DISRUPTED CHILDHOOD: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE PARENTIFICATION OF ELDEST DAUGHTERS IN THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU

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Abstract

Research Problem
Earlier critical readings of Neshani Andreas' The Purple Violet of Oshaantu have foregrounded it as a narrative of domestic violence, women's oppression, and agency, overlooking its significance as a story of disrupted childhood. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the novel as a depiction of the psychosocial burdens placed on eldest daughters within violent domestic environments and how such conditions launch them into premature adulthood.
Methodology/ Theory
To achieve this aim, the paper employs qualitative close reading, drawing on Family Systems Theory, Parentification Studies, concept of Eldest Daughter Syndrome, and Psychoanalytic Trauma Criticism to examine the impact of Kauna and Shange's violent marital relationship on their eleven-year-old daughter, Kandiwapa.
Results
The analysis reveals that domestic violence extends beyond the conjugal pair to restructure the family system, positioning Kandiwapa as witness and participant in her parents' crisis. It reflects her transformation into a surrogate caregiver through physical and emotional parentification, evident in her treatment of her mother's injuries, care for siblings, and role as family spokesperson. The paper further demonstrates her persistent fear, crying, and hypervigilance as psychological effects of sustained exposure to violence, while the concentration of caregiving responsibilities on her underscores the gendered organisation of domestic labour.
Conclusion
The paper concludes that by foregrounding disrupted childhood through gendered parentification, the novel extends the critique of the dangers of domestic violence beyond battered wives to eldest daughters.
Recommendation
It recommends that more critical and interdisciplinary attention be

devoted to children's experiences and the gendered dynamics of caregiving in both literary and domestic violence research.

Introduction

Domestic Violence (DV) is a major global public-health concern and its effects extend far beyond the adult couple involved. Recent research consistently shows that children exposed to DV face heightened risks of fear, trauma symptoms, internalising distress, behavioural difficulties, insecure attachment, and broader psychosocial maladjustment (Bamidele-Nelly & Sotunsa, 2024; Carter et al., 2020; Doroudchi et al., 2023; Noonan & Pilkington, 2020; van Eldik et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2024). These studies make one point clear: children exposed to DV are not mere onlookers but unwilling witnesses whose behaviours, expectations and feelings are altered within the family itself.

Set in rural northern Namibia, Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) has become an important text in discussions of DV, gender, patriarchy, and post-independence Namibian prose in African literary scholarship. The novel has been situated within postcolonial English-language writing from Namibia and has drawn attention to its unique linguistic texture, representation of women's oppression and resistance (Alexander, 2022; Arich-Gerz, 2010; Onyemachi, 2019; Perpetua, 2019). Nonetheless, there is more to the novel than its depiction of these themes. It also portrays how oppressive marital structures shape the lives of children trapped in them. While previous critiques on the novel provide valuable insights, they leave the lived experiences of the victimised child characters less theorised. This oversight draws keen attention because the novel repeatedly shows that DV does not end with the battered wife's afflicted body and emotions but that it extends into the eldest daughter's emotions, expectations, responsibilities and overall well-being.

To address this gap, this paper undertakes a close reading of *The Purple Violet of Oshaatu* (*TPVO*), deploying insights from Family Systems Theory, Parentification Studies, the Concept of Eldest Daughter Syndrome, and Psychoanalytic Trauma Criticism as analytical frameworks. The paper argues that these frameworks reveal four connected dynamics in the novel: the extension of DV from the immediate couple to the wider family; the conversion of the eldest daughter into an emotional and practical surrogate parent; the transformation of fear into vigilance and defensive maturity; and the gendered concentration of care labour in the eldest daughter. In this sense, *TPVO* is not only a story about DV but also a narrative about the parentification of eldest daughters.

Research Problem

This study addresses a critical oversight in existing readings of Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, which have predominantly focused on domestic violence as a gendered issue mostly affecting women while overlooking its developmental and psychosocial consequences for children.

While extant scholarship has richly examined patriarchy, female suffering, resistance, and linguistic strategies in the novel (Arich-Gerz, 2010; Perpetua, 2019; Onyemachi, 2019; Alexander, 2022), it has not sufficiently analysed how domestic violence restructures childhood within the family system. Specifically, the figure of the eldest daughter remains under-

examined despite the novel's sustained attention to her emotional labour, caregiving responsibilities, and psychological transformation as a result of her parents' violent marital relationship.

