

## WOMEN AND HEGEMONY IN SELECTED AFRICAN FEMALE NOVELS

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### Abstract

Women's writings have increasingly focused more on equality, intersectionality, sexual violence and reproductive rights. Women, hegemony and the survival strategies that they deploy amidst hegemonic institutions have not been given significant attention in contemporary African literature. While previous studies have written on hegemony, there is still a dearth of research on the various forms of hegemony and the survival strategies they deploy in combating such structures. This research used a qualitative content analysis to investigate how selected African female writers depict their female characters as victims of hegemony, and demonstrates how the characters eventually overcome the hegemonic structures that dominate them. Three novels were selected owing to their thematic relevance: Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Abi Dare's, *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, and Chika Unigwe's *on Black Sisters's Street*. The various survival strategies that the female characters adopt made it necessary for the research to adopt an eclectic theoretical framework which comprises: radical feminism, snail-sense, feminism, and nego-feminism. The textual analysis reveals that the economy, patriarchy, western hegemony, culture, and family were the hegemonic institutions that the female characters battled with. Women were also found to dominate other women. In Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Tsitsi's survival strategies are sexual compromise and syncretism. In Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, Adunni adopts resilience, defiance, escape and violence as her survival strategies. Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* presents four major female characters who are Efe, Ama, Alek and Sisi, who deploy various survival strategies. Efe's strategy is hard work followed by Ama who deploy soliloquy. Sisi's strategy, as well as the others, culminated into emigration to Europe. However, Sisi fails to adopt loyalty as a strategy, which leads to her death. The others eventually succeed because they were loyal. Overall, the study demonstrates that despite the pervasive and multifaceted nature of hegemonic structures, African female characters develop diverse, context-specific strategies that enable them to reclaim agency, assert identity, and navigate oppressive socio-economic and cultural systems.

**Keywords:** Agency; Feminism; Hegemony; Survival Strategies; Women's Writing

### Introduction

The concept of hegemony, especially as it concerns women in African literature, has over time focused primarily on patriarchy. Mostly, when African literary scholars examine women and hegemony in African societies as depicted in literary works, the emphasis has always been on patriarchy or male hegemony, even in contemporary literary criticism. Many contemporary literary scholars (such as Fondze-Fombele 497-509; Istifadah & Rohama 383-394; Nutsukpo 28-40; Metu 129-144; Toker 167-180; Were et al 1992-2003; and Wosu 929-937) focused their explorations of hegemony in African literature on patriarchy,

particularly.

Istifadah & Rohama claim that patriarchal hegemony in El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* manifests in the form of physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse and marginalization. They assert that the patriarchal hegemony in the novel corelates with Islamic teachings that place men ahead of women (383-394). Similarly, Nutsukpo asserts that patriarchal oppression, even in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa, places women at "the lower end of power relations in the African society", making them vulnerable to various forms of abuse and exploitation (28-40). Similarly, Metu is of the view that patriarchy creates the conditions for

hegemonic masculinity to thrive. Metu observes that in Onuobia's *The Son of the House*, women also enable male hegemony. Were et al opine that Ahdaf Soueif and Mariama Ba subvert patriarchy in their novels *The Map of Love* and *So Long a Letter*, respectively (67-86). A similar argument is projected in the works of Toker, Were et al, and Wosu. The focus, as observed earlier, has always been on patriarchy or male hegemony without recourse to other hegemonic structures and systems that subjugate women.

However, Hadjitheodorou (111) and Yimbu (71-80) go beyond hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy to examine cultural hegemony as it affects women in Africa, though theirs are still limited in scope because as a matter of fact, there are more hegemonic structures and systems that subjugate African women than patriarchy and culture. The exploration of hegemony as it concerns African women that is closest to the present work is Olumati's sociological study (108-110), due to its multifaceted approach. Olumati's work breaks away from the trend to explore cultural hegemony, patriarchy, women against women and other various forms of hegemony which African women encounter, albeit his work is sociologically-inclined, not a literary analysis.

Though some contemporary female writers (such as Ayobami Adebayo and Aiwanose Odafen) still portray women characters as weak, subservient and static in such dispositions, there are many who go beyond such portrayals to demonstrate the strategies that women in their works adopt against hegemonic structures. Although it is true that the motive of writers who portray female characters as weak, subservient and static might be to demonstrate the realities of African women, our argument is that beyond demonstrating the realities of the African woman, it is still possible to show how the typical African woman that is faced with hegemony is able to survive its clutches. It is also possible to broaden the exploration of the concept of hegemony in African literature beyond patriarchy or hegemonic masculinity. It is against this background that the present work investigates the strategies that women characters in African female-authored novels employ to survive various hegemonic structures

in Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. Panashe Chigumadzi is Zimbabwean, while Chika Unigwe and Abi Dare are Nigerians.

### **The Concept of Hegemony**

Houssay-Holzschuch claims that the concept 'hegemony' originated in Ancient Greece. It is mostly associated with the work of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (357). Hegemony is the name that Gramsci used to refer to an ideological system where the ruling class dominates all forms of production. At the core of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is the Marxist philosophy that the ruling ideas of each age are the ideas of its ruling class.

