power” (*On Violence* 53). Since violence lacks power in the true sense, it essentially lacks the capacity to influence and is merely an instrument. As a result, there already is an emerging revolutionary group in the novel headed by a man named The King of Beggars. It is obvious that the military regime has the ability to coerce people into obedience through violence, but people also make it their life mission to overthrow that regime. A speech by one young man at Freedom Square before a gathering of people who want to overthrow the

military regime shows how power is rooted in collective consent, while violence simply evokes more violence:

“...A country often becomes what its inhabitants dream for it. Much the same way that a novel shapes the writer, the people’s perspective shapes the nation, so the country becomes the thing people want to see. Every time we complain that we don’t want to be ruled by military dictatorship; but every time there is a coup, we come out in the streets to sing and dance and celebrate the replacement of one despot with another one. How long can we continue to pretend we are not responsible for this? How long...?” (Abani, *GraceLand* 155)

In *Becoming Abigail* (2006), the theme of human trafficking has been explored through the ordeal of the protagonist Abigail Tansi who is a victim of sexual slavery. Raised by her melancholic father due to the death of her mother at childbirth, Abigail was taken to London by a cousin named Peter who tried to force her into prostitution. She was chained and physically tortured by Peter for many days. Her father committed suicide just before she left for London, and she is absolutely helpless in London because she was taken to the country by Peter using a fake passport. Many of Abani’s characters are people from the marginalised section of society who are forced victims or are indirectly victimised by the social structures that they inhabit. Power relations between Abigail, the victim and Peter the perpetrator of violence could be located within the gender and class structure. The story of Abigail narrativizes the deep pain and horror of human trafficking from one part of the world to another. Abani draws attention to the fact that the female body bears the violence of societies across continents. Narratives about displaced peoples are an emerging trend in literature, and Amitav Ghosh in this context is of the view that we do not yet possess literary forms which could truly express the experiences of global migrants. He believes that this emerging reality offers “[a] radical challenge not just to writing, but to much of modern culture, to the idea of

distinguishable and distinct communities or civilizations” (Ghosh 30). Despite the protagonist’s ordeal and possible suicide at the end, the novel is essentially a bildungsroman in which the protagonist progresses towards self-realization and self-possession. A close observation of the narrative shows that the rape and brutal violence inflicted on her by Peter is not an isolated case of violence where Peter is the lone demon. A more systemic violence had already been inflicted upon her from childhood due to the baggage of her gender in a patriarchal and gendered society. The final manifest violence from Peter seems to be a culmination of the systemic violence that created conducive environment for exploitation of the female body. The narrative is riddled with accounts of how Abigail’s entire life has been largely dictated by the desires and wishes of men as the narrative expresses, “None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her. That she wore bronze lipstick, or had a beautiful smile that was punctuated perfectly by dimples” (*Becoming Abigail* 26). All the men she had been with had failed to ‘see’ her. The fact that her fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin molested her and threatened to kill her if she tells anyone shows how men starting from childhood have been raised to take advantage of women. The only time she experienced love and developed a feeling that she has not been used by a man is when she had an affair with Derek, a social worker placed in charge of her after she escaped from Peter’s home and was found by the police. Though her feelings for Derek seem genuine, it is ironic that Peter who is a married man carries out an affair with a person under his care who also happens to be a minor. Regardless of her feelings, it is arguably true that even Derek also took advantage of her. Right from her days under her father’s roof, Abigail struggles for a sense of ‘self’ because her identity has been wholly constructed by people other than herself. The fact that she has a name that is exactly like her mother’s name is symbolic of her lack of an individual identity. Caught up in other people’s expectation of her as a woman, including her own father who expects her to perform the role of a woman modelled after her mother, Abigail never got

the chance to be her own woman. Though his father did not mistreat her deliberately, Abigail is bereft of the power to define her sense of self. She has been made aware of the expected role of a woman not just from her father who raised her, but from every point of intersection with the outside society that is structured with patriarchy. The fact that she continues to live in the shadow of her dead mother is highlighted in the narrative through several references of Abigail the protagonist as “Abigail, this Abigail” (*Becoming Abigail* 44), reiterating her presence and attempting to put her story at the centre of the narration. In a scene where young Abigail tries to discuss about her menstruation with her father who is the only adult in the family, Abani dramatizes how the female body is controlled by means of socially constructed code of decency. Her father’s reaction, despite his attempts to be a good father highlights the deep bias against women inherent in the societal norms on decency.

He looked away uncomfortably. “Abigail! How can you bring that up, eh? I was just about to ask you to make dinner.”

“But Dad.”

“Your mother would never have talked like this, you know? She knew the right way to conduct herself,” he said. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 46)

The title of the novella *Becoming Abigail* resonates the ground breaking idea on gender postulated by Simone de Beauvoir that one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman, which is shown through the novella’s emphasis on ‘becoming’ in its title as well as in the narrative. Various instances in the narrative suggest that womanhood or gender is not an essence but a social construct, a role that one embraces, often by performance. Judith Butler reiterated the idea that gender is a social construct and argues against the fixed notion of gender identity. She stated that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be

its results” (25). The irony is that performativity is not a free choice in a society that systemically turns on violence. When Abigail made love with Derek, she felt that she was “...giving. For the first time, she wasn’t taken. And she wept for her joy” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 52). Her sexual intimacy with Derek culminates with her first feeling of liberation from the constraints of having to fit into the role of another woman which she could never fulfil. She expressed that “Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking” (52). This act of becoming subverts narratives on gender that attempt to pigeonhole women and the body functions as a site of resistance and liberation. Abigail’s self-immolation in the story which is termed as ‘exorcism’ and ‘cauterization’ (34) seems to be an attempt on her part to claim ownership of her body in a world where her existence has been perpetually defined by others. The words she inscribed on her body “*Not Abigail, My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody*” (34) signify her desperate attempt to break away from her existence as the shadow of her mother Abigail as well as people’s expectation of her as a woman, and gain agency over her body. One of the foremost writers on African Feminism, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, argues that “a woman’s body is her inherent property”(547). Abigail’s ritual that involves burning patterns on her skin and making permanent marks could symbolize Abigail’s claim of ownership and control of her body. After she made love with Derek, she went into the kitchen and made several dots at various locations on her body with hot burning needle. She then showed the words and the new dot marks she made on her body to Derek and explained to him:

“This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here,” and she was down on her stomach, “is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother’s. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don’t you see?” and she showed him the words branded on her skin... “This is my mother,” she was saying. “This is my

mother. Words. And words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail.”
(Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 53)

It is noteworthy that words represent the mother while Abigail is merely represented in dots without language. This could symbolize Abigail’s resistance of existing dominant narratives regarding who a woman is supposed to be, just like people expect her to be like her mother. Words are powerful medium of narrative, often used as a mode of control and obedience. Abigail’s branding of dots on her skin could be read as her resistance of societal narratives on gender roles and claim of ownership of her body. In the poem entitled “Caliban” from *Kalakuta Republic* (2007), this sense of the body is corroborated. Abani vividly portrays how imprisonment of the body and the ensuing violence took away the essence of a man and cloud him with fear and uncertainty about existence.

Fear grows on you,

smooth like well worn trouser buttocks.

Inmates devise elaborate schemes to

keep from being released, because

After twenty years in hell, heaven is too

terrible a possibility to contemplate. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 64)

Violence against Abigail is not an isolated act because systemic violence against Abigail as a result of her gender began from childhood which culminated in physical violence and her final breakdown at the end of the novella. In her upbringing as a girl child, there were several societal conditioning which created conducive environment for men to suppress women. Peter is not a lone wolf, but a product of society that marginalizes and objectifies

women which further led to normativization of violence against the female body. Abigail lost her virginity at the age of ten to her fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin, who gave her a bag of sweets and whispered, “I will kill you if you tell anyone” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 28). Before she met Derek, Abigail never understood love or real intimacy even though she had been with a few men. The men she had known wanted her either for gratification of physical desires or to gratify their ego and treated her as a trophy to show it off. The patriarchal society that structures Abigail’s reality systemically strips women of their voice, and violence against the female body becomes the last and most extreme method of control. It was her father and Peter who made the decision that she should go to London with Peter and the narrative indicates how casually she was left out in this decision that concerns her. “She had felt caught in the sheath of men’s plans” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 75) aptly sums up how she feels about her entire life as a woman.

The Virgin of Flames (2008) is a story about a mural artist in Los Angeles named Black, his struggle with his wounded past and his quest to make meanings out of his life. Gender and sexuality are important aspects of Black’s life story. As a struggling artist Black does not have enough money to hire models for his paintings, and on one occasion he dressed up as a woman in order to paint the Virgin of Guadalupe:

Since he was broke he couldn’t afford to hire any models, which is why he was sitting in front of the mirror trying on face paint. He intended to dress up as her and use himself as a model, painting a more detailed cartoon from his reflection. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 5)

This seems like a practical necessity faced by a struggling artist, but what added complexity to the issue is Black’s own confusion with his sexuality and his obsession with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl. Black’s deceased father was an Igbo man from Nigeria and under

the fear of an evil spirit that threatened to kill all male offspring in his family before turning six, Black was dressed up as a girl till the age of seven. Black's perspective on gender and sexuality is also deeply influenced by his late mother, an over-zealous Christian who told him that he is his punishment from God for getting pregnant before she was married to Black's father. She gave the name Black to him as a reminder of her shame and emptiness, and often forced his son to confess before the Virgin. As a result, Black seems to be caught up with a moral dilemma between the sacred and the profane, with his early zealous religious upbringing haunting him in the form of angel Gabriel. This deep confusion manifested in one of his artistic attempts to paint a mural of the Virgin which finally turned out to be a disturbing image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding what appears to be an AK-47.

There are various instances in the novel which suggest that Black masks his latent desire to subvert gender norms with an artistic experiment as he could not allow himself to dress as a woman because of his deeply religious upbringing. He is curious about his sexuality but also seems to suffer from internalised homophobia due to social and religious conditioning. He could accept his infatuation for the transsexual stripper Sweet Girl because she identifies herself as a woman and he justifies his attraction towards her as this is seemingly not a homosexual attraction. Even though "he had known Sweet Girl was a transsexual...he couldn't stop thinking of her as a girl. It was the only way Black could accept his desire for her" (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 28). Despite being an artist in Los Angeles, a liberal and cosmopolitan environment, Black inwardly carries the burden of his race and sexual orientation. His deep confusion with gender and sexuality could largely be a result of internalised homophobia where individuals are subjected to society's negative perceptions regarding LGBTQ people and turn those ideas inward and subscribe to those negative perceptions. Black's psychological turmoil and confusion coincides with the

definition of internalised homophobia by Meyer and Dean as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (161). This phenomenon is a part of the larger problem of minority stress which is defined as “some kind of conflict or disharmony between the minority member and the dominant social environment. For gay men and lesbians, this conflict is expressed in discordant values and norms regarding sexuality, intimacy, and, more generally, human existence and purpose” (Meyer and Dean 161). Black is caught up in the complex web of power relations that created systemic violence against the marginalized characters in the narrative on the basis of race, class, religion, gender, and sexual identities. Whiteness, Christianity and heterosexuality form the dominant power structure which the narrative perpetually attempts to subvert. Through performance, mimicry, as well as rejection, the narrative subverts these dominant identities. The narrative created a liminal space for marginal identities to emerge by doing away with binaries. But Black, the individual is capable of resistance and subversion only to a certain extent through his art as these power structures are often too dominant and pervasive, often posing limits on individuals. The title of the novel *The Virgin of Flames* is itself subversive; it conjures an image of a burning Virgin Mary, having been taken from a scene in which Black set the statue of the Virgin on fire during his childhood. After constant beatings from his mother who forces her to confess his sins and pray for a revelation of the Virgin, nine-year-old Black felt that he heard a voice during mass on Sunday.

She asked him to free her. Demanded. Ordered. Compelled...

His mother was on her knees, eyes closed, pounding out the act of contrition on her chest, oblivious to the world when he snuck away. Stopping in front of the statue, Black lifted one of the votive candles and placed it behind her, by the old parchment dry robes she wore and snuck back to his place next to his mother. The

flame caught just as the priest was yelling at Jesus to come to his aid and show the congregation a sign, “to come like Yahweh to Elijah,” in a voice all fire.

So.

She became the Virgin of Flames.

Perhaps it had been a miracle. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 134)

In Black’s final encounter with Sweet Girl where she exposed her body to him and taught him how to look like her, he was curious but said to her “You know I’m not gay,” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 280) reasserting his fear of embracing his sexuality. Black then violently attacked Sweet Girl in a sudden moment of frenzy, apparently due to his realization that Sweet Girl mirrors the person he is deep inside but which he is afraid to embrace because of his internalised homophobia. It is ironic that violence against Sweet Girl is not from a heterosexual man, but from a person who struggles with his own masculinity and gender identity. The novel is a chronicle of the deep turmoil and psychological conflict that Black deals with in coming to terms with societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. He is a victim of systemic violence that structures his personality as well as his reality beginning from his childhood, and he lacks agency. His act of violence, though not justifiable, seems to erupt from deep frustration and anger against societal normatives created by the structures of power that exist.

The climactic scene of the novel in which Black, who appeared at a rooftop wearing a wedding gown is mistaken by the “crowd of the faithful gathered below” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 288) as the Virgin is symbolic of Butler’s theory of gender performativity. According to Judith Butler:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance,

of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (25)

The scene affirms that the ‘sacred’ is not an essence but a construct of society based on its mass acceptance. This reiterates Foucault’s idea that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, and Arendt’s view that “*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (*On Violence* 44). The absence of essence behind gender identity and its performativity has been dramatized in the scene where people blindly accepts the bleeding Black in a wedding gown as the virgin because Black in this scene unintentionally performs a role that seems to fit the image of the Virgin for the spectators below. The sacred in religion or other institution achieves its sanctity not because of its essential quality but because of the power of collective consent of acceptance as the sacred.

He should do something about it, he thought. Tell everyone the truth. There was no Virgin, it was him in a dress, a stolen dress, on the roof of the spaceship. He couldn’t let them go on believing. Not when they were making their kids sleep outside in tents. But how? (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 93)

The fact that Black, a person of black colour could be mistaken from a distance as the Virgin due to face paint and costume symbolize the socially constructed nature of gender and racial identities as well as the sacred in religion.

In *GraceLand*, the patriarchal Igbo society considers masculinity and heteronormativity as a defining factor of its cultural identity. An attempt to reaffirm

established gender norm has been played out in the form of rituals. Five-year-old Elvis was made to kill an eagle in a traditional ritual of manhood rites. Despite Elvis's reluctance at killing, the ritual was forced on him by his uncle Joseph who said, "It is de first step into manhood for you. When you are older, de next step is to kill a goat, and den from dere we begin your manhood rites. But dis is the first step" (Abani, *GraceLand*19). This ritual, which is a literal performance of an action that is considered as masculine, shows that the concept of manhood relies on performances which are considered to be masculine. It affirms Butler's statement, "that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). On one occasion where Elvis's aunt Felicia and her friends play dressed Elvis as a girl, his father became furious and beat him severely, much to the surprise of Elvis. He remarked to Aunt Felicia, "No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual! Do you hear me?!" (Abani, *GraceLand*62). Sunday immediately shaved off his son's head in what seems to be an attempt at affirmation of his own idea of masculinity. This culturally constructed essentialist notion of gender and sexuality led to marginalization of any gender and sexuality that is considered a deviation from the normative masculinity and heterosexuality. Violence against any form of deviation, even if it is only in jest as in the case of Elvis has been justified due to the inherent belief in normative masculinity, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. As Elvis grew older and took interest in makeup, partly as a result of his desire to look like Elvis Presley whom he impersonates, his fear of being mistreated by society reflects the marginalized conditions of people who constitute the peripheries.

With the tip of his index finger, he applied a hint of blue to his eyes, barely noticeable, not enough to lift them off the white of his face. Admiring himself from many angles, he thought it was a shame he couldn't wear makeup in public. That's not true, he mentally corrected himself. He could, like the transvestites that haunted

the car parks of hotels favoured by rich locals and visiting whites. But like them, he would be a target of some insult, or worse, physical beatings, many of which were meted out by the police... (Abani, *GraceLand* 77)

This fear of any gender performance that is not in sync with heteronormativity shows that “manhood” perpetually relies on performativity to secure its social position as a normative gender identity. His father’s violence against Elvis also shows how violence is justified, if it is used to uphold the normative gender identity. This systemic violence that comes with patriarchy not only suppresses women, but also entraps men. Sunday did not mourn the death of his wife despite losing all his interest in life due to the pain of losing his wife because Igbo men do not mourn women publicly and it was considered bad taste. While the women are victims of marginalization in the patriarchal society, men are also in certain ways entrapped by the patriarchal privilege because they have to live up to the societal construct of masculinity. Sunday, in a moment of frustration expressed this emasculation and defeat that men suffer in a patriarchal society as he vented out his anger to his wife “Of course you don’t understand. You are a woman, how could you? Honor is a secondhand concept for you, earned through your husbands or sons. But for us...for us it is different” (Abani, *GraceLand* 219). Both Elvis and Black the protagonist in *The Virgin of Flames*, use art and performance to subvert and resist the power structures of society. Elvis’s father Sunday attempts to maintain authority and control through patriarchal social norms, but Elvis continues to delegitimize this through impersonation and performances that do not subscribe to societal norms on patriarchy and masculinity. He witnessed the rape of his cousin sister Efuwa by his uncle Joseph and he was also raped by the same man while he was a boy. His experience and knowledge of masculinity have been associated with violence, coercion, rape, and incest. So, he destabilizes the notion of patriarchy and masculinity through simulacrum. According to Ouma:

For Black and Elvis...there is a porous line between masculinity and femininity and their biological corollaries- maleness and femaleness. Both Elvis and Black perform androgyny. Sexual difference for them is a technique of dealing with the memory of a troubled parentage, of finding a way to earn a living and negotiating the multicultural worlds of contemporary city life. (84)

For Elvis, his first experiences and encounters with violence as a child are through men, while the women in his life have a soothing and calming nature. Though he has complex relationship with his father, he was very close to his mother and continues to hold on to the memory of her dearly even after she had died. His most cherished possession is his late mother's journal, "a collection of cooking and apothecary recipes and some other unrelated bits, like letter and notes and about things that seemed arbitrary as the handwriting" (Abani, *GraceLand* 11).

Violence in the novels of Chris Abani could be located both in its manifest and latent forms. The manifest physical violence inflicts pain and suffering, leaving behind deep scars and trauma in their lives. But the characters are in many ways victims of the systemic violence that places them in surroundings that perpetually contribute to their victimization. The characters somehow overcome physical violence and gain agency overtime, but fail to gain agency over the various facets of systemic violence suffered by them because they often fail to locate its mode of operation, and it is often beyond their control. The narrative of *The Virgin of Flames* offers the complex intersection of violence with issues of gender, race, religion, and sexual identity. Black represents the liminal space in terms of race, gender and sexuality as opposed to the accepted notion of the Virgin which is accepted and celebrated by the society that actively contributes to its validation. Commenting on *The Virgin of Flames*, Amanda Aycock states, "It is about being biracial. It is about being of uncertain gender and sexuality. It is about being multicultural. It is about being human and not fitting into the usual

categories” (18). This liminal space and marginalised identity represented by Black forms the basis of systemic violence that affects his life. It draws attention towards issues of marginality in terms of race, gender and sexuality.

The Virgin of Flames, read as part of Abani’s larger body of writing, draws upon recurring themes of becoming and belonging, tradition and ritual, and transformation and performance which directly respond to the construction and (re)construction of what it means to be African and speak of an African identity in the context of global capitalism, migration, and travelling theory and travelling tradition. (Krishnan 48)

The novel’s introduction of the protagonist Black begins with an artistic experiment which plays with a deeper symbolism on race:

White.