Accordingly, this paper intervenes by reading the novel through the lenses of Family Systems Theory, Parentification Studies, Eldest Daughter Syndrome, and Psychoanalytic Trauma Criticism to uncover how DV results in a disrupted childhood typified by forced caregiving, emotional vigilance, and gendered responsibility.

Aim and Objectives

The general aim of this paper is to examine how Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* represents domestic violence as a problem that upsets childhood through the parentification of the eldest daughter. The specific obectives are to:

i. analyse how domestic violence extends beyond the conjugal pair to influence the emotional and relational dynamics of the wider family system in the novel;

ii. examine the disruption of the eldest daughter's childhood through processes of physical and emotional parentification in the novel;

iii. critique the psychological impact of sustained exposure to domestic violence on the eldest daughter in the novel; and

iv. analyse the gendered organisation of adult responsibilities on the eldest daughter as illustrated in the novel.

Literature Review

Situating the Study: Domestic Violence, Parentification and the Eldest Daughter

Existing scholarship on *TPVO* provides an important foundation for this paper's argument. Arich-Gerz (2010) situates the novel within the broader field of postcolonial English-language prose from and about Namibia, thereby establishing its significance within Namibian literary history. Perpetua (2019) reads the text through feminist consciousness and resistance to patriarchy, showing how Andreas foregrounds women's suffering and survival within oppressive marital and cultural structures. In a related way, Onyemachi (2019) draws attention to silence as an expressive mode in the novel, suggesting that muted female experience is itself a powerful register of pain, oppression, and damaged subjectivity. Alexander (2022) demonstrates how Andreas' multilingual and translanguaging strategies perform important cultural and stylistic work in the text. Taken together, these studies show that the novel is deeply concerned with patriarchy, female suffering, resistance, language, and subjectivity.

Parentification research provides the next key lens. Parentification theory, initially propounded by Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973) and later expanded by Chase (1999), Byng-Hall (2002), and Hooper (2007), describes a dysfunctional family pattern in which children take on roles and responsibilities typically reserved for adults, effectively reversing the expected parent–child hierarchy. It further highlights that this may appear in instrumental forms, such as managing household chores or emotional forms, where the child becomes a confidant or mediator within the family. Recent studies substantiate this claim by defining parentification as a developmentally inappropriate reversal of roles in which children or adolescents take on adult-like caregiving

functions for parents, siblings, or the family as a whole (Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023).

Hooper (2007) argues that the phenomenon must be understood relationally, because it emerges within family systems where caregiving functions have broken down or been displaced. A crucial distinction in this literature is the difference between age-appropriate family responsibilities and destructive role reversal. While children may gain competence, empathy, or a sense of usefulness from helping at home, harmful parentification is chronic, necessity-driven, emotionally debilitating, and unsupported by reciprocity or validation (Dariotis et al., 2023; Jurkovic, 1997; Masiran et al., 2023). This distinction is central to reading the relevant child character in *TPVO*, because her labour is not a mere set of chores but one that grows out of repeated violence, maternal abuse, paternal failure, and her effort to adapt to the dysfunctional nature of her family.

The Concept of Eldest Daughter Syndrome further deepens this discussion. The concept is described as a socio-cultural pattern in which eldest daughters of families become default caregivers, organisers, emotional managers, and overfunctioners within the family (Chatterjee, 2024). Nonetheless, studies on birth order warn against reducing personality or responsibility to birth position alone, leaving findings mixed and context-sensitive (Botzet et al., 2021). A more common finding is girls' disproportionate involvement in unpaid domestic and sibling care, especially under family duress (O'Reilly & Quayle, 2021; Wikle et al., 2018). For this reason, this paper avoids using the eldest daughter syndrome carelessly, but as a phenomenon describing the gendered concentration of responsibilities that parentification studies and literary analysis can describe more extensively.

