



## THE METAPHOR OF PAIN IN CHRIS ABANI'S *BECOMING ABIGAIL*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article critically analyses the dynamic levels at which metaphor, as the preferred trope through which pain is conceived and expressed, is signified in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*. It interrogates the creative representation of pain as a psychological and physical motif using Trauma and post colonialism as its theoretical anchor. The adoption of metaphor, therefore, creates a therapeutic space that exists beyond linguistic constraints, having the individual wield a certain form of linguistic liberty and privilege. It is this privilege and liberty that the writer experiments with in his portrayal of the pain that characters feel in the creative universe of the novel that we engage in this paper. We conclude that the characters in Abani's novel are true embodiments of pain, who scale the hurdles and challenges posed by villain and the society at large to become assertive personalities against denials and effacement.

**Key words:** Trauma, Pain, Metaphor, Characterization, Psychological

### **Introduction**

Pain is a basic human experience. It could be a highly subjective and complex experience that is very difficult, if not impossible, to express in verbal language, "especially in a situation where the pain is both chronic and at least partly neuropathic" (Semino 2). The elusiveness of expressing pain is what makes pain a personal experience. Pain takes away a person's agency, language and sense of anything except his body in pain (Nuckolls 7). The crudeness left behind is such that cannot be relayed which translates into expressions that we label as melancholic. As a result of "the inarticulate nature of a person in pain, others cannot 'recognize and understand their feelings even when told' (Nuckolls 7). Expressing pain is, therefore, not relatable. For this reason of non-communicability, it is difficult to understand and interpret pain which is why there could be obscure and unconvincing. From this doubt comes alienation which pain brings with it. Evident from assertion is the summation that pain does not have a referential content as its non-relatable and non-transferable conditions makes it resist objectification.

On the conceptual definition of pain, the International Association for the Study of Pain defines pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual and potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage". makes an argument in this light when she the key items here are "sensory" and "emotional", as pain could be physical and psychological. Although pain is partly a biological phenomenon, our concern in this article is with its psycho-linguistic and social import, as expressed in Abani's novel. Lewis does a two way analysis of pain is portrayed in two senses; 1) "being a particular kind of sensation, probably conveyed by specialized nerve fibres, and recognisable by the patient as that kind of sensation whether he dislikes it or not" and in the second sense; 2) "any experience, whether



physical or mental, which the patient dislikes” which is likened to suffering, anguish, tribulation, adversity or trouble (78). Even the sadomasochist consciousness of pain which is inflicted in sexual experience, Lewis spells that “the aspect of capture and domination to a point [where] only ill-treatment of the beloved will satisfy the perverted’ is the underlying reason for pleasure. From the master to the beloved comes the idea of “I am so much master that I even torment you” while the latter’s expression is formed from the thoughts that “I am so enthralled that I welcome even pains at your hands” (79).

On the linguistic description of pain, Schott draws some parallel between pain and analogy. In Schott’s view, attempts to truly describe pain appear as difficult as they are frustrating, yet the need to communicate pain is overwhelmingly great, and he proffers: “I suggest that the only option [which could suffice] is the resort to analogy... whether by means of metaphor or simile.”(210). Semino follows that analogy within the domains which Schott is making reference to are metonymy, metaphor and simile, and further explains that where metonymy deals with cause and effects, metaphors and simile deal with comparisons (3).

All kinds of pain, as Semino holds, tend to be associated with affective response. It is the affective response that parties share when an empathizer attempts to comprehend the pain felt by another and tries to relate to it. Citing Gallese et al (2004), Semino believes that the relatively basic form of empathy which is mediated by embodied simulation is an important phenomenon in response to the other’s pain which is termed *experiential* as opposed to *conceptual*. People therefore comprehend pain by relying on metaphors which are recreations of “imaginative simulations of their bodies in actions that mimic the events” alluded to by the metaphors (10). Since the language of pain is non-relatable, Abani creatively captures pains through metaphors and symbols. His reveals pain both as it affects the anguished and the malefactor and how it is etched on the consciousness of the wounded. These metaphors are reflected through;

1. An intensification of feelings associated with certain objects that represents the inner feeling in through external representation.
2. The interaction and relationships between characters.
3. The most minute reaction to abuse, hurt and agony by the hurt.