Apart from Gramsci's theorization of the concept of hegemony, various scholars interpret it differently. Chase-Dunn regards hegemony as domination (362). Arrighi regards hegemony not as domination or supremacy but as leadership; when a state or an individual creates a path for development and leads others. Such a state or hegemon leads through consent, not coercion (365). According to Cox, hegemony is more than dominance; dominance is only a part of the whole. He goes further to suggest that hegemony, contrary to Arrighi's view, is coerced, when he states that "hegemony is an internalized coherence which has most probably arisen from an externally imposed order but has been transformed into an intersubjectively constituted reality" (366). The word 'imposed' makes hegemony in this view coercive. So, hegemony, seen from the perspective of Cox, is a kind of dominance that is exerted on groups and individuals, which may have devastating effects on such persons. Due to the various conceptualizations of hegemony, this study adopts the definition of hegemony as dominance by either consent or coercion. There are different types or forms of hegemony, which include cultural hegemony, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, socio-political hegemony, economic hegemony etc.

### **Empirical Review**

There are a number of publications which examine various themes in the novels chosen for this paper, though most of such publications have little or nothing to do with the interaction between women and hegemonic structures in the novels.

*Sweet Medicine* is among the four novels analyzed by Gawas in a thesis entitled *Transactional Sex Relationships in Fiction: The Disintegration of Women's Emancipation Through the Blesser Blessee Culture in Selected African Novels*. Gawas argues that poverty is one of the causes of transactional sex relationships in the novels (13). This is especially true in the case of Tsitsi in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*.

A study on Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* by Ibanga Grace, entitled *Interrogating Gender Injustice in Selected Nigerian Fictions* lays emphasis on patriarchy. Though Ibanga acknowledges that women also dominate other women, the prevailing argument in her work is that the novel is replete with instances of patriarchal hegemony. Ibanga's work is different from the present one in its selection of primary texts and its conceptual scope; it has a smaller conceptual scope. According to Firgiawaty and Nurcahyani, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is a novel of empowerment, as it depicts how Adunni, Big Madam and some other female characters empowered themselves through self-definition, self-valuation, and self-reliance (Firgiawaty and Nurcahyani 96). However, the claim of the researchers that Adunni empowered others is contestable, as the novel's plot does not include any such instance. Except if what they mean is that Adunni's resilience has the potential to empower female readers. This observable dearth of literary studies on Panashe Chigumadzi's novel and that of Abi Dare, especially as it concerns hegemony constitutes a research gap that the present study aims to fill.

Most of the literary studies on *Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters Street* are centered on the thematic concerns of migration, sexuality, trafficking, prostitution, and diasporic concerns such as multiculturalism and identity crises. For instance, Gabsa examines the myths that are being projected about Europe and how Africans go there with high hopes only to be disappointed and end up in shameful lifestyles. He also examines the efforts that the women in the novel employ towards redemption (1-71).

Again, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*, Habila's *Travellers*, and Ndibe's

*Foreign Gods Inc* are considered to be reinventions of the West by Terhemba Shija. Shija claims that the three novels present a failed attempt by Nigerian immigrants to meaningfully integrate into Western society (2030). True, Habila's *Travellers* and Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc* reflect such migrant realities, but this is not entirely the case for the characters in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*, because one can rightly claim that since Ama, Efe and Joyce eventually became successful entrepreneurs, they were successful.

However, Umezurike conducted a study using *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Beyond the Horizon* as primary sources of data. However, his focus was on how the female characters employed resistance against the hegemonic structures that subdued them. By using Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony, which could be coercive or non-coercive, Umezurike's study is similar to the present one in conceptual framework, but different in general scope and primary sources of data.

So far, the review above indicates that very few studies examined Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, a few examined Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* but it is observable that Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* has been given more critical attention. Also, quite a number of the studies reviewed above, including several others not mentioned here, examined the subjugation of women in African literary works without considering whether or not the experiences of the women transcend hegemony to demonstrate how these women show strength by adopting certain survival strategies. The present study finds it expedient to not only demonstrate the hegemonic experiences of women in the selected literary texts as portrayed by female African authors, but to also examine how these women survive some of the experiences. It is not enough to only analyze the negative experiences that women go through especially in patriarchal societies, as depicted by creative writers. Though such narratives are most probably intended to demonstrate the realities of these women, it is of utmost importance to also observe that not all these women allow themselves to remain subjugated all through their lives. This approach thus makes the

present study transcendental.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is eclectic in its analytical approach. It adopts three strands of feminism for analysis. It adopts radical feminism, snail-sense feminism and nego-feminism. Radical feminism is largely believed to be a Western ideology, especially an American movement, whose frontiers were pushed forward by groups of individuals in America known such as: Redstockings, Cell 16, The Feminists, and New York Radical Feminists (NYRF). These groups marked the formal beginning of radical feminism as a movement in America. Radical feminism holds the belief that all forms of social hegemony originate from male domination, and seeks to fight for equal rights and justice for women. Radical feminism is one out of the four dominant strands of Western feminism; others are: socialist feminism, Marxist feminism and liberal feminism.

Snail-sense feminism is another theory applied in the present study. It is an African alternative to feminist criticism developed by Adimora-Ezeigbo. The theory uses the metaphor of the snail to suggest that women in hegemonic (particularly patriarchal) societies should behave like the snail which does not confront obstacles, but negotiates its way around them. The snail, though slow, eventually reaches its destination without having to experience the pain of unnecessary battle scars because it is very sensitive to danger, and avoids it. One of the tenets of snail-sense feminism is individualism.

Also applied in this study is nego-feminism, which is very similar to Snail-sense feminism. It was propounded by Obioma Nnaemeka. It is, like Snail-sense feminism, a homegrown model of feminism/ feminist criticism that is based on African indigenous cultures, worldviews, and it draws inspiration from African proverbs. For instance, in a work entitled *Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practising, and Pruning Africa's Way*, Obioma Nnaemeka hinged her discourse on African proverbs, some of which are: "When something stands, something stands beside it" (Igbo proverb), "A person is a person because of other people!" (Sotho proverb), "One head cannot go into counsel" (Ashanti proverb). Nego-feminism is a feminism of negotiation,

also known as no ego feminism (Nnaemeka 356). Negotiation involves mutual compromise. It has to do with letting go of or ignoring certain rights, beliefs and principles for the greater good.

