

Migration and Identity Quest in Chika Unigwe's *On the Black Sister's Street*

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Abstract

Migration is a recurring theme in African literature, as it sheds light on the economic and socio-political struggles faced by the continent. This study focuses on Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, using postcolonial theory to analyze migration and identity formation. The novel is selected purposefully for its exploration of postcolonialism, migration, and the quest for identity. The research delves into the experiences of African migrants in both their home countries and their new community in Belgium, with a specific focus on four women. These women have endured horrific experiences in Africa and seek a better life abroad, ultimately becoming prostitutes in Belgium. Despite their new profession, they view their lives in Belgium as an improvement over the hardships of war, violence, betrayal, unemployment, and poverty in Africa. Migration from Africa is driven by these unfavorable conditions, and upon arriving in the diaspora, African immigrants face significant challenges, including the need to adapt to their new lives. Consequently, their cultural identity undergoes manipulation, subjugation, and synthesis, leading to the formation of a new identity. They undergo assimilation and transformative experiences. However, some migrants may also return to their home countries due to their inability to fully navigate life in the receiving community.

Keywords: *Migration, Identity Quest, Postcolonialism, Identity formation*

Introduction

Since prehistoric times, human migration has defined humanity. In his view, Adam Mckeown writes that migration has been noted as an important part of world history that has shaped the course of human civilization (170). Spencer Sarah also emphasizes the significance of migration throughout recorded human history, including Greek colonies, Roman conquests, European colonization, and major migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (20). Also, Luis Angels in his work, *The Causes of African Slave Trade*, opines that slave trade as the earliest form of migration has long been recognised as a central feature of African and indeed global economic history (3). Migration, whether voluntary or forced, internal or external, has played a crucial role in bringing about cultural changes and has been closely intertwined with industrialization (Haschman and Mogford, 900).

Russell King opines that Push and pull factors influence migration patterns in the world because Push factors, such as lack of economic opportunities, persecution, and hazardous conditions, trigger emigration, while pull factors, such as job availability, freedom, and favourable environments, attract migrants (10). Mark P. adds that environmental events leading to human migration are not always involuntary; reduced work and food opportunities can prompt large populations to move to areas with better survival prospects (300). These migrants also experience serious challenges in their new homes, such as racism and a lack of settlement policies, and these always contribute to their struggles and may create a "come-back syndrome."

Migrant literature emerges as a means for writers to express their concerns about the inadequacies and instabilities they encounter in their new homes or diasporic spaces. Furthermore, migrant literature addresses issues of alienation, nostalgia, culture, and the social reality of the new environment. This is because migration leads to significant changes in cultural identity, impacting language, clothing, food habits, and an overall outlook on life. According to Mark P The concept of home undergoes deconstruction and redefinition, challenging the notion that "home is the best" Exile often accompanies migration, as writers may voluntarily or involuntarily leave their native homes for political or personal reasons (300).

As for Tanure Ojaide, and many other African literary scholars, “literature is a cultural production where one expects it to reflect the experiences, values, aesthetic considerations of the people who supposedly own it” (16). That is why some African prose fiction is aligned to Chinua Achebe’s popular maxim that “art for art’s sake is a deodorised bullshit” (25). This is against the neo criticism doctrine of “art for art’s sake,” whereby literature is read for its aesthetic value; outside this, meaning ceases to exist. That is why in some African literature, the writers tilt their works towards the revival of a people’s cultural past to reflect their nature, values, experiences, history, and culture. African writers strive to use cultural mediation as a way to make African prose fiction distinct and reclaim Africa’s lost national identity. Olajide Akanji declares:

In Africa, like other continent of the world, migration... contributed to the making and shaping of the histories of the people. This is because at different points in the political and social histories of the African people, records revealed a large scale of in and out migration. (1-2)

Literature becomes a tool for social reforms, aligned with F.R. Leavis’s view, as it is strongly attached to the cultures and norms of a society (100). The writers demonstrate their deep rootedness in African society and its affairs, seeking to mould personalities and create a distinct identity, according to Jackson Sofola (9).

In the push factors, Kehinde and Mbipom aver that the failure of the native environment to provide political, social, and economic security acts as a major trigger for migration (21). Migrant literature also addresses writers’ dissatisfaction with their native homes, societal issues, and economic significance. Chika Unigwe’s novel, *On Black Sisters’ Street*, answers this question, as it portrays the lives of four African women who migrated to Europe in search of a better life but fell into a human trafficking scheme (45). The novel explores their experiences of violence, hardship, and poverty, highlighting their journey and resilience to survive. In conclusion, human migration has been a defining aspect of humanity throughout history. It has shaped cultural changes, influenced by both push and pull factors. Migrant literature provides a platform for writers to express their concerns about the challenges and instabilities encountered in their new homes. African literature, in particular, revives the cultural past and seeks to reclaim lost national identities. The failure of the native environment to provide security often triggers migration, which is reflected in migrant literature. Chika Unigwe’s novel *On Black Sisters’ Street* is a powerful portrayal of the experiences faced by African women who migrate to Europe, emphasizing their resilience in the face of adversity (51).