The defining characteristics of metaphors can be gleaned from the classical works of Aristotle where he defined metaphors as “the application of a strange term, either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy” (57b, 21). To him, the transfer of referent characteristics to a referred item was the major artistry behind its exclusiveness. The transfer of idealism from an unknown general domain to a well-known one marks the uniqueness of metaphors. On the attributes of metaphors, A. I. Richards asserts that metaphors contain two functional elements, a topic and a vehicle. The topic is the object or the phenomenon being described, whereas the vehicle is some other object or phenomenon that conveys certain meanings about the topic (Ottati et al, 688).

Pradis believes that metaphors can be consistent and conflictual. While some coincide with the meanings of words and expressions, others coincide with textual interpretations of complex expressions; and while some could stem from inconsistent meanings, others could arise from consistent ones (306). Stewart believes that metaphors create a therapeutic space



that exists beyond linguistic constraints. Following the formation of this space, more flexible patterns of behaviours can surface (27). Like pain, metaphors are dependent upon context and perception and the ambiguity that comes with them may be an opportunity for realizing new meanings. Stewart asserts that, “if we can accept that metaphor, when appropriately constructed, can make sense of the world” and influence appreciations of meanings, “we must also examine their socio-cultural implications for pain reconceptualisation” (28). Stewart’s emphasis on the interpretation of pain is wrapped around society and cultural implications. This summation is dependent on the notion that the reactions (both physical and psychological) that come from pain are open to social conditions. The society determines the conception and the interpretation of pain, according to Stewart.

Miall and Vondruska believe that inasmuch as both metaphors and similes are analogic in nature, since they are comparison tools, one of the variables associated with metaphor is its affective response. This leads them to the hypothesis that metaphors possess a greater power to unsettle a subject’s view of [a] topic ... [such that it] could be accompanied by a higher incidence of affective responses” (2). This therefore means that inferences could be generated from meanings of proposed metaphoric structures because that levity is given to the interpreter to interpret and respond to the metaphor as he deems fit. In application, the reader of a text could actually be lost in the world of the author’s comparisons and analogies or could create a new interpretation for themselves as implied from the text.

Abani’s metaphors are both physical and abstract, creating empathy in the minds of the readers. Through trepid physical representation, we are introduced to a world that is ripe with humiliating realities, gruesome conflagrations and demeaning perversions meted on our persons (since we are empathic to the characters’ suffering). The gloomy dark clouds do not simply signal rain in this stead by connotes and evokes petrification, horror and uncertainty. The lowering of a coffin amidst silent tears and elegies does not just signal death but further reveals the agony the departed has left in its trails. The lowering and the pouring of the soil on the wooden-framed coffin is not treated as an act in a burial rite anymore but as a farewell to a only source of joy/happiness the mourner has ever had; it is the relinquishing of hope, joy and mirth back to the earth from which creation, life and existence have come from.

### **Theoretical Concerns: Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Studies**

Trauma can be described as a wound to the psyche: a profound moment of physical and/or emotional distress that destroys, alters or transforms the mechanism of cognition, memory and communication (Finnegan 2). The root of trauma theory lies in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis which explores the mind in relation to the physical realities and factors within and beyond human control. Cathy Caruth’s exploration of the trauma theory follows from Sigmund Freud’s mind wound as reflected in the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) where he wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny ways in which catastrophic events replay themselves for those who have passed through them (Caruth 1). Freud upholds the idea that these are mostly not initiated by the individuals but are built from an uncontrolled pattern of established thought flow which is outside the wish and control of the individuals.

The phenomenon of trauma is an interdisciplinary concept. This is because it affects the mind, the body and on a larger scale, a third party. Deriving from the above, Cathy Caruth,



Bessel Van der Kolk, Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman and Dominick LaCapra have developed their ideas of trauma studies from history, memory and witnessing (Shuga 12). These factors are the background from which reliving, recasting and reestablishing of feelings and the reawakening of the mind wounds are accomplished.

According to Caruth,

In its most general definition, trauma can be described as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response of the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomenon (11).

Worthy of note in the above definition are expressions like ‘overwhelming’ and ‘intrusive phenomenon’, implying that trauma is so uncontrollable and overpowering that its victims generate a new set of behaviours and responses, some of which are not associated with their early non-traumatised persona. Trauma acts on response created by remembrance, going by Caruth’s description. And, also, these responses may be repetitive and oppressive. Traumatised individuals may adopt several approaches of assertiveness such as invisibility, violence, paranoia and dependency.

In Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* (2006), which is the thrust of this paper for example, trauma invariably describes Abigail’s state of mind from the period of her mother’s death to her father’s withdrawal from her on the claim that she caused the death of his beloved wife. In the face of the physical abuses by her assumed uncle, Peter, Abigail hides herself in the space of invisibility which she had created to conceal the maltreatment meted against her.