Black sat before the mirror applying paste to his face. Face paint really, but it was thick like wallpaper paste...he had to get the right shade of white...He studied his face from several angles, imagining in that pause Miss Havisham sitting in front of a mottled wedding cake in a mottled wedding dress, both of which were the color of the paste on his face, an aging ivory that recalled the musty smell of empire in decline, a sad color really. Whose empire he had no idea. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 4)

The protagonist, a person of colour who also has the name Black attempts to look like the Virgin of Guadalupe in order to use himself as a model for his artistic project to paint a mural of the Virgin. This could be read as a symbolic destabilization of race, gender, as well as religious identities which form the power structures in the society, and the novel is riddled with several instances in which boundaries between black and white, male and female, the sacred and the profane have been blurred. According to feminist theologian Lisa Isherwood:

Cross-dressing is an ingenious tool as it does not fit categories of sex or gender alone and as such exposes both and so in this way is a form of gender iconography, making visible the spaces of possibility which are closed off by dichotomous conceptualization. (Qtd. in Stobie 175)

In trying to recreate the looks of the Virgin Mary, Black pictures her hair to be blonde since there is no proof regarding her actual hair colour. The image that he visualized of Mary is more like Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich. This image of the Virgin that is peppered with the world of entertainment and glamour is the exact opposite of simplicity and humility that the Virgin Mary has been culturally associated with. Black is also perpetually haunted by an angel, but the angel that Black encounters is quite removed from the images and celestial attributes traditionally associated with angels. His encounter with Angel Gabriel has been portrayed in the narrative in a very casual manner, which further takes away the divinity associated with angels and reduces it to an ordinary earthly entity. The narrative indicated that “Angel Gabriel, sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon, had taken to stalking him” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*⁶), conflating existing image of an angel with a pigeon. The angel’s appearance has been described as stalking, and there is complete absence of Black considering Angel Gabriel as a miraculous revelation. Instead, what follows is a description of how Black “circled the paper the way Ali would circle the ring to psyche out his opponents” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*⁷) in preparation for painting the Virgin. The analogy drawn to Muhammad Ali, a black boxer who also became a Muslim to describe Black’s preparation for painting an image of the Virgin juxtaposes two very contradictory images and disturbs the binary between the sacred and the profane. The following lines further unsettles the age old accepted concept of the sacred associated with the Virgin Mary:

With his eyes closed he made a paper angel, then rolled about on the paper, making sure that his body touched every inch of it. He believed that this way, his body was one with the paper and that when he painted he could conceptualize very accurately the dimension needed. He made all his models do it. Again, it was ritual. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 7)

There are several instances in the narrative that symbolically subverts and challenges the power of dominant identities such as Black's purchase of online reverend-hood from the NewWineChurchofGod.com to the transsexual Barbie and a Jesus doll with a penis made by his artist friend Iggy. Through pervasive usage of image of fluidity, Abani unsettles binaries as Cheryl Stobie observes, "The reader is denied simple responses such as the solace of traditional religion or easy satire, but must grapple with the dialectic between differences in cultures, beliefs, and shifting sexualities" (170).

Sigmund Freud traces the origin of social order in human civilization to violence. In his work *Totem and Taboo*, Freud traced civilization back to a time when the sons united against the father to overthrow his tyrannical authority, and his famous Oedipal story is rooted in the desire for murder and incest, "the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex" (Freud 143). Thus the basis of social cooperation of human civilization has been attributed to an act of collective murder to overthrow the tyrant. Freud's theory received widespread criticism from a number of thinkers. Rene Girard postulated that "violence operates without reason" (46) and is not necessarily a product of sexual desire. The cause of violence is not necessarily related to the value of the object, but is rather a representation of the desire for the other, as opposed to Freud's contention of sexual desire as the root cause of violence. According to Girard, "Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single subject; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it" (145). The use of violence in order to check violence which appears to be harmful

for society often does not seem to be necessarily undesirable. But violence, in any form never brings about solution, just as in Freud's narrative where the sons employ violence in an attempt to end the violence of the father. In Abani's narrative, violence has never brought about solution even if it is generative violence that is meant to check "impure" violence. This is evident in *GraceLand* where violence seems to be infused in the normal daily life in the streets of Lagos. An incident where mob vigilantism presides over the fate of an accused thief shows how sudden eruption of violence is a norm in the streets of Lagos. When Elvis decided to take a closer look at the mob, Redemption told him to stay out of it. As the brutal public execution was carried out in full public display, Redemption's reply "I don't know and I don't care" (Abani, *GraceLand*225) to Elvis who asked him whether Jeremiah, the accused is a thief brings out the deeply fractured condition of the society. It also vividly portrays how violence has become a routine affair of life in Lagos, and people have become indifferent and almost devoid of basic sense of humanity, as long as they are not the direct victims of violence.

Elvis watched a young girl, no older than twelve, pick up a stone and throw it at Jeremiah...That single action triggered the others to pick up and throw stones. The combined sound was sickening, and Jeremiah yelled in pain. There was something comically biblical, yet purely animal, about the scene. (Abani, *GraceLand*225)

The violent mob further sets the man on fire, and the policemen simply watched the scene with "bored expressions" (Abani, *GraceLand*227) which suggest that this type of violence no longer has any shock value. Elvis's statement that "The fire will spread" (Abani, *GraceLand*228) after the lumber yard catches fire from the flaming Jeremiah symbolizes how mob violence does not bring solution or justice, but rather evokes more violence.

In *Song for Night*(2008), the fifteen-year-old protagonist, My Luck is a child soldier in a war. He has been forced to kill and rape by the ruthless commander John Wayne. The narrative takes place in an unnamed civil war in which the protagonist is part of a platoon of mine diffusers. He was recruited at the age of twelve and the member of the platoon communicates in sign language because their vocal chords have been severed. The narrative captures the horror and brutality of war created by the larger political structure, and the characters are helpless in the face of the violence that takes place. But more than the destruction of war, the novella is at its core, a story of self-redemption in the face of pain and guilt. Abani has not situated the narrative in a specific historical timeline as he expressed, “I chose to make it allegory to transcend the very limits that his position occupies so that his life can become the life of all children forced into darkness in this way. This is why there is no specific war, but a dream-like invocation of all West African wars” (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 236). What troubles My Luck is not just the horror of the war but his deep guilt that despite his will, he enjoyed killing and raping, as he remarks “I have killed many people during the last three years. Half of those were innocent, half of those were unarmed- and some of those killings have been a pleasure” (Abani, *Song for Night* 71). My Luck knew deep inside that he is at a certain level not just a victim of violence, but a perpetrator who is consumed by the violence which he has been forced to commit. This complex relationship between violence and human nature is something which Abani frequently brings up in his narratives. In a deeply personal and insightful essay called “Ethics and Narrative: The Human and Other” Abani questions his own sense of humanity, and his fear that exposure to violence might numb his humanity as an individual and normalize violence in his moral compass as he remarks, “The thing is, my knowledge of blood, of the terrible intimacy of killing, has taught me that though I have never killed a man, I know how, I know I could. The only thing that terrifies me is that I may not feel sorry” (171). He expresses how his exposure to violence has

made him “lost faith in the inherent goodness of humanity” (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 10) but realized the importance of fighting for humanity and love. The poem “Tequila Sunrise” depicts how all brutality and inhumane treatments did not come from the military regime. Even within the suppressed confinement of prison, inmates create a mini world in which there is a constant struggle for power, and violence is used as an instrument.

Angola beer. Brewed to perfection.

Only the best ingredients are used.

Reward for those daring to reject any act

that jars with their sensibilities; moralities.

Equal part water

and steaming urine...

This is not

a game of wardens,

but for fellow prisoners, peers

friends; an excellent ice breaker. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 36)

This invokes that any form of violence, even if it is generative and used for a seemingly good cause will corrupt its perpetrators as Girard states that “‘Impure’ violence will mingle with the

‘sacred’ violence of the rites, turning the latter into a scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation of further impurity” (39).

The idea of regenerative violence forms the basis of modern warfare wherein soldiers are made to think that violence in war is impersonal and justifiable because it is a necessary act to maintain peace. It pushes the agenda that wars are impersonal while encouraging the soldiers to unleash their primitive instinct of aggression. But even if so called “pure” violence has been used to check “impure” violence, it constantly risks going wrong. There cannot be pure or sacred violence that is entirely positive or generative, and violence cannot be positive even if the perpetrator’s motive appears to be for a good cause. There are always narratives that attempt to rationalize and justify the use of violence based on the cause. Mythologies and religious texts contain in large numbers sacrificial violence, and violence has often been narrativized as sacred depending on the religious groups or other institutions that require rationalization of its use. This narrative of violence as either sacred or generative has equally been the basis behind modern warfare and the jihadists. Narratives dealing with child-soldiers often portray the child-soldier as a “virtuous protagonist suffering injustice” and writers at times “have to bracket out violence committed by child soldiers” (Moynagh 44) to cater to sentimental social codes. But, Abani’s narrative in *Song for Night* problematizes the question of victimhood and perpetration, and though child soldiers are forced into violence, they are often consumed by violence and become the very thing they abhor in the beginning. My Luck saw through this false narrative of innocence and violence being a justifiable and necessary prerequisite of war situation as he states:

If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? I have seen rebel scouts cut off their enemies’ ears or fingers or toes and keep them in tin cans as souvenirs. Some collect teeth, which they thread painstakingly into necklaces. Who taught us this?

Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled only by an orgasm? (Abani, *Song for Night* 135)

In *GraceLand*, the crowd that gathered at Tinubu square listened to a speech from a young man who told the crowd that they complained about being under military dictatorship. Whenever there is a coup that overthrew the dictatorship, people took to the street in celebration only to witness the replacement of one despot with another. This clearly indicates that violence often result in another violence, creating a vicious circle as it lacks the power to bring change and knowledge. The scene in which mob violence took place against a man accused of stealing is symbolic of the ripple effect of violence. The angry mob took it upon them to bring justice by stoning and setting the accused young man, Jeremiah on fire. It is remarkable how the crowd quickly turns to a violent mob who justifies violence, if that violence seems like an act of justice. The crowd turns deaf ears to the plea of the accused thief, and resort to violence without any proof as the protagonist Elvis watched a young girl pick up a stone and throw it on Jeremiah. Elvis's remark that "The fire will spread" is both literal and symbolical, the fire symbolizing the chain reaction that violence causes (Abani, *GraceLand* 228). The horror witnessed by Elvis poses the larger question regarding how violence easily blinds reason and "whether aggression is a basic drive in human beings and, if so, whether, like the need to eat or the need to mate, a need to 'aggress' is present in human beings regardless of the presence of appropriate stimuli" (Rapoport 8). Violence is often justified in the name of self preservation or maintenance of order in human society, especially in cases of wars. But state sanctioned violence or legalized murder only shows how violence, despite its narratives of justification always loses its character of "ritualized violence" and loses its attempt to define itself as a necessary condition for the progress of mankind as Freud observes,

The individual in any given nation has in this war a terrible opportunity to convince himself of what would occasionally strike him in peace-time- that the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrong-doing, not because it desired to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolize it, like salt and tobacco. The warring state permits itself every such misdeed, every such act of violence, as would disgrace the individual man. (“Thoughts for the Times” 293)

While power operates in the form of influence and is directly related to knowledge, where violence rules everything must fall silent and violence itself is incapable of speech. This is evident in Abani’s narratives in which the characters attempt to voice their stories against the silencing effect of violence. The novella *Song for Night* which deals with the story of a child soldier and his traumatic experiences begins with the following lines:

What you hear is not my voice.

I have not spoken in three years; not since I left boot camp. It has been three years of a senseless war, and though the reasons for it are clear, and though we will continue to fight until we are ordered to stop- and probably for a while after that- none of us can remember the hate that led us here. (9)

The silencing effect of violence has been shown in the narrative in terms of the protagonist My Luck’s literal lack of a speaking voice. Recruited with other teenagers to diffuse land mines during war, the child soldiers’ vocal chords have been cut off so that they will not scream and cause panic for others if they accidentally stepped on the mines. Every chapter *Song for Night* is titled in sign language such as “Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat” (9) “Death is Two Fingers Sliding Across the Throat” (21) “Mother is Crossed Arms Rocking a Baby” (147) and so on which accentuated the sense of silence and voicelessness of violence. The silencing effect of violence has been observed by Hannah Arendt:

To be sure, not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws-*les lois se taisent*, as the French Revolution phrased it-but everything and everybody must fall silent. It is because of this silence that violence is a marginal phenomenon in the political realm; for man, to the extent that he is a political being, is endowed with speech [...]The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence.”(*On Revolution* 18-19)

Through his writings, Abani addresses the question of what it means to be human in circumstances and situations of violence and suffering. His narratives are attempts to narrativize experiences of violence, to lend a voice and stand up against the silencing effects of violence. About his experience of being imprisoned at Kiri Kiri, a maximum security prison, he wrote:

In that year, I came to question everything I had believed in before. The only thing I never gave up on was the conviction that there can be no concession in the face of tyranny and oppression. I also learnt how truly ephemeral our mortality is. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 9)

Representation of violence in literature or any other medium is a challenging task for an artist. Priebe comments:

In broad human terms, representations of violence in any literature, as in life, may do one of three things: they may overwhelm us with a sense of the banality of violence, they may impress in us our capacity for the demonic, or they may serve to leave us with some sense of the sublime. (47)

Abani's book of poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic* chronicles accounts of his prison experience, memories of having witnessed brutality and death and his own time in confinement. The poetry in this collection reflects how violence crushed all freedom and reason, as victims are rendered powerless. However, Abani also carefully depicted how victims have the potential to turn equally violent and become perpetrators, after being victims and witnesses of brutality. The poem "Chain Reaction" depicts how violence easily causes a kind of a chain reaction, and victims reflect almost the same kind of potential for violence. The prisoners killed the dog of the prison psychiatrist and devoured it by night:

That night

we hear its pitiful chained whines,

A thud, then silence broken only by

the crackle of a fire. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 29)

This shows how violence operates without reason and any kind of violence, even if it is state sanctioned or violence used for the purpose of mitigating other kind violence, has the risk of derailing its course. Poems in this collection also depict how violence and loss of freedom challenges the notion of morality and accepted social norms. The poem "Passion Fruit" portrays the sad nature of prison sexuality that reflects the emptiness of the inmates, and the diverse ways in which they attempt to make meanings out of sexual intimacy.

Here

Sex is not always a choice

lovingly made and enjoyed like

plump well-handled self-chosen fruit

teeth sinking into soft flesh in a dribble of pleasure.

Nevertheless

it abounds.

Some because it is the

truth of their being.

Some to deny, negate, sate

deep yearning, wordless, timeless. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 32)

“Killing Time” is a poem that deals with the poet’s experience of coming face to face with death where the inmates are blindfolded and some are shot while some are spared, only to terrorize them with the intimacy of death.

Shots crack

like so many branches.

Of 12, 8 fall.

Shirt, pencil and all.

I know I am alive

because

terror drips down my legs. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 40)

Abani's prison poems depict how imprisonment and the threat of violence slowly erode the humanity of the inmates, leading to identity crises. In some cases, the victims have been overwhelmed by what Priebe referred to as the "banality of violence" because there is no humanity reflected back at them for a long time. Abani believes in the statement "the only way for me to feel human is for you to reflect my humanity back at me" ("Chris Abani Muses", *TED*) because individuals are consciously and unconsciously subjects to ideas and behaviours reflected to them by society, power structures and their surroundings. Perpetual exposure to violence could distort a person's idea of what it means to be human and often result in confusion and perpetration of violence. His poems depict accounts of prisoners who killed fellow prisoners, and men who turned prostitutes in an environment where basic humanity has been denied. But at the core of Abani's art is always transformation and humanity that transcends pain, suffering and the structures of power that created conditions of violence. Especially in his poems which deal with his own experience of imprisonment, narrative of suffering is also a narrative that subverts the dominant power structures. The poem "Heavensgate" celebrates the inmates for their heroism:

Other heroes here are men and boys
 with no power, no privilege, no class,
 nothing to gain: not even a book published.

Their crime is to be poor and proud
 in the face of tyranny: unbroken by angels
 they worry liars to madness. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 69)

Despite the harrowing impact of violence that often poses threat to the character's lives and questions their sense of humanity, there is always a sense of transcendence. The characters, in their own terms find ways to subvert the crippling influence of the dominant power structures and violence, not through coercion but in the form of coming to terms with their own sense of humanity. And this shared humanity and hope which Abani attempts to represent and add value through his art is power in the Arendtian sense. As violence is an instrument that has the ability to destroy power, "freedom, love, kindness, honour, justice and truth are never to be taken for granted- but worked at, struggled with and fought for, at whatever cost" (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 10). Abani's narratives are therefore, attempts to narrativize what it means to be human and the power of humanity, even as it narrativizes experiences of extreme violence and brutality. His poems are more personal as it chronicles about his real life experiences of violence. In the face of tyranny and violence, it is true that words are often the biggest threat to tyranny because there is power in words, and more importantly the sense of humanity that lies behind those words. "Rasa" deals with a poem about an inmate in prison who plays a saxophone and renamed his house Kalakuta Republic, after Fela Kuti, the Nigerian musician and human rights activist who was a vocal critic of the military regime, and famously declared the independence of his communal compound named Kalakuta Republic from the rule of the military regime in 1970.

A regular. Nicknamed 'Customer',

he even renamed his house Kalakuta Republic,...

He had a saxophone smuggled into

jail and on some nights

riffed out a forlorn blues

condensing the walls into hot tears.

And we believed the notes wove

themselves into a terror that carried

on the wind, disturbing evil's sleep. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 27)

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Chapter III

Traumatic Effects of Violence

This chapter attempts to study the traumatic effects of violence in the selected texts of Chris Abani. Abani's accounts of violence in his narratives invite analysis both at the level of the individual characters and the society that constitutes their existence. As a writer whose life has been scarred by his own personal witness of violence and imprisonment at the hands of the military dictatorship in Nigeria, Abani's writings are narrative witness of violence and trauma that delve into the nature of traumatic experiences, and how traumatic experiences affect the lives of the characters. Trauma associated with violence is experienced not just by individual characters as Abani's narrative encompasses the collective trauma of the larger society.

Traumatic experiences pertaining to Nigerian civil war has in recent times become a rich treasure trove of artistic representation which "bears witness"(Griswold 233) to the political turmoil and conflict of the country, as trauma narrative became an effective framework through which catastrophic experiences are examined and represented. The devastating effect of war and trauma associated with violence have been revisited and narrativized by many writers as trauma associated with the civil war constitutes a significant aspect of peoples' collective memory and identity. Especially for the Igbos who paid the biggest price in the Biafran war, their shared trauma constitutes not just knowledge of past incidents but plays an active role as a part of their cultural memory that influences their identity in the present time. According to Jan Assman and John Czaplicka:

Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these

differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. (Assmann 130)

This seems to be exactly what Abani and the new generation of writers from Nigeria attempt to do with trauma of the civil war that dogs their consciousness and is predominant in their cultural memory. They attempt to break silence and inhibition about the war among the public, creating an atmosphere of possibility to acknowledge what happened on a collective basis. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes Biafra as “part of our history that we like to pretend never existed, that we hide, as if hiding it will make it go away, which of course it doesn’t” (“African Authenticity” 53).

Trauma is originally a Greek word which stands for ‘wound’ and was originally used to refer to injury inflicted on the body. In the present context, the term trauma both in the medical and psychiatric literature refers to a wound inflicted upon the mind that refuses to heal and constantly re-enacts itself. In his clinical study of neurosis, Freud observed that “undesired happenings and painful affective situations are repeated...and re-animated with much ingenuity” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 15). The wound of the mind created a breach in the mind’s experience of time and reality, and trauma has a repetitive compulsion because the impact of a traumatic incident cannot be fully comprehended and known by the subject at a time. According to Cathy Caruth,

...trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)

The pain of a particular event cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence, but realized by the ‘not knowing’ subject at a subsequent stage, relived and re-enacted. Abani’s narrative explores traumatic experiences of the characters as a result of personal as

well as structural violence enacted upon them. Trauma in Abani's narrative is situated in the discursive intersection of race, gender and neo-colonialism, besides political violence and war. Though all of Abani's works are not historically situated in Nigeria's violent past, violence and trauma are recurring and dominant themes in almost all his works and this is perhaps due to his own personal experiences of violence which forms a big part of his artistic vision. The personal experiences of violence are often represented along with narrative of the nation as "the specific terms of Nigerian literature emerged from the concerns of the modern African imagination to locate the meaning of nation, within the wider context and current of the African nationalist movements" (Nwakanma 3). Though all of his works do not embrace the politics of national identity as their predominant themes, Abani's works as well as his life has been deeply shaped and influenced by the political situation in Nigeria, and in this regard Adesanmi and Dunton's view that "the novels authored by Igbo members of the new generation negotiate the affiliative processes of ethnic and national identity in the contested site of Nigerian nationhood" (IX).

In the novella *Song for Night*, the protagonist My Luck, whose vocal chords have been cut off woke up from a mine blast and seeks for survival, trying to recollect the events that led to the mine blast. Recruited as a child soldier, he is trying to make sense of the violence he has witnessed, and also grapple with his guilt for being a perpetrator in violence after all his friends have died. Traumatized by the violence that he has witnessed, My Luck's story is characterised by temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence where linear representation or narration is impossible. In literary representation of traumatic experiences, temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence arise due to the repetitive nature of trauma which is re-enacted by the subject even unwittingly as trauma refuses to be relegated to the completed past. Traumatic memories hamper the protagonist's identity and definition of childhood in the war torn land. The traumatized protagonist cannot

fully comprehend the extent of the pain at the moment of its occurrence, but relived and re-enacted due to the repetitive nature of trauma. Cathy Caruth states “Trauma describes 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). The novel opens with My Luck’s narrative that begins with “What you hear is not my voice” because his vocal cord has been cut off (Abani, *Song for Night* 9). This absence of voice and use of sign language to communicate with members of his platoon bears testimony to Caruth’s observation based on Freud’s analysis of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that trauma “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” and needs to be approached with “language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 5). The use of sign language symbolizes My Luck’s need to narrate his traumatic experiences, while it questions the very possibility to narrate and express trauma. My Luck’s literal loss of his voice suggests the incapacity of communication and failure of language to effectively convey and express traumatic experiences, and hence the need to inscribe his traumatic memories on his body. Trauma which cannot be wholly represented or narrated using language gets represented through symbols that mimic its forms and symptoms. Patterns cut into My Luck’s arm in memory of people he loses, the blurring lines between life and death, and confusion of time, are but forms and symptoms of trauma which the novel evokes. Anne Whitehead states that trauma is “represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection” (3). The protagonist’s attempt to narrate about the murder of his mother conveys the sense of traumatic experience that defies narration. Words fail to convey the traumatic intensity of the situation in which his mother has been murdered while he hides in the ceiling:

...and I watch what happens below and I am grateful that I can smell my smell, smell my smell and live while below me it happens, it happens that night bright as day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched, and I cannot speak something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it. (Abani, *Song for Night* 33)

After *My Luck* narrates how he recovered from a mine blast that killed all his friends, he blames the explosion for jumbling up his memory. What follows is a first person narrative that is characterised by temporal disjunction, whose reliability increasingly disintegrates as the narrative progresses. He claims to have survived the blast because he heard the explosion and states “When I pinch myself it hurts, so I know I am not a ghost” (Abani, *Song for Night* 96). But his assumption of having survived the blast is increasingly undermined as the narrative progresses. An old man he met asks him if he is not a demon, and contrary to his assumption he is unable prove that he is a living person.

