

Woman at Point Zero and Uncle Vampire: A cross-cultural investigation of father-daughter incest in the light of feminist psychoanalysis



Authors:

Reem B. Atiyat¹ 
 Khaled Sarayreh¹ 
 Sameer Rimawi¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of English Language and Literature, Princess Alia University College, Al Balqa Applied University, Amman, Jordan

Corresponding author:

Reem Atiyat,
 ororah2001@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 25 Oct. 2021
 Accepted: 04 May 2022
 Published: 25 Aug. 2022

How to cite this article:

Atiyat, R.B., Sarayreh, K. & Rimawi, S., 2022, 'Woman at Point Zero and Uncle Vampire: A cross-cultural investigation of father-daughter incest in the light of feminist psychoanalysis', *Literator* 43(1), a1850. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v43i1.1850>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article aims at presenting a cross-cultural examination of uncle-niece incest through the theoretical scope of feminist psychoanalysis in literary studies. The paper is thus centered on two novels: *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Nawal El Saadawi and *Uncle Vampire* (1993) by Cynthia Grant. The main contribution in this article is to highlight the cultural differences found in eastern and western literary studies in relation to escaping or ending incest. The cultural differences are addressed in relation to parental assistance and institutional assistance. The article is thus structured around the exploration of two main research questions: 'What is the role of parents in helping a victim of uncle-niece incest to end her abusive experience?' and 'what is the role of official institutions in assisting a victim of uncle-niece incest to terminate her abusive experience?'. A central concern to the researcher in this article is to voice the victims' 'particular' struggle and efforts to escape the incestuous relationship in which she is trapped.

Keywords: incest; Feminist Literary Theory; particularity, assistance factors; psychoanalysis.

Introduction

With a few notable exceptions, incest avoidance appears to be common to virtually all societies. Even in contemporary fiction – for example, Ian McEwan's *Cement Garden* and A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Incests* – any breach of this accepted norm evokes outrage (Wolf & Durham 2005).

This article aims at addressing the cultural variations of investigating incest found in Western literary studies as opposed to Arabic literary studies. The article examines the revelation and narration of the details of the uncle-niece incestuous relationships portrayed in both *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Nawal El Saadawi and *Uncle Vampire* (1993) by Cynthia Grant. The choice of these two novels is core to the contextualisation of this research paper, as they focus on the conceptualisation of and reaction against uncle-niece incest, particularly during the late 1900s. A central concern to the researcher in this article is to voice the victims' struggles during the actual sexual attacks and their efforts to escape their incestuous relationships in the light of their surrounding resources and limitations. The article thus highlights the 'particularity' (Tyson 2006) of their experiences rather than their generalisability, a task that has not been addressed in the available research on literary domestic violence studies until now. Therefore, this paper is divided into seven sections. The first section provides an abstract, and the second section sets forward the introduction. The third and fourth sections, however, present a literature review followed by the methodological approach drawn upon to conduct this research paper. In the fifth section, a summary of the two literary works examined is given. As for the sixth section, this will be centred on addressing the protagonists' uncle-niece incestuous experiences through a comparative lens. Finally, section seven concludes the article presented. In the following section, the paper shall be providing a review of the literature.

A review of the literature

A literature review is a written document that develops a case to establish a thesis. This case is based on a comprehensive understanding of the current knowledge of the topic. A literature review synthesises current knowledge pertaining to the research question. This synthesis is the foundation which, through the use of logical argumentation, allows the researcher to build a convincing thesis case (Machi & McEvoy 2012:164).

The investigation of incest has not been limited to the fields of medicine (Borda-Niño-Wildman 2018) and social studies (Woolf 2004, 2014). Rather, it has transgressed these fields to capture the

attention of researchers across literary studies (Atiyat 2022; Doane & Hodges 2001; El Saadawi 1975; Grant 1993; Wolf & Durham 2005). Many researchers of various disciplines have also endeavoured to conceptualise acts of incest and to distinguish between their far-from-unified types:

Sexual intercourse between persons who are closely related by blood. While incest between father and daughter, mother and son, or sister and brother is almost universally forbidden, various cultures may extend the boundaries to prohibit intercourse with other relatives. In the U.S., the prohibition against incest is specified by many states' laws as well as by cultural tradition, with state laws usually defining incest as marriage or sexual relationships between relatives who are closer than second, or sometimes even more distant, cousins. (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect 1978:41)