Postcolonial studies draws breathe from the critical examination of cultural and developmental narratives as accounted by non-natives about the civilization and coming-of-age of a society. As a conscious form of deconstruction, Postcolonial critics believe that the cultural material of a society can be well fashioned and articulated by the well-guided and guarded thoughts of a native of such culture and society. Helen Tiffin tells us that there is actually a conscious attempt by the natives to create or recreate an independent local identity which has birthed the consciousness ascribed to deconstruction. This concern is what Tiffin describes as the ongoing dialogue between European and British discourses and their postcolonial dismantling (95). Creating a new identity, Tiffin continues, is only possible when the historical implications have been assessed and attained. Therefore, it is essential that new literary discourses about a native be written by themselves, not by imperialists whose coming is time-conditioned and situationally inspired. The socio-historical product, therefore, is in the best position to consider or analyze his (the native’s) history and personality. This deconstructive consciousness when transposed into literature births post-colonial discourse.

Robert J. C. Young builds the notion of post colonialism from the politico-economic perspective, considering class, ethnic, racial and bourgeois dominance. The domination on these parameters had to be met with an antagonism that sought to expel them. This is why the conception that postcolonialism is ‘contestatory and committed towards the political ideals of a transnational social justice’ is defensible (Inyabri 71). The struggle towards self-assertiveness births postcolonial studies. This confirms Homi Bhabha’s position when he asserts that postcolonialism emerges from the discourses of miniatures (245).

These deconstructive dictates of postcolonialism are not removed from the overall reflection of pain which is different from the comparative description of pain as a stereotypic



indescribable phenomenon. The Nigerian novelist under consideration, Chris Abani in *Becoming Abigail*, creates a new personality off pain, such that it can live in the everyday activities of characters and find a voice in their unspoken interactions with other personae. Pain is not that intangible internal feeling anymore. It is the cloud that follows the traumatised character everywhere, threatening to give itself a voice if not recognized, quieting antagonizing voices and asserting the psyche of the wounded individual. Trauma and the tangibility of pain are described by Abani as Cauterization (36).

### ***Becoming Abigail* and its Thematic Concerns**

The thematic considerations that Abani's *Becoming Abigail* has raised in the literary scene border around sexual trafficking and psychological impact of forced sexual labour. Several critics, exploring the social implication of sexual trafficking of the African woman have interrogated the effect of this insane practice on both the women and the continent at large. One of such critics is Susan Hall (2014) who interrogates the social identity and representation that human trafficking as a social vice is explored by Abani. Considering the feminist position on trafficking, Hall positions Abani's exposition as it answers and stages a protest against it. Tagged a social evangelist, Abani is revealed to have created a solid narrative that depicts the horrendous activities of sexual trafficking and the traumatic experience the victim have to undergo like in the case of Abigail.

Exhuming the buried trauma of the victims of sexual trafficking to raise an empathetic connection with audience and initiate a conscious protest against the barbaric act, Pamela McCallum's (2015) analysis of *Becoming Abigail* considers the artistry of Abani in recreating realistic images of sex trafficking. Revealing and juxtaposing the economic gains that the malefactor enjoys with the pains that the victim endures, McCallum demurs the condition that the victims suffer for the benefit of the culprit. Judith Butler's reflections on 'Precarious life' is McCallum's inspiration.

Examining the interpretations of the female African body in sexual trafficking and prostitution, Cedric Courtois (2019) interrogates how the negative portrayal of African female body has been normalised by years of sexual exploitation and abuse. The identity of the African woman in the Diaspora has been attributed to a mere object of sexual gratification occasioned by the representations as a commercial sex worker. Courtois summarises that the representation placed on travelling bodies of African women has been of exploitation and abuse as reveal through the characters of Abigail in Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and the female characters in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*.

Exploring sexual exploitation and its nefarious implications on a global scale, Bernard Oniwe (2017) questions 'the connections between neoliberal globalisation and the transnational migration of African women to countries of global north to supply its sex economy' (20). The import of globalisation and its impact on the third world nation is the aim of Oniwe's examination using Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*. Investigating the underlying factors that have led to the growth in the number of trafficked sex workers from Africa to developed nations, Oniwe highlights poverty, poor economic prospects in home countries of the exploited and the rise in the notion of shared humanity as the most compelling factors.



