

# Narrative and Subversion: A Reading of Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames*

**Z.D. Lalmangaihzauva**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Saiha College, Mizoram

## Abstract

This paper examines the subversive nature of Chris Abani's narrative in the novel *The Virgin of Flames*. The process of storytelling is often narrative constructions of identity that involves tensions and contradictions in its attempt to represent the subject in relation to the larger human society. Narrativizing produces gaps, fissures, and boundary trouble and the subject's position is never fixed or stable. The act of narrativizing is a process of identity construction because there is no single unified self that is capable of representing past experiences in its totality. This paper attempts a close reading of the selected text and locates the multiple ways in which Abani's narrative subverts dominant identities concerning gender, race, sexuality, and religion. In the light of relevant critical theories, it explores the myriad ways in which the narrative in *The Virgin of Flames* subverts and delegitimizes societal norms and dominant narratives without resorting to blatant didacticism.

**Keywords:** narrative, subversion, power, gender

*The Virgin of Flames* (2008) by Chris Abani is a novel that deals with the story of a mural artist in Los Angeles named Black. Chris Abani is a writer from Nigeria who had settled in the United States. He is one of the most celebrated contemporary literary figures to have emerged from Nigeria. Abani, along with his contemporaries constitute what critics term as Third Generation Nigerian writers.

The process of storytelling is often narrative constructions of identity that involves tensions and contradictions in its attempt to represent the subject in relation to the larger human society. Narrativizing produces gaps, fissures, and boundary trouble and the subject's position is never fixed or stable. The act of narrativizing is a process of identity construction because there is no single unified self that is capable of representing past experiences in its totality.

Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and "narrative necessity" rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness, although we have no compunction about calling stories true or false. (Bruner 4-5)

Even autobiographical narratives cannot claim to be representation of one absolute reality. "Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied" (Smith and Watson 375), and there cannot be life stories that articulate unified coherent selves. Within the domain of literary representation, narratology occupies a significant area of study as it "both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects" (Culler 83).

The protagonist in *The Virgin of Flames* is a mural artist named Black. Son of a migrant Nigerian father and a Salvadoran mother, Black's life and his art raise complex questions regarding race, gender, sexuality, and religion. Set in the crumbling, beautiful parts of East Los Angeles where Hispanic and African Americans live, the novel gives an insight into the life of the protagonist Black, a mural artist trying to make a living and attempting to come to terms with his gender, sexuality, race and faith through his art. A great deal of Black's confusion comes from the clash between his orthodox upbringing and his quest for artistic liberation. Tensions between the desires of the body- its self- destructive urges, and the spirit as mediated by ritual, sex, and art features prominently in the novel. Born of an atheist Nigerian father who was a NASA scientist and a devout Catholic Salvadoran mother who single-handedly raised him after his father died, Black's quest for the meaning of faith and spirituality continues to the end of the novel. Black uses his art as a means to come to terms with his internal struggles, and the narrative employs several symbols and images to dramatize Black's encounter with the dominant ideas and identities of race, gender, sexuality, and faith which often limit and position Black as a marginalized subject in the society. Black struggles for a sense of identity and the narrative portrays the tension between his orthodox upbringing and his quest for liberation.

The novel begins with Black painting his face white and wearing a dress for his artistic experiment to paint the Virgin Mary. Black is also obsessed with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl. After Black's father died, his mother, a devout Christian took to beating him and forces him to confess before the Virgin and to pray for a miracle. Probably haunted by this complex childhood relationship with religion and spirituality, Black is haunted by angel Gabriel who often appears before Black. Black's attempt to paint a mural of the Virgin results in a disturbing image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding an AK-47 rifle. The title *The Virgin of Flames* has been taken from an incident during Black's childhood in which he sets the Virgin Mary on fire at church during prayer. Towards the end of the novel, Black, who appears from a rooftop wearing makeup and a dress, is mistaken for a miracle by the crowd who witness from a distance below. The novel that ends with Black violently attacking Sweet Girl after a ritual-like incident in which she taught him how to conceal his penis with a tape in order to look like a girl, invites a close observation of the complex nature of violence in the novel.