Theoretical framework

This study examines the social dynamics of contrasting cultures interacting from a post-colonial perspective. In postcolonialism, Anne Dobbie believes that the conquest of a culture leads to the erosion or alteration of its identity, affecting both the conquered and the colonizer (31). Post-colonialism is closely linked to colonialism and neocolonialism, resulting in the loss of cultural history and essential elements. Emmanuel Obiechina argues that when cultures interact, a synthesis occurs, highlighting the indigenous culture (41). Thus, cultural reflections of their native homes provide the umbilical cord that ties the migrants to their native homes. The concepts in postcolonialism that will be used in effecting the analysis of this study are: Unhomeliness (home), Hybridity, Identity formation, and Diaspora (exile).

According to John McLeod, home, as a concept of nationalist representation, signifies belonging and rootedness in a land (231). Migrants often view their home country as an idyllic place of security and belonging. As Avtar Brah puts it: “Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (6). Migration deconstructs the original maxim of “east or west, home is the best” into the new slogan “home is home.” This concept will be used based on the complementary movements that are provoked by the push and pull factors. Hybridity, another key concept in post-colonial theory, refers to the integration of cultural signs and practices from colonizing and colonized cultures. That is, it refers to the integration (or mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and colonized cultures.

For Homi K. Bhabha, "Hybridity is a creation of a new cultural forms and realities resulting from colonial encounter" (13). Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin also defined hybridity as: "Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new trans-cultural forms within the contact-zone produced by colonialism" (118). The characters in the novel struggle with their African identity in their adopted countries. This concept explores how new transcultural forms arise from cross-cultural exchange.

Identity formation, as a concept, is the development of an individual's sense of self and their place in a particular group. Beller and Leerssen assert that identity formation is the "unique sense of self" (4). For Pavel Sysoyev, identity formation is "an individual's realization of his or her place in the spectrum of culture and purposeful behaviour directed on his or her enrolment and acceptance into a particular group, as well as certain characteristic features of a particular group that automatically assign an individual's group membership" (378).

Exile is another concept, and for Edward Said, it can be both actual and metaphorical. It is a concept that signifies the experience of being outside of communal habitation. Africans leave their home country voluntarily or involuntarily to escape harsh conditions.

This mass movement has affected African migrant writing because it has opened up a lot of interest, both from creative writers and critics alike. The interest, however, is aroused and subsequently sustained because of the large-scale experimentation, creativity, and commitment associated with African migrant literature. Kehinde and Mbipom recognize this experimentation, creative innovation, and commitment and consequently posit that "such are remarkable in the development of the genre, especially the writers' determined effort to project commitment and responsiveness to the socio-political and socio-economic realities of their motherland" (2).

The growing interest in migrant literature stems from two significant factors. Firstly, the increasing frequency and volume of migration from Africa to other continents has become a recognized reality. Secondly, the diasporic home abroad has opened up new perspectives, trends, and voices in literary discourse. African writers have eagerly seized this opportunity to explore life outside their home and in the diaspora. The intersection of migration and identity is evident, with displacement being a key element. The concepts of exile, migration, and diaspora are explored within this framework. Migration involves both push and pull factors, with local forces compelling movement and disillusionment abroad often leading to a return to the native home, either physically or psychologically. Hence, Steiner again posits that "the crossing of boundaries reveals not only the promise but also the threat inherent in a community..." (151). "These different realities presented by the two homes inspire writers, who covertly compare, mentally, the life that they had known until the time they began their sojourn in the Diaspora" (Kehinde and Mbipom, 64). Presumably, if the life they obtained at their host community measured below, pull factors set in, and the migrants develop the tendency to 'think home.'

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Africa's disillusionment after colonialism manifests in social instability, political crises escalating into wars, and economic mismanagement leading to inflation, unemployment, corruption, hunger, and hardship. These factors generate widespread unease among citizens, compelling many to seek refuge elsewhere. Frustrated and determined to improve their lives, Africans migrate in large numbers to Europe or America, as their homeland fails to provide a fertile ground for realizing their dreams.

