

**“WICKEDNESS IS A WOMAN:” EXPLORING FEMALE AGGRESSION IN
OPAL PALMER ADISA’S *IT BEGINS WITH TEARS* AND MARIE-ELENA JOHN’S
*UNBURNABLE***

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**A final research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree
of:**

Master of Arts

May 6, 2024

**Department of English
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In the early stages of Caribbean literature, it was a male-dominated canon, where writers looked to define a Caribbean national identity and explored various thematic concerns pertaining to the experiences of Caribbean people. However, this often-excluded women's, fictional or factual, experiences in the Caribbean. With the emergence of feminist consciousness, came an awareness of how women were portrayed in male-written fiction, as well as the rise of women's literary voices. Caribbean women's fiction surveys vast thematic concerns having to do with a Caribbean national identity by using and placing emphasis on female characters. However, they also expanded the thematic concerns explored in the Caribbean literary field. In the chapter "Caribbean Women's Writing," Wisker explains that women writers in the Caribbean often explore themes of identity, relationships, mother tongue, mothering, and motherhood (224). Moreover, Caribbean women's fiction explores the intersectionality of factors such as gender, identity, race, colonialism, and post-colonial experiences. Caribbean female writers have expanded Caribbean Literature and revolutionized postcolonial studies by featuring female characters as central protagonists in their written work. It gives the female character a voice within the historical context of the Caribbean. An impressive list of female writers from across the whole of the Caribbean form part of the genre. Notable Caribbean women writers include Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Dionne Brand, Opal Palmer Adisa, Myriam Chancy, and Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, who have made important contributions to the literary field by exploring an array of themes.

One thematic concern that can be common among the work of these Caribbean women is that of the complexities and ambiguities of female relationships. In some of their works of fiction, these female writers portray tight-knit communities of women who serve as a source of support, comfort, and strength upon violent and traumatic experiences. The solidarity found

among these communities enables women to resist oppression, heal from past traumas, and navigate through difficult landscapes. Particularly, in the contexts where women are often marginalized or oppressed such representations of positive communities of women offer a powerful commentary on the importance of building strong and positive bonds between them. However, some of these writers also depict the dark side of female relationships. Women are often taught to compete, compare, and undermine each other as a result of internalization of patriarchal beliefs. This results in a lack of a sense of sisterhood and community, which trigger women into acts of aggression towards each other.

As a result of gender norms, acts of violence, hostility, and aggression have been associated with men. Therefore, men have traditionally been expected to be protective, brave, competitive, aggressive, and violent. These attributes are often emphasized in female-centered texts resulting in the portrayal of men as aggressors and perpetrators of violence against women. On the other hand, some female characters are often perceived as incapable of inflicting pain upon others as they are perceived as tender, caring, empathetic, compassionate, and nurturing. As a result, violence against women is typically perceived as being more visible when perpetrated by men rather than women. However, the novels *It Begins with Tears* by Opal Palmer Adisa and *Unburnable* by Marie-Elena John, challenge this perception by depicting women-on-women violence. Both novels showcase how women can form strong relationships with each other but are also capable of being aggressors. The female characters in both novels use two types of aggression: direct and indirect. These two types of aggression are to bring harm to the female protagonist of these novels. The perpetrators are other female characters who have been influenced by factors such as jealousy, class, sexuality, and race.

First, it is important to understand that violence is a complex concept that has plagued humanity all throughout history and has been recognized as a “growing global public health problem” (Rutherford et.al. 676). The concept of ‘violence’ is quite difficult to define because of its multiple manifestations and context-dependent nature. In simple terms, it is defined as the use of force, coercion, or power to cause harm upon an individual, community, or society (Rutherford et.al 676). Violence can manifest in various forms such as physical, psychological, sexual, cultural, and economic. Additionally, the perception of violence and aggressive behavior can be shaped by cultural and societal norms, as well as power structures and historical contexts.

The Caribbean, like many regions of the world, has been influenced by a history of violent events that have shaped its culture and society. Caribbean literature often addresses the violent exploitation of indigenous peoples and the forced labor of African slaves at the hands of European colonizers. Many scholars have examined the concept of violence from different perspectives to provide insightful approaches and interpretations of it. Several theorists have examined and analyzed the complexities of violence in the Caribbean region from various perspectives. A notable theorist who has broached this subject is Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. Fanon's work explored the consequences of colonial violence upon the psyche of an individual and the process of decolonization. His views of violence depended on the notion of violence as two antagonistic forces. He proposes that violence is a weapon for colonization as well as a necessity to the process of decolonization.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he briefly examines the experience of women in the context of violence and acknowledges the role of women in the process of decolonization. A topic which female writers in Caribbean literature often explore. Furthermore, in *Black Skin White Mask*, Fanon briefly discusses the intersection of violence and gender and the

consequences they may produce on a woman's psyche. Yet, his work primarily examined the experience of the black man under colonial rule. He only acknowledged black women in relation to black and white men and not as oppressed individual. Therefore, Fanon fails to provide a broad analysis of how women experience objectification not only under colonial rule, but also within their own societies. Kalisa confirms this in her exploration of violence in Francophone African and Caribbean women's literature, where she explores the pain and trauma suffered by female characters after various public and private acts of violence. She states that Fanon "neglected to question the social inequalities between men and women that existed in pre-colonial and colonial Africa and the colonial Caribbean" (186). Even though, violence against women in the Caribbean region has deep roots in the legacy of colonialism.

In their book *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence through Caribbean Discourse*, Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef, through the study of Caribbean real-life and fictional discourses, reveal that "Caribbean social structure - and more specifically the ideological and social constructs of gender is rooted in epistemic and social abuses of slavery and imperialism" (10). The institution of slavery had an enormous impact on both the male and female slaves' psyche. For male slaves, the experience involved constant threats of violence, physical labor, harsh discipline, corporeal punishment, and acts of humiliation. While female slaves also experienced the same physical and physiological abuses as male slaves, they faced additional acts of violence as result of their gender. Female slaves often experienced sexual exploitation and violence at the hands of masters and overseers. This resulted in a sense of powerlessness and inferiority complex on both male and female slaves.