Gender and sexuality are important aspects of Black's life story. As a struggling artist Black does not have enough money to hire models for his paintings, and on one occasion he dressed up as a woman in order to paint the Virgin of Guadalupe:

Since he was broke he couldn't afford to hire any models, which is why he was sitting in front of the mirror trying on face paint. He intended to dress up as her and use himself as a model, painting a more detailed cartoon from his reflection. (Abani, *The Virgin* 5)

This seems like a practical necessity faced by a struggling artist, but what added complexity to the issue is Black's own confusion with his sexuality and his obsession with a transvestite stripper named Sweet Girl. Black's deceased father was an Igbo man from Nigeria and due to the fear of an evil spirit that threatened to kill all male offspring in his family before turning six, Black was dressed up as a girl till the age of seven. Black's perspective on gender and sexuality is also deeply influenced by his late mother, an over-zealous Christian who told him that he is her punishment from God for getting pregnant before she was married to Black's father. She gave the name Black to him as a reminder of her shame and emptiness,

and often forced his son to confess before the Virgin. As a result, Black seems to be caught up with a moral dilemma between the sacred and the profane, with his early zealous religious upbringing haunting him in the form of angel Gabriel. This deep confusion manifested in one of his artistic attempts to paint a mural of the Virgin which finally turned out to be a disturbing image of a Muslim woman strangling a dove and holding what appears to be an AK-47.

There are various instances in the novel which suggest that Black masks his latent desire to subvert gender norms with an artistic experiment because he could not allow himself to dress as a woman due to his deeply religious upbringing. He is curious about his sexuality but also seems to suffer from internalized homophobia due to social and religious conditioning. He could accept his infatuation for the transsexual stripper Sweet Girl because she identifies herself as a woman, and he justifies his attraction towards her as this does not count as a homosexual attraction in his view. Even though “he had known Sweet Girl was a transsexual...he couldn’t stop thinking of her as a girl. It was the only way Black could accept his desire for her” (Abani, *The Virgin* 28). Despite being an artist in Los Angeles, a liberal and cosmopolitan environment, Black inwardly carries the burden of his race and sexual orientation. His deep confusion with gender and sexuality could largely be a result of internalized homophobia, a condition in which individuals are subjected to society’s negative perceptions regarding LGBTQ people and turn those ideas inward and subscribe to those negative perceptions. Black’s psychological turmoil and confusion coincides with the definition of internalized homophobia by Meyer and Dean as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (161). This phenomenon is a part of the larger problem of minority stress which is defined as “some kind of conflict or disharmony between the minority member and the dominant social environment. For gay men and lesbians, this conflict is expressed in discordant values and norms regarding sexuality, intimacy, and, more generally, human existence and purpose” (Meyer and Dean 161). Black is caught up in the complex web of power relations that created systemic violence on the basis of race, class, religion, gender, and sexual identities. Whiteness, Christianity and heterosexuality form the dominant power structure which the narrative perpetually attempts to subvert. Through performance, mimicry, as well as rejection, the narrative subverts these dominant identities. The narrative created a liminal space for marginal identities to emerge by doing away with binaries. But Black, the individual is capable of resistance and subversion only to a certain extent through his art as these power structures are often too dominant and pervasive, often posing limits on individuals. The title of the novel *The Virgin of Flames* is itself subversive; it conjures an image of a burning Virgin Mary, having been taken from a scene in which Black set the statue of the Virgin on fire during his childhood. After constant beatings from his mother who forces her to confess his sins and pray for a revelation of the Virgin, nine-year-old Black felt that he heard a voice during mass on Sunday.

She asked him to free her. Demanded. Ordered. Compelled...

His mother was on her knees, eyes closed, pounding out the act of contrition on her chest, oblivious to the world when he snuck away. Stopping in front of the statue, Black lifted one of the votive candles and placed it behind her, by the old parchment dry robes she wore and snuck back to his place next to his mother. The flame caught just as the priest was yelling at Jesus to come to his aid and show the congregation a sign, “to come like Yahweh to Elijah,” in a voice all fire.

So.

She became the e Virgin of Flames.

Perhaps it had been a miracle. (Abani, *The Virgin* 134)

In Black's final encounter with Sweet Girl where she exposed her body to him and taught him how to look like her, he was curious but said to her "You know I'm not gay," (280) reasserting his fear of embracing his sexuality. Black then violently attacked Sweet Girl in a sudden moment of frenzy, apparently due to his realization that Sweet Girl mirrors the person he is deep inside but which he is afraid to embrace because of his internalized homophobia. It is ironic that violence against Sweet Girl is not from a heterosexual man, but from a person who struggles with his own masculinity and gender identity. The novel is a chronicle of the deep turmoil and psychological conflict that Black deals with in coming to terms with societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. He is a victim of systemic violence that structures his personality as well as his reality beginning from his childhood, and he lacks agency. His act of violence, though not justifiable, seems to erupt from deep frustration and anger against societal norms created by the structures of power that exist.

