

DYNAMICS OF FEMALE TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IN A DIGITAL AGE IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

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Abstract

The trafficking of female for whatever form of exploitative labour—physical, sexual, military, etc. - is a heinous violation of human rights and a reproach to all affected societies. The activities of trafficking, inglorious and dehumanizing as they are, have for a long time been carried out surreptitiously, leaving a vast majority of the world's population in the dark about its nature. Female trafficking is clandestine in nature and is carried out in most cases unnoticed and not indicated as a criminal network. The actors in this criminal enterprise have inflicted great pains on society and humanity, while they seek wealth and twist dreams and people's lives and aspirations, most times without being noticed. But in recent times, this menace has gradually been uncovered by writers, human rights activists, government agencies and international organisations. The efforts put in by these individuals and groups have yielded enormously in unearthing the schemes, structures and stratagems of the traffickers and their loathsome deeds. This paper therefore, explores the dynamics of female trafficking in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Keywords: Trafficking, Exploitation, Dehumanisation, Sexism, Womanhood.

Introduction

Literature is a representation of life, as well as mirror on the society that produced it. This is because the literary artist draws his material from a given society and milieu. Therefore, this paper reflects the topical issue that inspired the novelist whose work is selected for this study. Opinions on female trafficking, an aspect of the broader concept, human trafficking differs from scholar to scholar. It has become an issue of international concern, in addition to the exploitation of women for various reasons and purposes. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), "Trafficking in persons" (or human trafficking) is internationally defined by The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power/or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. (42)

Human trafficking can take a variety of forms such as slavery, forced labour or services, servitude, removal of organs, and/or sexual exploitation (United Nations,42). The First World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in 1996, defined the commercial component of *sexual exploitation* as, "sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons" (1). It is the commercial element that separates sexual exploitation from other sexual crimes such as rape, molestation, and sexual assault (5). In other words, it is an abuse by an adult pimped by another adult that involves a form of sexual

commercialization. According to Modupe Adeleye:

Human trafficking for sexual and domestic reasons is not a new phenomenon. Overtime, men, women and children have been trafficked for the profiting of members of criminal syndicates. More recently, humans have been trafficked for the retrieval of their organs and a lot of these victims have been left to serious health challenges and death. Trafficking for sexual and economic exploitation is considered as a modern form of slavery and a serious violation of the rights of victims especially because human trafficking always comes with issues of physical, mental and psychological violence, coercion, fraud and manipulation (27).

In the views of Ifeoma Odinye, "Trafficking and Sex slavery have become so rampant in Africa and in the world today. Thus, both are perceived as modern forms of slavery which impinge on the general well-being of boys, men, women and girls in particular" (18). Taneem Saeed in Odinye asserts that although it has been 200 years since slavery was officially abolished, there are millions of people across the world that are still subject to slave-like conditions. Trafficking is the biggest and fastest means by which people are exploited and forced in to slavery (31). In recent times, sex slavery and human trafficking are among the most lucrative and fastest-growing sources of income for some girls, and secretly organised criminal organizations all over the world. Corroborating this, Linus Akor's statement that "the history of human trafficking, including that of the trafficking of women, cannot be completely divorced from the phenomenon of slavery" (13).

Evelyn Nwachukwu and Chukwuka Ogbu maintain that "Human trafficking is a kind of modern slavery and the victims are mainly women and girls" (1). This is because both involve the acquisition and transportation of humans across local, national and international borders for servitude, with or without the consent of the trafficked person(s) (90). Slavery, according to Oshadare is the social sanction of involuntary servitude imposed by one person or group upon another. He explains that slavery, as a phenomenon, made its appearance when pristine tribes reached the pastoral (as distinct from the hunting and gathering) stage of development. Slavery-then was modest with regards to the number of slaves, because the care of flocks required only a few hands.

Omolola notes that a more dramatic change in the character and complexity of slavery came in the late 15th century-and mid-19th centuries when many Africans were shipped across the Atlantic as slaves in what later became known as the trans- Atlantic slave trade.