Even though they developed coping mechanisms and resistance strategies, the trauma inflicted by the slave system impacted generations, not only those who experienced it but also its

descendants. For example, the black man exerting his power by reducing a black or white woman into a sexual object as with the female body they can appease their inferiority complex. Fanon explores this in Chapter three “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” where he examines René Maran’s *A Man Like Any Other*. He asserts that “The majority of them, including those of lighter skin who often go to the extreme of denying both their countries and their mothers, tend to marry in Europe not so much out of love as for the satisfaction of being the master of a European woman; and a certain tang of proud revenge enters into this” (Fanon 69). This objectification of the female body to exert dominance as an act of revenge and ownership of power perpetuates a cycle of violence and gender inequalities.

Thus, this leads the discussion to the concept of gender-based violence. This manifestation of violence is directed against a person based on their gender. Generally, it is more recognized as violence against women because of gender disparities (Rutherford et.al. 677). It manifests in various forms, such as physical, sexual, and psychological harm against women. According to statistics, the most common manifestation of gender-based violence is domestic violence with perpetrators generally being men (WHO 5). However, when discussing gender-based violence there is little to no mention of women-against-women aggression. Despite the feminist movements promoting sisterhood and close emotional relationship among women, it is essential to recognize that woman can be harmful to each other. Chesler, upon the study and survey of women’s behavior and literature, states that women are naturally predisposed to perform intra-gender aggression, which is further perpetuated by patriarchal civilization (79). Therefore, not only men can perpetuate violence against women. Example of women-on-women violence can be observed in Opal Palmer Adisa’s novel *It Begins with Tears*.

Jamaican poet, novelist, performance artist and educator Opal Palmer Adisa is renewed for her significant literary contributions. With a doctorate degree, she has shared her writing and literature expertise at well-known universities such as California College of the Arts and Stanford University. Adisa has authored multiple poetry collections, novels, and collections of short stories, such as *It Begins with Tears*, *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories*, and "*Until Judgement Comes*." Her accomplishments include being a multiple award-winning poet, the American Book Award recipient, and a prolific writer whose writing has been included in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and other publications. Renowned authors like Alice Walker and Ishmael Reed have acknowledged Adisa for her storytelling skills and cultural engagement, underscoring her important influence on Caribbean literature. Born outside of Kingston, Jamaica, Adisa incorporates Jamaican Patois throughout the narrative and dialogue of her texts, particularly observed in *It Begins with Tears*, to reflect the cultural and heritage of Jamaica where the story is set. Adisa's use of Jamaican Patois helps to evoke the sense of community and shared cultural heritage that is central to the novel's themes.

Opal Palmer Adisa's novel *It Begins with Tears* centers around a group of women in Kristoff Village in rural Jamaica. The life of these women is disrupted when the charming, sensual, and seductive Monica returns to the village. With her return, she captures the attention of the men in the village and uncovers the wickedness and malice of women. Even though, Monica intended to keep away from other women and idle gossip, it was not so in Kristoff Village. Upon dismounting the bus, Monica encounters the hostility of some women in the village. Here, Adisa presents the first act Monica encounters of indirect aggression. She writes, "Whore! The wives spat, their grudging admiration fueling their anger, and pretended they didn't

see her” (Palmer Adisa 28). Here, the wives of the village begin name calling, gossiping, and ignoring Monica upon her arrival back to the village.

Phyllis Chesler writes in *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* that women are more likely to engage in indirect forms of aggression than men. Chesler defines indirect aggression as “characterized by a clique of relatively powerless (compared with their male counterparts) girls or women who exert power “indirectly” by bullying, gossiping about, slandering, and shaming one girl or woman so that she will be shunned by her female intimates...” (XIII). It is not much different than physical aggression as it aims to harm an individual. Indirect aggression does cause damage in covert ways in which no harm can be inflicted upon the perpetrator. Gossip is a powerful tool used by women to undermine each other and with it they can shun each other from communities. In *Idle Talk, Deadly Talk: The Uses of Gossip in Caribbean Literature*, Ana Rodriguez Navas explores the complexity of gossip within Caribbean discourses. According to Rodriguez Navas, “Gossip, in confronting the fraught, unstable realities of the Caribbean, emerges as not just a tool but a weapon: a system for self-assertion and resistance, but also at times for oppression and the suppression of dissent” (5-6). It is a term with multiple meanings and many manifestations. Rodriguez Navas highlights that it can be trivial and idle exchange, however, following the multiple meanings of ‘gossip’ she recalls it can “corrode social ties, disempower individuals, and silence dissenting voices” (24). Nevertheless, she also discusses that in some instances it serves a positive purpose such as building and fostering intimate communities and a tool of resistance for the disenfranchised.

Following the above-mentioned, it can be concluded that gossip can serve a malicious purpose and is closely related to social ties. Although it is often associated with women, a study shows that men do gossip with their romantic partners but do not use it with any malicious intent

(McAndrew 197). However, some women do use gossip with malicious intent. Women's use of gossip serves the purpose of isolating an individual from social groups and damaging their ability to establish a community among other women. In the case of Kristoff Village, the novel presents these village women spreading negative information to be able to manipulate Monica's reputation in Kristoff Village. They criticize Monica's appearance, call her a whore and shameful woman mere minutes after she arrives at the village. Furthermore, they question who would befriend such a woman. It is in these subtle ways that these women discuss their discontent with Monica's arrival, which raises the question of why these women are being aggressive towards another.

It is important to note that Monica is described as a woman who caused "a lustful disturbance... no matter how casual and indifferent she behaved" (Adisa 25). She was a woman who commanded the attention of men wherever she stood. At her arrival, she wore a "tight-fitting navy-blue dress with red polka-dot that came in at her knees then flounced out around her strong calves," which also showed her ample breast and behind (Adisa 27). The village wives are jealous of Monica and threatened by what she signifies. Adisa when describing some of these gossiping women uses the term 'wives' to display in a sense what they were afraid to lose. With Monica's arrival, these women feared the loss of their husbands to a much more attractive and sensual woman. These women saw Monica as rival, threatening their relationships with their husbands or men within the village.