### Methodology

This study adopts qualitative content analysis. The primary data consist of excerpts from three African female-authored novels. These texts were purposively selected based on their conceptual relevance to the study, particularly their engagement with the interface between women and hegemonic structures. Although African women's writing has increasingly focused on themes such as equality, intersectionality, reproductive rights, and sexual violence, the specific area of women, hegemony, and survival strategies remains underexplored. While several studies have examined hegemony in African literature, there is still a notable gap in scholarship that interrogates the multiple forms of hegemony and the varied strategies female characters employ to confront, negotiate, or transcend such oppressive structures. This research therefore seeks to fill part of that gap by examining how selected African female writers portray their characters as both victims of and agents resisting hegemonic power.

The novels selected for analysis, Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*—were chosen because of their strong thematic resonance with the issues under investigation. Each text engages with different but interrelated manifestations of hegemony, including economic marginalisation, patriarchal domination, Western cultural influence, family hierarchies, and cultural expectations. The narratives further demonstrate that women can also participate in structures of domination, thereby complicating the binary opposition between oppressors and the oppressed.

Through the systematic application of qualitative content analysis, this study demonstrates how African female writers' articulate women's experiences of hegemonic oppression and the diverse strategies they employ in response. The selected texts provide a rich corpus for examining the interplay between domination and agency, thereby

contributing to broader feminist literary scholarship.

### **Interface of Women and Hegemonic Structures**

#### **Socioeconomic/Sociopolitical Hegemony and its Impact in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine***

The types of hegemony that are most prevalent in this novel are socioeconomic and sociopolitical hegemony. Tsitsi finds herself in a difficult situation, subjugated by socioeconomic forces which make it impossible for her to get a well-paying job, a job that could enable her to take care of herself, her widowed mother and uncle. Despite her diligence and good grades in school (both secondary and university), and her pious upbringing (Chigumadzi 28, 33, 34), Tsitsi graduates and cannot get a lucrative job. She gets a job as a secretary, but her salary lasts only two days (87). Such is the fate of many graduates in Zimbabwe as depicted in the novel. The struggle for survival amidst endemic poverty is real and pervasive. To escape the troubles imposed on her by socioeconomic hegemony, she takes the option of seducing her boss, becoming his mistress, and eventually becoming his wife after he obtained a divorce from his first wife. Tsitsi was not the only one who monetized her sexuality as a survival strategy; her friend, Chiedza too.

#### **Women, Afro-cultural and Western Hegemony in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine***

Women, due to their deep immersion in Western religion, also serve as agents of hegemony against their fellow African women. Mama believes her daughter is living in sin, going against her catholic faith, yet she cannot reject what her daughter brings courtesy of the man she is living with. The woman would not forgive her daughter for not doing a white wedding, showing coldness towards the young woman, yet lacking the courage to reject the gifts from her. White wedding is foreign to Africans; it is a borrowed culture, perpetuated by western hegemony. Tsisi's mother presents us with a case of an intersection between socioeconomic, Afro-cultural and Western hegemony. The woman is torn between conforming to the dominance of western culture and rejecting the benefit she is getting from her daughter's 'sinful life'. If she rejects the help she is getting from her daughter, she would

starve. Yet her mind has been programmed to believe that traditional wedding is not enough; anything less than a church wedding is insufficient to guarantee cohabitation. She thus, illtreats Tsitsi.

At the end of the story, the psychological conflict that is finally resolved, the denouement of the story, is that Tsitsi chooses to seek help from an African traditional spiritualist. Although Tsitsi's act of consulting the *N'anga* is idolatry and it is a sin, it is a sin only within the context of Christianity, a Western religion that was imposed on Africans. Christianity is perhaps the strongest influence, the strongest legacy of Western sociocultural hegemony in the African continent. Chigumadzi's act of portraying Tsitsi as a victor after consulting the *N'anga* could be interpreted as a way of either disparaging Western hegemony or showing the potency of African ways of doing things. However, the question remains why she resorts to traditional medicine just to get the validation of a Christian mother.

#### **Hegemonic Masculinity, Culture, Patriarchy and Family as Hegemonic Structures in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice***

Though Tsitsi gets what she wants by becoming Zvobgo's wife, she has to continually subject herself to Zvobgo's hegemonic masculinity in order to remain in his good books, even when he treats her like she doesn't matter outside domestic matters. She isn't particularly happy with the way he treats her as though her opinion doesn't count, but then she has to be careful not to be like Mrs. Zvobgo who openly challenged him (120 – 121). Not only Chiedza and Tsitsi are portrayed as victims of hegemony by Chigumadzi. Even Tsitsi's mother is portrayed as a victim here.

Chapter twenty-two of the novel reveals that it was Zvobgo who actually introduced Tsitsi to the option of spiritual consultations, long before this desperate situation she found herself in. Zvobgo was in dire need of protection from his political enemies and coerced her to accompany him (Chigumadzi 186).

