

Migration and Diasporic Experiences in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*

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Abstract

Diasporic literature has a socio political consequence and essence for every contemporary society, as it captures the movement of people across time and space. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, migration is occasioned by so many factors. The problem of migration and immigration has been a long engaging aspect of African literature, as a result of this, studying the issues associated with migration in literature enhances the understanding of the experiences encountered by people found in this situation. These factors form the psyche of the migrating character. Over the years, Nigerian writers have viewed the diaspora, migration, its challenges and effects on the average African individual from a problematic perspective. Diaspora is regarded as the dispersion of a large number of people from one continent to the other. Writers from African especially in Nigeria see the concept of diaspora as a muster point where they all gather to discuss migrations issues as a predominant problem in the Nigeria. This research aim at pointing out the root causes, reasons and effects of migration and diaspora experiences on the average African person. This paper portray efforts made by the researcher to give an introduction to literature and its significance in x-raying the various happenings in the society especially as it affects migrating individuals. The researcher also looked at the contributions of several scholars to this study. The data for this study was gotten from both primary and secondary sources which formed a collective collation of ideas as an attempt to do a good study. The theoretical framework used in this study is realism which represents true life experiences in literature. The methodology adopted in this research is a qualitative methodology. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* is the chosen work understudy. This study discovered that young African men and women especially in Nigeria, are victims of unemployment, poverty and victims of distorted upbringing which influences them into seeking for a better life abroad. This study discovers that these migrants suffer from social injustice, social inequality, unemployment and all kinds of harassment in an attempt to make ends meet as their host countries treat them as plagues; many did not survive. To this effect, parents, the society and the government ought to find a way out of the tentacles that that rob these young people from making a living in their fatherland by creating job opportunities and skill acquisition platforms; to equip the young ones with the right tools for successful living in their country

Keywords: Diaspora, Nigeria, Migration, Nigerian writer.

Introduction

Literature, from the past, has always been a vehicle of social engineering. It is momentous to note that literature is as old as man. People from generation to generation have enquired into literature and other matters in connection with it. Literature as a mirror which reflects societal norms, values, attitudes, inter-relationships and peculiarities has become an integral part of any developing society. No society exists significantly without its literature and literature cannot function and blossom in isolation of society. It is now widely regarded by many scholars and authors as artists explore the society from time immemorial and in different climes around the globe. Literature has continued to fulfill its own unique function in national development. The great Ngugi Wa Thiong O, in his *Homecoming*, says:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in particular in a particular society. That the relationship between literature and these forces of the society cannot be ignored especially in Africa where modern literature has grown against the gay background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations (16).

So, no society can significantly exist without its literature. Many people have defined literature from varying perspectives, but what is worthwhile and momentous is that people still try to define literature even in our present time and this realization sometimes makes literature an enigmatic but interesting

and rewarding field of study. Irrespective of the bulk of definitions that have gone in, people are still trying to define literature thereby suggesting the fact that every scholar in any generation stands a chance of adding his or her voice in the attempt to define Literature and articulate all that it means and stands for holistically.

Literature cuts across many fields of human endeavours. We speak of scientific literature, historical literature, economics, law, medicine, and journalism even religion which involve one printed material or another in the chosen profession. All these fields among many others no doubt parade several literature of a given society, in a given field and profession gleaned from the idea that literature involve printed matters irrespective of field and area of specialization but our concern here is limited to literature in relation to the art and artistic creation of man and our definitions of literature will be limited to that. Many scholars and critics in the past have tried to define literature but each as it appeals mostly to him and from a perspective he considers most crucial and vital.

To Romanus Egudu, in *Modern African Poetry and African Predication*; “literature is a mode of expression. It is not just a subject that expressed something, rather it is the way, manner or method in which something is said or written” (8). Therefore, literature as a creative art has been subjected to varying degrees of function and usage. Hence, the writer becomes a satirist who could never avoid the temptation of chronicling the various incidents happening in his society at large. Obi Maduakor, in *Introduction to Poetry* is of the opinion that “literature has become an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of society such as politics, religion, economic, social conflicts, class struggle and human condition through the medium of language” (487).

Literature ridicules for the purpose of correcting. Literature is known for rewarding virtues by punishing vices. These virtues are the morals we learn as we often times think about our own lives and how best we make amends before time runs out. Ugwu also believed that “literature is any work or writing that has an ending value and of universal interest touching on themes such as religion, government, romance, politics and science” (1).