By analyzing the malicious gossip directed towards Monica, the narrative exposes how women use gossip as an indirect form of aggression to cause harm to other females. Publicly shaming her had the intent of undermining Monica's sexual appeal for her to not gain male attention and lower the risk of infidelity. Thus, depicting intrasexual rivalry between same sex-

peers. This concept is defined as “the struggle between members of one sex to increase their access to members of the other sex as sexual partners” (Polo et al.). According to Tania Reynolds, intrasexual rivalry between women stems from a matrilineal line that depended on males for resources. The loss of the male would mean the loss of the provider. Additionally, studies show that physically attractive women evoke feelings of jealousy, more so if they have “feminine faces, large breasts and a low waist-to-hip ratio” and “especially when primed with the threat of infidelity” (Reynolds). This explains some of the discontent the wives of the village feel upon Monica’s arrival as they know from other idle gossip that she is known for sleeping with other women’s husbands.

Another clear example of female rivalry is presented in the section “Su-su” of chapter two of *It Begins with Tears*. In this section, the reader meets three important women, Peggy, Grace, and Marva, who are “bosom friends”, similar to her husbands, Trevor, Desmond and Ainsworth (Adisa 59). First, the reader is met with Peggy, the wife of Trevor Campbell, as she recalls Monica’s arrival in Kristoff Village. Before her arrival, Peggy states she was already anxious about Monica’s move back to the village as she had heard from word of mouth that back in the city, “Monica was a big-time whore” (Adisa 62). Upon seeing Monica’s physical attractiveness, the narrator presents Peggy’s body insecurity as she compares herself, a mother of two children, with Monica, an older woman without children. Peggy’s discontent, spitefulness, and jealousy is presented throughout the narration:

Peggy was deeply disturbed. She had two boys and had been thinking about a third child lately. Monica didn't have any children. Her body hadn't gone through any wear and tear. She was barren. All she did was fuck men, other women's men. Bitch. Whore. Curse her womb and her pussy. Peggy spoke aloud in the empty room. (Adisa 61)

Here, her discontent lies in that Monica does not have children, is physically attractive, owns her sexuality and is not above stealing other women's men. All these factors end up with Peggy cursing Monica's body as she compares it with her own. Yet, no physical altercation had occurred at this point, but it is not discarded. At the end of the section, Adisa closes the narration by having Peggy state "She had a bone to pick, but she would wait her time," which hints at the future violent act against Monica that Peggy and her friends will perform (63).

Not only are these women envious of Monica's beauty, but they also find fault in her behavior as a woman. As a female character, Monica strays from the conventional role that women play in the village. For instance, Monica does not work with her hands, is a known sex worker, embraces her sensuality and freely expresses her sexuality. Moreover, at her forty years of age, Monica is not a mother and this the wives query as they state "And she barren too. Not a picknie fi bring her water in her old age" (Adisa 28). Here, through Jamaican patois, Adisa exhibits how Monica does not have a child who one day will take care of her in her old age. Another example lies in Peggy's narration, she also emphasized that Monica did not have any children, which is not conventional for a Jamaican woman of her age. In relation to the roles of women in the Caribbean, Powell discusses that a women's role can be that of a caretaker where childbearing and child-rearing is primordial (102). Clarke noted the following:

Not only is sexual activity regarded as natural: it is unnatural not to have a child and no woman who has not proved that she can bear one is likely to find a man to be responsible for her since 'no man is going to propose marriage to such a woman'. Maternity is a normal and desirable state, and the childless woman is an object of pity, contempt, or derision (qtd in Powell 103).

Women's role in society is often tied to that of motherhood and Monica's choice of not having children creates animosity within the female community of Kristoff. These women do not pity Monica for the fact that she is not a mother but show contempt in the way they refer to her. It speaks on the internalized sexism that pushes women into reinforcing traditional gender roles by judging, dismissing, and belittling other women. Thus, demonstrating the complexity of female relationships as at times women place high expectation upon each other. Gossip around Monica results out of jealousy, sexuality, and class difference. Its intent is to ostracize Monica from forming bonds in the community; but, unbeknownst to them she did not wish to intrude upon the village but rather live a tranquil life.

On the other hand, in the novel *Unburnable* by Marie-Elena John, gossip manifests differently than in Adisa's *It Begins with Tears*, as it manifests in a much more public sphere. Marie-Elena John is an Antiguan writer who is best known for her novel *Unburnable* published in 2006. This novel receiving praises such as Best Debut in 2006 and nominations for renowned literary awards such as the International Dublin Literary Award. She is not only a writer, but also a social justice activist. John specializes on African development and women's rights, and she presently serves as Senior Racial Justice Lead at UN Women. As *Unburnable* moves from past to present, it explores themes of African origins of Caribbean culture, African religion, and resistance to slavery in the island of Dominica. Born and raised in Antigua, Marie-Elena John draws on her knowledge of the African Diaspora in the Caribbean to craft the novel that explores the island's history, culture, and mythology.

Unburnable tells the story of three generations of women, Matilda, Iris, and Lillian, as they navigate the trials and turbulations that they experience in Dominica. In this novel, violence is a present theme where vicious acts are committed to and by female characters. Here, gossip is

presented by *Chanté Mas* songs called “Matilda Swinging,” “Bottle of Coke,” and “Naked as They Born,” through which the story of Matilda and Iris are told. For instance, the song “Matilda Swinging,” through veiled lyrics, tells the story of Matilda, an Obeah woman from an African community called Up There, who was hanged after being found guilty of the murder of her daughter’s lover. While the song “Bottle of Coke,” tells the story of Iris, a half Carib and black woman, who was raped with a bottle of coke by her lover’s mother-in-law. After the events that inspired these songs, they are sung by the *chantuelle* during the masquerade, played on the radio or sung by children while playing about. Therefore, demonstrating the popularity of these events in the public sphere. As a result, these songs prompt these women to live in exile.

In the chapter “Crime, Punishment and retribution: The Politics of Sisterhood Interrupted in Marie-Elena John’s *Unburnable*,” Thorington Springer states that gossip, through the *Chanté Mas* songs, discredit and humiliate both Matilda and Iris. She argues that “the various calypso, folkloric and storytelling practices referenced in Caribbean literature illuminate the various tensions and ongoing warring within Caribbean spaces as they relate to politics and culture” (Thorington Springer). Thus, Thorington Springer explains that gossip serves the purpose of creating public narratives that emphasize an individual’s ‘otherness’ to marginalize and disempower them. Iris, and Matilda’s ‘otherness’ lies in that they live opposed to what is common in Dominican society. Thorington Springer provides multiple examples in which these women oppose what is conventional, which result in their exile from Dominican society, predominantly seen with Iris.