He nods and squats. “We’ll see about that,” he says, drawing a sign in the dirt. “If you are a ghost, if you are dead, you cannot step over this sign.” It is an invitation, a command almost. I smile and think this is just mumbo jumbo, but as hard as I try, I can’t move. (Abani, *Song for Night* 104)

Towards the later part of the novel, it became apparent that the protagonist is not alive. In fact, the chaotic narrative that bears a dream-like hallucinatory state is the protagonist’s attempt to deal with his traumatic past. This disruption in the character’s sense of time, and inability to distinguish reality from hallucination is symptomatic of a traumatized subject, whose subjectivity is fractured by trauma that constantly re-enacts itself in his memory. Hamish Dalley states that “...the fractured subjectivity of the traumatized victim-perpetrator

protagonist emerges as an emblem of the conflict's refusal to be relegated to the completed past" (445).

The trauma of his violent past is intensified by the guilt felt by the protagonist, a child soldier who has killed and tasted blood. Though he killed and raped at the order of the people who recruited him and commanded him and the other children, his sense of guilt disrupts his identity and intensified the trauma. The image of a child soldier in novels as well as non-fiction has the immediate ability to project itself as innocent victim of war. This simplistic notion of victimhood is challenged by Abani's narrator, who is aware of his complicity in perpetrating violence, as he says, "If we are the great innocents in this war, then why did we learn all the evil we practice?... Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled only by an orgasm?" (Abani, *Song for Night* 143). The sense of guilt that My Luck carries adds to the trauma of his violent experiences. The poem "Tequila Sunrise" from *Kalakuta Republic* similarly portrays how the inmates in prison mimic the cruelty of the military regime, and how the suffering of others became a source of joy. Fellow inmates are forced to drink water that is mixed with urine, and this form of abuse and torture serves as a source of entertainment.

Angola beer, Brewed to perfection.

Only the best ingredients are used.

Reward for those daring to reject any act

that jars with their sensibilities; moralities. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 36)

Song for Night makes several references to My Luck's mother and other characters reminiscent of her. The fact that his encounter with a random woman reminds him of his mother as well as the first woman he had raped suggests his deep sense of guilt that escalates his trauma. According to Hamish Dalley:

...his culpability for analogous crimes means he cannot imaginatively position himself as an innocent witness to her loss. His memories blend layers of time in ways that disrupt his desire to make meaning of past events- images of his mother are haunted by the women he has killed and raped, making him implicitly responsible for the crime that constitutes his trauma. (454)

In a dreamlike narrative that is characterised by temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence, My Luck's dead lover Ijeoma tells him in his hallucinatory state "You aren't dreaming, My Luck, my love. These are memories. Before we can move on from here, we have to relive and release our darkness" (*Song for Night* 96). The fact that My Luck finds peace with his trauma only in death suggests the unresolved national narrative regarding trauma. Madhu Krishnan's observation that Nigerian war novels reject "notions of completeness, logic and sensibility" (193) corroborates the unresolved national narrative that is symbolised by My Luck as well as Elvis in *GraceLand*.

Becoming Abigail is another traumatic story about a young girl Abigail who lives in the shadow of her mother Abigail who had passed away while giving birth to her. Raised by her father who is grief-stricken due to the death of his wife, Abigail spent her childhood living the pain, loss and memories of her mother through her father's grief. Coupled with her unhealthy upbringing is the rape she encountered as a child which traumatizes her and makes her capable of neither trusting men nor having healthy relations with men. After his fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin raped her when she was ten and threatened to kill her if she told anyone, Abigail understood what men are like.

None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her...But then neither had she really seen them. She tried to. Staring. Watching from the corner of

her eye. Trying to piece them together. But they gave nothing, these men. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 26)

Abigail's identity crisis due to the absence of her mother is heightened by the ghostly presence of her mother, haunting her and her father with memories. The pain of losing her mother was not really felt by Abigail at the immediate time of her death, probably because she was a child and unable to comprehend the full measure of the pain and loss. She instead relives the pain which unravels itself slowly with the passage of time. As she grows up, Abigail lives with the trauma of her mother's death and perform it like a ritual, which his father found disturbing.

He was good. Not interfering when she decapitated all her dolls and recreated a funeral for each one. He grew uncomfortable yet still remained silent when she shot six birds from the sky with her rubber catapult and stones collected almost as a meditation from the loose gravel bordering Abigail's grave. He was silent even when she dressed them in lace torn from the trim of her mother's wedding dress. Collecting sticks into bundles that she arranged in geometric patterns, she placed the lace-wrapped birds on these funeral pyres, deliberately holding each one over a candle that stood like a sentinel, until they filled everything with the scent of roasting meat and the revulsion of burning feathers. She took seven photographs of her mother from the family album, tore the faces out and turned them upside down with seven candles on them while she muttered an incantation over the torn faces. Collecting with the deliberateness reserved for communion wafers, she then took the candles off the photo fragments, picked up the fragments, and held the severed photos of her mother's face up to the light before cramming them into her mouth. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 36)

This enactment of trauma takes a slightly different turn when she grows up. The pressure to become like her mother on the one hand and her personal need to become her own individual on the other hand adds to her confliction. This pain and emotional scar, which is perhaps beyond being contained or expressed in words gets represented in a ritual on the body.

This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even. Before she began burning herself she collected anecdotes about her which she stuck on her skin, wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chafing. Becoming. Becoming and chafing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 34)

The only time in her life that she becomes her own self, without the need to conform or consider other people's expectation is when she is with Derek-her social worker after she escaped and ran away from Peter's sexual slavery. It is the first time in her life that Abigail is free and feels the possibility of becoming her own self as the narrative states, "And Abigail was giving, for the first time she wasn't taken...Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking" (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 52). After this love making with Derek, Abigail repeats the ritual of branding her body with burning needle. But the mapping on her body is no longer about Abigail her mother, but her own sense of becoming.

"This one," she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. "This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here," and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?" and she showed him the words branded in her skin. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail*53)

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is a painful event that is “Experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). Abigail’s enactment of her mother’s funeral and the maps she branded on her skin could be a result of trauma that resurfaces in her memory. This interpretation is further complicated by the fact that Abigail’s mother died while giving birth, and it is impossible for Abigail to remember the death of her mother. This echoes Dominick LaCapra’s statement that “there is no fully immediate access to the experience itself even for the original witness, meaning trauma” and that “trauma can only be “reconstructed from its effects and traces” (21). Memories become distorted, incoherent and unreliable.

And this.

Even this. This memory like all the others was a lie. Like the sound of someone ascending wooden stairs, which she couldn’t know because she had never heard it. Still it was as real as this one. A coffin sinking reluctantly into the open mouth of a grave, earth in clods collected around it in a pile like froth from the mouth of a mad dog. And women. Gathered in a cluster of black, like angry crows. Weeping. The sound was something she had heard only in her dreams and in these moments of memory- a keening, loud and sharp, but not brittle like the screeching of glass or the imagined sound of women crying. This was something entirely different. A deep howling, a presence, dark and palpable, like a shadow emanating from the women, becoming a thing that circled the grave and the mourners in a predatory manner before rising up to the brightness of the sky and the sun, to be replaced by another momentarily. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 17)

The traumatized subject's notion of time, self and the world is fractured by trauma that imposes itself repeatedly in the memory of trauma victims. In case of child soldiers' accounts such as China Keitetsi, a former Ugandan child soldier, he finds it difficult to understand childhood or a sense of time as he expresses "My childhood is long forgotten. Sometimes I feel as if I am 6 years old and sometimes as though I am 100 years old because of all I have seen" (Coundouriotis 193). The same has been echoed by My Luck, the child-soldier protagonist in *Song for Night* who says "If you are anything like Ijeoma you will say that I sound too old for my age" (9). At fifteen, he has served as a child-soldier in a war for the past three years.

In *GraceLand*, Abani fuses the aesthetic and the political by weaving his own narrative into the socio political scenario of Nigeria. Unlike *Song for Night* which deals with a personal account of trauma and survival, *GraceLand* carefully weaves the politics of the street and society along with Elvis' personal struggle and his family issues. Violence in this novel may be looked at in terms of how colonialism remained a traumatic event for the Nigerian people, which impacts their concept of reality and identity. According to Amy Novak:

The economic, political, and cultural domination of colonialism lingers in multiple ways long after the changing of flags...The traumatic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in large-scale events of history but also in the daily private lives of citizens. (34)

The trauma of colonialism lingers in the form of cultural imperialism in *GraceLand*, and Elvis struggles to construct a meaningful identity in the face of lost traditions, coupled with political repression and the new neoliberal social system. Though the society depicted in the novel is after the end of colonization of Nigeria, the novel portrays the impact of colonial

legacy in the lives of the characters. Ethnic tensions and loss of tradition has been intensified by the new neoliberal economy where drug trade, black market, cross-border human trafficking, and Multinational Corporations continue the disruptive effects of colonialism in the past. According to Nigerian economist Bade Onimode:

Since the independence in 1960, the subsidiaries of giant multinational corporations (MNCs) have emerged as the powerful catalysts of multilateral imperialism in Nigeria. They are the Trojan horses whose monopoly capital and advanced technology, backed by enormous political pressure from their home governments, constitute the dominant mechanism for integrating this and other Third World countries more closely, and more pervasively, into the international system of capitalist domination. (137)

The complexity of the chaos brought about by the capitalist economy is that it is no longer possible to hold a foreign nation responsible as in the case of colonialism because it is not a repressive political domination by another powerful nation. There is no war or direct repression from an outside force. Ironically, the repression and domination of the characters in the novel come from the Nigerian military regime but it is obvious that the violent and chaotic society represented in the novel is a result of the hegemonic neo-colonialism. The Biafran war which has been alluded to at various instances in the novel and the violent and chaotic society of neo-colonial Nigeria constitutes the collective trauma of the nation.

Within Nigeria, the violence of the past and present are not outside knowledge but woven into cultural practices and everyday routines. The history of colonialism as trauma perpetrated by the West remains unacknowledged in the official histories of the Anglo-European civilizing mission and narratives of charity and progress. (Novak 36)

Elvis's story, his predicament, and the world he navigates in the novel is not just personal but allegorical. The narrative that deals with Elvis's childhood in Afikpo represents the deeply fractured traditional life, while his struggles in Lagos represent the societal chaos and problems ushered in by neoliberalism. Cultural imperialism of the West is evident in the character of Elvis and the society that he inhabits. Despite living a life of acute poverty in the slums, Elvis, whose name itself comes from Elvis Presley, a cultural icon of the west is well exposed to western music and cinema. From his taste for Bob Marley's songs to Christian anthems and pictures of BMW cars cut out from old magazines that adorn his room walls to him reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Elvis is in every aspect a cultural consumer of the west. Elvis impersonates Elvis Presley and performs for the tourists in order to earn money. He applied talcum powder on his face to recreate a white complexion but it did not work on his black skin, while his impersonation failed to impress the white tourists. The protagonist's name and the title of the novel which is apparently named after Elvis Presley's estate and Elvis's departure for America at the end of the novel raises questions of rootedness and cultural identity. Elvis's abandonment of his native country for America at the end by using his friend's passport whose name happens to be Redemption raises several questions regarding cultural and national identity.

“When did we start thinking of America as a life plan?” Elvis asked.

“When things spoil here. Don't blame me. I no spoil am,” Okon said.

“Even during your father's time we dey plan for abroad. Dat time it was London, now it is America,” Redemption said. (Abani, *GraceLand* 318)

It is ironic that America is considered to be a kind of redemption from the chaos and problems of Nigeria when American capitalism contributes to a large share of the problems that afflicts Nigeria. Elvis's life, his interests, and his aspirations as an individual are also

representative of the effects of the cultural hegemony of neo-colonialism. Redemption's mention of London and America as ideal destinations is also ironic as Nigeria was under British colonial rule and is currently grappling with economic and cultural influences America. Thus, trauma of the nation that results from the nation's history of colonization and the ensuing problems that arises from internal politics as well as the neoliberal economy has been portrayed in the novel. In this regard, literature in the African context has always been a creative response that addresses the problems and issues of the postcolonial nations. According to Mala Pandurang:

The novel begins to function as 'space' or a carrier of a message that challenges the 'escape connote' of African reality which continues to be violated through the ideological mechanisms of neo-colonialism. In this context the novel becomes a political narrative of liberation. (6)

Anne Whitehead states that "Trauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten" (82). Elvis's story narrativizes violence and trauma of a nation's past history, and Elvis's experiences and encounters could be read as an allegory of the lives of millions of people are victims of poverty and suffer from a crisis of cultural identity. Abani's narrative of life in Nigeria portrays the legacy and trauma of colonialism and attempts to narrativize the postcolonial experience from the perspective of an insider that bears witness to the national and cultural history. Elvis's story embodies a postcolonial narrative that poses a threat to the dominant narrative. According to David Punter, story tellers in the postcolonial context are those:

Who will not call a close to history, those who continue to be inspired by past configurations and conflagrations, who refuse to accept that the past moment can be

surpassed, those whose desperation, although it tells and signifies a story, will not be bought off by the alternative narratives so readily on offer from the consensus of neocolonisers. (128)

The novel which oscillates between Elvis' childhood in Afikpo which represent traditional Igbo society and life in Lagos which represents a modern and hybridized society are both deeply fractured. More than violence due to the result of personal vengeance against him, Elvis is more a victim of violence that permeates the society.

Not only is he a paralyzed observer of social injustice, but his body also bears scars of abuse, exploitation, and self-loathing that inhibit his psychic and physical maturation into adulthood. Although Elvis finds some solace in transnational cultural exchange, this is circumscribed by his simultaneous immersion in a global economic system that perpetuates his marginalization. (Harrison 97)

It is in this systemic violence that constitutes Elvis's reality that he is abused, raped and tortured from childhood. This violent social set up conditions Elvis' understanding of the world and his own self and leaves him confused and in a state of flux regarding his identity. Violence is presented as a pervasive phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the Nigerian society as Madelaine Hron states that "The child's quest for a socio-cultural identity is inextricably linked to issues arising from postcolonialism and globalization, often manifested in the context of repression, violence or exploitation" (29).

Each chapter in the novel begins with an Igbo traditional food recipe. Elvis treasures his mother's cook book which holds memories of his childhood and the ideal traditional Igbo life. But, apart from this slice of Igbo tradition that is portrayed in the form of food recipe, life in Lagos is essentially interpellated by western culture and values. The narrative defies representation of traditional Igbo traditional life in Afikpo as an ideal past that juxtaposes

with modern life in Lagos that is characterized by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. In fact, the chaos and trauma that afflicts the nation is an ongoing process that has no easy resolution. Even the inclusion of Igbo traditional food recipe and the kola nut rituals between each chapter in the novel, in what seemingly is an attempt to reclaim traditional culture and identity seems futile. As much as Elvis treasures his late mother's journal which contains the food recipe and which symbolizes tradition, Elvis cannot really identify with the content nor find meaning out of it as "It had never revealed his mother to him. Never helped him understand her, or his life, or why anything happened the way it had" (Abani, *GraceLand* 320). Elvis is a product of the hybrid society that came into existence as a result of several historical developments, and the tragedy is that there is no going back nor there is an immediate solution for the violence and the cultural imperialism of the neocolonial Nigeria. For Elvis, his mother's journal only evokes a sense of loss for the past that can never be reclaimed. Lauren Mason observes that the inclusion of Igbo cooking recipes and the kola nut ceremony are "awkwardly out of context" (213) and opines that:

At best, the kola nut ceremony, recipes, and herbal remedies serve as evidence of past shared cultural practices that no longer have a place in his world. It is because these narratives do not serve Elvis in any practical way that he must turn to other sites, however unstable they may be, to carve out a meaningful existence in the ever-shifting Lagos landscape. (Mason 213)

The inclusion of the kola nut ceremony invokes the Igbo oral tradition that precedes the written stories. It is an important aspect of cultural identity as Emenyonu states, "Oral Tradition had a definite purpose: to instruct the young in the principles of right and wrong" (1). But the impact of culture and tradition becomes a complex issue in the society that is represented in the novel. Not only is the deliberate inclusion of culture in the form of a ready-made package lacks connection with the narrative of the novel, Abani lends complexity to

this representation of traditional practice by having two different narrative voices. One is a narrative of an insider, while the second is a narrative of a Western anthropologist that attempts to reduce Igbo culture to a strange ritual. This shows the futility of trying to go back to an ideal, traditional, pre-colonial society because the cultural trauma of neocolonialism has pervaded all aspects of life in the novel. This idea has been expressed by Elvis who listens to the speech of the King of Beggars at Freedom Square who calls out on the evils of Western culture and capitalism and calls for a return to traditional values and ways of being.

Elvis's main problem with the King's theories was that they didn't account for the inherent complications he knew were native to his culture, or the American. As naïve as Elvis was, he knew there was no way of going back to the "good old days," and wondered why the King didn't speak about how to cope with these new and confusing times. (Abani, *GraceLand* 155)

Fanon's description of "the violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress" (5) aptly fits the neocolonial society depicted in the novel. Elvis' name and the majority of cultural references in the novel clearly indicate the overwhelming influence of the West as Amy Novak observes that "The hegemonic inheritance of colonial culture is seen in the identities and values adopted by the characters surrounded by the artefacts of western culture in contemporary Lagos" (34). The final departure of Elvis for America by using his friend's passport whose name is Redemption suggests that the only way out of Elvis's chaotic life is to leave his fractured society.

From the state's all-encompassing violence to the decayed landscape, the disquieting social relations, and finally, to this deterioration of the body and mind, every political,

social and spatial layer of the novel is rendered perilous. This fractured world- with its systemic violence, socioeconomic marginalization, and decay- shapes and constraints the lives of Abani's youth subjects. (Omelsky 87)

Just as Elvis's story lacks closure at the end of the novel, the collective trauma of neocolonialism has not been given a closure. My Luck's narrative in *Song for Night* alludes to the Biafran war that remains a traumatic memory especially for the Igbos. But because traumatic experiences defy understanding of history as a completed past, the narrative conjures images of the Biafran war, such as the mass killing of the Igbos in 1966 but refrains from being dated. The story lacks chronological markers to show the readers a particular date or time in history as Coundouriotis observes that "The indeterminacy of time and place (these are Igbo characters, but there are also Lexus cars so it cannot be Biafra in 1967) suggest the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness" (195). This mode of narrative emphasizes that My Luck's story symbolizes a collective trauma that extends beyond the Biafran War. In fact, it resonates the pain and suffering that continues to afflict Nigerian society long after the war has ended, which is evident in the trauma that arise from military regime and neocolonialism in *GraceLand*. Thus, instead of trying to tell stories that deal with historical specificities, Abani is more focussed on how trauma associated with the Biafran war persists in people's memory, an experience which Wole Soyinka describes as "a history that dogs our conscience and collective memory" (32). In *GraceLand*, traumatic memory of the Biafran war has been portrayed through Elvis's cousin Innocent who served as a boy soldier in the civil war. Elvis observes that "when Innocent slept over at Elvis's house, he woke up in the middle of the night, screaming. Oye told him that Innocent screamed because the ghosts of those he had killed in the war were tormenting him" (Abani, *GraceLand* 20). The novel, which is set a few years after the civil war in which the number of death is estimated to be between "one and

three million”, shows how the trauma of the war is fresh and present in peoples’ memory (Tariq 10). In the poem “Easter Sunday” from *Kalakuta Republic* Abani expresses through poetry that his experiences of violence continue to haunt him long after he has left prison. Though the poem is titled “Easter Sunday” Abani is unable to leave his past behind and rise from the dead like Christ and contemplates on whether he is “Too afraid to even become an alcoholic” (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 109). “Haunting” is another poem which evokes LaCapra’s observation that “there is no full immediate access to the experience itself even for the original witness” (21) as trauma repeats itself in memory without “notions of completeness, logic and sensibility” (Krishnan 193).

We return. The living.

Again. Wearing grief in gentle

bouquets, laid:

We return. The living.