"The intercontinental slave trade, which involved Europeans and Africans, was carried on through four continents of Europe, Africa and the two Americas. Following the voyages (countries such as Brazil and Haiti were discovered to be awash with rich mineral deposits and plantations waiting to be exploited. The exploitation of these resources required a large reservoir of labour, which the native Red Indians could not cope with. Consequently, as more plantations were set-up and more mines were opened up, the demand for slaves increased dramatically and attention shifted/to Africa. This marked the genesis of the massive importation of able-bodied Africans into the new world as slaves. This trend in human trafficking for forced labour continued until 1808 when the obnoxious trade was formally abolished (84).

Although slave trade ended in 1808, nearly 200 years ago, a contemporary form of slavery, that of the trafficking in women and girls for exploitative sexual and commercial labour in Europe and America from Third world countries, particularly Africa, has been on the upward swing in recent years. Several socio-political, cultural and poverty related issues may have accounted for the phenomenon of the trafficking of women in Nigeria.

Leadership problems, mismanagement of public funds, squandemania, the get-rich-quick syndrome, unemployment, growing population and mass migrations swelled the populations of major cities as parents and families began to take greater risks in an attempt to escape poverty and improve their living standards. Accepted practices such as placing and fostering children at the homes of relatives were turned into money-making ventures for parents and the phenomenon of cheap labour through human trafficking escalated, driving large numbers of young girls, women and children into the streets to work. Thus, trafficking of children and women for exploitative purposes in Nigeria is of two dimensions: internal and external. Internally, children are procured as domestic workers, while external trafficking provides girls and women for prostitution rackets in Europe and in some cases, unsuspecting young girls and women have fallen preys to traffickers who use them for rituals.

Besides, prostitution and related trafficking offences have been linked closely to other crimes like drug trafficking and human smuggling; these crimes are most common in border zones. It becomes easy to source for vulnerable girls and women who may be trafficked as sexual slaves. So trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is becoming one of the leading illegal economic activities along with drug trafficking and arms smuggling. The exposure of women and girls domiciled in border communities to human trafficking has become acute. In addition, a lot of females who hitherto were smuggled out of the country find themselves stranded at the border communities for several reasons and thereby become easy prey to human traffickers. Research has indicated that location and environment are key factors to consider in the sustenance and spread of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation. Scholars like Melrose posits that attention should shift from studying factors and causes from individual pathology to socio-economic and situational pathology. In other words, we should begin to look at how prevailing situations and circumstances in an environment predispose the members of such environment or community to certain patterns of living. This paper will examine perspectives on trafficking of women as portrayed in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*.

The theoretical framework for this study is Trauma Theory. The term, “trauma theory” was first documented and explained in Caruth's work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The theory originates from the exposition and explanation of Sigmund Freud on traumatic experiences in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism*. In essence, Freud's concept of “traumatic neurosis.” is what the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 accepted as “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD), an idea important in defining the trauma theory. Caruth defines “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) as:

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviour stemming from the event... The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly... To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (70).

Trauma theory is explored across different disciplines such as literature, critical theory, history and historiography, social sciences, legal studies, psychology and psychiatry, etc. Thus, it has influenced and affected many areas of human experiences. Shoshana Felman attributes the contemporary interest in theorizing about trauma to “three interrelated twentieth-century occurrences” namely; the discovery of psychoanalysis, the discovery of trauma as a new type of understanding of historical causality and of historic temporality. According to him, a traumatic experience occurs too immediately for the consciousness to record, but its mental or unconscious images (memory) come back to the victim belatedly and repeatedly when such action repeats

itself. Therefore, memory helps the victim to recall his or her experiences in the forms of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations etc.. Felman explains that literature appreciated, and literature of traumatic experiences remains opens with all horror, nightmares, silence both cognitive and linguistic breakdown. According to Patricia Clough, trauma is the engulfment of the ego in memory. But memory might be better understood not as unconscious memory so much as memory without consciousness and therefore, incorporated, body memory, or cellular memory.