In the article, Thorington Springer refers to these acts of opposition as crimes due to her perception of the acts of aggression performed as punishments. First, their crimes lie in the opposition of conventional roles women perform as stipulated by society. Matilda is an Obeah

priestess who has a high rank in her community. Therefore, she does not follow the conventional religious practice performed in Dominica. Furthermore, she takes part in a leadership role in her community where African practices are performed and where women are placed in high regard. While, in Dominica, women take the role of caregiver, wife, or nun, not necessarily a leadership role. On the other hand, Iris, from a young age, has expressed her sexuality rather openly. For example, she is the one who initiated her relationship with John Baptiste, the son of a rich family, by presenting herself to him in a public setting. Upon seeing Iris propositioning herself publicly, John Baptiste takes her up on the offer and makes her his lover. However, the article does not mention an important aspect of their relationship, which is worth noting. John and Iris's lovemaking is not limited to the cover of darkness that a night tryst may provide. They engage in these sexual activities during the day, so loud that the nearby washerwomen can hear it. As a result, these women, Matilda and Iris, are shunned from the community, become victims of aggression, and ultimately perish alone. Even after their death, the *Chanté Mas* songs remain and they may appear as amusing stories, but they hurt Lillian, the main character of the novel.

Long after her mother and grandmother are gone, Lillian is left to shoulder the burden of these women. Even before she is born, the *Chanté Mas* songs have a part to play in her life. Before being conceived Lillian's father, Winston Baptist, during his bachelor party, was signing the song "Naked as They Born." This song told the story of how his mother, Cecile, was attacked by Iris during the carnival. After performing the song and accepting a dare, he ends up sleeping with Iris and conceiving Lillian. If not for this song, Winston may not have ended up at Iris's doorstep. Icilma, upon discovering that her husband had an illegitimate child with a known prostitute could not bear leaving Lillian with her mother, thus taking her in. Knowing the power of the songs, having one written about herself, Icilma visits the mothers of the children who will

attend school with Lilian and asks them to not sing the songs around her. What Icilma does not know is that she would further condemn her stepdaughter to exile, John states:

As a result of this intervention, there was not a single child at Holy Family School brave enough to play with Lillian. She walked through the playground seemingly protected from the swarm of helter-skelter colliding children by some kind of reverse magnetism, an invisible field that repelled contact and surrounded her with a circle of untouchability. (46).

Icilma's prevention made the other children aware of Lillian's foremothers' history, which resulted in them fearing her and ostracizing Lillian. Unbeknownst to her is the reason why she is ostracized from Roseau's community.

According to Rodriguez Navas, quoting Olive Senior, gossip can serve as a means of "questioning differences" that oftentimes strengthens bonds between small groups. However, Rodriguez Navas contends that in the Caribbean, it is used to exclude those perceived as 'other' (29). Through the miscegenation of these songs, Lilian is known as the 'other' because she is the daughter of a half Carib and African woman and the granddaughter of an obeah woman who had close ties to her African heritage. As she goes through the process of her communion, Lilian makes the reader aware of the fact that she knows of her exile from Roseau. She draws emphasis on her anxiety about being exiled by stating, "She was taking no chances with what she knew would be the end of her exile" (John 51). Furthermore, when she is made aware of the story behind the songs and attempts suicide upon Iris's grave, she is further exiled from her community as she is sent to live in the United States. Even though the gossip of the island does not follow her to New York, it has left a major impact on her. Therefore, Lilian is separated from herself, her history, her home country, and her community. As a result, she is unable to interact or

form connections with others. Moreover, Lillian just like her mother uses sex to appease her emotional turmoil. Both mother and daughter, because of their exile and traumatic history, exert their power by participating in aggressive intercourse.

In the novel, Lillian cannot heal from her trauma unless she reconciles the true history of her mother and grandmother. The gossip that has spread and turned into songs does not tell the true story of these women, as Roseau has twisted the events to fit its own narrative. Not knowing the truth of her family Lillian is not able to form her own sense of self. According to Tyron Ali, the characters' behavior, attitudes, beliefs, lifestyle, and expectations are heavily influenced by their own past, as well as the history of their area or island. Using psychoanalytic theory, he argues that Lillian's traumatic experiences has stunted the development of her identity. In Roseau, Lillian's development of identity is negatively impacted by the fact that her matrilineal line is seen disapprovingly. The community fears Matilda's Obeah powers and loathes Iris's race and sexuality. Even though, Lillian herself did not commit the faults of her foremothers she is the barer of the community's apprehension long after they are dead.

Monica and Lillian experience different forms of gossip within their respective communities, but their purpose of is quite similar. Although the impact may differ, gossip is used by women and other individuals as a tool of aggression against those who do not align with the norms of the community. Its purpose is to harm the subject of the gossip. Chesler upon surveying studies about female relationships and gossip concludes:

Thus, gossip reinforces traditional morality, solidifies group identity, excludes "outsiders," and serves as a warning that one may become the focus of gossip if one behaves anti-normatively. Gossip reinforces patriarchal ethnic and class solidarity. The

prohibition against female gossip serves also as a prohibition against female solidarity.
(154)

To summarize, both novels use gossip to ostracize outsiders such as observed with Lillian and her foremothers in Dominica. It also enforces what is traditionally correct as presented with the outrage upon encountering Monica as she strays from the conventional role of women. Thus, in these novels, it can be said that the gendered violence performed using gossip by women perpetuate and uphold patriarchal beliefs and cherish gender-normative roles. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the women found in these novels are oppressed within their own households or communities. Therefore, they display their autonomy by lashing out against other women whom they perceive as competition or breaking away from the norm. However, it is important to question what will happen when gossip is not enough. Here, is where women-on-women violence comes into fruition as their aggression is manifested, exerted, and directed against other women in direct forms of aggression.