Not the dead. Fast flitting shadows rifling

between mental gravestones trying

to fix a thing unbroken. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 108)

Many of Abani’s characters are allegorical and representative of the violence and trauma that afflicts Nigerian society. In most of his works, violence is usually an outcome of the problem in the society at large, which created the condition for specific acts of violence. In an interview with Yogita Goyal, Abani expresses that his works attempt to revisit the people’s traumatic experiences and lend voice to their stories.

A lot of the driving force of my work is the recovery of the narrative that might be forgotten or erased by history for many complex reasons- shame, class, nationalism, etc. So for me there is no moving forward without the complex and difficult revisitation of the past. I grew in an immediately post-civil war Nigeria as a former Biafran, with all the profound loss and PTSD that was inflicted on an entire people. The silence around that war continues to reverberate in Nigeria's history until today, much like the American Civil War, fought in the 19th century, is still at the heart of much of America's political divides. The middle classes in Africa don't want these painful histories excavated and explored because it doesn't mesh with the way they want to be seen by their Western contemporaries, despite protestations to the contrary. My experience of living, and my understanding of things, is that the past not only haunts the present, but also is, in many ways, in control of the present, until the trauma of said past is given its due attention. (Abani, "A Deep Humanness" 232)

The Virgin of Flames is a novel about an artist's quest for identity. Black's confusion and depression is deeply rooted in his upbringing. Born of an Igbo father and a Salvadoran mother, Black struggles with his ethnicity growing up in Los Angeles. After his father, a NASA scientist disappeared, Black was raised by his mother who in a state of despair took to obsessive praying for the return of her husband. As his mother become more and more depressed, she forces Black to pray for hours and beats him to confess his sins before the Virgin Mary. Black's mother said to him:

You are my punishment from God. Do you know why? Because I got pregnant before I married your father. Against my family's wishes, I dated that monero. And now I have to live with you. You are my living sin, m'ijo. Pray, pray that God forgives you." (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 108)

This outright rejection and projection of the mother's frustration to young Black by using religion as a basis seems to have a huge impact on his struggle with his identity. Black is also confused when it comes to his sexuality. The possible reason for his confused gender identification is also rooted in his childhood.

My father told me that there is a curse on our family that a malevolent spirit kills all the male children before they turn six. So all the boys are dressed as girls and sometimes even given girl's names until they turn seven. Then the dress comes off and we become boys again. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 100)

Black is obsessed with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl, and he questions himself whether this meant that he is gay. The archangel Gabriel appears to Black in different forms and speaks to him on multiple occasions. Gabriel could be symbolic of Black's attempt to deal with his psychological trauma. The concept of sin and redemption has a strong impact on Black due to his mother's obsession with it. She named him Black as a reminder of the sin she committed in getting pregnant before her Christian marriage. She forced this idea of sin and repentance on to Black as a child, even before he was able to comprehend the meaning behind these religious ideas, and she often beat him in an attempt to make him repent from his sins. Because trauma "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4) Gabriel could be a reflection of the religious ideas that traumatized him from childhood. Black is a victim of socially constructed identities of race and religion from childhood, and his art is an attempt to come to terms with his traumatic past.

He was the only biracial kid for blocks and it set him apart. Everyone could tell he wasn't quite one thing or the other, and yet since his father wasn't around no one

could tell what he might be. Kids were cruel and didn't cut him any breaks. And his mother, yelling at him, calling him her sin, her mud in the mouth from God...

"You know, m'ijo," she used to say, always said, from when he was eight. "You are my punishment from God. Do you know why? Because I got pregnant before I married your father. Against my family's wishes, I dated that monero. And now I have to live with you. You are my living sin, m'ijo. Pray, pray that God forgives you."

"But I didn't do anything!"

"Neither did Judas, really. But still he hanged himself..." (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 106-7)

Black is subject to immense trauma during childhood, both from his mother and the society at large. Angel Gabriel who watches him and haunts him repeatedly is a manifestation of his trauma that re-enacts itself as trauma cannot be experienced fully but resurfaces repeatedly and influences the victim's sense of identity. The traumatic incident that occurred in the past comes back to haunt the victim in numerous ways as Caruth states "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (18). Black has a complex relationship with blackness and whiteness which seems to have stemmed from the sense of rejection and inferiority that he felt as a child due to the colour of his skin. He is obsessed with the Virgin Mary and tried to paint a mural of her. He applies white paint on his face and dresses up like her as a model for the mural that he attempts to paint. But the mural that he finally painted is a disturbing image that subverts race and religion that the Virgin symbolizes:

Rising fifty feet, on the side of the abattoir wall, in a head to toe yashmak, was the figure of a Muslim woman. Only her eyes and hands were visible. In one she was strangling a dove. The other was wrapped around something that, though still largely unformed, was meant to be an AK-47. The image was stunning and more than a little disturbing. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 188)

Apart from issues of race, Black is also traumatized by religious concepts of sin and redemption. This continues to haunt and traumatize him, which is reflected in his artistic vision as well. Black is also deeply troubled by the concept of good and evil handed down to him through religion because it contradicts with his sexuality. His obsession with a transvestite and his attraction towards the same sex indicate that Black shows homosexual inclination. But he represses and fights this inclination due to fear of social stigmatization as well as his religious upbringing. The fact that he is a person of colour also adds to his emotional turmoil regarding sexuality because the Black community is less accommodating when it comes to homosexuality, and his sexual orientation would subject him to double marginalization because of his of race and sexuality. Sweet Girl symbolizes Black's desire as well as his guilt. He is obsessed with her because Sweet Girl is everything that Black desires to be deep inside but afraid to admit due to societal norms regarding gender. Sweet Girl could take on any gender identity, while Black is afraid and confused about his sexual and gender identity.

“You know I'm not gay” he added. His voice was hard.

Sweet Girl laughed. Deep in her throat. Mocking.

“I'm not gay either. Well not in that way. I'm a woman, honey, this tackle is just a little inconvenience, okay? I am all woman. And if I'm gay, its because I'm a lesbian.” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 280)

There is a scene in which Sweet Girl, on the request of Black, literally demonstrates how to hide her penis when dressed as a girl. Black is amused by Sweet Girl's ability to successfully transform into an image of a female. He even touched Sweet Girl's private areas but "Technically Sweet Girl was a woman, so this didn't count as a gay experience, he told himself" (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 282). This vividly shows Black's internalized homophobia and his trauma regarding sexuality. When Sweet Girl helps Black hide his penis in a scene which is symbolic of gender transformation, Black becomes afraid, confused, and then suddenly turns violent towards Sweet Girl. When Sweet Girl asks him how he feels, Black is unable to articulate the complex feelings that take over.

He wanted to say something. Say, Help, I can't breathe. I am suffocating. I am claustrophobic. I can't feel my penis. Get this tape off me. It has gone for good. Who am I? What am I? He wanted to scream, to push this feeling like a small death. The way he imagined split honey spreading over a dying ant must feel, bliss, breathlessness and the onset of terror. He swallowed hard, dug his fingernails into his palms and looked in the mirror. He was a girl. He began to cry. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 284)

Black's reaction is symbolic of his desire as well as fear and guilt of transcending gender binary. Soon after, he suddenly turns violent towards Sweet Girl and hits her several times. During a physical fight that ensued between them, Black caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror which reminded him of the night he had been raped under the bridge. This traumatic instance of rape has a deep impact on his gender identity. Not only is Black afraid of social and religious stigmas, he is also inwardly afraid of embracing femininity as much as he desires it. Black is drawn by femininity but seems afraid and reluctant to embody it because in the patriarchal society that he grew up in, he associates femininity with passivity and submissiveness. This idea is further fuelled by the instance of rape, an act which is often used

for display of power and superiority of patriarchy. This seems to be the reason why Black suddenly becomes afraid of Sweet Girl who takes on the dominant role while he becomes the submissive one. Not only does Sweet Girl symbolize his guilt, he is perhaps reliving the trauma of his rape when he positions himself as a woman who is dominated and violated.

He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to be her bitch. He loved her. He despised her...He hated her. He hated himself. He couldn't differentiate. How did she end up as the man, dick swinging in his pants, while he was now her bride, the bitch? (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 284-285)

Overcome with conflicted feelings over Sweet Girl, Black suddenly turns violent towards her in a moment of frenzy. Black's fear of intimacy and the fact that he physically attacks the one person he desires is indicative of the impact of trauma on his identity as an individual. At thirty seven, Black has had no meaningful relationship. The fact that he turns violent towards the one person that he has been obsessed with for a long period of time shows that he is a deeply traumatized individual. This fear of intimacy has been portrayed in the poem "Tattoo" where the prisoners avoid being on close terms with other fellow prisoners because death constantly lurks round the corner.

Saddam

Even the guards call me that. Few people

want to know my real name

Here

Everybody goes by an alias.

Perhaps it is to avoid intimacy.

Dangerous

when you might be burying your

best friend the next day (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 48)

In *GraceLand* Elvis witnessed the rape of his cousin Efua by his uncle Joseph. He himself was later raped by the same man while he was a boy. In another instance in which Elvis is captured and tortured by the military for performing in a riot, he is sexually abused by a soldier. Elvis's experiences of homosexual acts are both violent display of power by the perpetrators. Unlike Black, there is no clear indication that Elvis is confused with his sexual identity or show signs of homosexual attraction. But there are indications that he is struggling with gender identity, which could have a co-relation with the violence of masculinity he witnessed from childhood, and the sexual violence he suffered. The way that gender is violently regulated in the novel is highlighted in a scene where the five-year-old Elvis is forced to perform the traditional Igbo rite of initiation into manhood by his male relatives. He was summoned to the backyard where his uncle Joseph painted strange designs all over his body. He called for his mother and his grandmother but his father prohibited them for taking part in the rite and said "Dis is about being a man. No women allowed" (Abani, *GraceLand* 18). When Elvis questioned why he has to kill an eagle when he is just a young boy, his uncle Joseph replied "It is de first step into manhood for you. When you are older, de next step is to kill a goat, and den from dere we begin your manhood rites. But dis is de first step" (Abani, *GraceLand* 19). This shows how performance of masculinity relies on violence and the fact that a chicken was used instead of an Eagle and Elvis did not really kill but was handed a bow and an arrow in which a chick has been pierced through in order to dupe the elders that the boy has done the killing symbolize the socially constructed nature of gender. According to Lindsey Green-Simms "When Elvis begins to cross-dress it is perhaps not surprising that he is seeking an alternative to the world of violent masculinity into which he has been initiated" (145). Elvis is very fond of his mother, Beatrice and has a close association with his

grandmother, Oye. When Elvis was nine years old his aunt Felicia and her friends apply make up on him and dress him up as a girl. Aunt Felicia weaves Elvis's hair into cornrows which Elvis thought would amuse his father but his father's reaction was in total contrast to Elvis's anticipation:

Elvis ran straight into the first blow, which nearly took his head clean off. As he fell, his father grabbed him with one hand, steadying him, while with the other he beat him around the head, face, buttocks, everywhere. Too shocked to react, still out of breath from his sprint, Elvis gulped for air as his father choked him... His lip was cut and he couldn't see out of one eye, but he could hear his father ranting in the backyard, giving Aunt Felicia a rough time.

"No son of mine is going to grow up a homosexual! Do you hear me?!" he shouted at her. (Abani, *GraceLand* 62)

Masculinity is a performance forced on Elvis with violence, but this further draws him away from it as he repeatedly finds ways to embrace femininity, though in covert manners. Like Black, it seems that Elvis disguises his desire to transcend gender binary in art and performance when he impersonates Elvis Presley. Though he refrains from making appearance in public with full make up for fear of scorn and harassment, the joy and excitement he feels when experimenting with makeup is suggestive of his inclination to subvert normative gender norms.

Opening the box, he adjusted the mirror he had taped to the inside cover. Then, methodically, with the air of ritual, he laid out the contents: a small plastic compact of hard, pressed face powder, a few tubes of lipstick in different colors, a plastic case with eye shadow in several shades of blue...Satisfied with the mix, he began to apply it to his face with soft, almost sensual strokes of the sponge. As he

concentrated on getting an even tone, his earlier worries slipped away. Finishing, he ran his fingertips along his cheek. Smooth, like the silk of Aunt Felicia's stockings. (Abani, *GraceLand* 77)

Kalakuta Republic is a personal account of Abani's own personal experiences of imprisonment. It chronicles his suffering as well as the lives of other inmates in prison. Abani felt that the intensity of pain and suffering is better captured in the form of poetry, as he states:

Because I started off as a fiction writer, and just the intensity of that experience was better portrayed in poetry. Partly because [poetry] allows people to come into a really profound and gut-wrenching experience, and stepping out of it almost frames of still photography rather than the full-length feature a novel gives. (Abani, "Voices in Wartime")

But at the heart of Abani's poems is the idea of transformation, despite the pain and sufferings he portrayed. Abani succeeds in elevating art and humanity above tyranny and violence. According to poet Kwame Dawes:

The poem about incarceration is really a poem about freedom. The fact is that the poem, by its very nature defies the baseness of suffering. By becoming the vehicle for the expression of horror, the poem forces the horror to be something else, to be managed, to be transformed into something beautiful. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 17)

Unlike his novels, the poems in this collection directly deal with the author's first hand experiences of violence. The poem "Old Warrior" is about an old man in prison who feels that his identity as a father has been taken away from him.

One night

a week after he arrived
he crawled across the cell
and shook
me
awake.

‘Please call me papa’

he begged.

‘60 years I have been somebody’s

papa.

I must have someone to be papa

to.” (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 26)

This poem highlights not only the significance of one’s identity in order to make sense of our existence it also brings out how violence also has a deep impact on masculinity. When removed from his identity as a father who takes care of his family and his children, the man is cut off from an important aspect of his identity. Similarly, in *GraceLand*, Elvis’s father Sunday Oke feels emasculated when he could no longer provide for his family in the new social set up of Lagos like he used to in Afikpo. This drives him into frustration and alcoholism because his sense of identity which is grounded in the patriarchal notion of a man as somebody who provides for his family has received a huge blow. Removed from an agrarian economy, Sunday lacks education and skills necessary to make a decent living in Lagos which hurts his honour as a man.

The poem “Caliban” portrays how trauma victims are repeatedly haunted because of the repetition compulsion associated with trauma. The impact of trauma on the minds of some prisoners, as observed by Abani, is so overwhelming that it negates the value and worth of freedom.

Fear grows on you,

smooth like well worn trouser buttocks.

Inmates devise elaborate schemes to

keep from being released, because

After twenty years in hell, heaven is too

terrible a possibility to contemplate. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 64)

Due to his own experience of violence and terror under military dictatorships in Nigeria, Abani’s depiction of violence is deeply rooted in his own personal memories. In the introductory note to his poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic*, he writes:

And now? Every day is a careful balance fought between the despondency that threatens to swamp me and the incredible joy of living. I think that my art, my poetry, prose and music come from these cracks in my being, these ley lines where spirit is said to reside. I have come out of the horror of that experience having lost my faith in the inherent goodness of humanity, yet curiously appreciating even more the effort it takes to be good. (10)

As an individual, Abani is deeply aware of the ensuing trauma that comes with violence, which is also reflected in his writings. Regarding the impact of war, Abani remarked in an interview to Hope Wabuke that “When a war is over, it takes another ten years for a war to be really over” (Abani, “The Middle-class”). This statement is not just indicative of the lasting impact of wars on economy and society, but encompasses the scar and trauma of violence in peoples’ collective memory that has long term impact on their identity.

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Chapter IV

Mode of Narration and Violent Discourse

Narrativizing or narrative is as old as the history of mankind. It exists in variety of forms throughout all places and societies. Narrative is present in all forms of representations such as myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, newspapers as well as other audio and visual mediums. Roland Barthes expresses that narrative is a part and parcel of human society and is present in multiple forms and states that “it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories...” (237). In literary representation, narrative becomes a crucial site of contestation and debate as it is a significant defining factor through which the human subject makes meaning out of the experiences. Experience and memory of incidents are organized by the human subject through narrative. Therefore, narrative is not generated by logical and scientific procedures but is subject to the human subject, which in turn is subject to various cultural and ideological influences. According to Bruner, “Cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (“Narrative” 3). The process of storytelling is often narrative constructions of identity that involves tensions and contradictions in its attempt to represent the subject in relation to the larger human society. Narrativizing produces gaps, fissures, and boundary trouble and the subject’s position is never fixed or stable. The act of narrativizing is a process of identity construction because there is no single unified self that is capable of representing past experiences in its totality. In fact, narratives are positions or perspectives taken in the present from stories of the past.

Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although we have no compunction about calling stories true or false. (Bruner, “Narrative” 4-5)

Even autobiographical narratives cannot claim to be representation of one absolute reality. “Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied” (Smith and Watson 375), and there cannot be life stories that articulate unified coherent selves. Within the domain of literary representation, narratology occupies a significant area of study as it “both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects” (Culler 83).

Narrative about violence has always been a significant part of literary representations of not just contemporary literature, but is overwhelmingly present throughout the ages from folklore and myth to lullabies and nursery rhymes. Abani’s narratives on violence, though not all strictly autobiographical are to a great extent self-representations as they are deeply influenced by his personal experiences of violence. As mentioned above, narrative or the act of narrativizing is closely related to issues of power in society, and this complex mechanism of power will be looked at in terms of discourse. According to Roger Fowler:

‘Discourse’ is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world. An organization or representation of experience-‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded. (Qtd. in Mills 6)

Thus, discourse could refer to all statements with meanings, both in speech and text which have an impact on the real world. Michel Foucault, who is most strongly associated with the term discourse, views it in terms of the relations between power, knowledge and truth. Foucault's interest is not simply analysing the discourses that prevails in a society at a particular time but attempts to show the arbitrariness of the nature of these discourses which often appear familiar and accepted as norms of a given society as "Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity" (Mills 15). Reality is often constituted through discourse that operates within discursive structures. These discursive structures legitimize certain statements or views and delegitimizes some, as our perception and interpretation of events or objects happens within discursive structures.

Discourse also constructs certain events and sequences of events into narratives which are recognised by a particular culture as real or serious events... the only way we have to apprehend reality is through discourse and discursive structures. In the process of apprehending, we categorise and interpret experience and events according to the structures available to us and, in the process of interpretation, we lend these structures a solidity and a normality which it is often difficult to think outside of. (Mills 53-54)

Abani's narratives are not always openly didactic, nor do they always provide clear solutions regarding the malaise of violence. Hence, it is significant to analyse his mode of narration in order to locate how his narrative offers a counter discourse to violence. The question also arises on whether, in representing violence, the narrative fails to eschew violence and instead helps in giving violence a bigger platform.

Images of violence in art (verbal or visual) are potentially so potent that they may serve only to demonize and dehumanize the perpetrators of the violence and

dehumanize the reader through the reader's reception of a kind of extreme pornography. (Priebe 48)

Scholars and critics on trauma studies have also become increasingly concerned about a trauma story being reduced to mere sensation or spectacle that evokes the reader's pleasure.

[I]n a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion. (Miller and Tougaw 2)

Despite this concern by critics and scholars, creative writers do continue to reflect and portray violence and trauma which have become even more widespread in recent times through their art. With regard to depiction of violence in art, Joyce Carol Oates states that "Serious writers, as distinct from entertainers and propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods...The serious writer, after all, bears witness" (Rev. Oates 35). This process of bearing witness is a complex one, and Abani's narrative regarding violence often seems ambiguous. The discourse on violence in the narrative is mostly devoid of sensationalizing or moralizing. But a close observation of Abani's narrative throws light on the narrative's eschewing of violence, and this is often manifested in the subversive nature of his narrative and his mode of narration that transcends the horror of violence through aestheticization. At the same time, most of his works lack closure and fail to provide easy solution or escape from the violence and chaos that structure the world of his characters, but build a discourse on violence which exposes the myriad social structures that lend legitimacy to violence. Priebe states that violence exists "in varying degrees in most African fiction that has been successful in the West. The very idea of Africa in Western discourse has Africa geographically situated as a place of violence" (Priebe 46).

Abani's works in certain manners reinstate this perspective of violence, but also build up a discourse that subverts violence and the societal structures that contribute to violence. His narrative acknowledges the lurking presence of violence in various aspects of human relationships in a given society but refrains from attempting to provide easy solutions towards the epidemic of violence that occupies most of his works. According to Foucault:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 100-101)

A close observation of Abani's narrative exposes the underlying discourse of power and shows how the narrative subtly builds up a counter discourse on violence through subversion of the existing power dynamic. Abani is careful not to succumb to graphic and sensational portrayal of violence through his art, but is straightforward and honest in his depiction of the violence that envelops much of everyday life in Nigeria and he seems to be unwavering by the stereotype of Africa as a place of violence in Western discourse. His narrative not only subverts the forces and institutions that facilitate violence, but balances it with the theme of transformation that pervades all his works, reaffirming the concept that "Great literature will always transcend the horror with insight into sublime wonder at human possibility" (Priebe 49). As a postcolonial writer, Abani's depiction of violence neither attempts to blame the West for the violence and chaos nor attempt to whitewash the traditional life as something that is devoid of violence.