Mama is first portrayed as a devoted catholic who would never compromise or mix

her faith with heathen or traditional practices that she believed to be contrary to Christianity, but later succumbs. Here is a woman who had demonstrated strength by refusing to allow *Tsikamutanda*, a witchdoctor who had paid a visit to their village to help identify witches, to enter her house; she had openly denounced him. She had demonstrated strength by refusing to see the *N'anga* when she had difficulty in getting pregnant, despite pressures from in-laws. She had stood her ground and decided that she was not going to make any more efforts at childbearing after she had three miscarriages, despite the pressure from in-laws, despite the fact that they were calling her a witch. But the same woman finally demonstrates weakness by agreeing to follow her late husband's brothers to the *N'anga* for the harsh treatment usually meted out to women upon the death of their husbands. It is a society where women can only prove their innocence or lack of involvement in their late husband's death by partaking in some traditional practices at the *n'anga*'s shrine. Instead of Mama to fight for her religious and personal beliefs, she succumbs to cultural practices.

Mrs. Zvobgo stands out in the experiences of female characters in this novel. She is depicted as strong-willed and intellectually independent, though she is given a minor role in the novel. This woman, unlike many typical African women, had the temerity to divorce her husband, a very important personality in Zimbabwe. But no active role is given to her in the novel. In fact, nothing much is said about her even before the divorce, except that she openly disagreed with her husband in public, debating with him (Chigumadzi 96 - 98), and even undermining him (Chigumadzi 101). Not much active role is given to her, except an exposition on her qualities of self-will, self-sufficiency, and the ability to value herself and place herself above patriarchal societal expectations of submission (Chigumadzi 125-126). That she is able to uphold her womanhood, her dignity, even going as far as fighting for and winning some of the properties from her marriage with Zvobgo (Chigumadzi 139), portrays her as a victor, not a victim, over hegemony.

Adunni's story in *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is one of great pathos. It is a

story that is capable of forcing countless drops of tears from even the stoniest hearts. She suffers from the severe effects of hegemony when her father calls her one morning and tells her that she will be married off to Morufu, a taxi driver in their village who already has two wives and four children. While it is true to admit that her father exercised dominance over her because of his power as her father, it is also important to note that he did that due to poverty. Dare presents the fact that the man could not pay his community rent of thirty thousand naira, and that they would be kicked out of their house for failing to pay, as a motive for the man's decision to marry off his teenage daughter (Dare 10). Thus, it is possible to argue that this is a case of hegemonic masculinity. It is also possible to argue that this is a case of socioeconomic hegemony; perhaps her father wouldn't have considered pushing her into marriage if he wasn't poor. It is however noteworthy that Adunni's father is neither an old man nor a disabled. Why couldn't he make something of himself? Why couldn't he think of other alternatives, other ways out of poverty? Well, her father collected thirty thousand for the rent from Morufu as part of her bride and shamelessly tells her afterwards (Dare 10).

The women that Adunni eventually becomes co-wives with in Morufu's house, Labake and Khadija, are also victims of Morufu's hegemonic masculinity. He beats them up (Dare 33). Again, he asserts absolute authority; no one questions his authority or talks back at him in that house. Moreso, Khadija was married because Labake couldn't conceive again after giving birth to Kike, who Morufu doesn't consider as a blessing because she is a girl.

Labake is a victim of hegemonic masculinity not only because she gets beaten by her husband, but also because she is made to live with the distress caused by polygamous marriage simply because she couldn't give birth again, and the child she has is not a boy. She is victimized by a culture that gives males upper hand over females. This causes her to find every available opportunity to assault her co-wives, a kind of transferred aggression (Dare 60). She had once forced Adunni out of the bathroom and poured sand on her while beating her naked (Dare 47). Khadija is also made a victim of

having to share a husband because, according to Morufu's irrational mind, she failed to give birth to a boy; all her three children are girls (Dare 37).

Adunni's troubles did not begin with her. The troubles were passed from her mother to her. Her troubles were a direct consequence of the troubles her mother, Idowu, went through as a young girl. Idowu was once in love with Ade, a boy from a rich family. Ade had come to Ikati from Lagos to spend the holiday with his grandmother when he eventually fell in love with Adunni's mother. He had bought puff-puff from Adunni's mother, and then fallen in love with her. He had wanted to marry her, but because she wasn't educated, his family said no to it. To forestall further interactions between them, Ade's family flew him abroad. Adunni's mother was eventually forced to marry papa (23) who, presently, cannot think of a better solution to his poverty than selling his teenage daughter to an old polygamous man. Adunni's mother is clearly another victim of hegemony. First, Ade's parents victimize her because of her poor educational background. Then, her parents use their power as parents to compel her into marrying a man she never loved.

Albeit it is observed elsewhere that Tia was a victim of her mother-in-law's hegemony, the fact that Tia's husband eventually confesses his infertility to Tia after her horrible experience with the fake prophet (Dare 250) makes that assertion not completely true. Tia was actually a victim of her husband, a victim of hegemonic masculinity. He knew all the while that he can't get a woman pregnant, yet he kept quiet when his mother was harassing his wife, making her miserable even to the extent of taking her to a psychopathic prophet! In a typical African marriage, the first person to be accused of infertility when children are not forthcoming is usually the woman. This demonstrates the bias, the injustice against women in African societies. Apart from being a victim of her husband, Tia was a victim of patriarchy as a system; her mother-in-law was only an agent.

Similarly, In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Efe, one of the four girls who traveled to Belgium for prostitution, is an innocent virgin in Nigeria who yearned for luxury after her mother's death. The eldest of

four children, her father has money which is only enough for food, and she wants more. Thus, it is not difficult for Titus, a man rumored to be a very rich businessman, to seduce her with money.