The concept of home in postcolonialism is intertwined with the idea of being unhomed (Lois Tyson, 101). Home, as described by Barbera, is a geographic, historical, and emotional space with political implications tied to resource allocation in multicultural societies. However, for refugees and migrants, the sense of belonging challenges traditional social codes and national boundaries, becoming a crucial step in identity reconstruction. Chika Unigwe captures the experiences of African migrants through photographic depictions of the harsh conditions they aim to escape. These experiences, ranging from

violence and desperation to emotional and pitiful circumstances, serve as the push factors driving the characters to Europe, particularly Belgium.

On Black Sisters' Street portrays Africa's postcolonial disillusionment, shedding light on the atrocities prevalent on the continent. These include human trafficking, war-induced massacres, sexual assault, and heart-wrenching betrayals. The text reveals that Joyce flees the devastating effects of war, Ama escapes from unjust treatment, and Efe is driven by an insatiable desire for a better life. Unigwe uses her characters to depict the social, political, and economic realities faced by ambitious Africans and the challenges encountered by immigrants in Europe. Unigwe also paints a picture of Africa still striving for civilization and political maturity, which prompts mass movements across borders. The harsh conditions at home, devoid of opportunities, push migrants to seek refuge abroad. The absence of an enabling environment ignites an unprecedented desire for a new life, and encounters abroad as the only escape to meaningful existence, as argued by Ayo Kehinde and Joy Mbipom. The novel serves as a reflection of these realities, highlighting Africa's search for progress and the mass migration it triggers. As the migrants eventually escape to Europe, they become culturally and spatially displaced, forcing them to renegotiate life and reality.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the concept of home in African migrant literature is explored. The migrants face the challenges of their new home, realizing that home is only home if it provides the necessary social security for survival. They also experience the infiltration of alien cultures into their own, leading to a cultural mix and a dual identity. The four women in Zwartezusterstraat share a room and exhibit a strong sense of sisterhood, caring for each other's safety and well-being. However, when Sisi is brutally murdered, their petty jealousies and rivalries are shattered, and they mourn her in silence.

The migrants' new home has both positive and negative impacts on their lives. As they navigate their new environment, their characters and attitudes undergo significant transformations. Sisi, for instance, achieves instant success and revels in her newfound lifestyle. However, the migrants also face domestic challenges in the diaspora, including racism, sexploitation, violence, and moral bankruptcy. Upon arriving in Belgium, they are forced into prostitution, and their earnings are controlled by a manipulative figure named Madam. The women fear Madam's punishments and remember the night she mistreated Efe for arriving late to work. Despite these challenges, the diaspora home provides opportunities for interaction with the community and other migrants. For instance, when Efe organizes a burial ceremony for her adopted grandmother from Nigeria, men from different nationalities are expected to attend. Through these interactions, the migrants assimilate into the community, fostering transformations in their lives. The novel depicts the complex nature of the migrants' concept of home, highlighting the struggles they face in their new environment while also exploring themes of sisterhood, survival, and cultural assimilation or transformation.

The transformative effects of migration on individuals provide evidence that borders lose their significance. Through successful assimilation, migrants gain access to the same privileges enjoyed by the citizens of their new community. They can accumulate wealth and property without restrictions, as demonstrated by Sisi, who purchased a Porsche and a house in Belgium, escaping the severe poverty she faced in Nigeria. The diasporic home offers a conducive environment for migrants to thrive, which is often absent in their countries of origin. The depiction of push factors in Unigwe's novel portrays the African situation as immense, bitter, horrifying, and outrageous. The narrative describes violence and mass killings, presenting Africa as a savage and deceitful continent. For instance, the four girls mourn the sudden death of Sisi, while Joyce recounts a scene of violence and horror in her home country, Sudan, ravaged mercilessly by war. The passage vividly describes a mother and son witnessing the arrival of Janjaweed militia, the ensuing chaos, and the tragic loss of lives. Such accounts highlight the brutal acts that occur in Africa, such as the war in Sudan.

The story in *On Black Sisters' Street* focuses on the lives of four prostitutes and their individual stories, which constitute their personal push factors. Journey serves as an essential motif in migrant literature, symbolizing the movement from one's native home to a diasporic home. In the novel, the movement is

from Africa to Europe, particularly Belgium, where the four women find refuge. Various African nationalities make up the African migrants in Belgium, as revealed during Efe's funeral party. Ghanaians, Nigerians, East Africans (Kenyans), Ugandans, and Zimbabweans are among the guests (9–10). The novel depicts a constant influx of African migrants into Europe, as mentioned by Dele, who sends girls to Europe every month (42). There are also records of African migrants heading to America (141). It shows that migration blurs border distinctions by providing migrants with opportunities for prosperity and equality. Unigwe's novel portrays the African situation as filled with immense challenges and violence. A continent where moral decadence, unemployment, poverty, violence, and human trafficking hold sway. The narrative emphasizes the journey from the native home to the diasporic home, with African migrants finding solace in Belgium and other destinations.