The novels of Habila and Abani are certainly not postcolonial if by postcolonial we mean an unavoidable mention of the former colonial masters: in essence they do not 'write back' to the Empire in the classic fashion of postcolonial textualities. Rather, they focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space with the goal of enhancing human flourishing there. (Eze 110)

One of the most significant aspects of narrativizing violence is the role of language. Language and speech form a discourse on violence, and the role of language in violence as well as in human existence as a whole is more complex and crucial than the general conception of language as a means of human communication. Language is in itself a site of contestation of opposing claims, and it can be used to instigate violence as well as to counter violence. Judith Butler states that when we claim to be hurt by language, we ascribe agency to language and a power to injure and this could possibly mean that we are constituted within the terms of language.

Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power. (Butler 1-2)

This notion of language would imply that discourse on violence through narrative could take up a life of its own, beyond the purview of authorial intention. Narrative dealing with violence has the potential of having a negative effect, even if the author's intention is to narrativize against violence. According to Judith Butler, "Language that is compelled to repeat what it seeks to restrain invariably reproduces and restages the very speech that it seeks to shut down. In this way, speech exceeds the censor by which it is constrained" (Butler

129). But this does not mean that all violence should be censored and omitted from representation for fear of the narrative promoting violence. In fact, violence of all kinds needs to be addressed, represented and voiced through language because the act of voicing through language constitutes power. The role of language in narrative, especially violent languages are so damaging that writers like Toni Morrison considers it not just as violent utterance but the very language violent in itself as she states that “The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, and mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge” (Morrison). Chris Abani and other writers who deal with violence in their works narrativize violence with an attempt to eschew violence and its damaging effects on human beings. But it is also a debatable issue whether their narratives always achieve their desired effects as a theoretical analysis of the nature of language highlights the complexity of any narrative. Just as discourse legitimizes certain ideas and delegitimizes some others, language itself operates as a discursive agency. It is a mechanism that operates within certain parameters of censorship. Butler expresses how every text is preceded by censorship because the author of any text follows a process of selection that “rules out certain possibilities, and realizes others” but this happens within the larger censorship imposed by linguistic possibility itself as “the speaking subject makes his or her decision only in the context of an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities” (129). At the same time, a text always escapes censorship and “effort to constrain speech cannot fully target or capture the polysemy of language” (Butler 129). In Abani’s narrative about violence, the idea of censorship applies to his written works as well as the state’s attempt to censor his voicing of atrocities committed by the military regime through physical imprisonment of the writer. But just as it is impossible to censor a text against its eschewing of violence, it is also impossible to rule out

the possibility of that very text inciting violence as often “the text in question takes on new life as part of the very discourse produced by the mechanism of censorship” (Butler 130). Apart from this problematic nature of language and text, reader’s responses to texts also problematize authorial intention of eschewing violence further. According to Terry Eagleton, “the reader makes implicit connections, fills in the gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches... The text itself is really no more than a series of ‘cues’ to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning” (Eagleton 76). It is within the ambit of this complex nature of language, narrative, and discourse that Abani’s narrativization of violence needs to be examined.

Abani’s narrative often lacks a sense of closure, and his narrative on violence can also be regarded as morally ambiguous in certain aspects. In an interview with Yogita Goyal he expresses, “As a writer, I am often opening up questions and exploring them with characters such that the work never shuts down, never ends and, in the end, never takes a definitive side” (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 231). This could be a result of certain reservations on the part of the author to make his creative works too didactic, due to a deeper insight into the complexity of the issues dealt with. Therefore, Abani has employed a narrative which may not always necessarily condemn violence but uses his art of storytelling to subvert the institutions and forces that contribute to violence. His narrative also gives platform for humanity to triumph even in the face of violence and brutality, so that his works transcend the pain and sufferings. However, it could also be argued that there is a possibility of his narrative having adverse effects in certain aspects due to the inherent nature of language which could escape its intended discourse and take on a form of its own. In *Becoming Abigail*, Abani tells a story of a victim of sexual abuse in which there is no poetic justice for the victim Abigail. The novella ends with the protagonist left with no strength to live on, finally committing suicide. It is true that in exploring violent experiences, the narrative

attempts to portray Abigail as a helpless victim in order that the readers empathize with the protagonist. The narrative also succeeds in dramatizing the emotional and mental trauma that Abigail went through. But the narrative that is filled with violence has the possibility of either overshadowing other aspects of the narrative or make readers numb to these kinds of experiences, rather than achieving the desired effect of coming closer towards the idea of humanity. The following lines are descriptions of how Abigail ran away from Peter's enslavement after she tore off his penis with her teeth:

Abigail ran out, half-naked, the severed penis clutched in her hand. Though the streets were crowded, only a few people noticed this gorgon with bloody mouth and hands, and the grisly prize she held up like a torch as she ran.

Time bled into the cracks on the pavement until a passing police car picked her up. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail*99)

In *The Virgin of Flames*, Black violently attacks Sweet Girl at the end of the novel. In this highly ambiguous but symbolic manifestation of violence, Sweet Girl becomes a victim of what is possibly a hate crime that arises from a form of internalised homophobia on the part of the protagonist, Black. Though the narrative offers an effective counter discourse against social norms that lend legitimacy through the narrative's skilful subversion of these social institutions, instances such as Black's violence towards Sweet Girl could be considered as normalization of gender violence. In a narrative that puts the story of Black at the centre, the victimization and injustice towards the transvestite, Sweet Girl has not been given a platform in the story, as the novel ends soon after the violent incident. Though the sudden violence from Black who before this particular incident was obsessed with Sweet Girl is intended by the author to manifest a more symbolic representation of Black's guilt and frustration as a result of his envy for Sweet Girl who represents the fluidity of gender and sexual identity he

inwardly craves for, it nevertheless normalizes violence against the transgender community in a story that does not account for Sweet Girl's victimization and ultimately of her essential humanness.

Raul, below, on piano was already off to a spirited solo, while someone banged on a tambourine. Black seemed to watch his left fist hit Sweet Girl, even as part of him registered the music. He knew it was him, but it wasn't. He felt rather than saw her surprise, her shock, her fear. Then he was hitting her again and again. She was a small woman and his blows had her on the floor. (Abani, *Song for Night* 285)

In *Song for Night*, My Luck was forced to rape a woman by his commander John Wayne, and the narrative description of the rape and the subsequent brutal killing of the woman denotes a kind of aestheticization of violence.

John Wayne laughed and put two rounds into the woman's head, spraying my face with her blood. The woman died with that look of absolute tenderness in her eyes...I was thirteen, armed and lost in a war with the taste for rape. (Abani, *Song for Night* 78)

Abani's technique and use of language in representing violence conforms to aestheticization of violence wherein violent events are represented in "a manner as to replace the reality of the violence with language or images that allow for a freedom of interpretation of those acts and events, or for a blurring of the real nature of those acts or events, that would not be possible if such act or event was witnessed in reality" (Thompson 29). Though all artistic representations could be argued to be aestheticization, aestheticization of violence is a literary technique employed by authors to avoid extreme disgust and repulsive reaction from the readers when dealing with horrific and graphic representations of violence. But what qualifies as aestheticization of violence is not quantifiable, and it depends on certain

parameters out of which the author's intention and use of language are significant factors. This figurative representation of violence as opposed to factual and graphic representation delimits understanding and interpretation of violence and renders the violent experience subjective and inter-subjective. Not only did Abani quite consistently employ this method of artistic representation in his representation of violent acts, in works like *Song for Night*, he had deliberately refrained from giving a geographical locale to the war that is taking place in the novella, in order that the war being represented is more evocative and allegorical, other than situating it historically and geographically as that would amount to a more factual and journalistic representation which often fails to encapsulate the multi-dimensional effects of wars. It is this aestheticization of violence that renders violent experiences into an art that conveys the damaging effects of violence that could evoke a sense of empathy and has a transcendental nature. When violent incidents are represented without aesthetic renderings, the effect is often horror and repulsion on the reader and it fails to have an empathic effect and a nuanced understanding of the incident. According to Priebe:

In fiction, unlike real life, we are given a sense of distance and control, and it is a basic aesthetic principle that those things that are most threatening in real life give us pleasure when encapsulated in play (artistic) form. The unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unspeakable can be thought, imagined, and spoken in literature with an impunity not granted us in real life, yielding an understanding we find hard to abstract from real events. (50)

Aestheticization is in a sense legitimization of violence through an artistic lens, and it relies heavily on the craft of the writer not to succumb to sensationalized representation of violence. Especially within the domain of films, graphic representation of violence has become rampant, possibly due to the fact that it is a visual medium. According to Zillmann:

Presumably because of its ability to present violence in compelling images, cinematic storytelling has embraced barbarian heroes and villains who slash, shoot and machine-gun their way to the things they want, all that without accepting societal impositions or moral curtailments that restrain normal mortals... There can be little doubt that slaughter of this kind has taken centre stage in the movies. Highly destructive violent encounters are featured with ever-increasing frequency. (180)

Aestheticization of violence could both be in case of personal violence and institutional violence. The poem "Killing Time" captures the poet's horrific experience of execution of fellow inmates in prison, his fear, and brutality of the military. The poem's depiction of the killing refrains from graphic representation and employs languages that are symbolic and the effect is achieved through certain images:

1900

hours.

Killing time. 12. Anointed.

Blindfolded. Herded by seraphs

wings tinged rusty by innocent blood.

Stapled

to a pock-marked wall by fear

steel bolts, ratchet bullets.

Shots crack

like so many branches.

Of 12, 8 fall.

Shirt, pencil and all.

I know I am alive

because

terror drips down my legs. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 40)

The horror of Abigail's victimization due to Peter's continuous rape in *Becoming Abigail* has been portrayed in the following language.

Fifteen days, passing in the silence of snow.

And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.

Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate the tattoos that made her.

Abigail. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 95)

The Virgin of Flames employs aestheticization of violence that is more institutional and systemic than personal and artistic objects such as the statue of Virgin Mary has been literally used as a site for aestheticization of violence. Black's burning of the Virgin, the incident which forms the basis for the title of the novel, is symbolic of Black's resistance against institutionalised religion. It is a highly subversive and symbolic aestheticization of

undermining the systemic violence perpetrated through religion. Black's attempt to paint a mural of the Virgin that eventually materializes into an image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding a gun subvert the sanctity attributed to the Virgin with an image that is representative of the West's anxiety over Islamic religion and terrorism associated with it. A symbolic representation of how violence in wars silences human beings, and the curtailing of freedom in wars have been achieved through the use of sign language for the titles of all the chapters in *Song for Night*, and titles like "Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat" (9), "Death is Two Fingers Sliding Across the Throat" (21), "A Question is a Palm Turning Out from an Ear" (135) et al not just reflect the fate of the protagonist whose vocal chords have been severed, but it also symbolically dramatizes the silencing effects of violence as well as the difficulty for victims of violence to narrativize their traumatic experiences.

Narratives concerning violence are naturally compelling but often run the risk of being sensational in the hands of lesser artists. It is significant that the narrative has the ability to transcend the pain and horror of violence being represented and put across hope and faith in humanity in the face of grave atrocities. Abani expressed his attempt to voice the power that lies in the idea of shared humanity through his poems. Though he is not in a position to change the socio-political structures that gave rise to violence, he believes in the power of humanity as power by its nature is not possessed but corresponds to the human ability to act in concert. In the author's note to *Kalakuta Republic*, he wrote, "If in reading these poems you can see the courage of the men and boys I write about, if you can feel their essential humanity, and realise that the best things in us cannot die, then I will have succeeded"(Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 10). In case of testimony and witness narratives on violence it become even more compelling and easy to be moved by the horror and graphic representation of violence as the narrative is shrouded with immediacy. It is not wrong to be moved by accounts of sufferings and violence, but the artistic representation would not

endure if it was only sustained by its shock value. Thus, it is important that the narrative has the ability to transcend the images of violence and pain, which lies in the hand of the artist. With regard to the power of art in transcending painful experiences, Kwame Dawes writes,

Great writers have discovered that the poem about suffering is really one about finding beauty in suffering. The poem about incarceration is really a poem about freedom. The fact is that the poem, by its very nature, defies the baseness of suffering. By becoming the vehicle for the expression of horror, the poem forces the horror to be something else, to be managed, to be transformed into something beautiful. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 17)

Thus, in representing violence it is significant that the writer builds up a discourse that condemns and delegitimizes violence even as it dominates the narrative. The narrative must have a transformative value that reaffirms humanity even in the face of inhumanity and violence. Abani's narrative employs several images, symbols that function as agents for subversion of power structures of society. Characters' names are often symbolical and convey deeper meanings. According to Lauren Mason, "Abani situates writing and images as different types of 'framing' devices. They are not competing discourses, but complementary 'ways of seeing'..." (210)

Another significant aspect through which Abani's narrative offers a counter discourse on violence is through subversion. Abani's mode of narration, through its skilful employment of subversion undermines and delegitimizes dominant social norms and institutions that lend legitimacy to systemic violence, and exposes the existing discourse of society. Violence in narrative discourse is often dismissed and its impact on real violence is often unacknowledged. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is "the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognised as such" (192). In *GraceLand*, the contradiction between

Elvis's first impression of Lagos and the stories he had heard about the city exemplifies the nature of discourse as well as the existing narrative about the city.

He hadn't known about the poverty and violence of Lagos until he arrived. It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavory parts. People who didn't live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels. (Abani, *GraceLand* 7)

This general impression of Lagos created a narrative of Lagos that focuses on the booming economy and developments as a result of the new era of neoliberalism, but fails to highlight the poverty and violence. This also shows how narrative about places and things are often largely informed by the interests of the dominant groups, and this is the reason why Elvis hardly know about the ugliness and chaos surrounding the city before he actually came and experienced it first-hand. But Abani's narrative offers a picture of life in Lagos that narrates about the underbelly of the rapidly developing city, a narrative that is not of the Western anthropologist, nor that of an upper class Igbo. According to Usher and Edwards, "A discourse author-ises certain people to speak and correspondingly silences others, or at least makes their voices less authoritative. A discourse is therefore exclusionary" (90). Abani's characters are often victims of the existing discourses on gender, race, sexuality, and cultural norms. These discourses and its discursive structures impose limits on their lives and often create conducive environments for outbreak of violence. At the same time, Abani's narrative also subverts the discourses that dictate the lives of his characters.

A discourse is a set of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think... we can say that discourses are those groupings of statements which have similar force- that is, they are grouped together because of some institutional pressure,

because of a similarity of provenance or context, or because they act in a similar way.

(Mills 62)

The narrative in *The Virgin of Flames* subverts the forces and institutions of power that systemically contribute to violence. The protagonist's name, Black, embodies a racial reference that situates him in a marginal position in relation to the Whites. Black is introduced in the novel in a scene in which he applies white face paint on his face. But the narrative that symbolically portrays the complexity of race subverts the notion of white superiority. Though Black's action of trying to create a white complexion is reminiscent of what Fanon refers to as "the black man who strives to whiten his race..." (xii). The narrative's comparison of the white colour in this context to Miss Havisham's wedding dress symbolizes the hollowness and instability of the notion of racial superiority.

He studied his face from several angles, imagining in that pause miss Havisham sitting in front of a mottled wedding cake in a mottled wedding dress, both of which were the color of the paste on his face, an aging ivory that recalled the musty smell of empire in decline, a sad color really. Whose empire he had no idea. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 4)

Despite the fact that the protagonist Black has been positioned as a marginalized subject due to his race, the narrative undermines this power structure that poses limits on Black's freedom which in turn contributes to violence in the novel. Black's inspiration for the Virgin comes from an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe that hangs on his wall with a brilliant white face and red cheeks. This religious image, which is quite removed from Black's racial identity, would be a source of torture and violence for Black from his mother who resorts to forcing her beliefs upon her son. But what ultimately materializes in Black's actual painting of the Virgin not only subverts the sacredness of the religious symbol but also of the cultural

situatedness of the image by conceiving an image of the Virgin as a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding an AK-47. By appropriating this disturbing and violent image with that of the Virgin, Abani's narrative subverts the sanctity of religion. It also subtly highlights the role of religion as a repressive institution by symbolically equating it with an image that is culturally disturbing and evocative of violence. Thus, the narrative in *The Virgin of Flames* builds up a discourse that became a point of resistance of violence. There is a scene in the novel where Black's friend Iggy plays with clay doll of Jesus and attaches a penis on to it, which she then attaches to a Barbie to create a transsexual Barbie.

Iggy was playing with Jesus.

Black, just entering The Ugly Store, watched with interest as she attempted to attach a clay penis to the anatomically incorrect doll. Jesus looked resigned to the indignity.

(Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 112)

Iggy further insinuates that Jesus was probably black, and also attaches the clay penis on a Barbie doll. This narrative subverts dominant discourses regarding Christianity, race and gender, all of which contribute towards systemic violence. The narrative explores the liminal spaces of sexual orientation through the character of Black, and further problematizes and destabilizes conventional norms of gender and sexual orientation through Sweet Girl, a transvestite who identifies herself as a lesbian. In this way, Abani's narrative offers a discourse that delegitimizes violence through subversion of the dominant discourse that conditions violent actions.

In *GraceLand*, Abani creates a character whose name is Elvis and is an Elvis Presley impersonator. The title of the novel is also an obvious reference to the late singer's mansion named Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee which now functions as a museum and is listed as a National Historic Landmark in the United States. The title of the novel and the name of the

protagonist not only reflect the cultural imperialism that plays out in the novel but offers a discourse that subverts the existing status quo. It is ironic that the protagonist Elvis failed in his impersonation of Elvis Presley. Because he could not make enough money from the impersonation, he soon had to find alternative means of earning a livelihood which exposes him to the underbelly of Lagos that is characterised by corruption and violence. Ironically, there is nothing graceful about the novel *GraceLand* with its depiction of war, violence, political chaos, grave economic inequality and erosion of traditional culture. Elvis's mother Beatrice, whose name means "bringer of joy and blessings" died early and his step-mother Comfort fails to bring comfort to his grieving father. It is also doubtful whether Elvis's friend Redemption who helped out Elvis on many occasions really brought about a solution for the problems that face Elvis and the society.

In general, Abani's mode of narration does not present a romanticized world view that provides a solution for the violence that prevails in human society. He refrains from positing idealized notions of love, religion, or essential human kindness and compassion as a means to counter violence. Abani's narrative on violence takes on an approach that neither sensationalizes violence nor endorses it. Without manifest condemnation of violence, Abani's narrative portrays the complex ways in which violence operates in human society. Due to this lack of manifest condemnation of violence in his narrative that often includes even graphic portrayal of the horror of violence, the question arises on whether the narrative in Abani's works succeed in condemning or providing solution on the epidemic of violence. But a careful examination of Abani's narrative highlights how his narrative offers a discourse that condemns violence in the form of subversion of the agencies that contribute towards violence. Moreover, a theme of transformation is pervasive in his works even when the characters experience and go through inhumane terror and violent situations. The narrative seldom provides an easy solution regarding violence because it acknowledges that it is a

complex phenomenon that is deeply woven in the structures of the society in question. This ambiguity also extends to the issue of violence and how it is portrayed in Abani's narrative as well. In *GraceLand*, the narrative ends with Elvis about to leave the country for America using his friend Redemption's passport.

“Redemption,” the airline clerk called.

Elvis, still unfamiliar with his new name, did not respond.

“Redemption!” the clerk called louder.

Elvis stepped forward and spoke.

“Yes, this is Redemption.” (Abani, *GraceLand* 321)

As the narrative ends with these lines, it is not certain whether Elvis successfully leaves the country. The lack of closure is even more significant in terms of the violence and chaos that remains in Lagos, even if Elvis were able to leave the country. “Elvis's world is one in which political and social structures have all but collapsed... For Elvis, the world is immediate, chaotic, and arbitrary; there are no structures left to which he can cling” (Mason 215). The fact that Elvis uses his friend's passport whose name is Redemption is ironic because the narrative does not provide an easy solution or redemption for all the crime, violence, and corruption that goes on. Madhu Krishnan observes that “The lack of closure in *GraceLand* points to the instability and uncertainty of existence in the postcolony, an instability born from its rupture with the past” (“Biafra” 189). The narrative does not provide answers on the political conflict nor on inter-personal violence such as rape in the story. The only hope of bringing structural changes in the society is through political overthrow of the military regime which is responsible for violence in the novel to a great extent. This hope for change has been exemplified by the King of the Beggars, who strongly opposes the regime, and calls for a cultural resistance of the West and Capitalism.