Chika Unigwe portrayed Efe in a completely negative light without giving any compelling justification as to why she preferred a life of prostitution abroad to finding better means of sustenance in Nigeria. First, we are made to understand that although her mother is late, her father, despite the devastation he suffered as a result of the mother's demise (Unigwe 52, 54), provided the basic needs of the family (Unigwe 54). Yet, she chose to go about frolicking with Titus (Unigwe 52-54). Here, the motive of her decision to become the sex toy of Titus was simply that she craved a life of luxury (Unigwe 49-50, 54). Efe is portrayed as a victim of Titus, a forty-five years old business man who used his riches to entice her, get her pregnant, and abandon her. Titus dominates Efe, having sex with her every day for months. And as Unigwe puts it:

Every night for the next four months, Efe saw Titus at his insistence. He said she had taken possession of him, that he had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her. (Unigwe 53)

Ama, one of the four ladies who travelled to Belgium for prostitution, was first a victim of her pedophile step-father. Who would have thought that a man who was an assistant pastor (Dare 109), a man who always put up an appearance of righteousness, always wearing white to signify holiness, was a pedophile, a rapist?

Chika Unigwe does not only stop at portraying Ama as a victim of rape, she goes further to put her in a position where her step-father gets a justification to send her out of the house (Unigwe 123). Because the man insults Ama for failing her JAMB exams once again, she explodes and tells her mum a secret she had never wanted anyone to know, the fact that the man had raped her multiple times when she was little. Her step-father, Brother Cyril, retaliates by revealing to her that he is not her biological father, he only wanted to save her from being a bastard, and that she should leave his house. Here's another case of victimhood,

psychological torture, that for twenty-one years, information as important as a girl's paternity is kept away from the girl, only to be revealed in the heat of an argument. And to make things worse, her mother did not believe her when she said the man was raping her when she was little.

Not only Ama is portrayed as a victim here. Even her mother is portrayed as a docile victim of hegemony. Brother Cyril, who likes to put up a fake appearance of piety by wearing a glowing white apparel, usually beats her anytime she fails to thoroughly wash his whites clean (Unigwe 121). Also, as a single mother who gets 'saved' by Brother Cyril after she got pregnant for another man, she didn't know, and still does not believe that Brother Cyril, her savior, eventually began to rape her daughter in exchange for taking her in with her daughter. When her daughter tries again to tell her about the rape, she reacts in a manner that no responsible mother would, as seen in the following excerpt:

"Just shut up. Shut up, Ama, before I am thrown out of my husband's house because of you. Mechie onu kita." (Unigwe 125)

Here, the woman is portrayed as docile, servile and selfish. Such a reaction from a mother is due to the fact that she has been completely subjugated by Brother Cyril, so much that she couldn't imagine a life outside his house. Her daughter's life and mental health does not matter to her.

Alek, who is later to be given a new identity, later to be known as Joyce, was actually a teenage girl from Sudan whose family got wiped out of existence by the Janjaweed militia. Even more disgusting was the manner with which the soldiers defiled her. "One by one the other men thrust themselves into her, pulling out to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was protein. Good food. Fit for African slaves" (Unigwe 159).

To what end were they exerting such baseless dominance on an innocent teenager? As the other refugees at the camp that Joyce found company after her gory experience narrate theirs too, it becomes clear that hers was not the worst case of hegemonic victimhood. While most of the people who were killed were men, the women who were left to tell the stories

had suffered various forms of sexual abuse and trauma. A certain woman's fourteen-year-old son was forced to have sexual intercourse with her (Unigwe 161).

As though her pains have finally come to an end, Joyce meets Polycarp, a good and jovial Nigerian soldier, an Igbo guy, at the refugee camp. She falls in love with him, and begins to cohabit with him, only to be disappointed when he succumbs to his parents' demand that he should marry a fellow igbo.

When he says later that he knew this would happen that's why he tried to avoid his parents, one sees clearly how terrible a person Polycarp is. It is despicable to see that he knew about his parents, about Igbo culture and his parents' loyalty to the culture, yet he kept cohabiting with the innocent girl, giving her hopes of a happy future with him.

Not all men do this, giving false hopes to women as a ploy to keep getting sexual satisfaction, but it is very common among men. Joyce was thus not only a victim of cultural hegemony, a victim of Igbo ways of life, but also a victim of hegemonic masculinity. The Igbo culture literally provided a bullet and a gun, but the person who pulled the trigger was the one man whom she thought meant the whole world to her.

Polycarp's way of compensating her was to connect her to Oga Dele, the man who could take her to Europe or America. What a compensation! A travel ticket for prostitution! Alek's fate was to be decided by a man. Her vocation, her future was to be decided by the man who betrayed her. Such is the fate of a woman who is a total victim of hegemony!

Segun, a man who lived in the same flat with the ladies and had a deceptive appearance of laziness (Unigwe 92) and imbecility, a man whose actual job none of them knew (Unigwe 92), except that he ran errands for Madam and was very good with a hammer, was the man who eventually killed Sisi. Luc, a European who falls deeply in love with her, successfully convinces her to leave prostitution, report Madam and Dele to the police, and get married to him. It is not easy making that decision as she believes it would put the other girls in danger. She goes ahead to leave, anyway, and that costs her life.

Though it is not explicitly stated who

was behind Segun's act, it is clear that Dele and Madam had a hand in it. In fact, Unigwe suggests this when she observes that Dele who lives far in Nigeria, has a tattoo of a hammer on his neck (Unigwe 34), and he had threatened Sisi (Unigwe 42). As for Madam's complicity in the act, it can't be forgotten that she had also threatened Sisi when Sisi arrived Belgium (Unigwe 152).

Without any doubt, Chika Unigwe can be placed within the same spectrum as other African feminists who claim that the singular most prominent problem of the African woman is patriarchy or the failure of men. This is because a careful consideration of the novel reveals that the male characters are either cruel perpetrators of evil dominance against women or simply weak.