From a socio-cultural perspective, Woolf (2004), for instance, in his book *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of Knowledge at the Turn of the Century*, proposes that:

An incestuous relationship is a union between biological relatives that is genetically closer than permissible under prevailing civil legislation. Most commonly, incest is defined as sexual intercourse between persons defined as first-degree relatives, that is, father-daughter, mother-son, or brother-sister. However, in some countries, such as Scotland, the definition includes half-sib and uncle-niece unions, where the partners have 25 percent of shared genes. (Woolf 2004:38)

Nevertheless, it would be a falsified notion to presume that defining incestuous unions is a simplistic matter that is merely limited to the aforementioned categories. In this regard, 'cousin marriages' are depicted as relationships of a controversial nature. That is, whilst Western researchers have viewed such unions as unacceptable forms of bondage, socioculturally speaking (Ottenheimer 1996), non-Western researchers have embraced cousin marriages as socioculturally normative practices (Lutfiyya & Churchill 2012). Pollak (2009) echoes the earlier presented definition and subcategorisation of 'incest' in the field of literary studies, adding that:

The feminist project of unraveling the cultural significances of incest is an ambitious one in which much is at stake and much remains to be done. Historical gaps need filling so that incest texts can be mined for their historical specificities and socio-cultural nuances. Literary theories also need to look more closely at the writings of incest survivors, such as those collected by Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton in 1983. Understanding the multiple discourses that constitute incest – fictional, autobiographical, and theoretical – is one way to work toward eradicating this damaging social syndrome. (p. 300)

In the light of the aforementioned urge to perform multidimensional investigations of 'incest' within the overall context of literary studies, it must be pointed out that the study of 'incest' cannot be accomplished thoroughly in the absence of the cultural values in which this sociocultural phenomenon is deeply rooted (Masson 2013; Pollak 2009; Spillers 2003). In the light of the sociocultural values that govern the practice of incest, researchers and scholars have maintained two different views regarding the

acceptance of this phenomenon. Whilst the first group of scholars has expressed its utter rejection of incest (Spillers 2003), the second group has viewed the practice of incest under mutual acceptance as a source of privilege and power transmitted from the father to his daughter (Masson 2013; Swiontkowski 2003). For instance, on the stance of the incestuous girl, Swiontkowski (2003) explains that it is through incest that:

She ensures the continuation of her privileged role as the woman who initiates and benefits from the incest with the father and the father-surrogates – the special woman who must inevitably subordinate even her daughter to that predominant specialness. (p. 46)

In his book *A Dark Science: Women, Sexuality and Psychiatry in the Nineteenth Century*, Masson (2013) later echoes the views of Swiontkowski (2003), arguing that incestuous:

Relationships do not always seem to have a traumatic effect. The father-daughter liaison satisfies instinctual drives ... Moreover, the act offers the opportunity to test in reality an infinite fantasy whose consequences are found to be gratifying and pleasurable. (Masson 2013:20)

Other feminist researchers have added that 'women's violation of the incest prohibition' is a 'potential site of resistance to patriarchy, a refusal of the imperatives of exchange' (Pollak 2009:300).

Yet, researchers in the field of incest must not overlook the limitations surrounding this mission, bearing in mind that literary production on 'incest' relating to particular sociocultural settings may not even exist. In the following section, the methodological approach adopted in order to conduct this research paper will be thoroughly discussed.

Methodology

Fiction writers conduct extensive research to achieve verisimilitude, similar to social scientists. Verisimilitude refers to the creation of a realistic, authentic and life-like portrayal, and it is the goal of both fiction and established social science practices like ethnography. Fiction writers and qualitative researchers both seek to build believable representations of existing or possible worlds and to truthfully and authentically portray human experience. (Leavy 2013:21)

This article is mainly based on secondary data. The data is derived from books and scholarly articles that are focused on examining 'incest' as a pattern of familial abuse (Pollak 2009) through the scope of feminist literary theory. The literary works that shall be taken into consideration for the purpose of presenting a literary cross-cultural investigation of incest are *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Nawal El Saadawi and *Uncle Vampire* (1993) by Cynthia Grant. This is to show the cultural differences found when dealing with incest upon its occurrence amongst the members of a particular family. The choice of Feminist Literary Theory as:

The theoretical context of examination and analysis in this article is due to the fact that this approach enables the reader to highlight

the particularity of abused women's experiences rather than addressing their experiences as subject to generalizability. (Atiyat 2022; Hooks 1984, 1986; Showalter 1981)

Conducting feminist content psychoanalysis enables the researcher to shed light onto the 'particularity' of the psychological consequences of the incestuous experience in relation to the investigated characters. In this context, an abused character's 'voice' is distinctive in revealing her internal, hidden struggle:

Despite great variation amongst feminists, all share the belief that, historically, knowledge has been skewed by androcentric bias within methodologies and methods and that feminist methodologies should seek to correct this. Often this is achieved through prioritising women's voices and through action-oriented research aimed at improving women's lives. (Rundle & Mandell 2000)

In line with Rundle and Mandell (2000) and Leavy and Harris (2011), in their book *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice*, stress the cruciality of addressing women's needs and issues through the scope of particularity in feminist content analysis:

A content analysis might find that there is a slight underrepresentation of white women relative to men, significant underrepresentation of black women, and the total absence of representation of Asian and Native American women. This is merely an example. It becomes more complex when we consider multiple dimensions of symbolic annihilation. What groups, ideas, and values are *not* visible in cultural texts? Whose stories and perspectives are *not* shown? (Leavy & Harris 2011:173).

Leavy and Harris (2011) then unveil the stages required to conduct feminist content analysis:

Feminist content analysis generally involves **initial immersion** into the content to get a sense of the 'big picture', determining the units of analysis, coding, analysis, and interpretation (there are typically multiple rounds of coding and analysis). During initial immersion, or what Roller and Lavrakas (2015) call 'absorbing the content', take notes on your overall impressions and ideas for how you might approach coding based on what you are seeing. Next, determine the units of analysis you will study and begin coding. (Leavy & Harris 2011:180)

In the light of the previously highlighted stages of feminist content analysis, the researcher had to read *Breaking the Cycle* by Zane (2005), *Uncle Vampire* by Grant (1993) and *Woman at Point Zero* by El Saadawi (1975). These literary works constituted the raw material of the incest experiences that underwent the primary screening process or the initial immersion stage. The first step was a necessary step in order for the researcher to be able to grasp a general idea about the literary works under investigation and to highlight the factors that allowed the incestuous attacks, in addition to the potential counteraction methods available for the victimised protagonists in these literary works during the second stage or the coding stage.

Units of analysis can be thought of as chunks of data (Leavy 2017). For example, in a written text such as a newspaper,

you may define the units of analysis as individual stories, each column of text, each paragraph of text or each sentence of text. Or instead of predetermining the unit of analysis based on the 'amount' of text, you may do it thematically. So every time theme x (something in your study) is mentioned, that is considered a unit of analysis (Leavy & Harris 2011:180).

The third step, however, involved deriving statements from the literary works read. These statements stood as pieces of evidence to clarify the factors that gave permission to the acts of incest to be continued, highlighting the possible means of assistance for the victimised protagonists to seek. Through this approach, thus, the researcher was able to compare and contrast between the protagonists' experiences based on their uttered words as documented in their accounts. In the following section, summaries of the literary works explored in this research paper will be presented.

Summaries of *Breaking the Cycle*, *Uncle Vampire*, and *Woman at Point Zero*

It is at this moment of convergence—when one's speaking of one's felt experience becomes a speaking up or out noticeable by others—that one can be said to have a voice with them, to be a presence that can be taken in by them, not merely noticed but attended to sufficiently to move them to rethink what they have previously thought or done, to make a difference in terms of what they believe or do, to affect their doxa or their praxis. (Scapp 2020: x-xi; Atiyat 2022: 16)

The literary works that were examined in this research paper are *Breaking the Cycle* by Zane (2005), *Uncle Vampire* by Grant (1993) and *Woman at Point Zero* by El Saadawi (1975). The choice of these literary works sprang primarily from the idea that all three protagonists in these works had gone through incestuous experiences. Yet their experiences are unique rather than generalisable because of the differences in the sociocultural values that governed the societies in which they lived.