Sigmund Freud located traumatic memories in an unconscious psyche, which is the mind. Patricia Clough and other affect theorists, such as Brian Massumi, located traumatic memory entirely within the brain/body. Hence, there is a strong connection that exists between affect theory and Cathy Caruth's well-known view of trauma. Caruth explains that

Trauma is experienced as the literal registration of an event ... Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring “engraving” on the mind, the “etching into the brain” of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory (152).

However, contemporary literary trauma theory further asserts that trauma creates a state of terror excited by sudden appearance of danger which divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a future argument that suggests that identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

Trauma, in my analysis, refers to an emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates a given society. The term, “trauma novel” refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on an individual based on recollected memory. One characteristic of the trauma novel is the sudden transformation of the self (personality) ignited by external factors such as terrifying experiences that expose previous recollected experiences which inform the new perceptions of the self and the society.

Therefore, the experience that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war. The traumatic experience can include, for example, an intimate personal experience of female sexual violence and rape as found in the selected text. The major trauma theory employed in a given literary piece depends on the nature of the experience which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a “temporal gap” and dissolution of the self. For example, Hurt Kali Tal writes: “Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of “normal” conception”(15).

The above explanations represent the Freudian concept of trauma and memory which emphasizes the importance of understanding trauma through narrative recall of a given experience. Many contemporary African literary scholars such as Chika Unigwe and others have depicted the ugly and bizarre experiences of girls and women who have been sexually molested in order to expose its negative consequences on the female gender, their growth, and development as individuals in different societies.

Dynamics of Female Trafficking and Exploitation in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

Opponents of immigration often prefer to ignore the tragic forces that compel people to risk death in order to reach our lands of plenty, not to mention the horrors that often await the "lucky" few, once they arrive. Unigwe focuses specifically on the very precarious situation of women, particularly on the issue of sex-slavery. *On Black Sisters' Street* renders an account of how four African sex workers

in the city of Antwerp strategically relate to exoticist definitions of African womanhood that are central to the sex industry, while it is simultaneously conveyed that their personal histories surmount these.

The story portrays four female characters —Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce. The first three women all left Nigeria on their own accord to go and work in Antwerp as prostitutes, in the hope of creating better lives for themselves and after earning enough money to start afresh. Crucially, the protagonists' stories diverge beyond these broad common features: Sisi, whose real name is Chisom, is a university graduate who has been unable to find a job in Nigeria because she does not have the right "connections" (22); Efe has to support a son whose father, a married man, refuses to acknowledge the child; and Ama, who was abused by her devoutly Christian stepfather in Enugu and, upon denouncing him, set off to her mother's cousin place in Lagos, finds no satisfaction in her "predictable" and "circular" job (159) at her relative Mama Eko's small restaurant. Of the four main characters, only one, Joyce, is tricked into coming to Belgium under false pretences. The young woman, whose real name is Alek, is originally from the Sudan, where her family were massacred by a Janjaweed militia. Following the tragedy —during which she is also raped— she spent several months in a refugee camp, where she falls in love with a Nigerian soldier, Polycarp. The couple soon settles in Lagos but the man, pressured by his family into marrying a girl from his own Igbo ethnic group, arranged for Alek to be sent to Belgium — allegedly to work as a nanny.

The novel firmly situates the life narratives of four African women within today's geopolitical power relations. The women's narratives include tragic episodes of poverty, war experience, sexual abuse and families torn apart in their home countries, which made them vulnerable to the call to enter the global woman's traffic network run by Oga Dele. On arrival at Belgium, they soon find out, however, that they have escaped their circumstances for a mirage of a better and wealthier life in Europe, and soon see their dreams shattered. The novel draws on life writing to portray the experiences, and memories of the four protagonists' may not seem entirely unexpected.