Literature explores the culture of the people. It is a form of art which involves performance in words. It can be realistic or idealistic, oral or written. In *English Usage for Higher Education*, Cornel Ujowundu stated that “literature is any kind of imaginative composition in prose work which aims at expressing feelings, telling a story, impacting an idea or conveying an expression through a special use of language” (359).

This shows that literature is the study of man in the society and also the vicissitudes of life. Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* adds:

If an artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writers cannot be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer (79).

He believes that the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done for he is after all, the sensitive point of his community.

Ikechukwu Asika, in *Literary Appreciation*, says:

Literature, in the commonest term, is the reflection of man and his society. It is a mirror through which man as a social being could be looked upon and his society examined. It looks at human behaviour and attitude to life which often extols, criticizes, ridicules and mocks in order to correct and build a more orderly and harmonious society. Literature teaches and entertains. It tells us who we are, where we are and where we ought to be (2).

The general acceptable notion is that literature mirrors the society. Further to this, it gives us the picture of our lives and goes on to suggest ways of improving ourselves. As expected and in the exploration of the gains and glories of literature, writers in all parts of the world have artistically manoeuvre the gains and benefits of this unique and distinctive art, literature and now play very prominent and significant

roles in the social re-education, re-orientation and re-direction of their societies evident in the quality of literary products across continents. Literature is the private and public awareness given to both the individual and the society respectively, through the exposure of the hidden and open truths that people seem to be ignorant of. Many other definitions exist which we may come across, each trying to define literature from its varying points, however it is better said here that they are almost saying the same thing. One thing that one will find different in their definitions is the choice of words and not the content, because literature is same in all around the world. Asika also says that “literature is an imaginative work of art through which writers and creative artists reflect their societies towards a more beautiful and idyllic future” (3).

Literature has over time become an important aspect of human life in the quest to adapt and understand our enigmatic world better. It has become pertinent and crucial to man in his effort to make the most important assessment of the values of his past, his present and articulate his future. Therefore, literature, we gather is a social art, a means of exposure and self-expression through which the societal values, dreams and aspirations are brought to limelight for a thorough and patriotic appraisal. It prevents the unrealized and hidden values of society, and as a mirror, it holds up to man and society, the neglected and several unrealized aspects of the dreams of his age which he hopes to help and guide the society in realizing. Literature gives insights, ideas and information pointing at the right track and direction through which man and society can find the measure of peace they so desire. David Ker rightly points out that “the writer is a member of the society and his sensibility is conditioned by the social and political happenings around him. These issues will therefore perforce be present in his work (7). Furthermore, Ngugi in his *Writers in Politics* states:

Literature cannot escape the power structure of our everyday life. A writer has no choice whether or not he is aware of it, his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense, economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he chooses is one or the other side in the battle field; the side of his people or the side of those social forces or class that try to keep his people down (8). In other words, a writer’s central ideas are influenced by the experiences of his age as his works reflect either the economic, religion, political, cultural or ideological struggles of the society.

Writers are the soul of the society, the voice of conscience whose role is to champion the goal and task of leading the people unto a glorious and prosperous future. Writers reflect the hard socio-political as well as religious and economic realities of the people. With this they hope, on one hand, to re-direct the society unto its peace, unity, harmony and the much desired future and on the other hand, to save the past events from a humanistic point of view for the generation yet unborn to see and bear witness to. Literature in this regard will never die for according to Chinyere Nwahunanya:

Contemporary society poses a lot of challenges that provides a variety of working materials for the creative writers. Most of our creative writers, therefore, because of the surfeit of socially relevant topical issues, believe they have a message worth listening to, once they dip their hands into the available pool of ideas and experiences which may not be new to their presumed audience... (379).

Writers at all times continue to follow the developing changes in their various societies which they believe that it is their duty as writers to intervene and proffer solutions to the various emerging ills of societies. This focus on developing changes targeted towards building the ideal, prosperous and harmonious societies of their dreams. It is in view of this that writers continue to examine several contemporary issues that are prevalent in societies today.

Furthermore, literature has been divided into three genres; they are: poetry, drama and prose. Therefore, it is pertinent to take a glance at these genres. First is poetry which is the earliest genre of literature. It is said to be as old as man and existed from time immemorial. Poetry means different things to different people; it has been viewed from various perspectives.