The King of the Beggars got up onstage and began plucking reluctant chords from a battered out-of-tune guitar. The crowd grew silent as he performed a series of tone poems. He was talking about the beauty of the indigenous culture that had been abandoned for Western ways... He spoke of the ancient systems of governance that were like a loose democracy, leaning more to a socialist system, a governance based on age-grades that gathered to discuss the way forward in any crisis... He spoke of the evils of capitalism that the United States of America practiced- a brand of capitalism, he said, that promoted the individual interest over the communal. (Abani, *GraceLand* 154-155)

But this ideology has not been endorsed by the narrative due to its apparent inability to cope with “the city’s shifting social and political landscape in a complex, direct, and honest manner” (Mason 215). Even Elvis, though impressed by the speech, understands that it is not possible to go back to an idealized past as the situation is more complex than advocating rejection of one thing in favour of another. Abani’s narrative treads on this ambiguous nature and manifestation of violence where poetic justice is not always available and the boundary between victims and perpetrators are often blurred. This has been exemplified by My Luck in *Song for Night* who states that “If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice?” (135). Due to the lack of poetic justice and a sense of closure in most of his works, Abani’s narrative often seem to represent violence as an inherent force from which the characters cannot escape. For instance, in *Becoming Abigail*, the narrative presents an ordeal from which the protagonist Abigail has no means of escape or recovery. There are few moments of transformation, but the protagonist finally succumbs to a state of absolute despair. The ending of the book suggests that she committed suicide by jumping into the river Thames as a result of her sorrow after Derek was imprisoned because of his affair with her. In *The Virgin of Flames*, Black’s abrupt outburst of

violence towards Sweet Girl and his burning of the Virgin during his childhood portray violent acts committed by the protagonist, for which there is no clear explanation. This also indicates how individuals often resort to violence as a means to escape oppression and gain power. According to Hannah Arendt:

That violence often spring from rage is a commonplace... Rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage... (*On Violence* 63)

But because violence can pursue only short term goals and is devoid of power, violence never yields positive change. But Abani's narrative builds a discourse that not only subverts the existing power relations but also throws light on why certain characters resort to violence under certain situations. But all violent motivations cannot be interpreted within this framework and the cause of violence as well as its manifestation is often complex and ambiguous.

In *GraceLand*, not only did Elvis carry this journal with him all the time in the story, every chapter of the novel is followed by an Igbo traditional food recipe. Just as Elvis subverts the violence of patriarchy through his association with feminine love and affection, Abani's inclusion of the food recipe could be seen as something which contradicts and juxtaposes with the narrative of violence. The food recipe has no direct bearing on the plot development of the novel, but is significant because it is representative of the traditional life that contradicts with the neoliberal and cosmopolitan life in Lagos. In this way, the novel develops a discourse that undermines the violence of the society that witnesses cultural imperialism, military regime, and capitalism. Description of the kola nut ritual that forms the

beginning of every chapter in the novel exemplifies the nature of discourse and the political nature of narratives. Every description of the kola nut ritual that occupies the beginning of all the chapters has been presented in two separate sections that seem to come from two contrasting perspectives. The first one is the observation of the insider, whereas the second observation belongs to that of a Western anthropologist whose perspective is located within the parameters of Western discourse.

We worship in different ways. With wine, the flow of worldly sweetness; with alligator pepper seeds, the hot and painful trials; with nzu, the sign of peace; with water, the blessing of the holy spirit... But greatest of all this, is the offering of kola nut in communion, the soul calling unto life.

The Eucharistic qualities of the kola-nut ritual are clear. There are close parallels to Catholicism, as there seems to be some kind of transubstantiation involved in the kola-nut ceremony, similar to the communion wafer in the Catholic ritual of mass.

(Abani, *GraceLand* 17)

Narrative of the West has been symbolically questioned when Elvis cook up stories and write letters to his grandmother Oye in the disguise of her pen pals from abroad. Elvis soon ran out of materials he borrowed from the Hollywood movies he had seen. When he finally turned to his imagination to cook up new stories, he discovers that he has numerous colourful stories that he could come up with. Elvis's storytelling and writing produce alternative narratives and spaces which highlights the unstable and fluid nature of narrative.

As a creative writer dealing with issues of violence, brutality and trauma, Abani is careful not to succumb to a sensationalized representation of violence and suffering. Kwame Dawes observes that Abani's portrayal of violence and suffering has the ability to transcend the pain and horror of violence. Accounts of trauma in the form of life writing gained

prominence in recent times. In the book *Trauma Texts* (2009), Whitlock and Douglas observe the surge in narratives about trauma that makes easy consumption in the twenty first century. Their work attempts to explore academic works on trauma with concerns about the ethics of testimony and commodification of traumatic story due to the politics of recognition that is involved in this field of writing.

The culture of confession in the mass media further elicits personal narratives of trauma, suffering and recovery. There is now a market for personal story and a proliferation and innovation in genres of creative non-fiction that expands those with stories to tell, and those with the desire to read life writing. (Whitlock and Douglas 2)

Abani's narrative on violence in his poems offers a discourse that offers a more vocal sense of transformation amidst harrowing accounts of violence. *Kalakuta Republic* details the horror of prison experience under the military rule, but the essence of the poems in this collection seems to be transcendence in the face of inhumanity. Abani's craft as a poet ensures that poems dealing with violence and torture are infused with humanity so that poems about incarcerations are really poems about transformation. The poem "Jeremiah" depicts courage and dignity even in the face of threat to one's own safety.

Jeremiah

was 6 feet, 9 inches the last

time we measured.

Face,

knotted against

sun-hard pain,

unravels.

Smiles, spread hemp

tendrils.

Often

fasting, he passes his food to

weaker, needier men.

He

stood between guards and a prone man,

helping him up

to

die on his feet, knees only slightly

buckled, eyes kissing the sun. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic*41)

Despite the theme of humanity that pervades his poems, Abani's narrative also clearly depicts the impact of violence on people's sense of morality and basic humanity. Some of his poems explore experiences of situations in which victims of oppression and violence became the very thing that they resist. Abani expresses his belief in the South African philosophy of Ubuntu which he explains as "The only way for me to be human is for you to reflect my

humanity back at me” (Abani, “TED Talk”). This further highlights the shared nature of humanity as well as the significance of creating a discourse that stresses on humanity, even in narratives that deal with violent experiences. At the core of his creativity has always been the attempt to reaffirm humanity in the face of brutal violence and human rights violations. His narratives, though fictional always bear close affinity with his own experiences of violence, and they come from a deep and personal understanding of violence. In his endeavour to transcend suffering and attempt to reaffirm humanity, his narrative mode also plays a significant role. The theme of transformation is always pervasive even in works that are replete with violence, as Abani states:

My understanding of the world is that the most sublime things co-exist with the most devastating things in every context, in every culture, in every situation. And what transforms the world is not denial of those things, but it’s actually the recuperation of them, literally, through love. (Abani, “*Song for Night* Highlights Hope”)

Thus, despite the fact that Abani’s narratives often lack closure and are cloaked in ambiguity when it comes to poetic justice for victims of violence, the author’s mode of narration and use of language elevates his narrative from sensationalised representation of violence or an art that is devoid of moral values. Though it may be arguable from certain perspective that Abani’s narrative fails to be vocally didactic in eschewing violence, it is not always permissible that the artistry of the work is limited by a dominant propaganda to condemn violence. Doing that would hamper the aesthetic rendering of violence that offers complex and nuanced understanding of violence within the domains of fiction. Though it is acknowledged that narrative often takes a life of its own, that language itself disseminates meanings beyond authorial intention, and that responses of texts are subjective, it is discernible that Abani’s mode of narration and use of language in his narrative eschew

violence and create a counter discourse on violence through a process of subversion and aestheticization.

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Chapter V

Conclusion

This study examines the complex process in which violence has been narrativized in the works of Chris Abani. Narrativizing violence in Abani's works looks into the processes and ways in which narrative operates in multiple ways. Taking into account the complexity and highly political nature of narrative, the thesis explores the various strands of narratives, both the dominant as well as the smaller narratives that constitute violence. Apart from the manifest incidents of violence that occupy the pages of Abani's works, this study brings attention to the ways in which violence and power are inter-related and explores the complex ways in which violence in the narrative is intricately woven with the system of power relations. It examines how the power structures in society create systemic violence which creates conducive environment for more overt manifestations of violence in the narrative. The thesis also examines the relationship between violence and identities of race, gender, sexuality as well as culture and brings out how these aspects influence one another and intersect in myriad ways. The effect of violence and its traumatic impact have been analysed through close observation of the narrative's use of language and narrative technique that resonates and mimics the manifestations of trauma as postulated by trauma theorists, while also laying emphasis not just on the personal trauma of victims but also bringing attention to social trauma that has been represented in a more allegorical manner. The study also examines the narrative discourse on violence and observes that it is largely ambivalent and refrains from claiming to suggest an easy solution. Acknowledging the complexities involved with any narrative, the thesis analyses the ways in which Abani's mode of narration creates a counter discourse of violence through subversion and a certain form of aestheticization of violence.

Narrativizing violence in Abani's works acknowledges the complexities involved with the very nature of narrative as the study "attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects" (Culler 83). Because of the political nature of representation and narrative, a text becomes a site of contestation of multiple narratives which are subject to various cultural and ideological influences. The process of narrativizing is also a meaning-making process and construction of identity because narratives create, reconstruct, and take positions on past experiences from the present. Smith and Watson state that "Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied" (375). It is within this complex, multifarious, and fluid nature of narrative that encapsulates layers of perspectives that violence in Abani's works have been critically engaged and examined.

One important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration in narrativizing violence in Abani's works is the author's personal and intimate proximity with violence. Though this is not a pre-requisite for a critically engaging and nuanced representation of violence, it is quite obvious that an author who was himself a victim of violence would be a vocal critic of violence who uses his art as a medium to eschew violence. But, regardless of authorial intention or the experiences of violence which definitely lend certain dimension of realism to the violent accounts, whether the narrative offers a nuanced representation of violence would ultimately depend on the author's craft in creating a narrative that achieves its desired effects of eschewing the forces that generate violence and ability in providing possible alternatives or ways of transcending violence.

The study begins with an attempt to understand key concepts on violence and narrative by exploring existing definitions and theories on these two concepts and situate Chris Abani within the Nigerian literary tradition with special emphasis on his personal experiences of violence that play an integral part in his artistic output. It highlights the

difference of the third generation Nigerian literature from the first and the second generation writings that characteristically exhibit the absence of an overarching ideological core, decentralization of narratives and dispersal in terms of thematic content. It situates Abani's place within the third generation writing, and delves into the socio-political situation in Nigeria in order to highlight how literature negotiates with the social and historical reality of the nation. Though the study acknowledges that analysis of literary texts based on authorial intention and social context offers a limited understanding of the complexities surrounding narrative, it explores Abani's tumultuous relationship with the military regime in Nigeria, his imprisonment and witness of violence as these are significant influences that form the core of his aesthetics. The writings of Abani's generation constitute a borderless, global, textual topography and Abani has also expressed how the concerns of his generation extend beyond issues of nation:

About my work, it is in many ways post-national and global not only in its reach, but in its attempts to locate a very specific African sensibility without attempting to limit it with certain kinds of arguments about essentiality and so forth. (Abani, "A Deep Humanness" 229-230)

Despite this post-national concern that differentiates the third generations from the previous writers, it does not imply that issues of the nation are completely abandoned by these new emerging writers. As writers of a postcolonial nation whose society, culture, or literature emerges and develops with the idea of the nation, the political and social unrest that afflicts and destabilizes the nation still form a significant theme in many of their writings even though the quest for cultural resistance of the colonizers may no longer be at the forefront of their narratives. Literature in Nigeria, however, is still closely connected to the idea of nationhood as Nwakanma remarks:

Nigeria is, in its current formation, a hybrid state; a nation of multiple nations coalescing to form the basis of nationness and national belonging. One of the fundamental sources of its evolution is to be found in its literature, particularly in poetry, that most nationalist of genres, but significantly also, in the form of the novel, which constitutes much of the narrative of nation. (Nwakanma 1)

The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War (6th July, 1967-15th January, 1970) and the subsequent military regimes have put Nigeria in a state of continuous conflict for decades. The earlier generation writers have not only negotiated with the legacy of colonialism and the ethnic and political conflict that afflict the postcolonial nation through their writings, several writers such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe were actively involved with the nation's struggle for independence and the civil war that follows while Christopher Okigbo lost his life in the Biafran War. Not only does Nigeria remain a country that is baffled by political conflict for several decades, ethnic issues remain at the forefront of the nation's fault line and to this day the idea of Biafra continues to live on as observed by Soyinka in an article "War in Nigeria: Victory Remains Elusive, 50 Years On" in July, 2017:

New generation writers, born long after that brutal war, have inherited and continue to propagate the Biafran doctrine, an article of faith among the Igbo populace, even among those who pay lip-service to a united nation. Millions remain sworn to uphold it... Amnesty International estimated that at least 150 pro-Biafra activists have been killed since August 2015. (Soyinka)

Though all of Abani's writings are not historical, much of his works deal with the chaos and violence that have been afflicting the country for decades. The devastating effect of the Biafran War as well as violence that continues under military regimes in the country have been revisited and narrativized by many writers as violence and trauma constitute a

significant aspect of the nation's collective memory. Especially for the Igbos who were the worst victims of the Biafran War, it is not just simply an event in history pages that is relegated to the past, but plays an active role in shaping their identity in the present time. The publication of Achebe's memoir *There Was a Country* in 2012, a book that revisits his personal experiences of the war and the issues that gave rise to Biafra is one obvious indication that the idea of Biafra still remains a pertinent issue. It is true that despite the diverse concerns of the third generation writers, narrative of nationhood always forms a significant aspect of their writings as Adesokan states that "in the larger context of political decolonization, the fictional voice (or perspective) also functions as a mode of testimony, bearing witness to issues thematized as political or humanitarian emergency" (3).

Chapter two of the study examines the relationship between violence and power in the narrative of Chris Abani. Based on existing relevant theories on the concepts of violence and power, the chapter highlights the inherent differences of the two concepts but explores the ways in which the two concepts intersect and influence one another. The study focuses on the function of power in Abani's narrative that goes beyond the traditional concept of power as an authority or instrument of coercion towards a Foucauldian concept that power is everywhere. This notion of power that pervades human society creates structures of power at a given context in society, even though power per se is not a structure. The chapter analyses how Abani's characters grapple with these power structures and how these power structures contribute towards systemic violence. But this is not to suggest that power is inherently violent or necessarily contribute towards violence or a negative force. Similar to Foucault's idea of power, Hannah Arendt observes that power is much more pervasive than strength, force, and authority and offers a clear distinction between violence and power. Acknowledging the conceptual difference between power and violence, the chapter explores the significant role played by power and how it creates conducive environment for violence

to take place in Abani's narrative. In its attempt to situate the ways in which the pervasive operation of power in human society contribute towards violence, the chapter takes into consideration theoretical concepts on violence that goes beyond the overt physical manifest violence to more institutional workings of violence. Based on the concept of structural violence postulated by Johan Galtung who applies the concept to a form of "violence that results in harm but is not caused by a clearly identifiable factor" (Vorobej 84) and quite a similar concept called 'systemic violence' propounded by Slavoj Zizek the chapter undertakes analysis of the society for a more complex understanding of power and violence. The existing structures of power in society constitute what Slavoj Zizek calls systemic violence. This systemic violence often provides the basis for manifest physical violence in Abani's narrative as well. Violence per se operates without reason and "rarely creates power" (Arendt, *On Violence* 89) and it is a weapon of people who lack the persuasive nature of power and knowledge. But the systemic violence that facilitates violence is often a product of power structures that exists in the society. Though violence in its manifest form appears prominent in Abani's narrative, the study looks into systemic violence and the role of power which constitute the smaller narratives regarding violence. In *Graceland*, Elvis and his family relocated to Lagos from their ancestral village in Afikpo with hopes of a better life in the city that witnessed rapid development and modernization. But the new neoliberal economy and globalization created a society that is starkly divided on the basis of wealth and led to loss of several Igbo traditional practices. The vast majority of the population constituted by people like Elvis are victims of the systemic violence created by the neoliberal economy. Much of the corruption and violence in the novel is systemic, and people like Elvis are to a great extent merely partakers of the condition created by the structures of power. Redemption's statement "No forget the whites who create de demand" (Abani, *GraceLand* 243) indicates that the responsibility for violence such as human organ trade does not reside much in the

hands of the individuals who transport the organs, but more so in the network of global exchange of goods. Systemic violence in the novel goes beyond the physical or individual intention. It results from relations of power which created social structures in which violence and exploitation is in built in the way that the society functions. It created a society in which dominant groups exert power and influence in society, and people in the margins such as Elvis are tossed about and victimized. This systemic violence has been normativized in society and hence, it is not easy to locate the cause of violence and its pervasive nature. Zizek stated that while the overt perpetrators of violence such as the religious fundamentalists and the terrorists commit violent acts that occupy news headlines, the capitalists are the agents of systemic violence through their participation in upholding an economic system that causes violent acts. The study exposes how much of the violence in Abani's narrative falls within this category of systemic violence that is created by power relations in the society. Apart from systemic violence, the thesis also looks into the physical violence and coercion that remains predominant. In *GraceLand*, the coercive actions of the military regime form an important aspect of the multiple manifestation of violence in the novel. Violence has the ability to silence people or force people into obedience, but it lacks power in the Arendtian sense because it is merely an instrument, without the capacity of influence. This is evident in the way that despite the authoritarian regime, people are determined to overthrow the regime and there is an active emerging revolutionary group in the novel.

A close analysis of the narrative in *Becoming Abigail* reveals the existence of systemic violence. The rape and brutal violence towards Abigail is not an isolated case of violence where the perpetrator, Peter, is the lone demon. A careful analysis of the narrative reveals that systemic violence exists and defines Abigail's existence as a result of the baggage of her gender in a patriarchal society. The final manifest violence from Peter seems to be a culmination of the systemic violence that created conducive environment for

exploitation of the female body. The narrative is riddled with accounts of how Abigail's entire life has been largely dictated by the desires and wishes of men as the narrative expresses that "None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her. That she wore bronze lipstick, or had a beautiful smile that was punctuated perfectly by dimples" (*Becoming Abigail* 26). All the men she had been with had failed to 'see' her. The fact that her fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin molested her and threatened to kill her if she tells anyone shows how men starting from childhood have been raised to take advantage of women. The only time she felt that she felt loved and seen is her affair with the social worker, Derek. But even this affair could be regarded as a kind of exploitation in some way because Derek is a married man who got intimate with a minor who is kept under his care. Right from her days under her father's roof, Abigail struggles for a sense of 'self' because her identity has been wholly constructed by people other than herself. The fact that she has a name that is exactly like her mother's name is symbolic of her lack of an individual identity. Caught up in other people's expectation of her as a woman, including her own father who expects her to perform the role of a woman modelled after her mother, Abigail never got the chance to be her own woman. Though his father did not mistreat her deliberately, Abigail is bereft of the power to define her sense of self. She has been made aware of the expected role of a woman not just from her father who raised her, but from every point of intersection with the outside society that is structured with patriarchy. The fact that she continues to live in the shadow of her dead mother is highlighted in the narrative through several references of Abigail the protagonist as "Abigail, this Abigail" (*Becoming Abigail* 44), reiterating her presence and attempting to put her story at the centre of the narration. In a scene where young Abigail tries to discuss about her menstruation with her father who is the only adult in the family, Abani dramatizes how the female body is controlled by means of socially constructed code of decency. Her father's reaction, despite his attempts to be a father highlights the deep bias against women inherent

in the societal norms on decency. The study exposes the myriad ways in which systemic violence and social norms put restrictions on individuals and create discourses that control their lives and limit their freedom, which also covertly contribute to physical violence. The patriarchal society that structures Abigail's reality systemically strips women of their voice, and violence against the female body becomes the last and most extreme method of control. It was her father and Peter who made the decision that she should go to London with Peter and the narrative indicates how casually she was left out in this decision that concerns her. The description, "She had felt caught in the sheath of men's plans" (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 75) aptly sums up how she feels about her entire life as a woman.

In *The Virgin of Flames*, Black is a victim of the dominant discourse on race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Black is caught up in the complex web of power relations that created systemic violence against the marginalized characters in the narrative on the basis of race, class, religion, gender, and sexual identities. Whiteness, Christianity and heterosexuality form the dominant power structure which the narrative perpetually attempts to subvert. Through performance, mimicry, as well as rejection, the narrative subverts these dominant identities. The narrative created a liminal space for marginal identities to emerge by doing away with binaries. But Black, the individual is capable of resistance and subversion only to a certain extent through his art as these power structures are often too dominant and pervasive, often posing limits on individuals. The title of the novel *The Virgin of Flames* is itself subversive; it conjures an image of a burning Virgin Mary, having been taken from a scene in which Black set the statue of the Virgin on fire during his childhood. The thesis examines how Black's behaviour repeatedly shows the conflict between his innate desires and the dominant discursive structure of the society. In his final encounter with Sweet Girl in which she symbolically performs gender transformation by showing Black how to look like her, Black is curious but is also afraid as he said to her "You know I'm not gay" (Abani, *The Virgin of*

Flames 280). Black conforms to internalised homophobia defined by Meyer and Dean as “the gay person’s direct or negative social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (161). Black is a victim of systemic violence that structures his reality from childhood, and he lacks agency. His sudden outburst of violence against Sweet Girl, though not justifiable, erupts from deep anger, fear, and frustration against societal normative created by the structures of power that exist. The fact that Sweet Girl is at the receiving end of abuse not from a heterosexual man, but from a person who has undisclosed homosexual tendencies is a reflection of the dominant discourse on gender, a form of systemic violence that lends legitimacy to gender violence. The climactic scene of the novel in which Black, who appeared at a rooftop wearing a wedding gown is mistaken by the “crowd of the faithful gathered below” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 288) as the Virgin is symbolic of Butler’s theory of gender performativity. The scene affirms that the ‘sacred’ is not an essence but a construct of society based on its mass acceptance. This reiterates Foucault’s idea that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, and Arendt’s view that “*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (*On Violence* 44). The absence of essence behind gender identity and its performativity has been dramatized in the scene where people blindly accepts the bleeding Black in a wedding gown as the virgin because Black in this scene unintentionally performs a role that seems to fit the image of the Virgin for the spectators below. The sacred in religion or other institution achieves its sanctity not because of its essential quality but because of the power of collective consent of acceptance as the sacred. The thesis exposes the ways in which dominant discourses impose limits on the characters, and violence is often rooted in the societal discourse. Besides gender and sexual identities, the thesis also examines the impact of dominant discourses on race and religion.