Voicing the memories and experiences of four African women in Flanders, the novel offers, a dreary portrayal of the submerged world of illegal prostitution in the red light district of Antwerp city. It suggests the descent into disorientation and denial of worth that they face. Working as sex workers, the women must pay back in monthly instalments the fee of 30,000 euros to Dele, the costs of their exportation to Belgium. With their fake passports withheld by Madam and living under her close surveillance, the four women are almost literally imprisoned in the house in the red-light district but also objectified in the position of black sex workers satisfying white men's sexual desires. "As for liking black women, Oga Dele had told her [Efe] that they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting a bit of colour and spice." (84) Primarily, the women are indeed socially constructed through exotic, sexualised codes of black womanhood.

The four women are indeed not victims of Dele's antics, as the novel conveys, but agents in a transnational world making choices, strategic choices that are restricted by circumstance. If they want to be successful as sex workers, the women are to abide to gendered and racialized norms and codes of behaviour. The novel is indeed not so much an account of four African sex workers with a glitter and a matching G-string, boots up to her thighs or as one who stood behind the glass, and prayed that no one would notice her." (134) The novel clearly suggests the constructed nature of black sexualised womanhood by describing how the four women dress up and act upon the role behind the window that is expected from them. If it is true, in the terms of Eva Pendelton, in her article *Whores and other Feminists* that "sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance of

highly charged feminine gender codes" (Pendelton, 183), to which we may also add racial codes, then the novel portrays the four protagonists in the process of performing these highly charged exoticist codes of black femininity.

The four protagonists cannot generally be seen to change or subvert the normative scripts they must follow; until Sisi's failed attempt to escape at the end of the novel, the women almost conscientiously do, say and behave according to what Madam and others tell them. The disruptive potential, however, resides not in the women's rewriting of the codes of black sex workers, but in the narration of how they act out these codes. Unigwe juxtaposes scenes of the women's performance as black sex workers to self-reflexive fragments that explicate their doubts, uncertainty, embarrassment or feelings of freedom, while being disguised and text portions in which the women are seen to take an emotional distance or critically comment on their behaviour. Unigwe describes what goes on in the heads of the women, while they try to the best of their capabilities to please the men that approach them. In so doing, their work is revealed to the reader as a strategic lie. Joyce piously scrubs the make-up off her face on request of a regular customer who calls her "Etienne's Nubian princess." She is ready to change the script and to change costume, as it were, whenever this is desired. Her ultimate goal is not, however, to please white men's desire. The latter is but a means to achieve economic purposes and upward social mobility. Or in the terms of Ama: "the men she slept with were just tools she needed to achieve her dream. And her dream was expansive enough to accommodate all of them" (169).

More specifically, *On Black Sisters' Street* inherently connects the issue of storytelling to constructions of black womanhood. Narrating their histories to each other - life writing being a formal way to underscore the narrative dimension of identity - the women change the story about themselves alongside the rapidly changing circumstances that have occurred to them. Sisi and Joyce have changed their names and are originally called respectively Chisom and Alek, the latter, as she reveals, is Sudanese, not Nigerian like she made everyone in the house believe. Alek refers to the UN refugee camp she lived in for a while as "a collection of sad stories" (194). On arrival to Belgium, Sisi is determined to "shed her skin like a snake and emerge completely new" (98). Madam invents the story of an escape from Liberia that Sisi must tell about herself in the Immigration office. Reiterating one of Unigwe's points in *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*, Madam further adds: "White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear us killing each other, about us hacking each other's heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story the better." (121) Sisi agrees to be Libyan, "in the next months she would be other things. Other people. A constant yearning to escape herself would take over her life" (121). While the performance of sexualized definitions of black womanhood is central to the four women's lives as sex workers, their family histories emphasize their identities as a series of narratives invented strategically to suit the circumstances.

