



## Objectification and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Nina Iphechukwu's *Disowned*

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**Abstract.** Literary theories have sought to analyse and examine the ideologies inherent in the lives and thinking of the people. To this effect, Literature on trauma analyses some dark experiences of humans that illuminate the traumatic experiences of literary characters. This paper examines Objectification and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in *Daddy's Little Girl*, a story from Nina Iphechukwu's *Disowned*. It examines childhood traumatic experiences and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the selected character. This paper adopts a literary content analysis method and trauma theory. The theory charts a correlation between the experiences of the selected character and the effects of the traumatic events. The paper concludes that nightmares, mental breakdown, helplessness, lack of trust, and self-effacement can be read as symptoms of repressed childhood traumatic experiences. It concurs with Cvetkovich and Blooms' assertion that trauma can be an external built-up of unpleasant events that affect the victim's psychological state which in turn affects the individual's external actions in life.

**Keywords:** Objectification, Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

### 1. Introduction

Literature reflects the various experiences, ideas and passions of human beings in their daily life and is directly derived from human life. It dissects reality and provides a window to an ideology, everything that happens within a society can be written, recorded, and learnt from the pages of literature. Frank (1984, p. 41) asserts that its boundaries cross our lives, our traditions, culture, social relations, national unity and a lot more. African writers both male and female have extensively used their works to mirror and reflect issues in their society. According

to Asong (1995, p. 16), literary writers speak on societal happenings, they have gone beyond the rights and wrongs of the societies to examine the ideologies inherent in the lives and thinking of the people.

African female writers have sought to rewrite the narratives as they were from the past by creating alternative female characters as well as exposing the ills of male total dominance and as against what has been the status quo in times past. In writings about feminism, female African writers, do not all write about the same views on the feminist subject; every writer has a perspective or attitude toward what feminism should be. This has led to several feminist perspectives, as writers portray their ideas based on their own socio-cultural and literary perception. According to Freedman (2001, p. 21), in her work *Feminism: Concepts in the Social Sciences*: "One could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women. Beyond these general assertions, however, it is difficult to come up with any other 'common ground' between the different strands of feminism". (28)

Freedman's statement indicates that as much as feminism calls for gender equality of the female citizens in the society, there are several strands or points of view to what a woman should be as an advocate against male domination. Thus, several concepts of feminism are portrayed by African writers, giving room for various views of feminism in their literary works. Despite these different strands, at the core of their argument remains that the patriarchal system of African societies has seen many women come face to face with violence both in the family

and in several social settings; these events have led to trauma among many African women.

## 2. Feminist Perspective Of Objectification

Objectification theory according to Frederickson (1997) provides a framework for understanding the psychological experiences that appear to be uniquely feminine. This theory analyses femalehood in a given socio-cultural environment and draws from Emmanuel Kant's concept of objectification whereby the status of a human is reduced to that of an object to be owned and used as it pleases the owner. Kant's explanation of object refers to the female as sex objects; an instrument for sexual gratification. This theory presents objectification as a form of gender oppression.

Feminist writers like Catherine Mackinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Lina Papadaki and others equate inequality to objectification, this is because unequal relationships translate to the objectification of the subordinate partner. It goes to say that in a patriarchal society, the female is degraded to the level of an object based on gender inequality. Mackinnon as quoted in Papadaki (2019) sees patriarchal societies as having clearly defined roles where all women as a group are objectified and the men, as a group are their objectifiers. Patriarchy, therefore, enshrines gender inequality which leads to the objectification of women. Objectification according to Dworkin (2000) occurs when a human being through social means is made to feel less human, turned into a thing or commodity.

## 3. The Concept of Trauma

The Oxford English Dictionary defines trauma as a medical term used to refer to "a wound or an external bodily injury," or "a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed" or "the state or condition so caused." Essentially, past trauma and traumatic memories affect the mind of characters. Confusion and insecurity cause trauma; typical causes of psychoanalysis trauma are sexual abuse, employment discrimination, police brutality, bullying, domestic violence, and particularly childhood experiences. Cvetkovich (2003, p. 45) comments that significantly, childhood trauma can lead to violent behaviour. Bloom asserts that "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden unexpected overwhelming intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind" (1999, p. 2). As both Cvetkovich and Bloom assert, trauma can be an

external built-up of unpleasant events that may affect the victim's psychological states internally which affects the individual external actions in life.