Prose, of all genres of literature, is the most expansive and varied and it is highly dependent on the writer for the form it adopts in expressing a given idea about life. Prose, in the views of Allwell Onukaogu et al is:

...the literary genre that most represents the narrative character of conventional storytelling. Prose may not possess the high linguistic sublimity of poetry or the presentational liveliness of drama, but it has its greatest strength that attention to detail which guarantees the accommodation of a vast array of literary techniques and devices and the manipulation of the structural base of the story. Because of its free-flowing style and its liberty of volume, prose fiction creates room for the exploration of human experience (154).

A prose could be fiction and non-fiction. Non-fictions are true or real stories put down as they happened. They are objectives or reports and not subject to bias or imagination. Non-fiction includes historical facts, biographies, reports, records of meetings and some other factual writings on hobbies, politics, religion and sciences. Fictions include all imaginative literature (it could be false) in narrative. Most novels, short stories and so on; are fiction-creative composition that are not true but made plausible. Examples of fiction include novels like, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Camara Laye's *African Child*, Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom*, Asika Ikechukwu's *Tamara* among many others. Fiction exists in three major forms: the novel, the novella or novelette, the short story; others include the fable and the folktale. For the purpose of this research, we will take a glance at the novel.

The novel is the most notable and popular subgenre of prose. It is the longest form of prose. It is a straightforward piece of writing that involves a long chain of narratives and events arranged in a rather patterned, well planned and chronological manner towards a logical and desired end. A novel according to Eustace Palmer in *Studies on the English Novel* is "a coherent, unified, fictitious prose narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with the materials deployed in such a way as to give the image of coherence, continuity and wholeness." It involves a long range of varieties of information, ideas, settings, characters and all other aspects of the aesthetics and literariness of a prose that makes it a worthwhile and most admired genre of literature. According to M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpman:

The term 'novel' is applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of fiction written in prose. As an extended narrative, the novel is distinguishable from the short story and from the work of middle length novelette; its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character and motives than do the shorter, more concentrated modes. As a narrative written in prose, the novel is distinguished from the long narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser and John Milton which, beginning with the eighteenth century, the novel has increasingly supplanted... (252).

A novel is not a disjointed piece of writing that is neither here nor there. Rather, it is an arranged piece of writing which takes tact and carefulness in its planning and execution. It must be arranged in such a way that it should have a beginning, a middle and end – all expressing a closely related and uniformed order of thought, information, events, ideas and situations. In the end, a novel carries in itself a degree of suspense, tension, anxiety, fear, anticipation, weaved around the characters and events created and patterned in such a crafted manner that all matters will be resolved at the end and all tied knots should be untied. Helen Chukwuma in *Accent in the African Novel*, says:

The novelist is the conscience of his age. He manifests a high sensibility in the individual in society and scopes out those aspects of the system that shook and intimidate him from which he has no relief. He shows a shape consciousness of the events of here and now the world of today. His responsibility as a writer is to make his readers more aware of their environment and the attending problems (39).

This research is therefore hinged on novels, and by extension African novels. Eustace Palmer in *An Introduction to the African Novel* refers to its emergence and development as "a product of self-determination in Africa and the emergence of educated and articulate elites whose work of art are designed to express the strength, validity and beauty of African life and culture" (3). In tracing the rise or origin of the African novel, a knowledge of what influenced the novelist to write is very necessary. As Shatto A. Gakwandi states in his book *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*, he says

that “the rise of the novel, and indeed other intellectual movements in Africa in the twentieth century, have been associated with nationalism, its rise and growth have been dominated by Africa’s contact with the western world” (7). Thus, the social, political and psychological implications of this contact have been the concern of most writers and this has been presented as a conflict since every writer is influenced by something from which he acquires his tools of writing; the language, the styles and the forms he came across – the modern African writer acquires his tools through contact with the least one of the western literatures. As Eustace Palmer also says that “the novelist task is not merely to convey experiences, but also to attempt to clarify and order the chaos of experience, and analyze the nature of man” (45).

In essence, the African novel, having emanated as a “protest” literature, could be placed in different classes. There are the novels which deal mainly with the past, or with the beginning of colonialism. There are those which portray the process of colonial domination. There are those which recreate the struggle for independence and there are those which evoke the post-independence social and political climate.

Aspects of Migration and Diasporic Experiences in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*

Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, unveils the predicaments of young girls that have been trafficked into Antwerp, Belgium to work as sex workers and earn money for their boss. Thus the background of each of them provides readers with the socio-economic and political reality in Nigeria and to some extent Africa in general. The young girls are four in number bearing such names as Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, all of whom have been trafficked from Lagos, Nigeria, to Europe, Antwerp, Belgium, by Senghor Dele.