Reading the novel as a narrative of community reveals how the text structurally resonates with ongoing mobility and circular movements of migration, rather than with linear-chronological notions of progress and plot development. Also, *On Black Sisters' Street* can be seen to defy exotic notions of black female identity and community, notions which define the four women when they are at work in the public space in Antwerp. The chapters entitled "Zwartzusterstraat" render an account of events that occur in the present, and are geographically situated in the city of Antwerp - more precisely in the house in Zwartzusterstraat. These chapters are interwoven with chapters focusing on the individual life stories of the women and bring into view their separate, idiosyncratic pasts and futures. Eventually, Ama and Joyce return to Nigeria, Efe stays in Belgian prostitution but

moves up on the social scale as she now employs African women. Sisi's ghost leaves her body and travels back to Nigeria too. Their individual stories follow the on-going movement back and forth between Nigeria and Belgium. Similarly, the basic story line prioritises circularity and ends where it begins, with an account of Sisi's death.

Female trafficking and Sexual exploitation appears to be the central themes of the novel as it focuses on the exploitation by Senghor Dele who 'exports' the girls abroad for his 'personal gain which has no negotiation, thirty thousand euros; which he makes very clear to all of his girls (commodities). "No try cross me oooo. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!"(268). The girls are denied their freedom by Oga Dele assisted by Madam until they pay the money used for their 'export'. The Madam also benefits from this exploitation as she is in charge of the girls in Belgium. The girls have no holiday at all, except for period breaks. And it is seen in the moment when Madam goes into Sisi's room to find her lying down instead of preparing for work like the others. She questions, "What's going on Sisi? Shouldn't you be leaving for work? Everybody else has gone!" (272). Sisi tells Madam she is on her period. Madam doesn't believe her but agrees still. This depicts the kind of bondage they're in and the exploitation involved.

The four girls happen to be victims of sexual exploitation, but that of Joyce happens to be worse, as she is sexually violated and raped at age twelve by the Janjaweed militia. Also, in the case of the other girls, Oga Dele informs them of the reason for going abroad, but in Joyce's case, he tells Polycarp that she will be taken to Belgium, 'Make you go look after people. Nanny work,' Dele tells her. 'Yes. Look after children. Dele will find you a job as a nanny in Belgium.' She bears that in mind, until she gets there and finds another different job altogether. Joyce's only mercy is that Polycarp pays her debt to Dele for her, so she gets to save her money. And unlike the other girls, "she enjoys a level of favouritism from Madam. The female characters are considered unfortunate victims of the actions of prurient men and their exploiting advances.

After the death of Sisi, they realize that they know basically nothing about each other especially late Sisi, despite having each other as their only family in Belgium. This unfortunate incident causes them to recount their different stories to each other, starting with Efe. Efe is the head of the three.....The skin on her neck looks burnt, flaky ochre with interspersions of a darker shade of brown. It is her neck that hints at the fact that at some point in her life, she was darker than she is now (38). Ama calls her the Imelda Macros of wigs, as high-heeled shoes and wigs were her trademark. Sisi teases her after she complains of the pain in her feet from too much dancing with high heeled shoe.

'But you always wear high heels! You'll complain today and tomorrow yow will be in them again,' to which she replies, 'With my height, if I no wear heels, I go be like full stop on the ground.' And Sisi replies her again 'You're not short You just like your heels high.' (11)

Unigwe's description of her is not really short. At least, she's not much shorter than who described her height as 'average'. 'Average' translated in her passport to five feet seven. But of all four women, Efe was the shortest and this gave her a complex (ii). Efe begins by narrating how she first discovers sex at sixteen at the back of her father's house. She had felt cheated, in her own words, *like pikin wey dem give coin wey no dey shine at all at all* (49). Efe loses her virginity to Titus, a man old enough to be her father, in exchange the basic necessities of life for herself and siblings; denied them by their father after the untimely death of her mother. The reader learns of the pedophilic nature of Titus through his wife on the day Efe goes to show him his son, a product of their love affair. Titus fools and deceives the naive Efe into believing that his wife is old and has creaky bones.