Trauma exists as part of human challenges since the start of human history. Lacan (1998, p. 151) marks that the concept of trauma has been theorized in the field of sciences. Disciplines such as Medicine and Psychology have champion studies on trauma, but it has also gained credence and theories in literature. As the world evolves from one age to another, so does literature, binding the history and culture of a place and people positively. Trauma in literature is narratives that tell of history, memoir, agonies and sorrows of the characters in literary works.

Marder's identification of trauma as a paradigm opens up an entirely different possibility of reading literary works (2006, p. 20). As an aspect of feminist thematic preoccupation, literary works on trauma faced by women have helped to portray the plight of women in African society and also serve as a means to overcome these sad events. Eustace (1983) recognizes that "individuals have become self-effaced because of the trauma experienced in life and an investigating of this human phenomenon is a worthy literary journey" (p. 88). In literary studies, reflections on the representation of atrocities, traumatic and post-traumatic stress are believed to produce some of the most influential and far-reaching new insights about the human condition.

Literature on trauma examines the human emotions of fears, pains, empathy and horror and sought to portray some dark experiences of humans that illuminate the traumatic experiences of the literary characters. Hartman is of the view that "as a specific literary endeavour, trauma study in the arts explores the relation of words and wounds; its main focus is on words that wound and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words" (1996, p. 259). Here, Hartman seems to believe in the power of art to represent the unspeakable. Since literary works like novels are understood by the writer's choice of diction, Hartman believes that the writer selects dictions that hurt the emotions of one character by another causing trauma. While words are at the peak of literary composition the subject matter is also designed to show these actions leading to trauma and self-effacement.

## 4. Trauma in Nina Anyianuka's *Daddy's Little Girl*

The story revolves around Elizabeth (Betty) who at the age of three is raped by her father. The story

starts with this declaration, ‘ THE FIRST TIME HE DID IT, I WAS THREE, MAYBE FOUR. I remember vividly It was a beautiful harmattan afternoon’ (47). Betty relives her first experience of rape by her father

I liked it when he paid me attention, but there was something not right with the way he groped me and caressed my neck with his face. His breathing was quick and heavy and his breath stank, a mixture of alcohol and stale food.

‘I want to ease myself,’ I said, trying to get away from him, but his grip got tighter.

You will relieve yourself afterward,’ ... please Daddy I will not do it again,’ I pleaded, certain I was going to be punished for something I had done, but he just laid me down on the bed, lifted my dress and removed my pants. I shut my eyes, hoping to hear him unlock the door and leave, the room grew quiet for a while, then I stiffened as I felt him rub something wet and slimy between my legs. I was too frightened and confused to scream till I felt a sharp pain pierce through me as something hard and unpleasant pushed into my body but he covered my mouth with his palm as he moved rhythmically on top of me’ (p. 49)

With the continued absence of her mother from home, Betty is left at the mercy of her abusive father, who constantly raped her. In her bid to escape from Daddy by running away to the convent, she ends up falling victim to Kola, the driver, who blackmails her into having sex with him in order to escape Daddy’s wrath.

The day Bene and I ran away to the convent it was my idea... when the Reverend Sister brought us home, daddy was out, but Kola the driver was around ... we begged him not to tell daddy... Kola came and asked me to follow him, he led me to the guest toilet downstairs and asked me to take off my pant and lie on the floor. As he mounted me he threatened to tell daddy we ran away if I ever told anyone.

Kola was worse than daddy and Paul, he put his hand in my dress every opportunity he got... The only time he was not mounting me, or groping my body, were times I was in school (68)

Betty is also abused sexually by Paul, her daddy’s cousin, who takes care of them in the absence of their mother. She complains, ‘I do not like him because whenever he gives me a bath, he touched my body in ways that made me uncomfortable’ (53). The sexual abuses escalate to include her secondary school teacher, Mr. Yode, who also tries to rape her. Eventually, the rape stops when at the age of almost fourteen she become pregnant for her father though daddy denies it. He abducted her at night while she

was sleeping and with the help of a woman injected her on the bottom. A few hours later she was rushed to the hospital and she lost the pregnancy. Her father visits her at the hospital and threatens to kill her grandmother and mother if she ‘runs her mouth again’ (97).