Black bears the burden of race from his childhood, and his mother's obsessive take on religion traumatizes him from childhood. The black protagonist whose name also happens to be Black has been introduced in the novel as he applies white face paint on his face in order to look like the Virgin Mary in order to use himself as a model for his artistic project to paint a mural of the Virgin. The study analysis how the novel symbolically destabilizes race, gender, as well as religious identities which form the power structures in the society, and the narrative's blurring of the boundaries between black and white, male and female, the sacred and the profane serve as counter discourse to the dominant discourses that poses limits on the characters and often give rise to violence.

In *GraceLand*, Elvis's initiation rites into manhood further reaffirms Butler's statement that "that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). The ritual, which is a literal performance that involves killing centres on the idea of masculinity defined by aggressive behaviour. On the contrary, Elvis's father Sunday's extreme anger when Elvis was play-dressed as a girl indicates fear that inadvertently affirms the performative nature of gender. If there is an essential masculinity other than the performance of masculinity, then there would be no need to fear Elvis's performance of femininity as the performance of femininity would have no impact on the essential masculinity, if such a thing exists. The socially constructed essentialist notion of gender and sexuality led to marginalization of any gender and sexuality that is considered a deviation from the normative masculinity and heterosexuality. Violence against any form of deviation, even if it is only in jest as in the case of Elvis has been justified due to the inherent belief in normative masculinity, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. As Elvis grew older and took interest in makeup, partly as a result of his desire to look like Elvis Presley whom he impersonates, his fear of being mistreated by society reflects the marginalized conditions of people who constitute the

peripheries. This fear of any gender performance that is not in sync with heteronormativity shows that “manhood” perpetually relies on performativity to secure its social position as a normative gender identity. His father’s violence against Elvis also shows how violence is justified, if it is used to uphold the normative gender identity. This systemic violence that comes with patriarchy not only suppresses women, but also entraps men. Sunday did not mourn the death of his wife because Igbo men did not mourn women publicly and it was considered bad taste, despite losing all his interest in life due to the pain of losing his wife. While the women are victims of marginalization in the patriarchal society, men are also in certain ways entrapped by the patriarchal privilege because they also have to live up to the societal construct of masculinity.

Apart from the more systemic violence that pervades the narrative of Chris Abani, the study also examines the nature of the manifest physical violence. It examines the complex motives behind violence based on Rene Girard’s idea that “violence operates without reason” (46) and not as a result of a particular phenomenon such as sexual desire as postulated by Freud. The chapter negotiates with the concept of “pure” and “impure” violence with an attempt to look into whether it is justifiable to use violence for a good cause. But, violence even if it appears to be for a “good” cause will ultimately derail its course because it lacks reason. According to Girard “‘Impure’ violence will mingle with the ‘sacred’ violence of the rites, turning the latter into a scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation of further impurity” (39). The idea of regenerative violence forms the basis of modern warfare wherein soldiers are made to think that violence in war is impersonal and justifiable because it is a necessary act to maintain peace. It pushes the agenda that wars are impersonal while encouraging the soldiers to unleash their primitive instinct of aggression. But even if so called “pure” violence has been used to check “impure” violence, it constantly risks going wrong. There cannot be pure or sacred violence that is

entirely positive or generative, and violence cannot be positive even if the perpetrator's motive appears to be for a good cause. There are always narratives that attempt to rationalize and justify the use of violence based on the cause. Mythologies and religious texts contain in large numbers sacrificial violence, and violence has often been narrativized as sacred depending on the religious groups or other institutions that require rationalization of its use. This narrative of violence as either sacred or generative has equally been the basis behind modern warfare and the jihadists. This idea of violence has been explained in the context in which the characters who are victims of violence often inflict violence and turn into perpetrators who enjoy inciting violence when given an opportunity. There is a scene in *GraceLand* where people turn violent towards a man who has been accused as a thief and the violent mob throws stones and sets the man on fire, and Elvis's statement that "The fire will spread" (228) after the lumber yard catches fire from the flaming Jeremiah symbolizes how mob violence does not bring solution or justice, but rather evokes more violence. Abani's narrative in *Song for Night* problematizes the question of victimhood and perpetration, and though child soldiers are forced into violence, they are often consumed by violence and become the very thing they abhor in the beginning. It is remarkable how the crowd quickly turns to a violent mob who justifies violence, if that violence seems like an act of justice. The crowd turns deaf ears to the plea of the accused thief, and resort to violence without any proof as the protagonist Elvis watched a young girl pick up a stone and throw it on Jeremiah. Elvis's remark that "The fire will spread" is both literal and symbolical, the fire symbolizing the chain reaction that violence causes (Abani, *GraceLand* 228). The horror witnessed by Elvis poses the larger question regarding how violence easily blinds reason and "whether aggression is a basic drive in human beings and, if so, whether, like the need to eat or the need to mate, a need to 'aggress' is present in human beings regardless of the presence of appropriate stimuli" (Rapoport 8). Violence is often justified in the name of self-

preservation or maintenance of order in human society, especially in cases of wars. But state sanctioned violence or legalized murder only shows how violence, despite its narratives of justification always loses its character of “ritualized violence” and loses its attempt to define itself as a necessary condition for the progress of mankind.

Chapter three of the study examines how instances of violence and trauma impact the identity of the characters through analysis of the narrative representation of the characters as well as the society that constitutes their social reality. Though Abani’s novels are not historically situated in the Biafran War, violence of the civil war, as well as the continuing political instability under military regimes, form the basis of the violence in his writings. For instance, Abani refuses to name the civil war that takes place in *Song for Night* so that the novella allegorically accentuates the protagonist’s suffering and victimization to symbolize the sufferings of thousands of child soldiers in Africa. The trauma in works such as *GraceLand*, *Song for Night*, and *Kalakuta Republic* are deeply rooted in the socio-political conflict of Nigeria. But more importantly, the thesis examines the ways in which trauma manifests in Abani’s narrative as violence in Abani’s narrative is situated in the discursive intersection of race, gender, sexuality, politics, and issues related to neo-colonialism. Examining the nature of trauma, the chapter takes into consideration significant theories of trauma and its relation to literature. In his clinical study of neurosis, Freud observed that “undesired happenings and painful affective situations are repeated... and re-animated with much ingenuity” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 15). This indicates that trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that refuses to heal and constantly re-enacts itself. This repetitive nature of trauma accounts for a narrative that is repetitive, non-linear, often chaotic and unreliable. Trauma creates a breach in the mind’s experience of time and reality, because of which linear narration or representation becomes impossible. The repetitive nature of trauma is attributed to the fact that a traumatic incident, because of its painful gravity cannot be fully

comprehended by the subject at the time of its occurrence. According to Cathy Caruth, "...trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature-the way it was precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). The study examines how repetition, temporal disjunction, and communicative ambivalence form crucial elements in Abani's representation of traumatic experiences. These characteristics of trauma coincide with My Luck's recollections of his past experiences as a child soldier in a war. My Luck's traumatic past which cannot be fully represented using language gets represented through symbols that mimics its forms and symptoms, reaffirming Caruth's statement that trauma "simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (5). In *Song for Night*, there are several instances in which trauma defy narration, one of which is when the protagonist attempts to narrate the scene of his mother's murder which he witnessed. The mode of narration employed by Abani reaffirms Anne Whitehead's statement that trauma is "represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (3). The traumatic nature of the first person account of My Luck is further affirmed by the temporal disjunction which makes the narrative reliability disintegrate as the story progresses. His initial claim to have survived the mine blast at the beginning of the narrative is increasingly undermined towards the end of his story, as the narrative displays several clues that makes My Luck's claim of having survived the explosion doubtful. This disruption in the character's sense of time, and inability to distinguish reality from hallucination is symptomatic of a traumatic subject, whose subjectivity is fractured by trauma that constantly re-enacts itself in his memory. In a dreamlike narrative that is characterised by temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence, My Luck's dead lover Ijeoma tells him in his hallucinatory state, "You aren't dreaming, My Luck, my love. These are memories. Before we can move on from here, we have to relive and

release our darkness” (Abani, *Song for Night* 96). Victims of trauma are often further inflicted with a deep sense of guilt which further aggravates their traumatising. In case of *My Luck*, images of his mother are haunted by the women he had killed and raped due to his deep sense of guilt. Though he had been forced to commit these atrocities, he cannot position himself as a helpless victim of war, and he is traumatized by his complicity in these heinous crimes. The fact that the traumatized victim’s notion of time, self and the world is fractured by trauma has been corroborated by witness accounts of other child soldiers. China Keitetsi, a former Ugandan child soldier expresses that his childhood is long forgotten and that sometimes he feels as if he is six years old and sometimes as though he is hundred years because of all that he has seen.

This sense of guilt is experienced by Abigail in *Becoming Abigail* who felt responsible for having an affair with her social worker Derek who is a married man. Derek faced charges after his wife discovers him and Abigail making love in their kitchen late at night. Abigail who is still a minor felt responsible and guilty for ruining Derek’s life when it is actually Derek who could be considered to have taken advantage of a vulnerable person who also happens to be a minor. Violence and trauma endured by Abigail has been analysed within the context of gender that forms the basis of the brutal sexual abuse suffered by her. Raised by a grief stricken father who drinks heavily due to the death of his wife, Abigail’s mother at child birth, Abigail’s has an abnormal childhood that is characterised by loss and grief. Abigail’s victimization by men began early when she was raped by her cousin Edwin at the age of ten and threatened to kill her if she told anyone. However, this incident as well as the subsequent brutal sexual abuse and violence endured by Abigail at the hands of Peter is situated within the social structure in which Abigail perpetually attempts to become her own self because of society’s attempts to define her role and place as a woman. Abigail’s trauma arises from physical sexual abuse as well as societal discourse on gender. Her father’s desire

for her to be like her late mother Abigail, and the challenges posed by constant comparison with her late mother is symbolic of societal expectation of women to fit into socially constructed notion of a woman. Abigail's attempt to claim an identity for herself often manifest in symbolic rituals performed on her body. There are several instances in the novella where Abigail performs a kind of immolation on her body as a means of dealing with her pain, affirming that trauma can only be "reconstructed from its effects and traces" (LaCapra 21) and these rituals are symbols that mimic trauma that otherwise do not find expressions in language.

In *The Virgin of Flames*, trauma intersects with issues of race, gender, sexuality and religion. Black had a difficult childhood due to his mother's orthodox religious beliefs and societal discourse on race, gender and sexuality. Black's non-conformity to the dominant discourse of the society that he inhabits, and his marginal position contributes to his conflicted identity and trauma. Born of an Igbo father and a Salvadoran mother, Black struggles with his ethnicity growing up in Los Angeles. His understanding of religion has been conflicted from childhood because of his mother who is obsessed with religion, and forces and beats Black to pray, confess, and witness miracles. Contrary to his religious upbringing Black is deeply confused with his sexual orientation, and there are various instances in the novel that suggest that he is a closeted homosexual who suffers from homophobia. This is possibly due to his internalization of dominant ideology of heteronormativity which further traumatizes Black because he is conflicted between his innate desires and his fear of being labelled as a homosexual and anything short of masculine. Black is obsessed with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl. He is also frequently haunted by the archangel Gabriel who appears in different forms and speaks to him. Gabriel serves as a symbol of his emotional conflict and trauma towards religion. As an adult artist, black surrounds himself with people who pay little attention to societal norms or religion and he

himself lives a liberal life. But his religious upbringing that was hammered on to him by his late mother continues to haunt him in the form of angel Gabriel, as Black is still deeply conflicted by it. Because trauma “imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 4) Gabriel could symbolize trauma that re-enacts in the form of an angel that takes various forms and shapes. The title of the novel *The Virgin of Flames* comes from an incident during Black’s childhood where the young protagonist sets the statue of the Virgin Mary on fire. Later in life, when Black attempts to paint a mural of the Virgin Mary, what finally materializes is an image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding an Ak-47 rifle in her hand. These behaviours symbolize Black’s conflicted attitude towards religion and are deeply rooted in his traumatising due to his mother’s obsession with religion during his childhood. The fact that Black is obsessed with the transvestite Sweet Girl indicates that he inadvertently desires to transcend gender binary and heteronormativity. There is a scene in which Sweet Girl demonstrates how to hide her penis, and helps Black do the same on Black’s request- a symbolic performance of gender transformation. But Black is also in a state of denial towards his sexual curiosity and desire due to social conditioning, and he seems to suffer from internalised homophobia. The traumatic incident in which Black was raped under the bridge has a deep impact on his attitude towards gender which further complicates his conflicted attitude towards gender. Black is drawn by femininity but seems afraid and reluctant to embody it because in the patriarchal society that he grew up in, he associates femininity with passivity and submissiveness. When Sweet Girl takes on the dominant role, Black suddenly turns violent towards her as he is afraid of being the submissive partner. Black is perhaps reliving the trauma of his rape when he positions himself as a submissive partner who is vulnerable to being violated. The fact that he has issues with intimacy, and turns violence towards even the person he has been obsessed with for a long time indicates that he is a traumatized person

who is not at peace with himself. This fear of intimacy has been portrayed in the poem “Tatoo” where the prisoners avoid being on close terms with their fellow prisoners because death constantly lurks round the corner.

In *GraceLand*, Elvis witnessed the rape of his cousin Efua by his uncle Joseph, who later raped him as well. In another instance, Elvis was sexually abused and humiliated by a soldier when he was captured and tortured by the military. Though there is no clear indication that Elvis struggles with sexual identity like Black, his experience of abuse has a deep impact on his perspective on patriarchy and gender. His childhood initiation rite symbolizes how masculinity is a performance that is tied with violence and aggression. When Aunt Beatrice and her friends play-dressed Elvis as a girl, his father beats him severely, even though as a child he did not understand why his father is so angry and afraid of femininity as he shouted Aunt Beatrice “No son of mine is going to grow up a homosexual! Do you hear me?!” (Abani, *GraceLand* 62). Masculinity is a performance forced on Elvis violently, but this ironically alienates him from it as he repeatedly finds ways to embrace femininity, albeit in subtle ways. According to Lindsey Green-Simms “When Elvis begins to cross-dress it is perhaps not surprising that he is seeking an alternative to the world of violent masculinity into which he has been initiated” (145). Like Black, it seems that Elvis masquerades his desire to transcend gender binary by impersonating Elvis Presley. His expertise in putting on make up and the joy he derives from the act suggests that he not only enjoys experimenting with femininity but that he has often done it, although he refrains from going out with make up in public. The desire to transcend gender binary is a leitmotif in the characters of both Elvis and Black, but this has been complicated by their consideration of societal norms as well as their traumatic experiences of sexual violence.

In *GraceLand*, the politics of the street and society has been woven with the personal story of Elvis. Violence in the novel symbolizes the traumatic impact of colonialism on the

lives of Nigerians, which lingers and impacts their reality and identity. According to Amy Novak, “The economic, political, and cultural domination of colonialism lingers in multiple ways long after the changing of flags... The traumatic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in large- scale events of history but also in the daily private lives of citizens” (34). *GraceLand* is in many ways a narrative that represents the trauma of the postcolonial nation that is characterized by ethnic tensions and loss of tradition in the new neoliberal economy where drug trade, black marketing, and cross-border human trafficking are rampant. Thus, Elvis’s story is both personal and allegorical. It represents the trauma afflicting the postcolonial nation not only in terms of violence and conflict but the complexity of a deeply fractured traditional society that is on the threshold of a new neoliberal and globalized society that ushers in immense chaos and structural inequality. The lack of closure and ambivalent ending of the novel in which Elvis attempts to escape to America symbolize that the allegory of the national trauma does not have an easy solution. But the narrative, by locating and narrativizing violence and trauma serves as a creative response towards the nation’s traumatic past. According to Anne Whitehead, “Trauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten” (82).

Chapter four analyses Abani’s mode of narration and violent discourse, examining the complex and often ambivalent discourse on violence in his narrative. Acknowledging the political nature of representation as a crucial site of contestation of multiple narratives, the study Abani’s narrative and analyses how his narrative achieves its desired effect of creating a discourse that eschews violence. Based on Michel Foucault’s idea of discourse that operates in terms of the relations between power and knowledge, the study highlights the arbitrariness of the nature of the discourses which appear familiar and accepted norms of a given society. As reality is often constituted through discourse, this chapter examines Abani’s mode of

narration with an attempt to understand the processes in which his narrative creates a counter discourse on violence through subversion and a certain form of aestheticization. A general impression of Abani's narrative discourses reveals that they are not always openly didactic, nor do they always provide clear solutions regarding the issue of violence. Hence, it is significant to analyse his mode of narration in order to locate how his narrative offers a counter discourse towards violence. The analysis also takes into consideration the possibility of the narrative failing to achieve its desired effect of eschewing violence. Narrative mode is a significant aspect of representation, and the author's usage language and other literary devices play a significant role in whether the narrative succeeds in achieving its intended discourse. In case of violent representations, there is a high possibility that the violent images conveyed serve only to demonize and dehumanize the perpetrators. These kinds of representations could only dehumanize the reader with graphic portrayal of violence without any transformative value that reaffirms humanity. This chapter acknowledges the complex ways in which narrative and discourse operate, and that the role of language in discourse is more complex than the general conception of language as a means of human communication. The polysemic nature of language implies that discourse on violence in a narrative could have life of its own, beyond the purview of authorial intention. Taking into consideration the complex nature of language, narrative, and discourse, the chapter examines Abani's mode of narration.

Abani's narratives often lack closure, and due to the absence of closure or poetic justice for victims of violence in the traditional sense his narrative on violence can be regarded as morally ambiguous in certain aspects. Abani's narrative on violence takes on an approach that neither sensationalizes violence nor endorses it. Without manifest condemnation of violence, Abani's narrative portrays the complex ways in which violence operates in human society. Due to this lack of manifest condemnation of violence and honest

and sometimes even graphic portrayal of the horror of violence, the question arises on whether the narrative in Abani's works succeed in condemning or providing solution on the epidemic of violence. His narratives do not always contain an overarching didactic condemnation of violence, but an analysis of his mode of narration shows that his narratives subvert the forces and institutions that contribute towards violence. The subversive narrative that is achieved through crafty use of language, symbols, and images succeeds in creating a discourse that subverts and undermines the legitimacy of the dominant social structures that led to violence. In *Becoming Abigail*, Abani tells a story of a victim of sexual abuse in which there is no poetic justice for the victim Abigail. The novella ends with the protagonist, left with no strength to live on, finally committed suicide. In *The Virgin of Flames*, Black violently attacks Sweet Girl at the end of the novel. In this highly ambiguous but symbolic manifestation of violence, Sweet Girl becomes a victim of what is possibly a hate crime that arises from a form of internalised homophobia on the part of the protagonist, Black. Though the narrative offers an effective counter discourse against social norms that lend legitimacy through the narrative's skilful subversion of these social institutions, instances such as Black's violence towards Sweet Girl could be considered as normalization of gender violence. In a narrative that puts the story of Black at the centre, the victimization and injustice towards the transvestite, Sweet Girl has not been given a platform in the story, as the novel ends soon after the violent incident. Similarly, the protagonist in *Song for Night* grapples with his complicity in killing and raping, and there is lack of solution for the violence depicted. Elvis's violent world in *GraceLand* and the fate of the nation remains ambivalent till the end, and some of Abani's prison poems lament the loss of humanity in the face of prolonged exposure to violence.

One of the most effective method through which Abani's narrative offers a counter discourse on violence is through the subversive narrative mode. According to Usher and

Edwards, “A discourse author-ises certain people to speak and correspondingly silences others, or at least makes their voices less authoritative. A discourse is therefore exclusionary” (90). Abani’s mode of narration, through its skilful employment of subversion undermines and delegitimizes dominant social norms and institutions that lend legitimacy to systemic violence, and exposes the existing discourse of society. Black’s art, the way he plays with colour, his burning of the statue of the Virgin, the mural he painted that turns out to be a Muslim woman, Iggy’s transsexual Jesus doll and so on are symbols that subvert the dominant discourses on race, gender, sexuality, and religion. In *GraceLand*, Abana subverts the dominant discourse of cultural imperialism and exposes the underbelly of capitalism through the story of Elvis. The inclusion of Igbo food recipe between each chapter of the novel, and the inclusion of the kola nut ritual at the beginning of every chapter, despite its apparent lack of connection with the plot of the novel serve as a counter discourse to the cosmopolitan life in Lagos. But this does not mean that the narrative attempts to present an idealized traditional past. In fact, the description of the kola nut ritual involves two contradictory voices—that of an insider and the Western anthropologist, in order signify the political nature of narrative. In *GraceLand*, Abani creates a character whose name is Elvis and is an Elvis Presley impersonator. The title of the novel is also an obvious reference to the late singer’s mansion named Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee which now functions as a museum and is listed as a National Historic Landmark in the United States. The title of the novel and the name of the protagonist not only reflect the cultural imperialism that plays out in the novel but offers a discourse that subverts the existing status quo. It is ironic that the protagonist Elvis failed in his impersonation of Elvis Presley. Because he could not make enough money from the impersonation, he soon had to find alternative means of earning a livelihood which exposes him to the underbelly of Lagos that is characterised by corruption and violence. Ironically, there is nothing graceful about the novel *GraceLand* with its

depiction of war, violence, political chaos, grave economic inequality and erosion of traditional culture. Elvis's mother Beatrice, whose name means "bringer of joy and blessings" died early and his step-mother Comfort fails to bring comfort to his grieving father. It is also doubtful whether Elvis's friend Redemption who helped out Elvis on many occasions really brought about a solution for the problems that face Elvis and the society. The narrative subverts the dominant discourses on gender and masculinity by highlighting its performative nature.