Beginning with *Breaking the Cycle* by Zane (2005), this short story describes the experience of a mother whose teenage daughter had been raped multiple times at the hands of her stepfather. The reader is introduced to this young daughter who lives in a dysfunctional family. She barely talks to either her mother or her stepfather. She has no brothers, sisters or even friends in whom she could confide her darkest secret. Yet one day, the daughter reaches the point of zero tolerance and becomes the source of empowerment for her mother, whom she encourages, despite their lack of financial resources, to end the cycle of violence for both the abused mother and her victimised daughter. Despite having been victimised herself, the daughter decides to break free from this cycle of violence. Consequently, the abused mother is influenced by the courage and determination of her daughter, and she decides to desert her violent husband once and for all.

With respect to the protagonist of the second literary work investigated in this paper, *Uncle Vampire* (1993) by Cynthia Grant, she is a little girl who is exposed to repetitive incestuous attacks at the hands of her uncle. The cycle of abuse continues until the protagonist, Carolyn, decides to confront her natal family with the incestuous relationship between her and her uncle. This decision is taken after Carolyn sinks into a seemingly endless cycle of denial, during which she imagines that she has a twin sister named 'Honey' who has the same incestuous experience with the abusive uncle but always tries to trivialise the seriousness of the attacks: 'Anyway, he's not hurting you –' she comments at one point when Carolyn is trying to express her repressed need to speak out and stop her perpetrator. Honey adds, 'It's not like he kills people'. The imaginary twin sister always keeps Carolyn from exposing her abusive uncle before the whole family, until Carolyn's hidden pain outweighs her fear of the potential consequences of revealing her uncle's violation of her body. She reports her uncle's behaviour to the police, and he ends up being imprisoned.

As for the third literary work focused on in this research paper, it is *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Nawal El Saadawi. This novel relates the experience of a young girl named Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel. At the introductory section of this literary work, El Saadawi (1975) sheds light on the seriousness of addressing and combating perpetrators of incest, regardless of one's having been personally victimised or not, saying:

You do not have to be a lost little girl to appreciate how great was Firdaus's need for her uncle and how terrible the shock when he abused her. You do not have to be a sex worker to understand how circumstances threw her into the pit of prostitution and how the demons drove her to murder her pimp. (p. 8)

Firdaus was turned into a pawn at the hands of her uncle; because she was young in age when her parents died, she had received no education and had no source of income in order to help her to desert her perpetrator and support herself. Even after having graduated from school, she was forced to marry a man whom she found repulsive. She turned to a life of sex work, claiming that it is through setting high sex prices that she could control men rather than allowing them to control and dehumanise her. In the following section, the experiences of all three protagonists will be investigated in order to show the impact of undergoing incestuous relationships on their abilities to reject and put an end to their perpetrators.

Literary accounts of incest: The limitations and sources of empowerment to end incestuous relationships

In carving its niche in social research, Leavy explains that fiction-based research seeks to create a deeper understanding of

experiences in a language that is more accessible to people than research published in academic publications. Using fiction creates an opportunity for the writer to simulate the environment, sights, sounds, and smells of reality virtually, which captivates the reader's imagination. (Leavy 2013:1)

The use of fiction-based accounts in order to investigate a certain phenomenon, Leavy (2013) maintains, enables researchers to live the addressed experiences with all their details despite the fact that the revelation of some specificities might be frowned upon socio-culturally; as they are cast under the category of 'taboo'. Bennett and Royle (2015) also assert this argument, stressing the value of literary approaches to voicing silenced experiences. *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *Uncle Vampire* (1993) and *Breaking the Cycle* (2005) are all examples of literary narrative accounts relating the experiences of silenced incest victims in varying depths. The authors allow the readers to witness the details of the actions that constituted each experience, highlighting the protagonists' journeys to terminate the abuse imposed upon them. They further highlighted the circumstances or assistance factors that enabled or prevented each protagonist from declaring and counteracting against the cycle of violence in which she had been entrapped.