Burdened at so young an age by the absence of loving parents, and the conviction given to her by her father that she was a terrible child Betty believes that the rape incidents must be her fault:

It was finally officially clear to me that there was something officially wrong with me, something that made men rape me all the time, men like daddy that should love and care about me, boys like Paul that should protect me like male cousins should protect their little sisters, men like Kola a driver that all he should have been to me was kind and now Mr ‘Yode who though I did not even take his class, found his way to me, and try to defile me (p. 83)

Although Betty grows up to marry Ross, a kind, gentle and loving husband, the rape incidents and abuses she endured at her young age affect her psychologically, ‘I was burdened by the guilt of the shame, disgrace and pain I brought upon my family for being a girl child’ (97). She blames her gender for the cause of her trauma.

##### **5. Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) faced by Betty in *Daddy’s Little Girl***

Scott’s ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Cognitive Approach’ defines PTSD in two stages in individuals ‘who have experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or the threat to the physical integrity of self or others and secondly, an individual’s response to intense fear, helplessness or horror (1997, p. 125). Among the several effects of psychological trauma faced by Betty, the protagonist in *Daddy’s Little Girl* is constant nightmares.

Victims of childhood trauma are made helpless by their inability to share their experiences. They prefer suppressing such experiences, most times out of fear for their loved ones or rejection. Daddy constantly makes Betty feel guilty over their dysfunctional family and this makes her determined to keep her loved one safe by keeping silent over the incidents of rape.

My young tender heart carried the guilt of mother’s going away, because of all the things daddy said and did to me, the worst was that before he laid me down or placed me on his legs, he always told me I was a

terrible child ... He warned me never to tell anyone what happened whenever he put me on his bed and threatened to take Bene and Oke away to England and send me to the village if I ever told anyone. He reminded me I would never see them, mother, grandpa or grandma ever again (58).

Betty's suppression of her traumatic experiences results in constant nightmares. These nightmares become a regular part of Betty's life from childhood to marriage. As Betty noted, "the nightmares have lived with me almost all my life" (50). These nightmares are scenes of the several cases of sexual abuse she had undergone. Betty relates that "the nightmares make me feel myself struggle through the darkness that is trying to suck me in and sit up. It takes a few seconds for me to get my thoughts together and return to reality". These nightmares traumatize Betty all through the story. "I have no happy memories to balance out the sorrows that have continuously trialed my life. All I have are pains, horrors, scars and nightmares. There is nothing truly happy about my world". (56)

Youngren et al. (2020) estimates that up to 88% of survivors of rape or molestation suffer from persistent nightmares that can occur multiple times per week, seemingly at random." (10) Recurrent nightmares are frequent in trauma survivors and they are distressing often manifesting as nightmares of the same event that happened. From this assertion, if an individual is raped, they can have nightmares of being assaulted again. These traumatized nightmares can be triggered by incidents that flash back the memories of the rape or molest incidents.

#### **6. Betty in *Daddy's Little Girl* struggles with the trauma which led to her been viewed as an ogbanje.**

It was when I got back to school after that weekend that the nightmares started. I would start up from sleep, screaming. Sometimes I fell out of my bed and caused the other girls to panic and scamper. Matron took me to the vicar who burnt incense in a burner that he dangled over my head and sprinkled me with the holy water. He gave me a chaplet to put under my pillow, but the nightmares continued. The other girls started avoiding me and said mean, hurtful things about me. They called me ogbanje, mammy water and witch. Most of the girls stopped speaking to me and would often run away or shout 'the blood of Jesus' if they suddenly came face to face with me. (78)

The Nightmares had social consequences in Betty's life. In the story, she says "The nightmares have lived with me almost all my life, it cost me friends in secondary school, roommates in the university, and boyfriends". (50) Thus the traumatic nightmares created a social distance between Betty and others.

Betty's fear of the persistent reliving of her rape experiences through nightmares led to her induced insomnia.