Chesler explains that direct aggression pertains to the use of physical attacks to harm an individual. In the case of her study, the perpetrator and victim of aggression is a woman. Upon her survey of primate studies, she states that there is a natural predisposition to be aggressive towards other women (Chesler 67-68). Anthropologist Victoria Burbank, who conducted a cross cultural of survey of adult human female aggression, states that physical aggression manifests in multiple ways, “in physical attacks, women pinch, scratch, beat with their fists, pull hair, bite, and rip pierced ears. They throw stones, fight with digging sticks and with fighting sticks, clubs, knives, awls, spears, and knuckledusters” (qtd. in Chesler 68). According to Marway and Widdows’ examination of various studies, their introduction highlights examples of where women can commit violence. Examples are interpersonal violence, where victims include

partners, children, acquaintances, and strangers, as well as political violence, which consists of militaries, insurgencies, and political leadership (Marway and Widdows 4). Moreover, the acts of physical aggression can manifest as a result of various aspects such as age, class, race, and social-economic factors. For example, researcher M. J. George observed that young, impoverished women were more likely to resort physical aggression than older or wealthier women (qtd. in Chesler 72). Furthermore, female on female aggression in the form of physical attacks can be influenced by psychological factors such as individual experiences of maltreatment and trauma (Moretti et al 22).

In both novels, physical aggression manifests first with a violent beating of the female victim. Then, the violent act of sexual assault is performed using an object such as a spicy pepper and a broken bottle of coke. The descriptions of these scenes are vivid, violent, brutal, and aggressive, as the authors went into great depth when describing them. Upon reading these scenes, it raises the question of what influences these women to act against each other in such horrendous way. The violent acts experienced by female characters in Adisa's *It Begins with Tears* and John's *Unburnable* are influenced by some of the factors mentioned above. Particularly, it can be observed factors such as jealousy, self-loathing, trauma, class, and race. Nonetheless, it is critical to understand that women in the Caribbean region have faced oppression due to colonization and the patriarchal system. Therefore, this factor intersects with the others abovementioned and influences the female characters' aggressive action against other women.

In *It Begins with Tears*, Adisa interwove the characters motivation to commit the violent act all throughout the narration of the novel. Since the beginning, the author lets the reader know that Monica's arrival at Kristoff Village evokes negative feelings in other women as she

commands the attention and lust of men. Through the help of gossip and rumors, the women of the community know that Monica was a well-known prostitute who had the tendency to sleep with other women's husbands. This information serves as a detonation for the act of aggression. Nonetheless, one part that illustrates the influences that led to women-on-women violence through physical attacks can be found in the narration of the sexual assault scene. The first recitation of the incident is described from the perspective of a narrator, while the second recitation is recounted by Monica as she tells the community of women of the attack. The narrator describes Monica's assault in the following way:

She lay on the sofa and dozed. She did not hear them enter until she felt the scarf stuffed deep into her throat.

She started to laugh at their boldness, but caught sight of their eyes, and her breath stopped. They were angry. They hated her. Two marched around her, fingering her dress, jabbing her in the face and chest while the third stood behind and firmly pushed her down on the sofa by the shoulder.

She knew them, they knew her; but this wasn't a game. The evening was suddenly cool and very quiet. She couldn't hear a mosquito buzzing or a cricket chirping as hard as she listened. She needed sound. They supplied it, threatening her and reviling her as they shoved her into the bedroom, pushed her on the bed. They pulled her closet open, grabbed out her clothes, went into her dresser drawers, turned out her underclothes, emptied her many bottles of perfume, sprinkled powder in her hair and laughed. The first sound was her tears.

Then they closed in on her and one of them smeared her face with pepper, pushed pepper up her nose. They flung her dress over her head and ripped off her panties. One of them shoved her peppered fingers as deep into her womb as they could reach until the cup of chopped peppers was empty and her fingers were on fire. They didn't say anything then. They didn't look at her or one another. They couldn't hear her scream in her head or see her tears sealing her eyes. As they left, they turned off the television and lights and pulled the door shut behind them, leaving her to go

silently mad.

Bitch! Whore! Man-stealer!

No stars warmed the sky, no moon held court. They walked in single file, shadowing the banking.

Their steps were light, their hearts heavy.

‘Night.’

‘Night.’

‘Night,’ they mumbled as the first reached home.

‘Night.’

‘Night,’ they mumbled as the second arrived at her house.

The third pulled the gate closed behind her. Swollen fingers were immersed in lime water.

(Adisa131-132)

The narrator in this scene does not mention the perpetrators by name, however, Monica is aware of who they are. The anonymity allows the reader to focus on the key details of the attack. First, it is made aware that the assailants are filled with anger and hatred against Monica as they begin to taunt her. The motive behind the aggression Adisa carefully wove within the narration, through which it can be concluded that jealousy is a factor that drove the assailants.

While jealousy can be a common trigger for aggression in both genders, the narration demonstrates that jealousy can influence women to use direct forms of aggression to maim other women. An example that highlights the factor of jealousy, is the assailants' deliberate focus on tearing Monica's room apart. First, they begin by tearing her clothes from her hangers, turning out her drawers, and spilling her many perfumes across the room. Throughout the novel, Monica is known for her fine dresses and heeled shoes, which cannot be easily accessible for some of the women in the village due to financial reasons. Additionally, the factor is further seen when the assailants' taunting is presented by the narrator by stating, “Bitch! Whore! Man-stealer!” (Adisa 132). The adjective ‘man-stealer’ is important and leads to confirmation that jealousy had a part to play when fueling the assailants. As mentioned before as Monica arrives at Kristoff village, she evokes feelings of jealousy in women since she commands the

attention and lust of men in the village. Through gossip and rumors, she had a reputation for sleeping with married men. Therefore, the assailant's reasoning for committing the attack is rooted in the fact that Monica may be sleeping with her husband.

Further evidence of this can be found when Monica herself recounts her attack. Among a safe community of women, Monica mentions by name who her assailants were. She states that “Marva was de ring-leader. She de one carry de bowl of peppa. Dey stuff a scarf in me mouth. Den Grace suggest them strap me to de bed, and she hold me hand while Marva and Peggy tie me up (Adisa 217). She recounts each of the three women’s roles in her attack as well as the reason why they were doing it. Marva, Peggy, and Grace assault Monica because they presume that she is sleeping with each of their husbands. Peggy confirms this as she speaks to Monica, “Dat will teach you fi leave women men alone” (Adisa 217). Likewise, Marva tells Monica, as she spreads peppers in her eyes, that she will blind her for trying to steal her man. Even though throughout the novel, Monica is only known to be having an affair with Grace’s husband, Desmond. Nonetheless, a deeper look at the three women will reveal additional factors that led to the attack.