With respect to the protagonist of Zane's *Breaking the Cycle* (2005), she endures the agony of living in shame. She is ashamed to confront herself by the tormenting fact that her own daughter has been the 'incest' victim of the girl's stepfather:

He started having sex with me when I was twelve, about a year after you got married. He told me that if I ever told you, he would send me away. That he would split us up for good and there was no way you would ever believe me. It was his word against mine. (Atiyat 2022:29; Zane 2005:14)

Yet the daughter's sense of shame is minimised once she senses her mother's willingness to listen to her and support her, despite the mother's initial denial of the experience (Atiyat 2022). The mother's support as a type of social assistance to act against violence (Atiyat 2022) in addition to financial resources are labelled as 'resistance factors' that pave the way for the termination of the experience of violence. David Read Johnson in 2012 explained the importance of social support to the empowerment of abused, victimised women, saying:

Across examples, social support has been shown to protect against retraumatization. In particular, research suggests that individuals who have higher levels of actual or perceived social support are less likely to experience subsequent traumas. Such support may take a variety of forms, including practical assistance (e.g. financial help, access to resources, emergency housing) or emotional support. For example, such forms of social support are readily apparent in advocacy programs, which provide trauma survivors with emotional support, information, and access to community resources. Actually, research suggests that such programs exert their protective effect against retraumatization specifically by bolstering and increasing social support. (Johnson 2012:570)

Another literary work which asserts the necessity of 'resistance factors' to the abolishment of cyclical violence is *Uncle Vampire* (1993) by Cynthia Grant. These resistance factors could range from financial resources, family and friends to neighbours and coworkers (Atiyat 2022; Haynes 2012). In the case of Carolyn, the protagonist of *Uncle Vampire* (1993), she lacks parental support and the financial resources required to put an end to her perpetrator:

My parents always tell me that I'm an actress, that I invent drama to keep life interesting. How on earth could my uncle be a vampire? Vampires are a myth based on a man who lived in the Middle Ages, a cruel prince known as Vlad the Impaler, who tortured peasants and drank their blood. (Grant 1993:8)

Carolyn likens her uncle's repetitive invasions of her small body to the haunting attacks of a vampire, which consume her energy and ability to fight back every time he lays his hands on her. She is just a vulnerable child left to endure her pain and misery in silence. The importance of voicing the silenced experiences has been a central concern of feminists since the 1960s and 1970s:

Feminism has its party line and women who feel a need for a different strategy, a different foundation, often find themselves ostracized and silenced. Criticisms of or alternatives to established feminist ideas are not encouraged, e.g. recent controversies about expanding feminist discussions of sexuality. Yet groups of women who feel excluded from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves only if they first create, via critiques, an awareness of the factors that alienate them. (Atiyat 2022:24; Hooks 1986:9)

However, Carolyn never loses hope. She eventually thinks of writing a letter to her elder sister, Maggie, trying to speak up about her terrifying reality:

I wish I could talk to Maggie ... I started a letter to her but never finished it. Then it got lost ... Uncle Toddy's a vampire. Did you know that, Maggie? He's drained me. He's sucking all the life out of this house. (Grant 1993:5)

Going through the previous lines enables the reader to sense Carolyn's hesitation to counteract against her perpetrator. Her decision to stand up to him and expose his viciousness is crippled by her traumatising fear of what might happen to both her and her family if the uncle's behaviour is uncovered. This is because the whole family sees the uncle as a source of assistance around the house. He does chores to help Carolyn's mother, for instance:

Uncle Toddy knew Mama didn't want him to live there, so he brought her pots of African violets and helped with the housework and cooking. Those had never been Mama's favorite chores. After a while she liked having him around. He made bookcases and birdhouses in his shop in the cellar. His occasional jobs were usually on the graveyard shift. 'I'm a night owl', He explained. He was a wonderful help when Mama had her breakdown. (Grant 1993:11-12)

He keeps the family together when Carolyn's mother is suffering from poor mental health. His charming acts of pretentious politeness and seemingly genuine care for the

family's well-being make him seem like a loving member of the family. Therefore, when Carolyn thinks of voicing the reality of his torments to her parents, she is afraid that they will not believe her in the first place:

Maybe if we told our parents, they'd call the police, they'd throw him out. Honey says no, we can't tell them. She says they've got enough on their minds without some stupid fantasy. She's not being honest, with herself or me. I think she's afraid that if we tell Mama and Papa that Uncle Toddy is a vampire they'll look at us with flat zombie eyes and say, 'So what? Shut up.' (Grant 1993:20)

At another instance, Carolyn complains of the lack of communication and the absence of empathy that shape her relationship with her parents, fearing that they might result in her parents' utter denial of her victimisation:

I know about make-believe. My parents say I have a vivid imagination. They make it sound like a disease. It can be, when it's hard to tell what's real, especially when you're little and nobody believes you. (Grant 1993:56)

Eventually, however, Carolyn manages to report her uncle's abuse to the police and puts an end to her perpetrator. The stages she goes through are not clearly stated. Yet the effect of her elder sister's assistance on preventing the continuation of her victimisation is asserted:

I have been living with Maggie and Michael for several months. When I wake up crying in the night, Maggie comforts me. She holds my hand while I fall asleep. (Grant 1993:169)

The importance of assistance factors has been asserted in relation to ending cycles of violence:

Environmental or contextual factors also seem to increase risk of retraumatization as well. Factors such as poverty or neglect can increase the likelihood of a person being exposed to multiple potentially traumatic events, including childhood abuse and family and community violence. Poverty may also be a risk factor for retraumatization amongst people exposed to disasters because they are more likely than more affluent people to lose (or simply not to have access to) vital resources that facilitate post-disaster recovery. (Reyes, Elhai & Ford 2015:95)

Yet, despite the fact that both victimised characters in *Breaking the Cycle* (2005) and *Uncle Vampire* (1993) ultimately receive assistance and break free from their cycles of violence, presuming that social and organisational assistance resources are equally and easily accessible for women of non-Western backgrounds as they are for their Western counterparts is a faulty generalisation (El Saadawi 1975; Perry 2012):

Further, there is serious question and debate within the literature regarding the extent to which countries, including developed economies, have made sufficient resources available to meet the unique needs of identified victims and overcome barriers to service that need to be trauma based and culturally sensitive. (Perry 2012:311)

This lack of support is portrayed in detail in *Woman at Point Zero* by El Saadawi (1975). Firdaus, the protagonist of El Saadawi's (1975) *Woman at Point Zero*, voices dreadful images

of how she was exposed to humiliation at the hands of her own father who sold her to a total stranger in the name of marriage:

My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time. (p. 10)

Firdaus's stepmother also dehumanises her by over-working her with chores around the house. However, the most horrifying experience she makes Firdaus go through is having her undergo a procedure of genital mutilation:

Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night. (El Saadawi 1975:12)

These examples of parental abuse and lack of consideration for the protagonist's well-being justify why Firdaus remains silent after she is molested by her own uncle for the first time:

The heat of the oven was full on my face, singeing the edges of my hair. My *galabeya* often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. (El Saadawi 1975:17)

Reyes et al. (2015) echo Kirton (2011) in his direct association between parental abuse and the incest victim's lack of ability to expose the perpetrator of incest:

Victims of incest are usually under tremendous pressure not to tell. They fear that if they tell no one will believe them or that in some way they are to be blamed for the activity. This fear is not ill-founded because adults are likely to believe another adult than a child, and often there is no corroborating evidence. (p. 167)

Firdaus's avoiding the disclosure of her uncle's incestuous behaviour leads to the repetition of the cycle of incest:

Every time there was the sound of footsteps at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. But whenever everything around us lapsed into silence, broken only ever now and then by the snap of dry twigs between my fingers as I fed the oven, and the sound of his regular breathing reaching me from behind the book so that I could not tell whether he was snoring quietly in his sleep or wide awake and panting, his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping almost brutal instance. (El Saadawi 1975:17)

Another factor which is directly linked to the repetition of Firdaus's cyclic incestuous experience is parental neglect. She explains how she feels worthless as a human being, saying:

For, like most people, I had many brothers and sisters. They were like chicks that multiply in spring, shiver in winter and lose their feathers, and then in summer are stricken with diarrhoea, waste away quickly and one by one creep into a corner and die. (El Saadawi 1975:17)