Moreover, research on DV and child adjustment expands the major argument of this paper. Existing review and meta-analytic studies reveal that harm does not arise only when marital conflict becomes spectacularly violent. They argue that children's maladjustment is tied to the quality of the interparental relationship, to children's own responses to conflict, and to disruptions in attachment and emotional security (Barletta & O'Mara, 2006; Noonan & Pilkington, 2020; van Eldik et al., 2020). In this sense, children exposed to DV may show fear, sadness, dysregulation, and compensatory caregiving, while attachment research suggests that parental abuse in the caregiving environment is associated with less secure child attachment (Carter et al., 2020; Noonan & Pilkington, 2020). This body of work is especially relevant to critiquing the experiences of the relevant child character in *TPVO* because the novel does not present an isolated episode but a sustained atmosphere of danger that trains the child character into vigilance and care.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in a close reading of the novel selected for analysis. It treats the *TPVO* not as sociological data but as a suitable literary narrative that depicts the emotional atmosphere of a dysfunctional family and the pitiable lived experiences of the eldest daughter trapped in the menace. Close reading is especially appropriate here because the novel's author builds meaning through repetition, domestic detail, gesture and shifts in who speaks for whom. These narrative choices make it possible to trace the child character's evolution from child witness to a burdened caregiver. The method, therefore, attends not only to what the novel renders about DV but also how it stages it through scenes, dialogues and recurring images of violence, care and endurance.

To aptly critique the aforementioned, the paper adopts Family Systems Theory as an analytical framework. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) sees the family as an emotional unit in which anxiety, conflict, and compensatory roles circulate across relationships rather than staying sealed within single individuals (Brown & Errington, 2024). Its concepts of triangles, family projection, sibling position, and multigenerational process are relevant to this paper because they explain how strain in the marital dyad can be extended onto children and internalised through recurring patterns (Brown & Errington, 2024; Calatrava et al., 2022). For a literary text such as Andreas's, this framework is important because it helps to unravel how the household and other layers of community operate as overlapping emotional units.

To further aid the analysis, Parentification Studies is paired with Family Systems Theory because it names the specific role reversal that the relevant child character experiences. So while Family Systems Theory explains circulation, Parentification clarifies the burdened role through which that circulation is managed. The Concept of Eldest Daughter Syndrome is added to foreground the novel's distinctly gendered organisation of care. It specifically helps explain why the burden settles so heavily on the eldest daughter. Used together, these frameworks guard against romanticising premature competence by distinguishing resilience from coerced responsibilities (Botzet et al., 2021; Chatterjee, 2024; Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023; O'Reilly & Quayle, 2021; Wikle et al., 2018).

Psychoanalysis is deployed as a final and necessary framework because it uncovers the emotional and mental costs of parentification in the novel. Psychoanalytically informed trauma theory, especially Cathy Caruth's work, highlights the delayed, repetitive, and often bodily return of overwhelming experience, while clinical psychoanalytic work on children who witness violence underscores how deeply such scenes can be internalised (Caruth, 2016; Parson, 1997). This perspective is especially useful for reading how the character engages her dilemma emotionally and mentally.

While these frameworks have been widely deployed in other fields, this paper extends their relevance by integrating them within literary analysis. Unlike prior studies where Family Systems Theory and Parentification are deployed as explanatory frameworks for empirical family dynamics, this study demonstrates how Andreas' narrative style, such as dialogue, repetition and domestic detail renders these frameworks viable for critiquing lived experience in literature.

Furthermore, by combining Parentification Studies with the discourse on Eldest Daughter Syndrome, the paper extends their relevance to the discussion of the gendered nature of role reversal in patriarchal contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the premise that domestic violence in *TPVO* operates not only as a gendered form of oppression but as a family-wide process that unsettles childhood through the reconfiguration of emotional and domestic labour. Within this framework, the child, particularly the eldest daughter, is analysed as a critical site where violence is absorbed, managed, and reproduced in altered forms.

The framework synthesises three interrelated conceptual strands. First, parentification provides a lens for understanding how adult responsibilities are transferred to children within dysfunctional family systems, producing

premature role assumption and emotional burden. Second, the concept of the eldest daughter foregrounds the gendered organisation of such responsibilities, drawing attention to how patriarchal expectations disproportionately position firstborn girls as caregivers and emotional stabilisers. Third, insights from research intersecting domestic violence and childhood situate these processes within a broader context of sustained conflict, fear, and relational instability, showing how repeated exposure to violence shapes children's emotional responses and behavioural adaptations.