The first of the girls to have her identity and background revealed is Sisi whom the story revolves around. Sisi’s real name is Chisom, however, she changes her name to Sisi on her way to Europe in order to bear a different identity and live a fresh life which is common to most prostitutes who travel out of their locality for prostitution. Sisi is a daughter of a Lagos based civil servant and a graduate of business administration in the University of Lagos. After graduating from the university, she finds it difficult to have a job and support herself and her family who expect her to assist her younger siblings acquire education too. She has submitted so many job applications but is not invited for any job interview. However, her parents’ income is so low that it is difficult to get a better accommodation for the family let alone meeting the family’s general needs. This makes Sisi frustrated with life and living in Lagos. This is captured thus:

...two years after leaving university, Chisom was still mainly unemployed and had spent the better part of the two years scripting meticulous application letters and mailing them along with her resume to the many different banks in Lagos.... she was never invited to an interview. Diamond Bank, First Bank, Standard Bank and then the smaller ones. And then the ones that many people seemed never to have heard of Lokpanta National Bank. Is this a bank? Here in Lagos? Is it a new one? Where? Since when? Even in their obscurity they had no place for her. No envelopes came addressed to her, offering her a job in a bank considerably humbler than the banks she had eyed while at school, and in which less intelligent classmates with better connections worked (20).

This is Sisi’s condition and it also reflects the social reality in the Nigerian society where thousands of university and tertiary institutions’ graduates have filled the labour market which is unfruitful. The government does not provide enough jobs or employment opportunities for graduates. The private sector too is too thin to accommodate a lot of graduates. Most sectors of the private sector pay very meager wages that do not help in the harsh economic situation in the country. Therefore unemployment is the order of the day with its attendant consequences of poverty, crime, frustration and desperation. Most of the people caught in this are the youths who have the highest population in the country. And in most situations, their journey in education is conditional which means that their parents strive to send them to school to enable them get employed after graduation and assist them and their younger ones.

Once one fails to get a job years after graduation, one is considered a failure and one becomes frustrated with life and seeks desperate means of survival which is a trend that is putting the youths into trouble. This is where some seek to travel abroad to seek for greener pastures and most times ending up being trafficked for cruel and illegal business.

As Sisi's unemployment status prolonged and the weight of her parents' and siblings' expectations from her deepen and her desire to escape poverty and turn her fortunes around overwhelms and haunts her, she becomes open to whatever opportunity that comes her way to improve her life. Then she meets a human trafficker, Dele, who sends beautiful girls to Antwerp, Belgium, in the guise of helping them have jobs and escape the poverty in Nigeria. But in reality they go there and work as prostitutes to earn money for him. He disguises himself as a business man, importer/exporter, and lures young girls to Europe. Sisi is making her hair in a saloon while Dele brings a young girl for her hair to be made shouting on top of his voice that she is going to Europe. Sisi gets curious and asks the girl what she is going there to do. Dele then jumps in and asks Sisi if she wants to go to Europe too. He hands Sisi his business card to contact him so that they will discuss and make proper arrangements. Sisi is suspicious of Dele's intents but her poor condition and a broken relationship with her parents make her visit Dele's office to see how he can help. This comes out thus:

When she got home that night and she had to eat garri and soup for the third day in a row she thought nothing of the man's offer. The next day, when she came home to announce that there were rumours of job cuts in the civil service, "they are likely to let me go. Twenty-four years and pfa, to go because I am not from Lagos State!" - Chisom merely brought out the card and fingered it. As she would something beautiful, some silk underwear perhaps, and put it back in her purse. When she went to the toilet and found the cistern broken and pan overrun with squirmy maggots and a day's load of waste - there was a city-wide water shortage - she felt short of breath. She needed to get out of the house. Go for a walk. And even then she had no destination in mind until she found herself at an office on Randle Avenue, standing at the address on the gold-edged card, that she had, somehow without meaning to, memorised. (33)

This is the rate at which Sisi and her family's socio-economic condition deteriorates. It moves from bad to worst and her frustration increases. She then had to make the hard decision of meeting Dele in his office to see how he can help even though she is suspicious of his life style. Also it unravels the reality of the level of squalor that ordinary Nigerians live in albeit some being civil servants. This is for the fact that social amenities and salaries of workers are not well catered for.