Evaluating Marva, Peggy, and Grace character descriptions at the beginning and through the novel reveal further factors such as class, envy, trauma, and sexuality as detonators of the attack. In the section “Su-su,” the narrator describes each individual woman in a negative way. Beginning with Marva, the initiator and perpetrator of the rape, her character descriptions reveals that she is an unhappy woman. The narrator states that no one knew why she was so unhappy but pondered if it was because she was impoverished as a child, lacked affection growing up in such a big family, or was teased by her appearance and lack of education (Adisa 59-60). Furthermore, she is depicted as a woman that has many insecurities as she compares herself with her friends or demonstrates her discontent with her image as she compares herself to a “bloated frog about to burst” (Adisa 127). Also, she is not able to catch the attention of her husband as he rather be reading or spending time with Monica.

Even though these factors have nothing to do with Monica, Marva uses her and other women as scapegoats for her insecurities and unhappiness. Research reveals that exposure to childhood trauma, such

as poverty and neglect, can have a long-term effect on individuals, involving issues in emotional regulation and social interaction (Nikulina et al.). The trauma of poverty and lack of affection are factors that led her to be aggressive. For instance, before attacking Monica, Marva was verbally abusing the young girls that she employed to do domestic work. Therefore, Marva's social and family environment contributed to the development of aggressive and violent tendencies. As she had no means to change her circumstance, Marva exerts her power by attacking women that she perceives to be easy targets, or on equal footing. Her insecurities start to consume her, leading her to feel increasingly jealous of Monica. This is further fueled by Ainsworth's close friendship with Monica, making her the target of Marva's envy and resentment.

While Marva initiated the attack, Peggy and Grace are also complicit as perpetrators and bring forth their own issues and factors. As mentioned before when discussing gossip, Peggy resents Monica as soon as she arrives at the village. In the novel, Adisa describes Peggy is to be a wealthy woman who is tight, mean spirited, and jealous of others (59). In Kristoff, she is known for her pride as she flaunts her nice house, expensive jewelry, and well-dressed appearance. Despite her wealth, she seems to be critical of everyone in the village. It is stated that "She 'got mouth', and people who wanted to avoid her wrath would often cross the road rather than walk in front of her yard, perched on a little hill so she could sit on her veranda, pretending to do her business, but straining her neck to mark people passing by" (Adisa 59). As she was always so noisy and critical, often people would avoid her. As seen with Angel and Beryl as they make their way to the river to attend the birth of Arnella's daughter. Beryl, upon encountering Marva, Peggy, and Grace, decides to be curt and continue their way, not before muttering low enough for Angel to hear how "Dem worse dan fowl dat have yaws" (82), showing her distaste with the three women. Based on the description of Peggy, it can be inferred that she is a self-conscious and insecure woman that is too concerned with her appearance. Therefore, as soon as she encounters Monica, she quickly compares her body to hers and loathes Monica for being physically attractive. Even though she only met Monica upon her arrival, Peggy marked her as a threat and the object of her jealousy.

Unlike Marva, there is no information on Peggy's childhood. Therefore, there are no traceable factors that may explain her insecurity. However, it can be assumed that some of her self-consciousness and lack of confidence may stem from Trevor's lack of attention. It is only after Monica's attack that information about their relationship is presented. In the section "Not every cutlass can bill glass," Trevor is known to frequently travel to Kingston in search of vehicle parts, which Peggy suspects is a cover for an affair (Adisa 192). Furthermore, Peggy confides in Marva that she feels unloved and ashamed upon confessing that Trevor has not touched her for a year. Hence, it can be assumed that Monica is a scapegoat for Peggy's insecurities as she attacks her because she thinks she is sleeping with Trevor. As the reader knows, Monica declined Trevor's advancements and offered only her friendship. Therefore, when Marva entertained the idea of beating Monica, she quickly agrees to it and adds fuel to the fire.

Meanwhile Grace's husband Desmond is confirmed to be having an affair with Monica, but she is the one who is most reluctant to attack her. During the sexual assault, she tries to stop the other women, but is unable and continuous with the attack. This action illustrates how reluctant Grace can be in the face of violence but is susceptible to be perpetrator of it. As Miss Cotton warns Monica in regards to her affair with Desmond, "I said Grace might be foolish but she is a woman too and even the mildest woman can be prompted to sting or bite or kill (Adisa 158). Adisa described Grace to be a fearful woman as she is afraid of many things, including lizards, rolling-calf, not being liked, of someone stealing her husband, and aging (61). As a result of her fears, her mother decides that a younger Grace should face them and leaves her outside at night. This event left Grace traumatized. For this reason, she often finds herself immobilized and foaming at the mouth when faced with her fears. Furthermore, she demonstrates an inclination to aggressiveness and violence. For example, in the section "In-between," Grace is described to be "rather too quick to reach for and use the belt," demonstrating a quick inclination to aggressiveness and violence when her children misbehave (Adisa 56). When she learns of the affair of her husband, she decides to be passive aggressive. To avoid direct confrontation, she decides to send food for Desmond to Monica's house via her children to let them know she knows of the affair. Finally, she is easily persuaded into becoming a further perpetrator of violence by participating in Monica's rape.

Thus, Grace is susceptible to becoming a perpetrator of violence because of her trauma. Research demonstrates that trauma can increase someone's likelihood of reacting violently due to its impact on the brain and behavior. It can alter parts of the brain that control emotions, memories, and impulses (Smith). These alterations can include increased emotional reactivity, memory problems, and difficulty controlling impulses. As a result, individuals may become more prone to violent or aggressive behavior (van der Kolk). This kind of behavior can be observed with Grace as she further perpetuates violence as she beats her daughter, Althea, because of her emotional instability. As she beats her, Grace states that it is a result of Desmond's affair. Yet, it can be determined that many factors contributed to it such as Althea's pregnancy, the violent act committed, the loss of her husband, and her inability to regulate her emotions. In an interview, Opal Palmer Adisa speaking on motherhood states that she has observed "mothers whose boyfriends or husbands have left them and so they take out their hatred and their resentment on their children" (213). However, Adisa clarifies that this reaction stems from the mother's unresolved trauma, which can be observed with Grace's beating of Althea as she is not able to reconcile her childhood trauma (213). Thus, trauma is a factor that influences these three women's decision to attack Monica.