I have not had nightmares in two weeks because I have not slept in two weeks but instead of feeling tired, I feel energetic and alive. I constantly feel I am on a drug-induced high... once in a while tiredness starts creeping in, but I ward it off with two cans of energy drink and feel better (81)

With time, it tells on her and she loses control of her emotions leading to her been diagnosed as Schizophrenic, a form of mental disorder that affects the thinking ability of an individual. In the story *Daddy's Little Girl*, Betty is viewed as a schizophrenic namely because she attempted to block out the traumatic experiences she experiences during her subconscious dream state resulting in nightmares that overpower her psychologically adversely affecting her mental state. In the hospital, Betty assumes things that others do not understand because of her past events. She pictures scenes relating to his father, Paul and Kola abusing her which leads to Schizophrenic behaviors.

"Suddenly a bright light sparkles, and I know daddy has lighted the firecrackers. I shriek excitedly and run toward the door, to go to daddy, but as I open the door, I am enveloped by thick darkness. I try to run back, but the room is now dark, and the beautiful decorations have become huge sooty cobwebs. I freeze as all the guest start turning into scary monsters, reaching out to tear me apart; tears stream down my face, as I call out to Oke and Bene for help, but they have become little monster grabs my shoulder; and I sit up to find Ross walking me up". (56-57)

As she describes:

Although I do not understand why I am in the psychiatric unit of a hospital or why I am in a hospital at all, my life has fallen into a routine. Ross keeps saying he believes I am Okay, but that the doctors say I am schizophrenic. 'Schizophrenic' I have heard the word before but cannot remember what it means, but I know it means something really bad. (98)

Believing she is schizophrenic, she is taken to a psychiatric hospital. Betty though struggles to make others believe she is not mad, but her traumatic

behaviors make people think otherwise. Her life becomes a living hell because of her traumatized experience from several sexual cases of abuse. Her desire and shame cause her to hide her past creating a mental void that made it difficult for others to easily comprehend her constant screaming and ways of reasoning.

Beckham and Beckham's 'Coping with Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' asserts that PTSD affects every aspect of a person's life. Emotionally, it can create feelings of anxiety, guilt, loss of self-esteem, helplessness, guilt, loss of trust and irritability (4). Among the effects of the traumatized experience faced by Betty is her lack of trust in men. Her rape experiences make her lack trust in men and sexual relationships.

I try to change the subject by talking about men. I do not trust men; they are rapists, liars and they are mean.... I don't think Ross is a bad person but I don't trust him". (106)

This is a result of the trauma from the several rapes by her father, her cousin, Paul and their driver Kola. This is seen in her relationship with her husband Ross. As she says "I dated Ross for two years before I let him touch me," (62) This long wait by Betty portrays her lack of trust in men and her disdain for sex.

Her fear and lack of trust for men are later seen in her conversation with Dr. Pathy at the hospital.

'Do you enjoy sex?' She asks.

'No'

'Have you ever enjoyed sex?'

'Never'

'Why not?'

'For me, it represents a dirty disgusting activity'.

'So do you have sex with your husband?'

'Yes ... and I still feel dirty but it is something I do just because Ross is a good man.'

She makes a very long note before asking, 'So why did you get married?'

'I don't know', I concede dejectedly, because even I do not know the reason I got married.

This confession by Betty shows her view of sex and marriage. Her sexual assault experiences have created a debased view of sex. The trauma from sexual experiences no longer makes sex and relationship appealing to her. She sees sex with Ross her husband as just a responsibility she must fulfill but not to be enjoyed.

Furthermore, Betty's self-imposed barrenness is a result of her irrational fear of how the child, either boy or girl will turn out borne out of the trauma from

the sexual rape incidents. Though in the story, she is pregnant on two occasions, one for her father during the constant periods of rape and the other for her boyfriend Ross before they are married. They were aborted; her father craftily engineered her first abortion, while she aborts the second.

While discussing with Dr. Pathy, Betty blurts out her decision not to have children. Dr pathy ask her "do you think you got married just to have children? But Betty replies 'I don't want children'.

I am afraid of having children because I do not want a daughter people will molest and rape and abuse. I do not want a son that will inherit my father's trait and molest, rape and abuse little girls and eventually my daughter. I do not want to be a weak, negligible mother like my mother and turn the other way when my kids are molested and abused. (107-108).

This highlights the traumatic situation and the prolonged effects on Betty. She ended up choosing not to give birth because of the traumatized fear of what will happen to her child if she gives birth.