Taken together, these concepts enable the paper to present more than mere descriptive accounts of child victimisation in the novel to a more critical understanding of how DV re-assigns family roles, fosters coerced maturity, and disrupts childhood.

Textual Analysis

Synopsis of *TPVO*

Set in Oshaantu, a rural community in northern Namibia, *TPVO* depicts the condition of women in a deeply patriarchal society where marriage is metaphorised as a site of suffering rather than of companionship and protection. Through Kauna's troubled marriage to Shange, Andreas exposes how cultural norms, religious expectations, and communal silence sustain the abuse of women and normalise their pain. Kauna, once admired for her beauty, gradually becomes physically and emotionally battered by a husband whose violence, infidelity, and control reflect the wider gender values of the society around him.

More importantly, the novel shows that Kauna's suffering is not hers alone. The effects of Shange's brutality spill into the lives of her children, especially her eldest daughter, Kandiwapa, who repeatedly witnesses her mother's abuse and is drawn into responsibilities beyond her age. As DV becomes a recurring feature of the home, the eleven-year-old Kandiwapa is forced into a position of emotional vigilance and practical caregiving, revealing how DV steals childhood and places adult burdens on eldest daughters.

Andreas also presents Oshaantu as a community where abuse is widely trivialised. Many men dismiss wife battering as a normal part of marriage, while several women, shaped by the same patriarchal culture, endure violence in silence and even regard it as inevitable. Although figures such as Mee Ali and Mukwankala challenge this silence, the broader social order remains complicit in Kauna's oppression. In this way, the novel not only critiques the structures that sustain DV but also shows how such violence reshapes family life, reproducing suffering across generations through daughters like Kandiwapa.

Domestic Violence as a Family System

In *TPVO*, the household formed by Shange and Kauna is such that is typified by constant chronic conflict. Sadly, the conflict does not stay within the conjugal pair. Their eldest child and daughter, Kandiwapa, is repeatedly caught in the position of witness, spokesperson, and emotional absorber of the repeated conflict. The violence that Shange inflicts on his wife, Kauna, is not hidden from their children; it erupts in private and public spaces, so that they hear screams, see the aftermath, and learn to read their home as a site of danger. One striking scene describes Shange beating Kauna so badly that Kandiwapa and the younger children cry uncontrollably while their mother lies sand-covered and injured;

…Then it all happened so fast, Kauna and her bucket full of water landed on the ground.

Kauna tried to escape Shange's rage, but he was too fast for her, He caught her. She screamed… Kauna was lying on the ground covered in a blanket of sand. She moved like an old clothe as Shange's shoes struck her mercilessly all over her tiny body. The heavy mine shoes sounded as if they were breaking every bone. She had covered her face and part of her head with both arms and hands (Andreas, 2001, p. 58).

In this moment, the children are not passive onlookers but are emotionally implicated in the violence. Kandiwapa, in particular, is positioned within the family system as one who must absorb and respond to its effects.

This is illustrated in the aftermath of the beating when Mee Ali, a close friend and familiar witness to Kauna's abuse, offers to treat her wounds. She asks Kandiwapa to observe how she is tending to the bruises so that she can help her mother in future occurrences. The shocking force of the scene lies in Kandiwapa's response, "I know how to do it!" When Mee Ali asks how she learned, she explains, "… I do it every time he beats her." Overwhelmed by the implications of this disclosure, Mee Ali embraces the girl while weeping, "Tears that told me that this little girl had seen too much for her age" (Andreas, 2001, pp. 59–60).

This incident is central to the paper's theoretical argument. From a Bowenian perspective, Kandiwapa has been triangulated into her parents' unresolved conflict. The anxiety generated within the marital relationship is displaced onto her in a way that compels her to occupy a stabilising and caregiving role. What should ordinarily remain the responsibility of adults is transferred to the child, making her an emotional extension of her mother's suffering and a participant without any other choice in the management of family crisis.