Everything Efe knew about Titus's wife, Titus told her. She was tucked away in their Ikeja duplex with five bedrooms and three sitting rooms. She was old. Almost as old as Titus was. He also said her bones were creaky, *krak krak*, and he needed someone with young bones to make him happy. He told Efe she made him the happiest man in Lagos, the happiest man in Nigeria even. 'I go to bed with a smile and wake up with a smile because of you, my Efe.' (54)

Efe discovers upon arrival to Titus's house that all she heard about the bones of Titus's wife were all lies, and her bones didn't creak, *krak krak*. After receiving her own portion of the insult as the five other women with offspring from their individual affairs with Titus before her, he learns of his wife's determination to not let any woman lay claim to the fruit of her patience. None would share the money she had waited so patiently and so good-humouredly to make. It was her right and her children's legacy, and so she guarded it jealously (74).

Unigwe portrays Titus's prurient nature through his wife as the reader learns that:

From the day she married Titus and caught him ogling at her chief bridesmaid, his wife had known he had a roving eye. As long as women swayed their hips at him he would respond, like a drooling dog chasing a bitch in heat. It was not his fault; it was just the way he was created. She could live with it (71).

Also, his paedophilic nature is revealed as his wife narrates his "specs" in the girls he chose, as he slept around without a 'raincoat.' Titus had the sense to stick with inexperienced young girls, young women like the one who had disturbed their lunch this afternoon (Efe), stupid enough to think they could waltz into their home with his child (74). Unfortunately, what Efe had not known, for who would tell her was the sixth woman in as many years to come to Titus with an offspring from an affair. And all six the wife had dismissed in more or less the same way, marching them to the door with orders never to return, asking the house help to bolt the door behind them (71). Efe the naive under aged girl falls victim to the deception of Titus, with the untamed libido. She tries to transfer the aggression of Titus's denial on the baby. "Efe felt she ought to hate the baby; after all, she never asked for him. He kept her at home and was a visible sign that she was damaged goods" (75).

Refusing to let her past define her, without any help from her father, Efe is determined to provide her son with the kind of life she had dreamed for him when she thought she would be able to get Titus's help. This pushes her to work two jobs in a day. Every morning, before she went to her cleaning job at an office in GRA, she whispered in her son's ear as he slept, 'I promise you, I shall get you out of here. I don't care how I do it.' She had never been more serious about anything in her entire life (77). Efe worked two jobs and desperately prayed for a third job, just to save up more money for L.I's upkeep.

"She finds an advertisement for a cleaning woman on Randle Avenue. Randle Avenue was close to the location of the second job and she was sure she could juggle all three. Three jobs meant more money, more bonuses, which equalled a better life for L.I. And a better life for L.I. totalled a happier life for her" (78).

She gets the job, which happens to be in Dele's office after a series of questions from him "interview". Dele turns out to be the most generous of her three bosses, giving her huge bonuses at holidays and even complimenting her. She secretly nurses the hope that Dele would one day ask her out. He never did, and it is not until seven months later when she starts to complain about finding a good nursery school for L.I., so that Rita could go back to school, that Dele asks her if she would like to go abroad.

'Belgium. A country wey dey Europe. Next door to London.' He made it sound as if you could walk from one to the other. From one door to the next (81). She accepts, and tells her father and siblings that she is going to work as a kitchen help for a rich family. Her siblings are of the belief that she is

travelling to go and make pots of money for them. On the day of her departure, she, upon the insistence of Rita to not take L.I. to the airport, takes him as the only luggage of worth in her head. A strong memory of L.I. holding on to Rita, crying as Efe walked through security at Lagos airport. She wanted to soak in the smell of his skin. And right up until she had to hand him over to Rita, she had had her nose in his hair where the scent was the Strongest. She wanted to take the smell and store it where she could have easy access to it (87). Unfortunately for her, without spending up to three weeks in Belgium, she struggles to remember the smell amid all the other ones that were suffusing the space around her. Unigwe points out that she only gets to remember the smell and see her child before her eyes which pushes her to cry in a way she believes she would never do again.