Additionally, in "The Erotics of Change: Female Sexuality, Afro-Caribbean Spirituality, and a 'Postmodern' Caribbean Identity in *It Begins with Tears*", Donna Weir-Soley makes clear that "The threesome's ability to participate in such an act demonstrates a complete and unnatural lack of identification with Monica as a woman. Their objectification of her as the "other" is so totalizing that they cannot locate themselves in her" (168). As mentioned before, Monica does not conform to the existing conditions of Kristoff Village, and this sets her apart. Weir-Soley describes Monica to be an outsider "who is aligned with the shifting values of modernity" (167). This is because Monica is a known prostitute, conducts an affair in the light of day, and openly explores her sexuality. Therefore, her behavior disrupts the traditional system of the village. While the women in Miss Cotton's spiritual community accept Monica and her behavior, Marva, Peggy, and Grace are not as accommodating. This is because, as Weir-Soley argues these three women depart from the "cultural model of intersubjective social relations between women" (168). The term refers to a theoretical framework that examines how

factors such as cultural beliefs, norms, values, gender, and race shape women's interactions and relationships. Thus, Marva, Peggy, and Grace prioritize their personal experiences over fostering community and accepting women's differences and experiences. Therefore, the complete disconnection and dehumanization of Monica.

Similarly, the novel *Unburnable* by Marie-Elena John demonstrates instances of female-perpetrated violence against other women that stem from the disconnection and dehumanization of women. Within the narrative of *Unburnable*, two instances of violent attacks are depicted, with Iris occupying the roles of both perpetrator and victim. The first attack narrated is when Iris publicly attacks John Baptiste's wife, Cecile, during Carnival. The attack is narrated in chapter 19, "Body and Blood," where the narrator states that it is unclear when Iris lost her mind enough to commit the attack. This is because the narrative portrays that the attack was obscene, vulgar, and exceeding what was decent and socially acceptable in Rosseau. Iris confronted Cecile as if emulating a sexual act, "She had writhed up to her, pelvis rocking back and forth, in and out, first one leg up, then the other, and with both her hands pulled off Cecile's mask and then easily ripped off the man's pajama suit Cecile was wearing" (John 115-116). She continued her attack and humiliation by bearing Cecile's body to all those attending carnival, Iris "tore the top off, brassiere and all, and then pulled off the bottoms by the elastic, panties and all, Cecile going down hard on the tarmac as they came off... swollen, milk-dripping breasts springing out from between Iris's hands" (John 116). Encountering this attack, as the narration suggests, invites the question of what drove Iris to this act.

When encountering sections of the novel that depict Iris, the narration demonstrates that Iris's violent behavior is a result of multiple factors. These factors are related to her past experiences, the people she interacts with, and her current circumstances. First, Iris is presented as a girl that had "been badly spoiled" because of her beauty, which was a mix of Carib and West

African features (John 4). This had gained her a lot of attention and adoration from the communal child-care system, which was run by the women of the village of Up-There. As a result, she developed an expectation of being treated generously by everyone and a desire to please and be liked. When sent to Roseau for an education, Iris is placed with a Lebanese family to become a “schoolgirl boarder-servant,” where the family continues to overindulge her (John 64). Thus, the narration states that she is not able to learn Roseau’s social hierarchy regarding love, where she is at the bottom. If she had known this, it may have been possible for her, a teenager, not to enter the relationship with John Baptiste.

Therefore, the dynamics of this relationship contributes to Iris’s act of violence against another woman. Iris falls in love with John Baptiste at first sight and makes an effort to get his attention when they meet at a wedding. From then on, their relationship was something to be envied as he set her up with her own house and visited her at odd times during the day. Based on John’s words and her love for him, she forms the belief that he intends to marry her. However, John Baptiste does not reciprocate and does not marry Iris. Instead, he marries Cecile Richards, an upper-class woman, who gives birth to twins a year after their wedding. Factors such as race and social barriers prevented Iris from marrying him. Her status as a poor, half-Carib girl, daughter of an Obeah woman, placed her outside the acceptable standards for a man such as John Baptiste.

Driven by her emotions of humiliation and anger, Iris lashes out at Baptiste by publicly humiliating his wife. As Liz Kelly argues, “women’s violence originates from their powerless position and resistance to male violence” (qtd in Kalisa 93). Therefore, in situations where women find themselves devoid of power over men, they may feel compelled to exercise their power over children or other women. Hence, Iris’s anger is not directed solely at Baptiste for his

deception. Instead, she attacks Cecile, who she may perceive to be on equal grounds and an easy target. The narrative depicts Iris making a determined approach towards John, linking her arms through his and rubbing up against him to get close to Cecile. Thorington-Springer argues that Iris's anger directed at Cecile stems from an internalization of patriarchal values, as the attack stems from contempt and competitiveness over John Baptiste. Little is known of the attack from Iris's perspective, but it can be inferred that the competitiveness might stem from the class distinction between the two women, their beauty, and the fact that one became John Baptiste's wife. The contrast in their social class likely played a part, with Iris feeling overshadowed by Cecile's elevated status. Ultimately, Iris's pride was probably wounded by Cecile's success in marrying John, which solidified her status as the "other woman."

Consequently, driven by vengeance for her daughter's assault, Mrs. Richard, Cecile's mother, brutally attacks Iris. The narrative suggests that Mrs. Richard meticulously planned her revenge. First, she arranged Cecile's travel to protect her from the inevitable gossip. Next, she made a calculated confession, not to seek absolution but to buy herself time to commit the act. Finally, accompanied by her most trusted servants, Mrs. Richards sought out Iris. Inside her house, Iris braced herself for Mrs. Richard arrival, determined to endure the beating without struggle, like a Carib. The narrative details the attack in the following way:

She did not even raise a hand to protect her face when their knuckles had pulverized her flesh, tenderized it so that each new blow caused the spot upon which it fell to burst open, blood oozing or jettisoning out, streaming down to the wooden floor and collecting in small pools. Not the smallest sound forced its way out of her windpipe when the pain began in earnest, when the knuckles and the feet began targeting internal organs, the kidneys, the spleen. Not even when one of them jumped on her chest and sent a rib into

her heart... But when Mrs. Richard said, “Enough of that,” and opened her handbag, when the beating stopped, that was when Iris began to scream, to fight against the two sets of hands that were now holding her limbs down. She had seen what came out of the purse, and she knew what it was for...And then it stopped being graceful as Mrs. Richard planted the jagged end of the bottle as far up into Iris as her hand would go. And then again, and then again. Until finally her hand came out empty, covered with blood midway to her elbow. (John 121-123)