Like in any voluntary migration, these migrants are fleeing from an inhospitable homeland. The personal accounts of the four women—Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce—illustrate the various reasons for their migration. Joyce's situation seems the most horrifying, as she was raped at the age of twelve by the same militia that killed her parents and brother (190–191). The accounts of the four women highlight the personal push factors that drive individuals to migrate. Joyce's harrowing experience sheds light on the atrocities and trauma faced by many African migrants. After the bestial sexual escapade with the sinister-minded Sudanese soldiers, Joyce runs to the refugee camp, where she is picked up by a Nigerian soldier on a peacekeeping Mission in Sudan. The soldier, Polycarp, brings her to Lagos, Nigeria, after vowing repeatedly that he would marry her. Polycarp sends her to Belgium when it becomes apparent that he is no longer willing to marry her as he promised. Through these movements, Joyce completes both transnational and transcontinental migrations.

Sisi is an ambitious girl who wants an escape from her parents' poverty. She craves a decent life for herself. It is Sisi's dream to own a flashy car and a big house with all the niceties that offer comfort (Unigwe 19–21). She works hard to graduate with a good grade. After graduation, she looks forward to getting a nice job. As the years go by, she becomes anxious and even desperate; yet no job comes her way. Although she does not like the condition Dele attaches to sending her to Europe, she accepts it merely because of the huge relief it would bring her and the prospect of overcoming the abject poverty in her family. In Efe's case, she is sexually exploited by Titus, a rich Igbo businessman old enough to be her father. In addition to witnessing the death of her mother in the hospital, her life is already in shambles. Meeting Titus becomes a divine intervention. The every-now-and-then-sexual escapades result in pregnancy, and Titus walks out of her life. After the birth of her baby boy, Efe takes the child to Titus, his biological father, but Titus' wife humiliates her, and walks her out of the house, threatening her. She promises to get them out of their predicaments, but she confesses that she does not know or care to know how she could do it (77). She takes up two casual job appointments, and is on the verge of taking another, when she encounters Dele. At the opportunity Dele offers to go abroad, Efe responds quizzically: "*If I wan' go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody dey ask pikin if the pikin wan' sweet?*" (81).

Initially, Ama is thought to have the best of home backgrounds, yet she reveals herself to be more pathetic than the other girls. Her parents are rich and caring, and they try hard to project an enviable future for her. But unknowingly, Brother Cyril, who passes out as her father, clandestinely rapes her, turning her into a sex object. In addition to this, Ama fails the university entrance examination, JAMB. Brother Cyril cajoles her, who, out of anger and frustration, belittles her father for always raping her. Brother Cyril expels her from his house after he informs her that he is not her biological father. Ama goes to Lagos to stay with her cousin. In Lagos, her dream of going overseas begins to filter through. Ama's only wish has been to escape from all her problems.

From the various accounts of these women, it shows an escape from the horrors of life and afflictions of the motherland. In most cases, it becomes even more difficult to determine whether a migration is voluntary or not since most movements are unavoidably imposed as a condition of choicelessness on the migrants. From the various accounts of the girls' historical backgrounds, the readers become aware of the enormous or high scale of human suffering in Africa. The chronicle of these characters' experiences serves the purpose of expressing the numerous challenges that migrants face in their

motherland, which force them into voluntary exile. It is based on these inescapable and harsh conditions that voluntary migration appears to be involuntary.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the exiled characters face challenges including racism, violence, insecurity, loss of freedom, and diminished identity. They are forced into prostitution, abandoning their dreams of a better life. Sisi's brutal murder, linked to her inability to repay debts, exposes the lack of protection for migrants. The characters lack complete freedom, as Madam rules them with an iron fist through a harsh and impersonal relationship. Similarly, in the essay titled "*The Silenced Minority*," British Caribbean author Caryl Philips vividly depicts the harsh reality of African/Nigerian girls involved in prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium. These girls live in cramped, filthy bedrooms and remain trapped in servitude until they can repay their traffickers. The Keteltje bar scene reveals a surreal situation with a large number of bored Nigerian girls outnumbering the scarce clients during an economic recession. This portrays the difficult lives of these Nigerian girls in Antwerp.