The focus moves over to Ama, another victim of the paedophilic act of her step-father. Ama allows her past control her as a person, to the point of attitudinal changes and mood swings. Ama is portrayed as an aggressive character with a short temper, which can be understood by the reader as a psychologically, mentally and sexually abused character. Even her flat mates complain about this, especially Efe, where she confronts her, after Ama picks up a bottle of Leffe beer and starts to drink. After drinking, she flings the bottle onto the floor. Efe eyes it as it rolls, slows down and finally stops

'Isn't it too early to be drinking, Ama? Day never even break finish!' Efe tells her. 'It's early and so fucking what?' Ama burps. Tugs at her crucifix. 'You dey always get ant for your arse. Every day na so so annoyance you dey carry around.' 'Fuck off (25)

Apart from the face-off with Efe, there are other instances of such arguments with the other girls. For instance, during the preparation for Iya Ijebu's burial party, Efe's "supposed grandmother", she engages in an argument with Sisi, which would have led to a brawl but for the timely intervention of Efe. 'How could you burn the rice, Sisi? I can't get the fucking pot clean!' 'I don't know what's eating you, Ama, but I don't want any part of it. Whoever sent you, tell them you didn't see me, I beg of you.' She flung the dish towel she had been using over her shoulder and raised her hands in surrender. I don't want to fight abeg (6).

'Fuck off. Why don't you fuck off on one of your long walks?' Ama's voice was a storm building up (6). She picks another in Efe's comment about telling her to dance in the sitting room in a bid to appease her. 'I can see you don dey ready for the party Ama. Ooh, shake that booty, girl! Shake am like your mama teach you! (7). The mention of her mother clearly annoys her as she recoils, 'Oh, shut it! What has my mother got to do with my dancing?' (7) Ama moved away from Efe. the crucifix around her neck glinting. Every now and then, the reader sees instances of her, frequently tugging at a crucifix on her neck. The reader finds that the crucifix is given to her by Mama Eko, her aunt, who seems unconvinced and uncomfortable about Dele taking her abroad. Mama Eko sneaks a tiny gold crucifix into her hand. 'May God go with you, nwa m.' Ama was touched. Nobody had ever cared for her in that way, given her a sense of totally belonging.....(170).

The reader follows a series of events that happen in Ama's life, that brings about a relationship with Mama Eko begins and progresses before she travels to Belgium. After her eighth birthday she is sexually molested, by "her holier than thou father", Brother Cyril, who is the assistant pastor at the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh, Jehovah El Shaddai, Jehovah Jireh, one of the biggest churches in the city. He belonged to a church where everyone was sister and brother. According to Ama, her father didn't give her a chance to dance to her desired music; he would have none of that. 'It's the Devil's music; he said. 'They do not edify the things of Our Lord. The Devil shakes his waist and sways his horn when he hears music like that. He claps his hands and stokes his fire for the many souls that he's winning (128).

So for Ama, instead of the kind of music she heard from across the street, their house was infused with music from Voices of the Cross, the Calvary Sisters, Jesus is the Saviour Band, Ndi Umuazi Jesu. Voices that grated on her nerves. She never thought of telling her father that the voices irritated her. She knew what would happen if she did. The things of the Lord were not to be Abused. Nor Slighted. Nor Ridiculed (128)- She would be flogged with 'Discipline', the cowhide cane. Brother Cyril is portrayed as a self-righteous man who uses his self-righteousness as a yardstick for determining a good or bad person. For instance, whenever he sees a lady whose cloth didn't cover her knees, the sight would throw Brother Cyril into a righteous coughing fit, coughing out curses on 'the daughters of Eve who destroy the reputation of women', and always ended with him calling for his wife, 'A woman fit for Christian eyes,' to soothe him and get him a glass of water.(130) He always insisted on wearing white safari suits and dashikis which his wife Rose had to always boil, in a pot of water just to ensure that the cloths' whiteness glowed and this is, because of his anticipation to meet the Lord, at any given moment. (131)