Though there are female characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* who were cruel to their fellow women, they succeeded in their cruelty because they were enabled by men. Titus' wife succeeded in pushing Efe out of the house when Efe took Titus' son to him because Titus enabled her to do so. Efe wasn't the first to get pregnant for the man. It was a norm that anytime any girl showed up with a baby for Titus, the wife did the chasing while the man showed absolutely no concern. It was an unwritten rule (63-64, 66). Clearly, Polycarp's mother couldn't have come to exert evil dominance over Joyce if she wasn't enabled by Igbo culture, which is largely patriarchal. The only woman in this novel whose cruelty can hardly be explained or linked to a man is Madam, the business partner of Dele who sublet her flat for all the girls, receiving a rent from each of them every month.

Like Abi Dare, Chika Unigwe misrepresents nego-feminism by portraying all her male characters in a bad light. It is a bias kind of gender portrayal that does not align with the principle of gender equality and is against nego-feminism's tenet of inclusiveness, as opposed to man-hating. This interpretation of Chika Unigwe's plot and characterization is in consonance with Ugwanyi's (1-17) claim that Ama Darko's novels subvert patriarchy by depicting female characters as strong, and independent on the one hand, while depicting male characters as either weak or irresponsible.

### **Hegemony: Women against Women in Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, and Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice***

It is important to observe that the hegemonic structures and entities that women interface with in the novels under study are not always outside womanhood. Mrs. Zvobgo was a victim of Tsitsi, a fellow woman. Tsitsi had gone unhindered to the woman's husband, telling him that she could be a better wife, and eventually succeeded in seducing and taking the man away from his wife.

In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, as soon as Sisi arrives Belgium, she is dominated by Madam, the Nigerian woman at the other end who was in the business of trading prostitutes with Dele. First, Tsitsi is made to understand that her place is an inferior one in the house. The following excerpt illustrates this:

“Why?” Madam echoed, her voice mocking and lilted by a laugh.  
“My dear … what’s your name?”  
“Sisi.” “My dear Sisi, it’s not your place to ask questions here.  
You just do as you are told, and you’ll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. You understand?  
Three days ago I gave Joyce the same instruction. She did not ask me questions. She just listened and did as she was told. I expect the same of you. Silence and total obedience.  
That’s the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. Capisce?” (Unigwe 102)

Sisi gets this response from Madam when she asks why she is told to go to the ministry of external affairs for registration (101). She later realizes that Madam's expression of hegemony was more than mere words, when she tries to escape from the business without completely paying her dues.

To consolidate her hegemony over Sisi, Madam tells her, after a failed mission at the ministry of external affairs, that Sisi belongs to her. In her words, she says to Sisi:

“Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you...Until you have paid up every single kobo ...every single cent of what you owe us, you shall

not have your passport back...  
Every month you go to the Western  
union and transfer money to Dele.  
Any month you do not pay up... “  
(Unigwe 152)

The last linguistic unit in the excerpt above was a threat left to hang. Upon her failure to pay up and her disappearance due to her decision to quit, Sisi would later realize that Madam's threat was not an empty threat. Sisi's first day at work was not only repulsive; it was painful. It was not easy allowing a complete stranger to touch her and have sexual intercourse with her. But she had already come thus far, there was no going back especially as she thought of all the things that the money could do for her.

Under the dominance of Big Madam in *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, Adunni suffocates. The woman wants absolute respect. In fact, she wants to be worshipped. “Don't stand and ‘yes, ma’ me, “When I am talking to you, I expect you to be on your knees” is what Big Madam tells Adunni the first time she talks to her.

Adunni soon begins to experience another level of Big Madam's hegemonic tendency when she is told by Kofi that Big Madam says she can only give her food once a day (Dare 132). For a woman with so much wealth, this is unbelievable! Kofi, being a good person, will sometimes call Adunni in the morning and give her food before Big Madam wakes up. But it so happens one morning that they aren't careful enough. Adunni is eating right inside the kitchen. Big Madam wakes up, finds her seated, eating in the kitchen and gives her the beating of her life. More beatings follow, almost every day (Dare 133). It is disturbing how Adunni is subjected to so much violence by another woman. However, an opportunity for deliverance presents itself when Adunni wins a scholarship exam after being tutored by Ms. Tia.

As observed in the case of Chika Unigwe, Abi Dare also consciously and intentionally aligns herself with feminist scholars who claim that the foremost problem of the African woman is patriarchy (see Aboye 11), when she relates every misfortune that happens to her female characters to a man. Every unfortunate experience that her female characters went through can be traced to a man.

This is against the principle of gender equality, and against the tenets of nego-feminism which advocates for inclusiveness in social transformation. Exactly what early male African writers such as Chinua Achebe, J.P Clark, Wole Soyinka etc. have been accused of doing to their female characters (see Methuselah, 151-164; Ebimobowei, 77-82) is what Abi Dare has done.

#### **Survival Strategies in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice***

Chiedza's survival strategy in Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine* may be described as sexual compromise (Chigumadzi 73, 75). This was not her original ambition in life. Like Tsitsi, she is a graduate of Economics who had great plans for herself, but is eventually dominated by the socioeconomic woes of her country. The economy is in a terrible state and it renders her unemployed. Before her moral degradation however, she is portrayed as a hardworking and wealthy lady who made lots of money “after burning money on the black market” owning landed properties and working with an NGO (Chigumadzi 106). But things change for her when the government begins shutting down NGOs. Thus, she goes about having multiple boyfriends and sugar daddies.