Sisi's father has worked in the civil service for twenty four years without promotion and salary increase. He has to manage his little income to cater for his large family which is not easy. He lives in two bedroom apartment with five grown children, a small kitchen and a small bathroom toilet which he shares with his family and other tenants. Water supply becomes short and water scarcity looms. To bath, flush the toilet and cook is difficult. Amidst this, the infrastructure in the apartment degrades and living in it is unbearable. Therefore Sisi would appreciate anything that she can do to escape this horrible situation.

Sisi meets Dele in his office and he tells her of how he can help her get out of her sorry situation. And his deal is to send her to Europe, especially Antwerp in Belgium. He brags before her that he has friends overseas that can help and that he sends girls abroad yearly. What the girls do there to survive is a secret though it is partially hinted for the fact that Dele only deals with beautiful girls and appreciates their physical qualities erotically which he often says will have them something reasonable to do. This is the offer Sisi is given by Dele. Its terms are difficult. She is to pay him thirty thousand Euros upfront or get to Europe and be paying instalmentally, five hundred Euros per month. This is captured thus:

In his office Dele's voice was not as loud as it had been in the salon the other day. Perhaps, Chisom thought, the rug and the air conditioner swallowed up the noise. Or perhaps it was the sheer distance put between them by the massive wooden table he sat behind, his stomach tucked neatly away from sight, that softened his voice.

'I dey get girls everywhere. Italy. Spain. I fit get you inside Belgium. Antwerp. I get plenty connections there. Plenty, plenty!' He panted with effort of talking. Hmph, hmph.... 'But I no dey do charity o. So it go cost you. Taty t'ousand euro it go cost you o'. ...when you get there, begin work, you go begin dey pay. Instalmental payment we dey call am! Mont' by mont' you go dey pay me'. (33)

Chisom thought maybe she should go. Just walk out the door because the man was obviously a joke. Every month she would send five hundred Euros. 'Or any amount you get, minimum of a hundred, without fail'. The without fail came out hard. A piece of heavy wood, it rolled across the table and fell with a thud. Any failure would result in unpleasantness, he warned. 'No try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!'... (42)

Sisi's interaction with Dele reveals the reality of how young girls in Nigeria are lured by traffickers for a ticket into Europe with promises of a better life which is not clearly spelt out. And in the process they massively exploit the willing travelers to their full advantage. Dele promises to help Sisi go to Europe but with a condition that she will pay him a huge sum of thirty thousand Euros. On Sisi's protest he tells her that it is when she gets there and starts work that she will be paying installmentally, five hundred Euros a month which is still huge if there is nothing really reasonable to hold onto. But Dele has his plans and knows what he wants. It is just to make them work as prostitutes for the fact that sex sells very well in Europe. Especially that African girls provide a cheap option and experimentation for white men. Therefore the girls pay Dele his thirty thousand Euros bit by bit. This enriches Dele and his ring of traffickers so much at the peril of the victims. Meanwhile it takes them so many years to pay that by the time they finish, they get older and lost their physical value to attract sex customers. Thus they connive and recruit more young girls and make them work under them so that they will make their own profit. So the ring of trafficking continues and expands and more girls are fooled into it and exploited. This is a social ill and a reality in Nigeria that has caused adverse social disorder. Also, Dele's physique, arrogant speech and use of Pidgin English reveal that he is a thug common to Nigeria. This is realized through photographic and authentic description of Dele's personality and physical attributes which is the realist technique of portraying characters in prose fiction.

Sisi finally arrives in Antwerp, Belgium, via Dele's arrangements. She is picked by Segun, one of Dele's associates in Belgium, and taken to Zwarte Zusterstraat where Dele's trafficked girls are kept under a Madam who inducts and coordinates their activities in the sex industry. Sisi's first encounter with the Madam is presented thus:

....'I am your Madam', she said by way of introduction, walking over to the window and opening Sisi's blinds. 'heard you arrive safely. I trust you have rested well. Today you start work. We haven't got any time to lose'....