Despite the challenges faced by exiled individuals, they experience a notable transformation and start planning for their future. Joyce, for instance, envisions opening a boutique called TOTT after Polycarp repays her debt. She aspires to become independent, hoping for the return of her passport and saving money. Thinking of home, she considers traveling to Europe annually to shop for her boutique. Sisi, whom Joyce confides in, expresses interest in becoming her partner once she achieves her own freedom. This demonstrates that even in exile, migrants yearn for their homeland, highlighting the incomplete nature of migration without the possibility of return.

Again, the displacement of individuals in different spaces has a profound impact on their identity and its formation. According to Barbera, the search for recognition and empowerment plays a crucial role in reconstructing one's identity (5). Leaving their home country, migrants lose their social status, family, and social networks, finding themselves in a new country without a history or image (Barbera, 2). They experience a sense of loss, isolation, and unfamiliarity, struggling to integrate while facing mistrust and hostility. In their diasporic homes, migrants must negotiate their own culture with that of the host community, leading to altered cultural identities. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, characters like Chisom and Alek changed their names to ones they felt were more fitting for life abroad, such as Sisi and Joyce, respectively, though influenced by Dele's suggestion. Despite the fact that Alek hated the principal actors acting on her and tinkering with her name, there was nothing she could do to change it. It, therefore, becomes a new reality, which she must accommodate if she must cross over to Europe.

Sisi's new lifestyle in Europe is marked by changes in her dining choices and personal habits. In the beginning, she stands indecisively between Panos and Ekxi restaurants, eventually opting for the slightly pricier Ekxi. She purchases a lettuce-filled sandwich and a thick fruit smoothie, enjoying them while seated outside with her shopping bags nearby, symbolizing her departure from a frugal past. This contrasts with her previous life in Lagos, where she endured days of eating Garri and soup consecutively. In Europe, Sisi's transformation is evident as she engages in numerous sexual encounters, including with Luc, and even takes up smoking cigarettes. She becomes involved with fifteen clients during prosperous times and diligently sends money to Dele through Western Union. While she still holds onto her dream of building a grand house, its significance begins to wane, evident in her emotionless phone conversations and distant gaze, with a cigarette firmly grasped between her fingers. There is also foreign interference in the language or accent of the migrants. Migrants use foreign expressions and slang, such as "where's my fucking mascara?" (3). "Men are bastards" (6), "Seth Africa" for South Africa, "we got a lotta for we have a lot of (12). This is not to say that they lose their original language: they, especially the Nigerian migrants, still use Nigerian and Pidgin English occasionally, as Efe's speech affirms: "i been dey call her Granny, but she be just this woman wey live near our house wey I like well well" (8).

What this suggests is that the language the migrants use and the manner in which they use it depend on their mood and the occasion they find themselves on. When they are alone, they usually speak Nigerian or Pidgin English, but when they are with other people, they tend to show off their learned foreign

language and accent. For instance, during the preparation for Efe's party in honour of Iya Loja, Ama and Sisi have a lace-off as follows: "I don't know what's eating you, Ama, but I don't want any part of it. Whoever sent you, tell them that you didn't see me, I beg you.'... I don't want to fight abeg" (6)."What's eating you", "whoever sent you", "abeg" are instances of Nigerian language and can only be understood within the Nigerian cultural context. All these instances indicate that migration acts upon the migrants, thereby imbuing them with mixed identities. This is a result of the pressure that the cultures of their receiving community exert on them, forcing them to blend. In the process, the transformation that occurs affects their identity and identity formation.

Migrant writing likewise encompasses return migration, whether voluntary or involuntary. Involuntary return occurs when migrants are compelled to go back due to immigration policy violations. Sisi's situation becomes unique as she lacks blood relatives to arrange for her burial in her native home. Psychological return migration involves a strong longing for the home country, as seen in Joyce's plan to open a boutique shop in Lagos and her savings towards that goal. Sisi also embraces the idea and suggests a partnership with Joyce once her debt to Dele is settled.

Conclusion

On Black Sisters' Street adheres to the expectations of migrant prose narrative, exploring migration, identity quests, and the harsh African environment. *Unigwe revealed* that the tropes of migrancy include unhomeliness, exile, journey, and identity formation. He also highlighted the push factors of unemployment, betrayal, war, and sexual exploitation drive as the reason for the migration of Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce to Belgium. The novel portrays the challenges they face, including loss of freedom, prostitution, exploitation, and insecurity, leading to Sisi's tragic murder. Despite the obstacles, the migrants achieve financial success, but at the cost of cultural and personal transformation. Their culture becomes hybrid, dominated by the host community, while their personalities undergo changes as they negotiate their identity crisis in the diasporic home.

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