The conflict in the novel also extends beyond Shange and Kauna's private household into the wider social structure of the novel. Family Systems Theory is useful here because it not only illuminates the internal emotional processes of the affected family but also helps explain how this dysfunction is sustained by larger communal patterns. In *TPVO*, neighbours, extended family, church values, and village customs repeatedly normalise Kauna's abuse as an ordinary part of marriage. Thus, the dysfunction of the nuclear family is reinforced by a broader societal emotional process in which violence is trivialised as a mere marriage challenge, female suffering is naturalised, and intervention is discouraged. Even where there is sympathy, there is often no meaningful disruption of the system that sustains abuse.

This is why apparently sympathetic figures can remain structurally complicit. Mee Ali, for instance, recognises the violence and feels deeply for both Kauna and Kandiwapa, yet her suggestion that the child should learn how to nurse her mother in the case of subsequent abuse reveals a mindset that the abuse is a constant. In effect, she acknowledges the violence without imagining a system in which it can be decisively halted. Similarly, Michael, Mee Ali's husband, though not physically abusive to his own wife, minimises Kauna's suffering by treating wife battering as a private and normal aspect of marriage. Following one of Mee Ali's concerned interventions, he reprimands her,

Ali, I think this time you went too far. For you to ask the church to end Shange and Kauna's marriage. Are you crazy? You are not God. You will not solve the problems of all the women in this village. It looks as though you want to jump in and fix everything every time Kauna confides in you. Maybe she doesn't even expect you to sort out her problems. Maybe she only wants you to lend her your ear. Have you ever thought

of this? 'And now the men are looking at me badly. They talk behind my back, they say that I have a wife who is not disciplined. Please, I don't want to go through this again…Now promise that you will not interfere in the Shanges' problems again and that you will never ever try to fix them. Do you hear me! (Andreas, 2001, p. 9).

In this scene, Michael's reaction to Mee Ali underscores the extent to which patriarchal culture conditions even non-abusive men to accommodate and excuse violence against women.

By contrast, Mukwankala attempts to disrupt this normalised pattern. As the outspoken mouthpiece of oppressed women in Oshaantu, she confronts Shange publicly at the Cuca shop, a male-dominated communal space. Her decision to challenge him there is symbolic because it removes DV from the private sphere and forces it into public scrutiny. Her rebuke is direct and cutting: "…tell me how many men you have beaten in this village the way you beat your wife? … Men who beat women are the ones who cannot stand up against other men." (Andreas, 2001, p. 64). In challenging Shange's masculinity, Mukwankala exposes wife beating not as a sign of male authority but as an expression of cowardice. Her confrontation appears to temporarily calm the physical assaults on Kauna, yet it does not end Shange's domination. Instead, his abuse mutates into other forms, especially emotional control, as he continues to regulate Kauna's movements and maintain his extramarital affairs. The system, therefore, adjusts rather than collapses, revealing the resilience of DV even when it is publicly challenged.

The complicity of the wider community is further reinforced by women who have themselves internalised patriarchal assumptions about marriage. Except for characters such as Mee Ali and Mukwankala, many local women regard abuse as a normal and inevitable part of married life. Mee Maita, for example, insists that "Husband and wife should fight every day; he should abuse her and the children, he should go after other women…" (Andreas, 2001, p. 5). Her warped understanding of marriage as a space of constant suffering reveals the extent to which patriarchal values have been normalised within the female consciousness of the community itself. Mee Ali resists this view, insisting "that marriage doesn't need to be a miserable thing" (Andreas, 2001, p. 5), but her dissent remains marginal within a culture that has long naturalised women's pain. Even Kauna's mother, despite knowing that her daughter is being abused, describes Shange as the husband divinely assigned to her and therefore someone Kauna must endure. In this way, the family system is upheld not only by male violence but also by communal beliefs that permit female suffering and discourage resistance.

This same pattern of normalisation appears in the treatment of battered women outside the home. According to Mee Ali,

The nurses were not always sympathetic. In our presence they would talk about how village women get beaten up by their husbands; and how they lie to the doctors, saying that some cow had kicked them in their faces while they were milking; and that treating these women was a waste of time because they always return, worse! (Andreas, 2001, p. 62).