'Dele was right about you. Ah, that man knows his stuff. He never disappoints. He has the best girls on show, you know? To see the girls some of these jokers bring in! Ugly faces, bodies that need serious panel-beating and breasts hanging like scrotums'. She laughed.... 'Ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid I am in charge of it.' (117)

From this extract, the reality of Sisi's job and existence in Europe dawns on her. She fully realises the nature of her work, prostitution. Her passport is seized meaning that she cannot travel anywhere outside of Belgium again thus she is living at the mercy of her traffickers. As Sisi's experience here shows, it goes to prove the reality of girls who are trafficked as sex slaves to Europe. They live under threats and stringent conditions. They have no freedom, cannot earn their income but make huge amount of money for their traffickers. After Madam had introduced herself to Sisi, she gives her materials and tips on how to operate in their business. This seen where the narrative voice reveals that:

...She pulled on the skirt Madam had chosen. Clenched her teeth and reached behind to pull up the zip. She looked at the blouse. Laughed, Pulled it over her breasts with aggression. She pursed her lips and smeared on lipstick.... She was a dream-maker in silver and gold. These were not clothes she would ever have picked out for herself. Not

even for this job: a blouse that hugged her intimately, sequined in silver. A gold coloured nylon skirt which showed her butt cheeks when she bent. (201)

The tight clothes that Sisi wear reveal her erogenous zone which fits her in the sex business and prepares her for the task of the trade. Madam then takes Sisi to a bar where she will be hanging around to wait for men, customers, and seduce them to buy more drinks while offering sexual services to interested ones for pay:

Madam tapped Sisi on her shoulder. Lightly but with urgency and authority. The man behind the bar had extricated himself and to Sisi's surprise was not as portly as he had looked behind the counter.... He smiled at the two women, his teeth gleaming at them. He nodded, raked his fingers through straight, black hair, brought out his hand and traced Sisi's figure. 'Very good, Madam, Very good. She knows the drill? Ja? Here, the klanten...how you say "klanten"?' He turned to Madam and she provided the lost word. 'Customers. "Yes, "customers". Thank you. The customers, they come first, ja? Make them drink. Make them buy lots of drinks.

Much, much drinks. Expensive drinks. You give me business; I give you business, no? (207)

It is clear here that the role of Sisi is to make money for the bar owner and for her trafficker, Dele. The way that Sisi is forced to dress seductively, the location she is to hang in, the role that she is to play and the manner in which the bar owner traces her figure indicates sensuality and prostitution. This proves the inhuman treatment meted at trafficked girls as their freewill and dignity are trampled upon. Sisi's experience in the hands of the Madam and the bar owner indicates reality because it is obtainable in society.

Sisi begins to wait around the bar to have men have sex with her and pay her. She is not contented with the job and the bar environment. Though reluctantly, she does what she has to do and pays Dele his demand of five hundred Euros monthly. A place is later found for her at a show room where she stands in a glass and strike seductive poses to attract her customers. However, she keeps losing interest in the business as it is demeaning to her perceived personality, a university graduate of business administration. Her interest continues to wane until she meets a boyfriend, Luc, in a church that she attends. The boyfriend loves and adores her despite being aware of her status. She decides to quit the prostitution, get married to Luc and looks for something credible to do. She skips her monthly remittances of five hundred Euros to Dele and then Dele and his associates get her killed. This is divulged thus:

When Sisi answered and found Segun at the door she was surprised but not alarmed. 'Hello, do you want to come in? He did not want. 'Bu...bu...but I want you to come, I mean ... to ... to ... to come with me in the car. We ... we ... we ... I mean, we ... we ... we have some... thing to dis...dis...to discuss'. Busy hands flailing all the while. Restless feet tapping on concrete. ... 'No. I am sorry, Si...si. Not here. No... no ... I mean, not here. It ... it... it wo ... wo ... won't take time, I promise'. His voice was low. He clenched and unclenched his fists. It struck Sisi that this was the longest he had ever spoken to her.... She was not scared of Segun. He was harmless, everyone knew it. So the hammer hitting into her skull had come as a shock. She did not even have time to shout. She was not yet dead when he dragged her out on the deserted road leading to the GB and pushed her into the boot of the car, heaping her on top of a purple-and-grey plaid blanket.... (292).

Sisi's murder confirms the dreaded reality of human trafficking and the wickedness of its perpetrators.

Efe is one of Sisi's house mates in Zwartzusterstraat, Antwerp, and has a story that reveals the social reality in contemporary Lagos and Nigeria in general. She loses her mother at an early age and being the eldest child, the responsibility of handling the home and taking care of the younger ones is rest with her. Meanwhile, her father has lost control of himself after losing his wife. He turns to drinking alcohol and has no time for his children. He works as a labourer, earns little and gives little to Efe for family upkeep. No other basic necessities are provided by him. Efe grows into adolescence and out of naivety

is lured by a forty-five year-old man, Titus, who is married, into being his sex partner. Titus compliments her with money which she uses in buying clothes and other necessities for herself and her siblings. Titus engages in marathon sexual intercourse with Efe almost on daily basis. He eventually impregnates her and when she reveals it to him, he dumps her and disappears. This comes out in the text thus:

Efe discovered sex at sixteen at the back of her father's flat. That first experience was so painful, so ordinary that she had spent days wanting to cry. She had had no notion of what to expect, yet she had no thought it would be this lucklustre, this painful nothing. She felt somewhat cheated, like pikin wey dem give coin wey no dey shine at all at all. She remembered nothing but a wish that it would not last too long and that the pain between her legs would be well compensated. The man who held her buttocks tight and swayed and moaned and was responsible for all that pain was forty-five. He was old. Experienced. But most importantly, he had a fortune that was rumoured to be vast. Money wey full everywhere like san' san'. He had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth. And everything else she fancied between the two as long as she let him have his way. (49)

...Every afternoon, for the next four months, Efe saw Titus at his insistence. He said she had taken possession of him, he had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her. (56)

The detail manner in which the first sexual experience of Efe and her sexual exploitation by the old and experienced Titus and how Titus is described as using pidgin English to flatter Efe shows reality which is identifiable in the setting of the text, Lagos, Nigeria. What is revealed in the excerpt exposes the reality of how rich old men in Nigeria lure young innocent and vulnerable girls into a sexual relationship with money and so many lies. They leave their wives at home and go on sexual tourism with such young girls for their personal pleasure. For them it is all about the pleasure and they always have it. However, the young girls end up being ruined where either they get pregnant and get dumped or made to do abortion which is life threatening or they get infected with dreaded sexually transmitted diseases. Sometimes these young girls naively have children for these old men who on the other hand turn them down making them frustrated and desperate with life.

Titus impregnates Efe and runs away. Efe feels betrayed and suffers with the pregnancy alone. She rejects abortion for pains involved in it and decides to keep the baby. She gives birth to a son but Titus does not turn up to support. She takes the baby to Titus' house but she is sent out by Titus' wife in presence of Titus. However, Titus feigns ignorance of the whole affair. This is captured thus:

The night she told Titus she was sure she was pregnant was the last time, day or night, that he turned up for their daily appointment. He had been lying in bed, stroking her shoulders. 'I am pregnant, Titus. That was all it took to get him out...' (59)

'You.' She pointed a finger. 'You come into my house and accuse my husband of fathering your baby. How dare you? Eh? How. Dare. You?' Her voice was soft and the half-smile of before stayed on her lips so that Efe thought that perhaps it was no smile at all but something else. A sneer. Or something worse. 'Useless girl. Ashawo. May a thousand fleas invade your pubic hair. Useless goat. Shameless whore, Ashawo. Just take a look at yourself. Small girl like you, what were you doing with a man? At your age what were you doing spreading your legs for a man, eh? Which girl from a good home goes around sleeping with a man who is old enough to be her father, eh? Answer me, you useless idiot. I see you can't talk any more. You have gone dumb, abi? And you have the cheek to show your face. You were not afraid to come into my home with that thing in your hands, eh? You were not scared to ring my doorbell and show your face, eh? Now I am going to shut my eyes and before I open them I want both you and that bastard of yours out of my home' Even without looking at Titus, Efe knew that he was still eating. She could hear him smacking his lips as he sucked bone marrow. She got up and slowly walked out. (70)

These issues that are captured in the excerpt are social realities that are common in Lagos, Nigeria, the milieu of the novel. As Titus rejects Efe and his wife sends her out of his house, Efe leaves and swears to keep the baby and give it a good life. She works in three offices in a day cleaning to make money

and take care of her son, siblings and herself. The demands get too much and when she meets Dele he promised to send her to Europe where she could work and earn big money for herself and takes good care of her son and family. This is how Efe fall victim of Dele's trafficking ring and ends up in Antwerp, Belgium, working as a prostitute to make money for Dele.