The feelings of degradation and lack of interest in her well-being lead Firdaus to hide her traumatic experience. After her father passes away, she has nobody to turn to other than her perpetrator for financial support. The incestuous attacks continue until her abusive uncle decides to send her to a boarding school because his new wife does not like the idea of Firdaus's presence in the same house.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the protagonist in *Breaking the Cycle*, edited by Zane (2005), portrays the character of a woman who is crippled by the limited resources she has to confront and escape the violence imposed upon her and her daughter by her abusive husband. However, bearing in mind the cross-cultural rejection of incestuous violations, the protagonist is left with no other choice but to break the cycle of violence imposed on her and, most importantly, on her daughter. The multifaceted violence she endures from her husband is a tool to keep her silent towards her perpetrator's abuse. She is also forced to tolerate the violence she is exposed to because of her limited access to financial resources that could potentially enable an abused woman to break free from the grasp of her perpetrator. However, once she learns about her daughter's having been raped by her stepfather, the abused mother reaches the point of zero tolerance. She is not willing to live the rest of her life struggling in fear not only for her life and sense of security, but also for the safety of her only daughter. She decides to take counteraction against her husband, the abuser of both herself and her daughter. She decides to break her silence and leave the house with her daughter to avoid any potential confrontation or harm that might be caused by the husband, who would be enraged because of her decision. To the abused mother, incest is turned into a resource of power, instead of being a mere pattern of violence as argued by literary studies on intimate partner violence. Through this resource of power, the victim is emotionally empowered and tries to reclaim her control over her life. She eventually ends up 'breaking the cycle' of violence and male domination over her.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Atiyat, R., 2022 'Into the Darkest Corner: A Literary Feminist Examination in the Light of Authoritative Intervention.' *International Review of Literary Studies*, 4(1), 18–30.
- Bennett, A. & Royle, N., 2015, *This thing called literature: Reading, thinking, writing*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Borda-Niño-Wildman, C., 2018, *The medicalisation of incest and abuse: Biomedical and indigenous perceptions in Rural Bolivia*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Doane, J. & Hodges, D., 2001, *Telling incest: Narratives of dangerous remembering from Stein to Sapphire*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.
- El Saadawi, N., 1975, *Woman at point zero*, Zed Books Ltd., London.
- Grant, C., 1993, *Uncle vampire*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, NY.
- Haynes, E., 2012, *Into the Darkest Corner*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York.
- Hooks, B., 1984, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, Routledge, New York.
- Hooks, B., 1986, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women', *Feminist Review*, 23, 125–138.
- Johnson, D., 2012, 'Interpersonal factors', in C. Figley (ed.), *Encyclopedia of trauma: An interdisciplinary guide*, p. 311, Sage, London.
- Kirton, B., 2011, *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect in Contemporary Caribbean Society*, Authorhouse, Bloomington.
- Leavy, P., 2013, *Fiction as research practice: Short stories, Novellas and Novels*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Leavy, P. & Harris, A., 2011, *Contemporary feminist research from theory to practice*, The Guilford Press, London.
- Lutfiyya, A. & Churchill, C., 2012, *Readings in Arab middle eastern societies and cultures*, Mouton and Co. Printers, Paris.
- Machi, L. & McEvoy, B., 2012, *The literature review: Six steps to success*, Sage, London.
- Masson, J., 2013, *A dark science: Women, sexuality and psychiatry in the nineteenth century*, Ginny Glass and Untreed Reads Publishing, San Francisco, CA.
- Ottenheimer, M., 1996, *Forbidden relatives: The American myth of cousin marriage*, University of Illinois Press.
- Perry, R., 2012, 'Human trafficking', in C. Figley (ed.), *Encyclopedia of trauma: An interdisciplinary guide*, Sage, London.
- Pollak, E., 2009, 'Incest', in E. Wallace (ed.), *Encyclopedia of feminist literary theory*, Routledge, London, p. 300.
- Reyes, G., Elhai, J. & Ford, J., 2015, *The encyclopedia of psychological trauma*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., Trenton, NJ.
- Rundle, L. & Mandell, N., 2000, 'Qualitative methodologies', in L. Code (ed.), *Encyclopedia of feminist theories*, p. 413, Routledge, London.
- Showalter, E., 1981, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry* 8, 179–205.
- Spillers, H., 2003, *Black, white, and in color: Essays on American literature and culture*, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Swiontkowski, G., 2003, *Imagining incest: Sexton, plath, rich, and olds on life with daddy*, Associated University Press, London.
- Woolf, A., 2004, *Conceptualizing 'incest' in western and Arab cultures: A comparative approach in the context of literary studies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Woolf, A., 2014, *Incest avoidance and the incest taboos: Two aspects of human nature*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Wolf, A. & Durham, W., 2005, *Inbreeding, incest, and incest taboo: The state of knowledge at the turn of the century*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Zane, 2005, *Breaking the cycle*, Strebor Books International, New York, NY.