The several traumatic experiences faced by Betty the protagonist led to self – effacement. By this, Betty loses her inner pride, joy and lives with feelings of guilt. Her condition left her feeling worthless. In the story, Betty lives a double life to redeem herself from the self-effacement she feels inside. As a radio presenter, she tries to act as a strong woman who solves the problem of others; yet in reality, she tries to hide her feeling of worthlessness. She admits thus: My job as an on-air radio personality is a false representation of who I truly am or how I truly feel about myself. On the radio I am a cherry, happy, confident girl who lives in a happy world, has her life together, and carries around a life toolbox, fixing people's problems by proffering advice that works. In reality, I am a damaged young woman, dented, and bent out of shape by an abusive childhood (55)

This feeling is a built-up of her ordeal which encompasses several incidents of rape. She would look at herself in her bathroom and cry, viewing it as her only fortress through the years. (57) This is caused by the shame of memories of rapes. This shame results in her self-effacement. It is not only an after effect of the harm done to her but also the lies she has been told about herself that haunts her. Her father made her believe she is at fault and she carries the guilt that men are attracted to her because of her doings.

My young, tender heart carried the guilt of mother's going away because of all the things daddy said and did to me, the worst was that before he laid down on

me or places me on his legs, he always told me I was a terrible child and said I was the reason he always drank so much. He warned me never to tell anyone what happened whenever he put me on his bed, and threatened to take Bene and Oke away to England, and send me to the village if I ever told anyone. He reminded me that I would never see them, mother, grandma, or grandpa ever again. I because so sure it was my fault mother kept going away. It devastated me to know that whatever I did to make daddy drink so much was the same thing that made mother never to hold or kiss me. I concluded that must be the reason she was punishing me by not coming back for my Birthday". (58)

Betty maintains this low self-esteem, she felt she was the problem and this thinking not only traumatized her but created a self-effacing attitude in her.

It was finally officially clear to me that there was something wrong with me, something that made men rape me all the time, men like daddy that should love and care about me, boys like Paul that should protect me like male cousins should protect their little girl cousins, men like Kola a driver that all he should have been to me was kind and now Mr. Yode who though I did not even take his class, found a way to me, and try to defile me (83)

This constant guilt brought the feeling of worthlessness to Betty and she becomes self-effaced among others. As she relates:

Kola was worse than daddy and Paul, he put his hand in my dress every opportunity he got. I hated weekends, public holidays, midterm breaks and school holidays because of him. The only time he was not mounting me, or groping my body, were times I was in school". (68)

Betty exhibits Bhuptani & Messman-Moore (2019) findings of sexually traumatized victims of rape which includes heightened shame and behavioural self-blame as she said, "I hated myself and was sure I deserved everything that was happening to me. I wanted to talk to someone but there was nobody to talk to. I was afraid I would be blamed, beaten and laughed at". Her self-effacing attitude affected not only her relationship with others but even her daily life routine.

Although I was happier at school, I could not shake off the fear of daddy coming for another weekend. I tried not to think about it, but it stayed at the back of my mind, and each time the fear overtook me. I went blank during exams, forget my lines during drama presentations, choked on my food, or woke up from my sleep screaming. Kodi knew something was

wrong with me but I was too scared and too ashamed to tell her the truth. (79)

In her adult age, Betty continues to feel self-effaced, she spends more time at work, even happy to cover people's shift in other to hide her pain. As she mentions "I am a pretentious woman, totally damaged by people too close and carrying secrets too dark and immense for even her to bear." Thus while she lives as a hardworking married woman she feels downhearted and carries the feeling of self worthlessness. She sums up her ordeal to Dr. Pathy:

*I am the one living with the guilt of deceiving and hurting a man who has been nothing but loving, kind and generous to me. I am the one who will go through loneliness and childlessness, not because I am barren but because the first child I carried in my womb was seeded by my father, its grandfather.* (108)

## 7. Conclusion

Betty's traumatic experiences are centered on the objectification of her body from a very young age. Betty's father, daddy's cousin, Paul, their driver, Kola and the Biology teacher saw her as an object of sexual gratification. These experiences affect her as she experiences series of nightmares, mental breakdown leading to hospitalization and eventual diagnosis of schizophrenia, helplessness and her determination not to give birth as well as lack of trust and self-effacement are consistent with the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress. The eventual disclosure and her determination to share her traumatic experiences with her husband initiate the healing process from her PTSD. It is thus deducible that female objectification is a source of great trauma often leading to PTSD in victims.

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