Ama is also one of the sex workers in Antwerp under Dele. She comes from Enugu in Nigeria. She falls victim of Dele's trafficking as a result of the frustration and abuses she faces as a child in the hands of her parents, her mother and stepfather. As a child, Ama is restrained from playing with other children and from talking to anybody outside of her home which is made up of only her mother and stepfather. Her stepfather rapes her the day she celebrates her eighth birthday. This continues without her mother intervening until she began her menstruation at the age of eleven. She graduates from secondary school and finds it difficult to gain admission into the university as she fails entry examinations. She is frustrated and then her stepfather comes home one day and began insulting her of being a failure. She feels bad and shouts at him that he is not her father that he rapes her for many years. The stepfather, Brother Cyril, becomes angry and sends her away from his house. This is presented thus:

...For Ama's big party her father, predictably, wore one of his white safari suits. After Ama had blown out the candles and the cake had been eaten and the clown had made the children laugh and the cameraman had captured all the joy and laughter on video, after the guests had gone and Ama had been sent to bed certain that this was the happiest day of her entire life, her father floated into her room in his white safari suit. In the dark and dressed all in white, Ama thought that he was a ghost and would have screamed if he had not pre-empted her by covering her mouth with one broad palm and smothering the scream in her throat. With the other hand he fumbled under her nightdress, a cotton lavender gown with a print of a huge grinning bear. (131)

This passage shows a nuanced and graphic description of a rape incidence of a minor by an adult which fits in the realist tradition. More, this act of crass abuse of Ama by her stepfather, Brother Cyril, violates her childhood, destroys her sense of belonging and makes her mentally deranged. She loses her sense of dignity and self-esteem. She then longs for admission in the university as an escape from her stepfather's brutality. But fortune does not smile at her until the stepfather mocks her about not being her father and she shouts at him and is sent packing. She left for Lagos to stay with an aunt, Mama Eko. From there she is not satisfied with her life and then Dele steps in with an offer to get her to Europe and she falls for it.

Joyce, whose real name is Alek, is the last of the four girls and Sisi's friend portrayed in the novel. She is from Sudan and changes her name from Alek to Joyce to leave her ugly experiences in Sudan behind and live a fresh life. Her family members are killed in a militia attack by soldiers during the Sudanese civil war. She is raped by the militia, so many men taking turns to rape her. And at the end she is left half dead. She wakes up later and joins other survivals of the attack as they go to a United Nations (UN) refugee camp. In the camp Joyce meets a Nigerian peacekeeper, Polycarp, they fall in love and Polycarp returns to Lagos, Nigeria, with her. He intends to marry her but his mother would not allow him marry a foreigner especially being the first son. He thus takes Joyce to Dele to help her go abroad so that she can find something better to do and take care of herself. It is therefore through this way that Joyce too becomes Dele's sex worker in Antwerp, Belgium. (185- 189). This depicts the reality of victims of war whom struggled to survive their ordeals. Amidst their survival instincts, they find love just as the case of Alek and Polycarp. Further in reality, Polycarp's mother did not accept Alek because she is not from their tribe; this shows the situation which some young lovers find themselves in today's society which brings in the notion of parents having the final say, to whom they marry.

Conclusion

This research examines a study of Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. It resolves that the novel dwells more on characters than plot and also revolves on the common, the social and the contemporary issues in society which affirm its realist bearing.

This study has shown that there are some migration experiences that are gender specific and this has been the preoccupation of Unigwe as we have demonstrated in this research. For instance, black male immigrants are hardly ever victims of sex-trafficking and never are there any mention of an instance in the two novels in focus here where they are put in windows to be showcased like their female counterparts. This is not to say the male black migrants do not face their own challenges and identity crises in the West. Unigwe, as a very realistic writer portrays the extremely degraded life of female black immigrants' existence in the West. In the theatre of their lives, nothing is hidden. Unigwe takes out the stories of these women from the blood-curdling, red-light zones of Antwerp or So-Ho but brings the chilling orgies that characterize the lived experiences of these women for close scrutiny of her reading public. Their unnerving experiences of dislocation, displacement, alienation, and racism place the women on the fringes of life in their host countries. Such locations do not portend much good for them as they are in positions that are the most vulnerable in society. Unigwe thus belongs to a new crop of African writers who are based in the West and are still preoccupying themselves with experiences of Africans in metropolitan centers of the west. In her own words she says: "I find it easier writing from experience... and I do believe in writing as therapy, so I tend to write a lot about Belgium, about Africans in Belgium, about African women in Belgium" (111).

From the eyes of the four prime female characters, Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce, in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, who are prostitutes in Antwerp, Belgium, and the diasporic experiences of young Nigerian and African men and women who are suffering from social injustice, unemployment, inequality and prejudice that have made them vulnerable. Also, the concerns of the novel, which are the socio-economic and psychological challenges of the lower class young men and women in Nigeria, have brought to the fore the social reality of life of the lower class in Nigeria and immigrants in Europe. Therefore, well placed individuals, parents, civil society organizations and the government should make efforts to improve and secure the lives of young women in order to help them escape from their vulnerabilities.

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