After Anna's eighth birthday party, which was the happiest day of her life, Brother Cyril floats into her room in his white safari suit, which scares Ama to the point of screaming. He covers her mouth immediately. He has a carnal knowledge of her, and the only thing she talks to are her pink walls.(132) Unable to tell her mother about Brother Cyril's wicked acts, Ama consistently keeps to herself and the pink walls. She stops eating pap because of the sticky whiteness which gushes out of him. It's warm and yucky,' she complained to her walls. 'I'll never eat pap again (132)

Unigwe portrays the wickedness of the self- righteous Brother Cyril in the way he quotes the bible whilst forcefully having sex with her. Whenever she stiffens her body, her father would demand. 'What's the fifth commandment?' 'Honour thy father and thy mother,' she would reply, her voice muffled by the collar of her nightgown in her mouth. And then she would relax her muscles, let him in and imagine that she was flying high above the room (132). This evil act of the righteous Brother Cyril continues right until she turns eleven, when her period starts. As she gets older, she begins to think that her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness otherwise, she should have seen right through her. This event makes her confront Brother Cyril after he insults her for failing her JAMB examination twice and then he kicks her out of his house, with the support of her mother and reveals the truth about not being her father. Her mother disbelieves her, ignorantly slaps her and throws some crumpled naira notes at her as her bus fare to Lagos the very next day. She leaves, after taking a bath, without food to the park. Her journey to Lagos turns out to be stressful as all she thinks about is her father and all the possible lies she must have been told, on an empty stomach. She finds it hard to believe that her sinless mother bears a child "out of wedlock. She lives with Mama Eko who treats her like a daughter until she meets Dele. She initially refuses his offer to take her abroad, but after giving it much thought, she succumbs, after all, Brother Cyril takes it from her without her permission and it wouldn't be in Nigeria.

It pains Mama Eko to watch her leave, and for that she gives her that crucifix which Ama holds so dearly to her heart. In the end, Ama, would be the one to open a boutique. She would take Mama Eko as its manager. Mama Eko would tell her she always knew she would make it. They would never talk about her years in Europe. Unigwe has a deep understanding of poverty and its hungers. She portrays her four major characters as cool-eyed gamblers, not passive victims, as women willing to play "the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs" (26) in exchange for the material goods they crave, the chance of coming home rich enough to buy their families cars, apartments and businesses.

Unigwe conveys both what is miraculous about the West to foreign eyes and what is awful, how

people live and die alone, unmourned, without the sustenance of family and neighbours. And she shows her readers how the women who survive their pact with Dele choose to deploy their hard-won wealth. While Efe stays put, running her own brothel, Joyce and Ama prefer to build their businesses back home. *On Black Sisters' Street* also pursues a nuanced construction of identity. Here, we have four women, living the same life but all with different personalities, background, biases, emotional baggage and different futures. Sadly, to the western men, they are just objects much like Westerners have reduced the identities of Africa.

Conclusion

The incidents in *On Black Sisters' Street* are portrayed as happening all at once. The novel simultaneously divulges the backgrounds of the four women, how they got into sex work and how they collectively cope with Sisi's murder. This method is effective in that it reinforces the prominence of the women's past in their decision-making. For example, Sisi's decision to become involved with sex-work is very much tied to her parents' inability to fulfill their dreams, whilst Efe's is in a bid to provide a bright future for her son and siblings. Though the reader knows the death of Sisi beforehand, the circumstances that lead to her death are also the conflicts of the themes of the novel. In the novel, Sisi's demise is an image about what may have gone wrong with the lives of the characters before their arrival at Antwerp. The novelist gives four faces to two corrupt systems, the sex industry in Belgium and the hierarchy of dishonest wealth in Nigeria.

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