These lies point to the shame, fear, and silence that surround DV in the novel, but they also indicate how the larger social environment participates in its continuity. Shange's clan is not left out as they fondly downplay the seriousness of his cruelty by claiming that he is merely an imperfect man who makes mistakes like anyone

else. The result is a community that is unwilling to name Kauna's suffering for what it is, let alone intervene meaningfully.

It is within this context that the rumour of Kauna poisoning Shange spreads quickly after his sudden death. The speed with which suspicion falls on her reflects a patriarchal order more prepared to criminalise the abused woman than to acknowledge the suffering she has endured. Andreas thus presents Oshaantu as a society in which women's choices are severely limited and where silence often becomes a strategy of survival. This is why many of the women attempt to hide their bruises and scars with brown shoe polish, despite the severe physical and emotional injuries they bear (Andreas, 2001, p. 65).

Through the lens of Family Systems Theory, the reader sees that DV in the novel emerges not as a private issue between husband and wife, but as a destructive emotional process that engulfs the household, recruits the child, and is sustained by the wider community.

From Child to Surrogate Caregiver.

Kandiwapa's most revealing scenes are those in which she shifts from child witness to caregiver. For instance, when Mee Ali offers to teach her how to clean Kauna's bruises, the child replies that she already knows how because she does so after each beating. Also, to control the flow of curious community onlookers feigning sympathy to witness Kauna's recent beating, Ali tells them, 'I think Kandiwapa and the other children will manage' (Andreas, 2001, p. 60). This moment is a revealing case of destructive parentification. It is instrumental because the child is expected to perform physical care that should be done by adults. It is equally emotional because she must also manage her own fear, hurt and orient herself towards the needs of her younger siblings. Parentification scholarship is clear that such role-taking becomes harmful when it is developmentally excessive, repeated, and tied to family dysfunction rather than to supported, age-appropriate participation (Dariotis et al., 2023; Jurkovic, 1997; Masiran et al., 2023).

Andreas' intensifies this role reversal by making Kandiwapa the household's emergency spokesperson. When Shange dies suddenly, adults do not turn first to Kauna but to a distressed Kandiwapa for an account of what killed her father. For instance, Mee Ali asks her, "What is happening?" Confused and too shocked to give a coherent response, Kandiwapa answers her with tears, "It is ... it is ... Dad ... Daddy". Not satisfied by her response, Kauna herself grips the child and asks her to explain events to the gathered adults: "Tell them what happened!" Utterly clueless, "Kandiwapa cried more from shock at the way in which her mother was behaving, than from the strength of her grasp" (Andreas, 2001, p. 12). Here, Kandiwapa is overwhelmed such that she lacks the suitable words to express her herself. Totally ignoring her feelings, the adults mount more pressure for her to verbally mediate between the current family crisis and public inquiry.

In addition, Kandiwapa is also pulled into the family's labour economy after her father's death, helping her mother with strenuous land-clearing work at the very moment when adult protection should have reduced rather than expanded her burden. Even the apparently caring injunction she often receives from Mee Alli and other adult members of their community anytime she is burdened by her mother's ordeal, "…you must stop crying now. You need to be strong for your little brothers and sisters" (Andreas, 2001, pp. 60, 109), confirms her adultification. While the concerned community see it as offering her comfort, they display it in a form that deprives

her of childhood vulnerability and forces her into adult discipline and control. Therefore, the novel offers a subtle insight: the very people who comfort Kandiwapa also unintentionally ratify the extraction of that comfort from her.

The Psychoanalytic Afterlife of Domestic Violence

The psychoanalytic atmosphere of Andreas' narrative appears most clearly in scenes of anticipatory fear. For instance, following one of Kauna's abuse episodes, Kandiwapa freezes in shock when she hears Shange slam a door, assuming that another of such episodes is imminent, even though Shange is actually leaving rather than returning to the house (Andreas, 2001, p. 61). This reaction is not ordinary nervousness, but her body's learned expectation that violence is a recurring phenomenon in their home. Caruth's work on trauma helps illuminate such moments because it shows how overwhelming experience often survives not as a memory fully mastered, but as belated recurrence, triggered fear, and involuntary re-experiencing (Caruth, 2016). Also, studies about childhood exposure to DV stress how terror becomes deeply internalised in child victims as a result of persistent exposure (Bamidele-Nelly & Sotunsa, 2024; Doroudchi et al., 2023; Ehrensaft & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2021; Oluwajobi et al., 2024; Parson, 1995). In *TPVO*, Kandiwapa's environment trains her to hear sound as a threat and to inhabit her domestic space as a site of possible recurrence.