In this manner, through Abani's characters often appear as victims of violence conditioned by the dominant discourses in society, a close examination of his narrative subverts and often undermines the legitimacy of these dominant discourses. Abigail, despite her horrible fate struggles to take control of her life. Her body becomes her last site of resistance, and the brandings on her skin symbolizes her attempt to mark her territory. The implied suicide at the end could also be regarded as a way of claiming her body, a mark of resistance against violation. Similarly, the narrative of a voiceless protagonist in *Song for Night* achieves a powerful counter discourse through its allegorical journey into finding peace and forgiveness.

The chapter also postulates that Abani's technique and use of language in representing violence conforms to a certain form of aestheticization of violence wherein violent events are represented in "a manner as to replace the reality of the violence with language or images that allow for a freedom of interpretation of those acts and events, or for a blurring of the real nature of those acts or events, that would not be possible if such act or event was witnessed in reality" (Thompson 29). Though all artistic representations could be argued to be aestheticization, aestheticization of violence is a literary technique employed by authors to avoid extreme disgust and repulsive reaction from the readers when dealing with horrific and graphic representations of violence. This aestheticization has been differentiated from the

aestheticization of politics as defined by Walter Benjamin in which aestheticization has been utilized by fascism in order to cloak its ugly face with a certain kind of beauty. Though the argument acknowledges that what qualifies as aestheticization is not strictly quantifiable as it depends on several parameters. Aestheticization is in a sense legitimization of violence through an artistic lens, and it relies heavily on the craft of the writer not to succumb to sensationalized representation of violence. The chapter made several textual references in order to show that Abani's narrative mode and use of language in its figurative representation of violence as opposed to factual and graphic representation delimits understanding and interpretation of violence and renders the violent experience subjective and inter-subjective. Though Abani's narrative on violence is complex and highly ambivalent, the mode of narration and use of language elevate his narrative from sensationalised representation. Though it is acknowledged that narrative often takes a life of its own, that language itself disseminates meanings beyond authorial intention, and that responses of texts are subjective, it is discernible that Abani's mode of narration and use of language in his narrative eschew violence and create a counter discourse on violence through a process of subversion and aestheticization.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Abani's works encompass a variety of themes which are diverse and the focuses of his writings are not easy to categorize. As such, his creative output demands more critical inquiry, and this thesis which focuses on aspects of violence has been able to deal with just one of the many issues that the writer has dealt with in his narrative. Issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, race, history, hybridity are some of the recurring themes that are worthy of further study and exploration. Due to the rich diversity of his influences and experiences, Abani's works have a certain looseness and fluidity as compared to his contemporaries. This fluidity and experimental nature of his writing

encapsulate and touch upon diverse issues that extend beyond the usually expected narrative of national and cultural identity from a Nigerian writer.

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ABSTRACT

NARRATIVIZING VIOLENCE IN THE SELECTED WORKS BY

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Narrativizing Violence in the Selected Works by Chris Abani

(An Abstract)

This study examines the complex process in which violence has been represented in the narrative of Chris Abani. Abani, one of the most acclaimed contemporary Nigerian writers was born on 27th December, 1966 in Afikpo, Nigeria. Abani and his writings belong to the new generation of Nigerian writers who are often referred to as the third generation writers and “children of the post colony” (Adesanmi and Dunton 7). Abani began writing at an early age, and was imprisoned thrice due to his writings by the military regime in Nigeria during the 1980s. He left Nigeria in 1991, and is currently Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University, Illinois. Four works of fiction, *GraceLand* (2004), *Becoming Abigail* (2006), *Song for Night* (2008), *The Virgin of Flames* (2008) and a poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic* (2007) have been taken up for study.

Violence remains a predominant and recurring theme in most of Abani’s works. As a writer who has experienced and witnessed violence, it is quite natural that his personal intimacy and close proximity with violence manifest in his creative output. Though personal experience of violence is not a pre-requisite for a critically engaging and nuanced representation of violence, it is a general expectation that a writer who was a victim of violence would be a vocal critic of violence who uses his art as a medium to eschew violence. But, whether the narrative offers a nuanced representation of violence that explores the multi-faceted nature and manifestation of violence, and creates a counter discourse on violence would ultimately depend on the author’s art of narrativization. Scholars and critics on trauma studies have become increasingly concerned about stories of violence and trauma being

reduced to mere sensation or spectacle that evokes the reader's pleasure. Miller and Tougaw have observed how accounts of extreme situations attract readership and state that "Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion" (2). At the outset, Abani's representation of violence often seems ambiguous, and is mostly devoid of categorical binaries of sensationalizing or moralizing. As distinct from entertainers and propagandists, a serious writer represents the complexity of the world and "bears witness" (Oates 35). This study examines Abani's narrativization of violence with an attempt to situate the complexities involved with the nature and manifestation of violence.

The process of narrativizing is a construction of discourse that generates new meanings and ways of understanding a narrative text. Narrativizing violence in Abani's works acknowledges the complexities involved with the very nature of narrative as the study "attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects" (Culler 83). Because of the political nature of representation and narrative, a text becomes a site of contestation of multiple narratives which are subject to various cultural and ideological influences. The process of narrativizing is also a meaning-making process and construction of identity because narratives create, reconstruct, and take positions on past experiences from the present. Smith and Watson state that "Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied" (375).

In Abani's works, narratives of violence operate in multiple ways. Apart from the manifest incidents of violence that occupy the pages of Abani's works, this study brings attention to the ways in which violence and power are inter-related and explores the complex ways in which violence in the narrative is intricately woven with the system of power

relations. It examines how the power structures in society create systemic violence, which in turn creates conducive environment for more overt manifestations of physical violence in the narrative. The study also examines the areas of intersections between violence and identities of race, gender, sexuality as well as culture and brings out how these aspects influence one another and intersect in myriad ways. The effect of violence and its traumatic impact have been analysed through close observation of the narrative's use of language and narrative technique that resonates and mimics the manifestations of trauma as postulated by trauma theorists. It explores not only the personal trauma of victims but also the less obvious social trauma that has been represented in a more allegorical manner in the narrative. The study also examines the narrative discourse on violence and observes that it is generally ambivalent, without being vocally didactic. Acknowledging the complexities involved with any narrative, a close analysis of Abani's mode of narration shows that his narrative creates a counter discourse of violence through subversion and a distinct form of aestheticization of violence that elevates the representation of violence from cheap sensation.

The introductory chapter begins with an attempt to understand key concepts on violence and narrative by exploring existing definitions and theories on these two concepts, and situate Chris Abani within the Nigerian literary tradition with special emphasis on his personal experiences of violence that play an integral part in his artistic output. It highlights the difference of the third generation Nigerian literature from the first and the second generation writings as the third generation's writings characteristically exhibit the absence of an overarching ideological core, decentralization of narratives and dispersal in terms of thematic content. It situates Abani within the third generation writing, and delves into the socio-political situation in Nigeria in order to highlight how literature negotiates with the social and historical reality of the nation. The writings of Abani's generation constitute a

borderless, global, textual topography and Abani has also expressed how the concerns of his generation extend beyond issues of nation:

About my work, it is in many ways post-national and global not only in its reach, but in its attempts to locate a very specific African sensibility without attempting to limit it with certain kinds of arguments about essentiality and so forth. (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 229-230).

The chapter explores the significance of the nation’s past, events such as the Biafran War (6th July, 1967-15th January, 1970) and the ensuing political instability that has formed the subject or influenced the writings of the new generation writers. It highlights how despite the diverse concerns of the third generation writers, narrative of nationhood still forms a significant aspect of their writings as Adesokan states that “in the larger context of political decolonization, the fictional voice (or perspective) also functions as a mode of testimony, bearing witness to issues thematised as political or humanitarian emergency” (3).

Chapter two of the study examines the relationship between power and violence in Abani’s narrative. There are some theorists who consider violence as nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power. C. Wright Mills in his book *The Power Elite* (1956) stated that “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence” (Qtd. in Arendt 35) in the context of his view of the state as a legitimate violent institution. On the other hand, Michel Foucault conceives of power as dispersed and pervasive, rather than the general conception of power as coercion, domination and an authoritarian force. Hannah Arendt, an established scholar on the subject of violence offers a clear distinction between violence and power. Similar to Foucault’s idea of power, she observes that power is much more pervasive and complex than strength, force, and authority. Therefore, power is not the same with violence nor does it necessarily lead to violence. According to Arendt,

“Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (*On Violence* 44). Though power per se is not a structure and is not similar to violence, its manifestation in human society creates certain structures of power that has great influences on individuals.

In order to understand the deeply seated operation of violence in Abani’s narrative the thesis incorporates the concept of ‘systemic’ violence postulated by Slavoj Zizek in his work *Violence* (2008). Systemic violence, according to Zizek is violence which is inherent in human social structure. This systemic violence forms the normal state of things from which we perceive subjective violence—violence which is performed by a clearly identifiable agent. Systemic violence “is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent...It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence” (Zizek 2). This concept of violence which is embedded in the structures of society offers an understanding of violence beyond the manifest physical violence in Abani’s narrative.

Elvis, the protagonist in *GraceLand* (2004) is a victim of systemic violence conditioned by the new neoliberal economy in Lagos, as he and his family live a life of acute poverty. Violence that takes place in the novel, including Elvis’s involvement in some crimes has been examined within the context of the larger social structure that conditions violence and corruption. Redemption’s statement “No forget the whites who create de demand” (Abani, *GraceLand* 243) indicates that the responsibility for violence such as human organ trade does not reside much in the hands of the individuals who transport the organs, but more so in the network of global exchange of goods. In *The Virgin of Flames* (2008), whiteness, Christianity, masculinity and heterosexuality form the dominant power structures which the

narrative perpetually attempts to subvert. Black's mother who is obsessed with religion often beats and forces Black to confess his sins from an early age. The title of the novel, *The Virgin of Flames* which has been taken from a scene where ten-year-old Black sets the statue of the Virgin Mary on fire symbolizes one of the many ways in which the narrative subverts the dominant discourse on religion. In his final encounter with Sweet Girl in which she symbolically performs gender transformation by showing Black how to look like her, Black is curious but is also afraid as he said to her "You know I'm not gay" (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 280). Black conforms to internalised homophobia defined by Meyer and Dean as "the gay person's direct or negative social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard" (161). Black is a victim of systemic violence that structures his reality from childhood, and he lacks agency. The chapter explores the ways in which violence is moulded in the fabric of the society in Abani's narrative, and systemic violence is often more harmful as it is pervasive and operates within the power structures and discourses.

Apart from the systemic violence, the representation of physical violence in Abani's narrative has also been analysed in this chapter. The thesis analyses how violence "operates without reason" (Girard 46) and often evoke more violence in Abani's narrative, reaffirming Arendt's statement that "violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction" (79). Violence is often justified in the name of self preservation or maintenance of order in human society, especially in cases of wars. For instance, mythologies and religious texts contain in large numbers sacrificial violence, and violence has often been narrativized as sacred depending on the religious groups or other institutions that require rationalization of its use. This narrative of violence as either sacred or generative has equally been the basis behind modern warfare and the *ihadists* who kill in the name of religion. In *GraceLand*, a crowd quickly turns to a violent mob against a man named Jeremiah

who is accused of stealing, and they justify the use of violence because that violence seems like an act of justice. The crowd turns deaf ears to the plea of the accused thief and resort to violence without any proof as the protagonist Elvis watched a young girl pick up a stone and throw it on Jeremiah. Elvis's remark, "The fire will spread"(Abani, *GraceLand* 228) is both literal and symbolical, the fire symbolizing the chain reaction that violence causes.

Chapter three deals with Abani's representation of trauma in his narrative. It attempts to understand the ways in which trauma is represented in Abani's narrative. Trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that refuses to heal and constantly re-enacts itself. According to Cathy Caruth, "...trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature-the way it was precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Trauma creates a breach in the mind's experience of time and reality, because of which linear narration or representation becomes impossible. The repetitive nature of trauma is attributed to the fact that a traumatic incident, because of its painful gravity cannot be fully comprehended by the subject at the time of its occurrence. The study examines how repetition, temporal disjunction, and communicative ambivalence form crucial elements in Abani's representation of traumatic experiences. In *Song for Night*(2008), My Luck's recollections of his past experiences as a child soldier in a war cannot be fully represented using language and get represented through symbols that mimics its forms and symptoms, reaffirming Caruth's statement that trauma "simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (5). There are several instances in which trauma defy narration, one of which is when the protagonist attempts to narrate the scene of his mother's murder which he witnessed.

...and I watch what happens below and I am grateful that I can smell my smell, smell my smell and live while below me it happens, it happens that night bright as day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched, and I cannot speak

something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it. (Abani, *Song for Night* 33)

The mode of narration employed by Abani reaffirms Anne Whitehead's statement that trauma is "represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (3). The traumatic nature of the first person account of My Luck is further affirmed by the temporal disjunction which makes the narrative reliability disintegrate as the story progresses. My Luck's dead lover Ijeoma tells him in his hallucinatory state "You aren't dreaming, My Luck, my love. These are memories. Before we can move on from here, we have to relive and release our darkness." (Abani, *Song for Night* 96)

There are several instances in the novella where Abigail performs a kind of immolation on her body as a means of dealing with her pain, affirming that trauma can only be "reconstructed from its effects and traces" (LaCapra 21) and these rituals are symbols that mimic trauma that otherwise do not find expressions in language. Black in *The Virgin of Flames* is frequently haunted by the archangel Gabriel who appears in different forms and speaks to him. Gabriel serves as a symbol of his emotional conflict and trauma towards religion because of his mother's obsession with the Biblical concept of sin that shaped his childhood. Because trauma "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4) Gabriel could symbolize trauma that re-enacts in the form of an angel that takes various forms and shapes. The title of the novel *The Virgin of Flames* comes from an incident during Black's childhood where the young protagonist sets the statue of the Virgin Mary on fire. Later in life, when Black attempts to paint a mural of the Virgin Mary, what finally materializes is an image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding an Ak-47 rifle in her hand. These behaviours symbolize Black's inner conflict and trauma due to his mother's beatings and fear inflicted in the child's mind. In *GraceLand*, the

politics of the street and society has been woven with the personal story of Elvis. Violence in the novel symbolizes the traumatic impact of colonialism on the lives of Nigerians, which lingers and impacts their reality and identity. According to Amy Novak, “The economic, political, and cultural domination of colonialism lingers in multiple ways long after the changing of flags... The traumatic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in large-scale events of history but also in the daily private lives of citizens” (34). *GraceLand* is in many ways a narrative that represents the trauma of the postcolonial nation that is characterized by ethnic tensions and loss of tradition in the new neoliberal economy where drug trade, black marketing, and cross-border human trafficking are rampant. The lack of closure and ambivalent ending of the novel in which Elvis attempts to escape to America symbolizes that the allegory of the national trauma does not have an easy solution. But the narrative, by locating and narrativizing violence and trauma serves as a creative response towards the nation’s traumatic past, as indicated by Whitehead that “[t]rauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten” (82).

Chapter four analyses Abani’s mode of narration and violent discourse, examining the complex and often ambivalent discourse on violence in his narrative. The study attempts to show the arbitrariness of the nature of the discourses which often appear familiar and accepted as norms of a given society as “Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity” (Mills 15). But just as discourse renders certain narratives dominant, it also has the quality of undermining and delegitimizing those dominant world views or narratives. According to Foucault:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse

transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (100-101)

Abani's narratives often lack closure, and due to the absence of closure or poetic justice for victims of violence in the traditional sense his narrative on violence can be regarded as morally ambiguous in certain aspects. Due to this lack of manifest condemnation of violence that is honest and sometimes even graphic in its portrayal of violence, the question arises on whether the narrative in Abani's works succeeds in condemning or providing solution on the epidemic of violence. His narratives do not always contain an overarching didactic condemnation of violence, but an analysis of his mode of narration shows that his narratives subvert the forces and institutions that contribute towards violence. The subversive narrative that is achieved through his use of language, symbols, and images succeeds in creating a discourse that subverts and undermines the legitimacy of the dominant social structures and discourses that led to violence. According to Usher and Edwards, "A discourse author-ises certain people to speak and correspondingly silences others, or at least makes their voices less authoritative. A discourse is therefore exclusionary" (90). There is a scene in *The Virgin of Flames* where Black's friend Iggy plays with a clay doll of Jesus and attaches a penis on to it, which she then attaches to a Barbie to create a transsexual Barbie.

Iggy was playing with Jesus.

Black, just entering The Ugly Store, watched with interest as she attempted to attach a clay penis to the anatomically incorrect doll. Jesus looked resigned to the indignity. (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 112)

Iggy further insinuates that Jesus was probably black, and also attaches the clay penis on a Barbie doll. Black's art, the way he plays with colour, his burning of the statue of the Virgin, the mural he painted that turns out to be a Muslim woman, and Iggy's transsexual Jesus doll

are symbols that subvert the dominant discourses on race, gender, sexuality, and religion. In Abani's narrative, characters' names are often symbolical and images are used to convey deeper meanings. According to Lauren Mason, "Abani situates writing and images as different types of 'framing' devices. They are not competing discourses, but complementary 'ways of seeing'..." (210).

The chapter also explores Abani's technique and use of language in representing violence that conforms to a distinct form of aestheticization of violence. Though all artistic representations could be argued to be aestheticized outcomes, aestheticization of violence evades extreme disgust and repulsive reaction from the readers when dealing with horrific and graphic representations of violence. This aestheticization has been differentiated from the aestheticization of politics as defined by Walter Benjamin in which aestheticization has been utilized by fascism in order to cloak its ugly face with a certain kind of beauty and legitimize power politics. Aestheticization is in a familiar sense legitimization of violence through an artistic lens, but it is also an important aspect of the craft of the writer not to succumb to sensationalized representation of violence. It equips the writer to represent violence in "a manner as to replace the reality of the violence with language or images that allow for a freedom of interpretation of those acts and events, or for a blurring of the real nature of those acts or events, that would not be possible if such act or event was witnessed in reality" (Thompson 29). The representation of violence in art has the risk of creating a kind of pornographic enjoyment of violence. According to Priebe:

Images of violence in art (verbal or visual) are potentially so potent that they may serve only to demonize and dehumanize the perpetrators of the violence and dehumanize the reader through the reader's reception of a kind of extreme pornography. (48)

But a close analysis of Abani's narrative highlights the writer's thorough control over his representation of violence. The chapter made several textual references in order to show that Abani's narrative mode and use of language in its figurative representation of violence as opposed to factual and graphic representation delimits understanding and interpretation of violence and renders the violent experience subjective and inter-subjective. The following is a description of Abigail being raped while being chained like an animal.

Fifteen days, passing in the silence of snow.

And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.

Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate the tattoos that made her.

Abigail. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 95)

Though Abani's narrative on violence is complex and highly ambivalent, the mode of narration and use of language elevate his narrative from sensationalised representation.

Chapter five of the study sums up the ways in which the earlier chapters explore the multi-faceted dimensions of violence. A study of Abani's narrative uncovers the multiple manifestations of violence and the power structures that lend legitimacy to violence. The study brings out the writer's understanding and skilful treatment of the complex and pervasive theme of violence that has no easy solution, and locates the subtle ways in which Abani's narrative offers a counter discourse on violence. Though it is acknowledged that narrative often takes a life of its own, that language itself disseminates meanings beyond authorial intention, and that responses of texts are subjective, it is discernible that Abani's mode of narration and use of language in his narrative is a conscious mode to eschew violence and create a counter discourse on violence through a process of subversion and

nuanced aestheticization. With regard to the power of art in transcending painful experiences, Kwame Dawes wrote in the introductory note to *Kalakuta Republic* (2007):

Great writers have discovered that the poem about suffering is really one about finding beauty in suffering. The poem about incarceration is really a poem about freedom. The fact is that the poem, by its very nature, defies the baseness of suffering. By becoming the vehicle for the expression of horror, the poem forces the horror to be something else, to be managed, to be transformed into something beautiful. (Abani, *Kalakuta Republic* 17)

The study not only explores the various nuances of violence in Abani's narrative, it shows that Abani's narrative has a transformative effect, not by being vocally didactic, but through a reflection of humanity in the face of violence, which is achieved through the artist's careful handling of the narrative.

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