On the psychological plain, Asika and Ifechelobi (2015) explore the mind of Abani's characters in the lines of the Freudian Id, Ego and Superego. Investigatively, they examined and demonstrated how the author has been able to fully explore the intricacies of the human mind in his character revelation; as the characters are made to be full embodiments of their environment, realities and experiences. The complexities that lie in being a conscious human and the interaction that follows (both personal and environmental) are the totality of what makes the mind unique. Abani's ingenuity is revealed as he creates well developed characters through the instrumentality of dialogue, individuals who are masks of the ideal human society, representing reality as in the actions and inactions (Okpiliya, 203). Asika and Ifechelobi reveal how the mind is formed from environment as they note that a deeper inquire into Abigail's character reveal that she was not born different from every other normal child (52).

However, this article presents a new dimension in the analysis of Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* as it explores the artistic representation of pain which is a difficult feeling to project. The consideration here will center on the creative manipulation of symbols, occasion and character description; and how characters have been able to portray their feelings to other characters as well as the readers.

### **Pain and its Metaphors in *Becoming Abigail***

Chris Abani finds a way of breaking the silence of those in pain through the manipulation of physical material rather than expressions. Ashipu and Okpiliya conclude that it is language that plays this fundamental role in conveying the intended message(s) of the writer...his ability to convey his intentions depend on his choice of words (81). The actions, inactions and the physical interactions of his characters reveal the emotional and psychological trauma they have to undergo without necessarily voicing their innate thoughts and mindsets. Merging the atmosphere with abstract and concrete representations, Abani situates the conflicting thoughts and silent grappling his characters have to undergo in the workings around these characters to reveal torture, torments and trepidation. Abani's characters are caught in the web of either putting up with pain and shutting themselves out or voicing their pains and revolting against their malefactors.

The first lines of Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* paint a picture of despair, uncertainty and loss of self. The gory picture painted, in a way, spells the physiological situation which the item called pain has etched on the consciousness of Abigail. One is introduced to an atmosphere of mourning and gloominess where joy and gladness had once dwelled but which is now wrapped in forlornness and hopelessness. Abigail, the protagonist, is a true reflection of pain and the anguish she suffers are clear masks, trailing and seriating down her back and torso, as relics of the unfairness which the world has dealt her. Born into a family where love has long died off like the burnt-out flames of a winter chimney, Abigail suffers the fate of rejection and hopelessness. Her mother, as she remembers, is a faint picture of a coffin, which had been carried amidst tears. The metaphor of a wooden coffin sinking into the earth is the livid metaphor Abani created of her mother, a fleeting imagination which is sunk deep into an insignificant fraction of the crude earth which she strides on. The significance of the sinking coffin is relative to her joyfulness being let into the deep black abyss. Buried with the coffin (within which lay the remains of her mother) was her mirth – lost with the dingy memories which become of the woman who had given her life. She never feels the tender touch of her mother, nor has she cuddled in the arms of a motherly embrace. The nipples of true tenderness



never touched her tenuous lips. That was the cruel painful reality Abigail was born into. Her father, too, was a walking representation of the pains that shaped her life as she sees him as a tall whip of blackness looming on a black night. The pain her father carried was such that she could see; it was not abstract, it was physical, tangible, and realistic. He drank when he was sad. Abani says, “He was always sad- as the word, sad seemed inadequate to describe her father” (20). Her father was constantly so lost in his pains that he always saw in Abigail- her mother, the one he loved wholeheartedly. Pain as described here is in a memory, which cannot go and yet cannot stay, depicting the lasting emotional anguish attributive of trauma Caruth defines, where the traumatized is absent, yet present. Abani describes one of his constant reveries thus: “But here, in the living room... Her father was in the middle of the room swaying along to ‘The Girl from Ipanema,’ clutching a photograph of Abigail to his chest” (21). Drunkenness had become the escape path he followed till his eventual demise.

Abigail feels the pains on three levels. Firstly, there is the pain of having to care for a psychologically decapitated man who had not and will not get over a lost loved one. On the second level is the pain over losing a mother whom she did not come to the world to see. The third level is the pain of never being loved and always being regarded as a liability – an entity. She understands her father’s obsession. The picture she is given suggests a striking resemblance to her mother, that her father in many cases wishes she were the latter. Whenever he looked at her in his drunken state, he saw the dead Abigail – her mother. There was always a glimpse of hope even in his drunken stupor that fate could jeer him up from his dreams where he would wake up to his Abigail. On one of those nights where he drinks himself to stupor and she had to tend to his needs, the novel reveals:

He turned and looked at her and she saw it and recognized what it was. She looked so much like her mother that when he saw her suddenly, she knew he wanted her to be Abigail. Now she realized that there was also something else; a patience, a longing (22).