In a similar way, though in a more restrictive sense, seduction/sexual compromise is the survival strategy that Tsitsi adopts when she can no longer handle the challenges she faces as a grossly underpaid civil servant. She works most hours of the day, five days a week. Yet her salary doesn't last beyond two days! Thus, she adopts the strategy of compromise and negotiation. She compromises her religious beliefs, her catholic upbringing, and negotiates a sexual relationship with her boss, telling him that she could be a better wife. This act is in tandem with Nego-feminism's tenets of compromise and negotiation.

Nevertheless, when Zvogbo has had enough of her and is no longer attracted to her body, she observes that seduction and sexual compromise won't work any longer (Chigumadzi 72-73, 78-80), so she adopts syncretism as a new survival strategy. She needed to survive the cold treatment she got

from her mother (Chigumadzi 33-34, 132-133) who was a devout catholic, for living with a man she was not yet married to, in fact Mama had once called her a whore for this reason (Chigumadzi 132), and also maintain her stay in Zvogbo's household as his wife by getting wedded in church. Thus, she remains a Christian, paying her tithes, even as she was being fetish, consulting a witch doctor. Chigumadzi puts it thus:

Tsitsi struggles to her feet and thrusts US\$500, half her weekly allowance – a tenth of which had gone to her tithe – into the *n'anga*'s hands. The woman licks her finger and flips through the notes, counting them twice before snapping an elastic band around them and planting them behind the fabric of her bra (Chigumadzi 16).

Mama's survival strategy against the onslights from her late husband's family was initially that of resistance (Chigumadzi 172-173), then religious compromise and obeisance (Chigumadzi 173-174), and then resistance (Chigumadzi 175). A woman who was known to be vehemently intolerant of mixing her catholic faith with traditional customs, now had to compromise and in an act of obedience, participate in traditional funeral rites which involved consulting the *n'anga*, something she would never have accepted in her youth. But when the in-laws who had subjected her to the funeral rites returned a year later for another traditional custom to mark the one-year anniversary of their late son's passing, and tried to subject her to another traditional custom, she resisted. For that, they called her a witch (Chigumadzi 175)! Mama's survival strategy can thus be described as that of flexibility which is also in tandem with the tenets of nego-feminism; knowing when to detonate patriarchal landmines and knowing when to negotiate your way around them.

All through her novel, Chika Unigwe portrays the ladies in *On Black Sisters' Street* as victims of hegemony, but they are not portrayed as completely unaware of the potent viable alternatives to their circumstances. Before she gets to Belgium, Efe works two jobs to enable her overcome the circumstance that Titus pushed her into. To cater for herself and her

baby, she had to work very hard. Her survival strategy therefore, was hard work. It was her determination to earn more by taking a third job that led her into the waiting arms of Dele Senghor. She took the cleaning job from Dele, then months later he asked her if she wanted a job in Europe (Unigwe 71).

It was not easy living with a pedophile as a step dad. Ama found herself in a very difficult situation, living with her mother, who was married to Brother Cyril, the seemingly righteous man who had no qualms being a pedophile. Ama couldn't speak to anyone about what was happening to her, as she was little, ignorant and naïve. So, she resorts to talking to the pink walls in her bedroom. She finds solace in soliloquy, or as Unigwe would put it:

Ama told the walls how he held her nipple between his fingers and squeezed. She told the walls of the pain of the squeezing and the coldness of her father's hands. Over the next days the walls heard how he ignored her when she said that he was hurting her inside. They heard of how she tried to push him away when he lay on top of her, but he was a mountain and she did not have the strength in her to move a mountain (Unigwe 112).

Sisi was a victim of the lethal poverty and unemployment that continually pervade most African societies, a kind of poverty and unemployment that are mostly engendered by corruption and weak systems of governance. Schoolmates who knew less than Sisi and were clearly less competent got jobs but she kept seeking for a job for years (Unigwe 25-26). Corruption and poverty have become deeply entrenched in the African socioeconomic and political sphere, and it has become a culture. Thus, Sisi could be described as a victim of cultural hegemony, dominated and destroyed by the corruption and poverty around her which had become a way of life. To survive the harsh socioeconomic/sociopolitical condition she is faced with, she succumbs to the idea of emigration, when providence brings Dele her way (Unigwe 33-36, 42-43). The only way she could see out of her trouble was to travel to a foreign country; it doesn't matter the kind of job she would be going there to do.

Beyond expressing hegemony, and stating clearly the kind of relationship that was to exist between her and the ladies, Madam makes it clear that their survival depends on their loyalty, absolute loyalty! The phrase *total obedience* says it all. It takes Efe thirteen years of loyalty to Dele and Madam (Unigwe 74) before she becomes free from hegemony. Ama was loyal for over nine years before she gained her freedom. Joyce had the least number of years under Dele and Madam's dominance, most probably because she was greatly assisted by Polycarp who was paying into Dele's account back home in Nigeria. Thus, the survival strategy that Efe, Ama and Joyce adopted was loyalty. Efe went into the trade she learned from Madam, having her own girls. Joyce returned to Nigeria and established a school named after Sisi. Ama also returned to Nigeria and opened a boutique (Unigwe 229). But for their loyalty, Efe, Joyce and Ama would have ended up like Sisi who was brutally killed by Segun, the seemingly lazy guy whom they all took for an imbecile. Sis had survived socioeconomic hegemony from her father's household in Nigeria, the dominance of poverty and unemployment through determination. She had survived through emigration and sexual compromise. But she had failed to be loyal to Dele and Madam to the end.

The death of Sisi bonds the ladies. First, they see how untouched Madam was about the fact that one of their close colleagues had just been murdered. And then they realize that it could happen to any of them. As they mourn Sisi, they soon begin to tell stories of their past. Efe is the first among the ladies to tell the story of her past. As the story is being told, they bonded. None of them can say how long they have been sitting there, huddled together on the couch as if seeking the heat of one another's bodies, listening to Efe's story usurp the silence. Their arms touch, and the fight of before is all but forgotten (Unigwe 81).