Moreover, her persistent crying also indicates a serious psychological concern. The novel presents several scenes in which Kandiwapa cries intensely during and after her mother's beatings, while adults urge her to quieten herself and remain "strong" for the others (Andreas, 2001, pp. 11-12; 60-61; 109). The interpretive danger here is clear: while Kandiwapa is encouraged to be composed, helpful, observant and mature, psychoanalytic criticism advocates a more careful reading of such virtues as defensive remodelling of the self around danger and responsibility. Kandiwapa's familiarity with dressing Kauna's wounded body also suggests a strong identification with her injured mother by trying to restore what the adult world (her father) keeps destroying. Instead of being securely held within parental care as a recipient, Kandiwapa becomes a giver.

The Gendered Burden of the Eldest Daughter

Reading Kandiwapa through the lens of Eldest Daughter Syndrome sharpens the novel's gender politics. The burden she carries is not simply that of an oldest child in the abstract, but one of an eldest daughter in a patriarchal setting where women are expected to absorb domestic pain and where girls are socialised early into care, endurance, and emotional overfunctioning. Research on sibling caretaking and girls' unpaid domestic work shows that girls often shoulder more physical and relational care than boys, while emerging studies on eldest daughter syndrome name the cultural tendency to cast firstborn daughters as household co-managers and emotional backstops (Chatterjee, 2024; O'Reilly & Quayle, 2021; Wikle et al., 2018). Kandiwapa's case fits this pattern, but the novel also intensifies it by placing those expectations inside an unstable, violent marital system. Her eldest daughter's role is not a gentle nurturing into adulthood but a process through which patriarchy secures unpaid care work from the nearest available female child.

This is why the novel's hopeful but open ending must be read critically as well as sympathetically. Kauna's resilience, which she metaphorically likens to the "mahangu millet"

that recovers after damage, offers one of the narrative's clearest emblems of female survival:

You know what happens to the mahangu millet? After it has been knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle, it finds the strength to repair itself and grow better. It is often bigger and more vibrant than the millet that has not been threatened by any danger and cut to the ground (Andreas, 2001, p. 174).

However, this symbolic restoration of Kauna does not automatically restore Kandiwapa's disrupted childhood. Parentification scholarship warns that even when caregiving fosters competence, the developmental residue of chronic and coercive role reversal may remain long after the immediate crisis has ended (Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023), and Andreas seems alert to this reality. Kauna's freedom from Shange's domination after his death is vividly illustrated but Kandiwapa's psychological future is left open for the reader to decipher. This silence by Andreas matters because it reminds the reader that a marriage can end, a violent husband can die, and a woman can heal from an abusive past, while the young daughter who learned to mother in the midst of abuse may continue to carry the remnants of the dysfunction within her.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* should not be read only as a feminist indictment of patriarchy and DV but also as a powerful narrative of stolen girlhood. Family Systems Theory shows how Kauna and Shange's turbulent marriage becomes a circulating family crisis rather than a private adult dispute. Parentification Theory foregrounds the violence through which eleven-year old Kandiwapa becomes her mother's nurse, family spokesperson and custodian of her siblings. Eldest Daughter Syndrome clarifies why these responsibilities revolve strongly around Kandiwapa as a firstborn girl, while Psychoanalytic Trauma Criticism reveals the emotional cost of such forced competence in the forms of crying, fear and hyper-vigilance. Taken together, these frameworks bring into focus the ordeals of children who are often left at the margins of readings centred only on the abused wife.

The wider significance of this argument is twofold. First, for African literary criticism, it shifts attention from women's suffering alone to the patriarchal damage inflicted on eldest daughters through unpaid emotional and domestic labour. Secondly, it shows how literary texts can creatively demonstrate the lived experience of parentification in ways that formal empirical studies may miss.

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