Although her mother had died during child birth, Abigail still had to grieve, a passive grief because her father mourned all his days. He often stayed away and observed her when she did. It was always strange to him “to watch his child who looked so much like his wife, grieve. As though she was a young version of his wife; grieving her own death in advance” (38). He never interfered when she grieved as she never did during his as well. Father and child knew the pains they both felt that they had to keep out of each other’s feelings.

The pain, both physical and psychological, Abigail contends with makes her life into three stages. Firstly, we are introduced to the Abigail who sees life from the despair her father suffers as she simply lends support to him and feels a second-hand effect of pain. As a child and teenager, she understands pain and despair as her father plays it out. Her first fear of psychological despair comes from the inability to fill the void created by her mother’s demise. She seeks to know who Abigail, her mother, was that she hunts for stories about her, trades chores and parts with gifts and money just to be informed. All through her life, she has a craving to be known as herself, this Abigail, but her father who had been her only family knew not this Abigail but the other one – the dead one. This pain deals her such a psychological blow that the desire to be noticed for herself clouds her mind. On a particular occasion, she dyes her hair a bright purple and wears a thick coat of makeup, painting a picture which she feels could have made her father notice her, if not angelic at least alarming and also with the aim of putting him



out of despair and detachment. She approaches him and sits with him. After this, she asks for an audience with him, which he grants but what he sees becomes a tool of comparison. He turns her away, clearly stating how different she is from “the good Abigail” who to him was cultured, knew how to conduct herself and was never intrusive. These further dents her self-esteem as she cuts her hair and desecrates her mother’s marriage dishes with several items to show defiance. She needed him – her father, her guardian for a friend and confidence but she finds a dull dead wall of despair and agony, a father who has been reduced to a state absent mindedness, lethargy, languor and comatose. It is evident that silence becomes the tool with which the father expressed pain. Just like Nuckells posits, “Pain reinforces silence and the lack of expression allows pain go unnoticed” (5). The silence that is wrapped around the home after the demise of the mother, Abigail, speaks volume of the pain that both father and daughter are going through.

Part of her ritual to show her rage, pain and deliriousness was decapitating her dolls and conducting a burial for them, shooting some birds off the skies with collected stones from Abigail’s grave. Her delusion and psychological pains transcend the physical so that she seemingly became metaphysical. She performed a ritual of dressing these dead birds with the cotton from Abigail’s wedding dress and in another occasion, cuts up the dead Abigail’s pictures and chews them up. Her father knows that her delusions needed to be arrested and takes her to a psychologist who does nothing but for a witch who performs some fetish acts proposed to arrest her spirits.

Another level of pain Abigail grapples with is hurt and defilement melted against her by the men she comes in contact with. The physical and sexual abuse by those who are supposed to provide succour for her changes her totally as she becomes passive to the world and sunken into herself. She had been ten years old when she had her first taste of defilement. Edwin, her fifteen years old cousin, had defiled her and threatened to kill her if she told on him. Then, come Peter, who first touched her tenderly during her cousin’s wedding. Then, he had kissed her, while his fingers explored her. Peter visits again, promising her father a life of bliss for her as he takes her to London. The night of her arrival had revealed who Peter was – a beast in human flesh. She had seen him deal his wife a beating and she had been Mary’s comforter that night, asking why she had not retaliated. Unknown to her, her fate is sealed to be like Mary’s. Things fall apart when Peter brings his first client to lay with her. Abigail had bitten the man, drawing blood as the latter ran off in anger. Peter let out the *fury of a thousand hungry leopards* on her as he handcuffs her and leads her to the dog house which would be her home. He quips, “You want to bite like a dog? I’ll treat you like a dog” (91).

He handcuffs her to the chain in the dog house and spits and urinates all over her. She is reduced to the life of a dog, drinking from the plate of rancid water, feeding off leftovers and crouching over on her knees with hands fastened behind her. Mary tells Abigail of how their only child had died as a result of Peter’s beatings simply because she was not a boy. The incident had been caused by Peter throwing her down off the stairs as she landed on the child accidentally. Abigail succumbs to Peter’s whims as “she no longer fought Peter when he mounted her” (96). She becomes a dog, lost in the world of pains, of torment – controlled by her master, Peter. But also, stretched to her limits, she is no longer afraid nor remorseful. Here, Abani introduces us to a transformed Abigail, who has crossed the damaging level of pain and has embraced self actualization and sufficiency. It is this Abigail that bites off the phallus of Peter and runs into



the streets of London with her prize in her hand. Upon being released by Mary, she runs into the world where she has now come to the understanding that pain is part of what makes one human.