Ama and Joyce also tell their stories to the group, one after the other. They encourage one another as well (147). The act of telling their stories to each other was what they needed to ease the traumatizing experience of losing a housemate and a colleague with whom they had shared moments. What they did was similar to what Joyce had experienced in the refugee

camp where she lived after her family was killed by the Janjaweed militia. At the camp, women were encouraged by aid workers to tell their stories to one another in the belief that sharing such stories was therapeutic (Unigwe 162-163). Bonding is thus a survival strategy in Unigwe's novel.

In Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, Adunni's journey through life and her survival strategy through dominance of various kinds has been one of resilience. First, she loses her mum at a very tender age, the woman who wouldn't have rested until Adunni got proper and advanced education. It wasn't an easy one, as Adunni always remembers her mother anytime she finds herself in a difficult situation, though she eventually recovers from the loss. After the loss of her mother came a forced marriage imposed on her by her father.

Also, there comes a time in Adunni's experience of hegemony that the only way she could survive is to escape. When Bamidele abandons Khadija and Adunni at the bank of the river, saying he would go and return with the special soap used in bathing pregnant women for a safe delivery, and Khadija eventually dies waiting in vain, Adunni goes to Bamidele's house which Khadija had shown her earlier. Adunni's aim was to confront Bamidele. There, a pregnant woman who was most probably Bamidele's wife threatens to call a mob against Adunni, and the woman made her threat a reality by actually shouting 'ole' (Dare 78-79). At that point, seeing death face-to-face, Adunni runs for her life to her father's house. She has to run away again when she is convinced that her father, instead of protecting her, would hand her over to the village chief and she would be blamed and killed (Dare 82-84). Adunni escapes to Iya's house. When her father follows her to Iya's house, she has to escape again with the help of Iya. That's how she finds herself under the evil dominance of Big Madam and Big Daddy in Lagos.

In compliance with Tia's advice, Adunni resorts to violence as a survival strategy when Big Daddy makes a real attempt to rape her. While he is pressing her on the floor, almost having his way, she remembers Ms. Tia's council and takes action. Tia had advised her to fight whenever the man comes to her room with a bad intention.

Big Madam is no less violent. She also seeks a way out of her troubles, out of her abusive marriage by openly confronting her husband, getting terribly beaten, and then transferring her anger and frustrations to Adunni. The way she goes about constantly beating Adunni for the slightest reasons leaves many questions unanswered, until one realizes through a conversation, she had with Adunni that it was all a transfer of aggression. Out of fear, the fear of Big Madam, Adunni observes that Big Daddy is responsible for all the aggression that Big Madam exerted on her domestic staff. She said:

It is Big Dady ma. He is a bad man. Very wicked... He beats you nearly every time and fills you up with so much anger and sadness that when you see me and Kofi, you pour all of the anger out on us, on me most of all. Your husband, he makes you sad and ... (Dare 267).

Abi Dare uses the character of Adunni to tell us that Big Madam's cruelty is all transferred aggression. The excerpt above reveals Abi Dare's intention, which is to tell the reader that Adunni was indirectly a victim of Big Daddy; that all the pain, all the cruelty she got from Big Madam originates from Big Daddy.

Big Madam's act of openly confronting her husband and locking him out of the house for three days after the fight between them reveals her radical feminist inclinations. Like Labake, Morufu's first wife, Big Madam does not subscribe to any African model of feminism which advocates for non-confrontation, negotiation and non-combative approaches to solving problems of hegemony. She is always confronting her husband, even when she knew very well that she isn't good at karate, which is something Cell 16, the radical feminist group known for physical combat, advocates. She always gets terribly beaten by her husband, but her feminist inclination isn't radical enough to encourage separatism. Big Madam was radical to the extent that she had the nerves to lock her husband out after the gruesome fight they had because he was cheating on her with her best friend. The man had to gather his relatives to

come and beg on his behalf.

Other female characters in the novel adopted strategies other than radicalism; strategies that align with the tenets of African alternatives to feminism. For instance, Adunni, though she had a sharp mouth, always knew when to adopt negotiation, avoidance or escape to overcome her problems and survive. Adimora-Ezeigbo made use of the snail to illustrate the intellectual underpinning of her theory. The snail, according to her, senses danger and avoids it. It negotiates its way out of trouble or finds an escape route around it, rather than challenging or confronting it. And that's exactly what Adunni always did, though she was not sluggish like a snail.

### Conclusion

The major characters in *Sweet medicine* were found to be dominated primarily by economic hardship, patriarchy and western religion, and they chose sexual compromise, syncretism, resistance and flexibility as survival strategies. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, women were found to be dominated primarily by economic hardship caused by unemployment, and hegemonic masculinity. Their survival strategies are emigration, sexual compromise and loyalty. The prevalent hegemonic structures against women in *The Girl with the Louding Voice* are hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, and the survival strategies are defiance, escape, violence and resilience. One thing that is common between *Sweet Medicine* and *On Black Sisters' Street* is the idea that most young ladies in Africa are plagued with hardship and they seek to survive through sexual compromise.

This paper demonstrates that hegemony occurs in various forms; some tangible and some abstract. It reveals, contrary to popular feminist opinion, that men are not the only hegemonic force against women in Africa; that the economy is also the problem of women in Africa; even women too are problems to other women. It also reveals some of the survival strategies that women in African literature deploy against the hegemonic structures that dominate them.

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