This brutal act exposes Mrs. Richard’s inclination towards violence as she seeks retribution for her daughter. While the narrative offers little about her past, it does highlight her affluent status. This places her as a woman of high regard in Roseau. This suggests that Mrs. Richard’s violent reaction arises from Iris’s attack from Cecile, but also from the audacity of someone of a lower status humiliating her daughter. Mrs. Richard’s brutality may stem from her inability to see Iris as a woman worthy of empathy. Feminist scholar Weir-Soley explores this concept in her analysis of *It Begins with Tears* and can also be applied to *Unburnable*. This is because Mrs. Richardson struggles to identify Iris as a woman as factors such as race, class, and social hierarchy interfere. For her, Iris is a half-Carib whore who is beneath her. For instance, there is a section where the washerwomen state that Iris’s attack is a sacrifice for “some kind of purification to placate the gods of social order and the gods of class distinction and the gods that allowed a man to have as many women as he so pleased” (John 117). Thus, the attack was the result of Mrs. Richard’s plight of restoring social convection in Roseau.

In “She Had Put the Servant in Her Place:’ Sexual Violence and Generational Social Policing between Women in Marie-Elena John’s *Unburnable*,” King argues that John’s novel depicts women of a higher status using violence to police lower class women’s actions, which

she builds using Kalisa's notion of "socially sanctioned patriarchal violence" (137). Using the concept of "imperial motherhood," King argues that Mrs. Richardson's use of sexual violence serves the purpose of protecting social class and racial stratification. Therefore, as an imperial mother, Mrs. Richard embodies the legacy of colonial structures in the Caribbean. She enforces social rules built on class and social hierarchies by wielding her power to silence any woman who challenges the social order. Not only is she reinforcing the social order, but she is also upholding patriarchal values as she does not hold John Baptiste accountable for having a mistress. Instead, her problems lie in the fact that Iris's does not follow conventional rules. This speaks on how Mrs. Richard internalizes patriarchal ideals brought by the colonial system, which drives her further away from feeling sympathy for lower class women.

Kalisa argues, using Francophone African and Caribbean literature, that "the mother, as a figure of authority, becomes the patriarchal messenger sent to enforce the rule of the father" (80). This quote from her book, along with the analysis of *Unburnable* and *It Begins with Tears*, suggests that the "father figure" represents the oppressive European influence regarding women that shaped the treatment of women in the colonies. The colonial process, which imposed conventional rules on the Caribbean, may also influence these female characters' behavior towards other women. The use of violence by the female characters in both novels can be understood through the lens of Frantz Fanon's theorization of violence in the colonial context. Even though he did not speak out on the violence experienced by women in the colonial context, he brought up an important point regarding violence in the oppressed. Fanon considers that colonialism is a system that was built on violence, and it instilled that violence in the colonized population's consciousness. Fanon states, "The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people" (52). As

presented in both novels, the constant presence of violence shapes these women's actions.

Having been influenced or traumatized by violence in their surroundings, some of these female characters resort to violence themselves, either in self-defense, to express pent-up emotions, or to hold other women accountable.

Moreover, the use of sexual violence, as manifested in the novels as an act of rape, is an important aspect that demonstrates the complex representation of female relationships and a demonstration on how violence is learned. It is unsettling that female characters such as Marva, Peggy, Grace, and Mrs. Richard use rape against other women as rape is a gendered crime typically perpetuated by men against women. Marway and Widdows states that "sexual assault stems from a lack of recognition and respect for women as equal moral agents" (15). This means that the perpetrator view women as objects to be used, rather than as people with their own thoughts, feelings, and autonomy. Furthermore, various factors can drive a person to rape, including a mix of psychological, social, and cultural influences. According to research, some characteristics of rapist include a lack of empathy, narcissism, and feelings of hostility towards women (Aqel).

Upon reviewing this information, several factors and traits can be observed in Monica and Iris's attackers. For instance, the perpetrators of the assault exhibit a lack of empathy towards the victim. In both *It Begins with Tears* and *Unburnable*, these women categorized Monica and Iris as 'other' because they did not conform to societal norms. In Iris's case, Mrs. Richard did not view Iris as a moral and social equal as Iris was a woman from a lower class and race. While Monica, expressed her sexuality in an open manner and consciously slept with another woman's husband. These women result to using sexual assault as a direct act of aggression because they are women themselves and know how the assault has traumatic effects. Furthermore, an

explanation for this women-on-women sexual assault is the perpetrators desire to exert power and control. Sexual assault often instills fear in women, which in turn controls and constraints women's actions. In the case of *It Begins with Tears* and *Unburnable*, it is not about fulfilling a sexual desire but rather serves as a means of asserting control over these women.

As it has been noted, Opal Palmer Adisa and Marie-Elena John demonstrate the complexity of female relationships as not solely determined by individual's personal beliefs and experiences. Rather, it is influenced by a complex interaction of cultural and societal norms, power dynamics, and historical context. These factors influence how these women perceive and respond to various sorts of violence and aggression. Both *It Begins with Tears* and *Unburnable*, depict various examples of women-on-women violence, challenging the stereotype of women as only gentle and caring. Through the use gossip and physical aggression, women maintain social order and regulate behavior. Gossip is a useful tactic to shun other women for the group and preventing other women from going against convention. Additionally, physical aggression, serves as a means to punish the female characters from daring to not conform to the social conventions. Furthermore, it serves the purpose of reinforcing social hierarchies among women.

Through the narrative, Opal Palmer Adisa confirms what has been presented, "wickedness was a woman, could be any woman wronged or believing she was wronged, any woman who separated herself from the clan, any woman who forgot that she wasn't invincible, any woman who didn't know that if you spit in the sky it was bound to fall on you. (160). This statement reflects the complexity of female experiences, portraying how any woman, under certain circumstances, can be driven to act against other women. As Fanon states in *The Wretched of the Earth*, individuals who have internalized violence and aggressiveness due to colonial oppression are more thana likely to direct these as a weapon against its own people. This

demonstrates the intense impact of colonization has on the psychology of the colonized. In both *It Begins with Tears* and *Unburnable*, the narrative reveal that cycles of aggression, social and class status, patriarchal values, competitiveness, and trauma are factors that influence and contribute to external conflicts among women.

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