The third level of pain Abigail grapples with is the loss of the only one whom she believes ever loved her – Derek. Before the coming of Derek into her life, she had been treated as an object, a completely dreary item, unnoticed and worthy of neglect. She had been invisible to the several men who had had sexual dealings with her. Abani describes her relationships thus:

But they gave nothing, these men. They were experts at hiding themselves, the details of their lives. Even when they walked hand in hand with her in public, it was never the luxuriating of one person in the presence of an equal. No. they led her... they never undressed with her, or for her. There was always a furtive shame to their nudity, and a need to be done quickly, to hide it, theirs and hers, behind clothes again... And though there had only been a few men, sometimes she felt like there had been a whole horde (29).

With Derek, she feels the warmth of a lover, a desire she is always consummated with. Owing to this, the pains she feels when Derek is being ushered away after the court pronouncement surpassed the pains she had ever felt – that pain that makes her deal the social worker who tries to bad-talk Derek in a bid to console her a blow. She could never forget him and her experiences with him. Abani shows us a glimpse of the bliss that followed every episode of sexual intimacy she and Derek had:

She smiled in the dark and pulled him close. They stood there a while. Then she unbuttoned his shirt and hers. Her breast, her nipples hard, pressed into his softer chest. This feeling wasn't the familiarity she had expected. Instead, she felt passion enveloping her, and she gave into the safety, the warmth, looking up into his eyes, eyes blue as the sea she had never seen except on television... This was love? (53 – 54).

After Derek's departure, her life becomes vague, empty, and incomplete. Derek's love had helped quell the psychological pains that she had as she marks herself during an after-sex episode with him. She uses a needle (Derek's wife's) and brands herself, with points which she painstakingly endures, enjoying her art and solidifying her desires for him on her skin. Derek, carried away by her show of emotion, pulls her into an embrace and cries. Inasmuch as this was painful, she bore the pains with love and desires. This goes to assert that the greater pain which Abigail felt all through the novel was not physical but psychological. This is evident in the fact that she endures body marking which are excruciating in order to keep pleasurable memories intact. She forgoes physical pains for the mental ones. She scars herself with burns from cigarettes just to ensure that she never forgets Derek. She inscribes DSHND on her skin, an acronym from Derek's favourite quote from a Dylan Thomas' poem; *Death shall have no dominion*. Abani describes her burns:

The burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even. Before she began burning herself, she collected anecdotes about her mother and wrote them down in red ink on bits of which she stuck on her skin, wearing them under her clothes all day... But at night, in the shower, the paper would dissolve like a snow lie, the red ink, warm



from the hot water, leaking into the drain like bloody tears. That was when she discovered the permanence of fire (36).

Like her father, Abigail returns to an abstraction to conceal her fears – two items: old maps and Emperor Su Wu’s poetry. Her attraction to maps is because of the quality of their silence. The silence is such that describes the silence between her and her father, the empty spaces that cloud their conversations and the understanding/apprehension that shelters each stare. Emperor Su Wu’s poetry always had a way of interpreting her situations and soothing her hunger for a voice to talk with. Worthy of mention are a couple of lines she reads to remember her experiences with Derek, rendered thus,

Think of the days  
When we were happy together  
If I live I will come back  
If I die, remember me always (43).

When she had to go to London to stay with Peter, she had her fears and worries over the uncertainties of her tomorrow. Emperor Su Wu’s lines again consoled her:

To what can our lives on earth be likened  
To a flock of geese  
Alighting on the snow  
Sometimes leaving the traces of their passage (77).

It is therefore worthy to say that Abani makes a safe haven which may be material/tangible or abstract/metaphysical for his characters. To Abigail’s father, alcohol and melancholic music were his refuge while Abigail makes old maps and poetry her sanctuary.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been concerned with the portrayal of pain as felt by characters in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, and how the writer has used the troupe of metaphor to recast the experiences reflecting these pains. The characters in the novel are confronted with the challenges of speaking, sharing or showing their experiences, especially the protagonist, Abigail, and her father. Their actions are portrayals of their resourcefulness to fully accept or negate the experiences which, to them, make them difficult to be understood by other characters. The traumatic experiences of the characters and the pains associated with them have been able to create a new personality which is receptive, withdrawn and paranoid.

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