The climactic scene of the novel in which Black, who appeared at a rooftop wearing a wedding gown is mistaken by the "crowd of the faithful gathered below" (Abani 288) as the Virgin is symbolic of Butler's theory of gender performativity. According to Judith Butler:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (25)

The scene affirms that the 'sacred' is not an essence but a construct of society based on its mass acceptance. This reiterates Foucault's idea that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, and Arendt's view that "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (44). The absence of essence behind gender identity and its performativity has been dramatized in the scene where people blindly accepts the bleeding Black in a wedding gown as the virgin because Black in this scene unintentionally performs a role that seems to fit the image of the Virgin for the spectators below. The sacred in religion or other institution acquires sanctity not because of its essential quality but because of the power of collective consent of acceptance as the sacred.

He should do something about it, he thought. Tell everyone the truth. There was no Virgin, it was him in a dress, a stolen dress, on the roof of the spaceship. He couldn't let them go on believing. Not when they were making their kids sleep outside in tents. But how? (Abani, *The Virgin* 93)

The fact that Black, a person of black colour could be mistaken from a distance as the Virgin due to face paint and costume symbolize the socially constructed nature of gender and racial identities as well as the

sacred in religion. Throughout the novel, Abani's narrative continuously subverts fixed identities and norms, even if the protagonist, Black, lacks agency to transcend. Commenting on *The Virgin of Flames*, Amanda Aycock states, "It is about being biracial. It is about being of uncertain gender and sexuality. It is about being multicultural. It is about being human and not categories" (18). This liminal space and marginalised identity represented by Black forms the basis of systemic violence that affects his life. It draws attention towards issues of marginality in terms of race, gender and sexuality. According to Madhu Krishnan,

*The Virgin of Flames*, read as part of Abani's larger body of writing, draws upon recurring themes of becoming and belonging, tradition and ritual, and transformation and performance which directly respond to the construction and (re)construction of what it means to be African and speak of an African identity in the context of global capitalism, migration, and travelling theory and travelling tradition. (48)

The novel's introduction of the protagonist Black begins with an artistic experiment which plays with a deeper symbolism on race:

White.

Black sat before the mirror applying paste to his face. Face paint really, but it was thick like wallpaper paste...he had to get the right shade of white...He studied his face from several angles, imagining in that pause Miss Havisham sitting in front of a mottled wedding cake in a mottled wedding dress, both of which were the color of the paste on his face, an aging ivory that recalled the musty smell of empire in decline, a sad color really. Whose empire he had no idea. (Abani, *The Virgin* 4)

The protagonist, a person of colour who also has the name Black attempts to look like the Virgin of Guadalupe in order to use himself as a model for his artistic project to paint a mural of the Virgin. This could be read as a symbolic destabilization of race, gender, as well as religious identities which form the power structures in the society, and the novel is riddled with several instances in which boundaries between black and white, male and female, the sacred and the profane have been blurred. According to feminist theologian Lisa Isherwood,

Cross-dressing is an ingenious tool as it does not fit categories of sex or gender alone and as such exposes both and so in this way is a form of gender iconography, making visible the spaces of possibility which are closed off by dichotomous conceptualization. (Quoted in Stobie 175)

In trying to recreate the looks of the Virgin Mary, Black pictures her hair to be blonde since there is no proof regarding her actual hair colour. The image that he visualized of Mary is more like Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich. This image of the Virgin that is peppered with the world of entertainment and glamour is the exact opposite of simplicity and humility that the Virgin Mary has been culturally associated with. Black is also perpetually haunted by an angel, but the angel that Black encounters is quite removed from the images and celestial attributes traditionally associated with angels. His encounter with Angel Gabriel has been portrayed in the narrative in a very casual manner, which further takes away the divinity associated with angels and reduces it to an ordinary earthly entity. The narrative indicated that "Angel Gabriel, sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon, had

taken to stalking him” (Abani, *The Virgin* 6), conflating existing image of an angel with a pigeon. The angel’s appearance has been described as stalking, and there is complete absence of Black considering Angel Gabriel as a miraculous revelation. Instead, what follows is a description of how Black “circled the paper the way Ali would circle the ring to psyche out his opponents” (7) in preparation for painting the Virgin. The analogy drawn to Muhammad Ali, a black boxer who also became a Muslim to describe Black’s preparation for painting an image of the Virgin juxtaposes two very contradictory images and disturbs the binary between the sacred and the profane. The following lines further unsettles the age old accepted concept of the sacred associated with the Virgin Mary:

With his eyes closed he made a paper angel, then rolled about on the paper, making sure that his body touched every inch of it. He believed that this way, his body was one with the paper and that when he painted he could conceptualize very accurately the dimension needed. He made all his models do it. Again, it was ritual. (Abani 7)

There are several instances in the narrative that symbolically subvert and challenge the power of dominant identities such as Black’s purchase of online reverend-hood from the NewWineChurchofGod.com to the transsexual Barbie and a Jesus doll with a penis made by his artist friend Iggy. Through pervasive usage of image of fluidity, Abani unsettles binaries as Cheryl Stobie observes, “The reader is denied simple responses such as the solace of traditional religion or easy satire, but must grapple with the dialectic between differences in cultures, beliefs, and shifting sexualities” (170).

Similar to Black, Elvis, the protagonist in the novel *GraceLand* by Abani uses art and performance to subvert and resist the power structures of society. Elvis’s father Sunday attempts to maintain authority and control through patriarchal social norms, but Elvis continues to delegitimize this through impersonation and performances that do not subscribe to societal norms of patriarchy and masculinity. He witnessed the rape of his cousin sister Efua by his uncle Joseph and he was also raped by the same man while he was a boy. His experience and knowledge of masculinity have been associated with violence, coercion, rape, and incest. So, he destabilizes the notion of patriarchy and masculinity through simulacrum. According to Ouma,

For Black and Elvis...there is a porous line between masculinity and femininity and their biological corollaries- maleness and femaleness. Both Elvis and Black perform androgyny. Sexual difference for them is a technique of dealing with the memory of a troubled parentage, of finding a way to earn a living and negotiating the multicultural worlds of contemporary city life. (84)

To conclude, Abani’s narrative often lacks a sense of closure, and his narrative can also be regarded as morally ambiguous in certain aspects. In an interview with Yogita Goyal he expresses, “As a writer, I am often opening up questions and exploring them with characters such that the work never shuts down, never ends and, in the end, never takes a definitive side” (Abani, “A Deep Humanness” 231). This could be a result of certain reservations on the part of the author to make his creative works too didactic, due to a deeper insight into the complexity of the issues dealt with. Therefore, Abani has employed a narrative which may not always explicitly condemn injustice but uses his art of storytelling to subvert social institutions and norms that contribute to injustice.

**Works Cited:**

1. Abani, Chris. "A Deep Humanness, a Deep Grace: Interview with Chris Abani." Interview by Yogita Goyal. *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Africa and the Black Atlantic (Fall 2014), pp. 227-240. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979).
2. ---. *The Virgin of Flames*. Vintage Books, 2008.
3. Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Harcourt, 1970.
4. Aycock, Amanda. "Becoming Black and Elvis: Transnational and Performative Identity in the novels of Chris Abani." *Safundi :The Journal of South African and American Studies*, Vol. 10, No.1 (2009), pp.11-25. [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com).
5. Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No.1 (Autumn,1991), pp.1-21. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1343711](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343711).
6. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
7. Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
8. Krishnan, Madhu. "Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure in the Third Generation Nigerian Novel." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2010), pp. 185-195. [www.rupkatha.com/V2/N2/BiafraandNigerianNovel.pdf](http://www.rupkatha.com/V2/N2/BiafraandNigerianNovel.pdf)
9. Meyer, Ilan H & Laura Dean. "Internalised Homophobia, Intimacy, and Sexual Behavior among Gay and Bisexual Men." *Stigma and Sexual Orientation*. Edited by Gregory M. Herek. Sage, 1998, pp. 160-186.
10. Ouma, Christopher E.W. "'In the name of the son': Fatherhood's Critical Legitimacy, Sonhood and Masculinities in Chris Abani's GraceLand and The Virgin of Flames." *English in Africa*, Vol.38. NO.2, (August, 2011), pp.77-93. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23074952>
11. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. "The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists." *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz. Blackwell, 2005.
12. Stobie, Cheryl. "Indecent Theology, Trans-theology, and the Transgendered Madonna in Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames*." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Achebe's World: African Literature at Fifty (summer, 2011), pp. 170-183. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979).