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## Migration, Modern Slavery And Sexual Objectification Of Women In Nigerian Fiction: A Study Of Unigwe Chika's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the intersection of migration, modern slavery, and the sexual objectification of women in Nigerian literature, with a specific focus on Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street*. Through a critical analysis of the text, the study examines how the author portrays the experiences of African women who migrate to Europe under the illusion of better opportunities, only to become entrapped in systems of exploitation and sexual servitude. Unigwe's narrative foregrounds the structural inequalities, gender-based violence, and socio-economic pressures that drive female migration and enable their commodification in foreign lands. By situating the novel within postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, the paper reveals how Unigwe critiques global systems of oppression and challenges the silencing of marginalized female voices. Ultimately, this study highlights the ways in which literature can serve as a powerful tool for confronting the realities of modern slavery and advocating for social justice.*

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### Background to the Study

History has evidently shown that man has always been on the move, and because of the migratory nature of man, researchers have always asked two pertinent questions: "Why do people migrate?"

and "Where are migrants coming from and where are they going?" (Kuhnt, 2019:1, and Etzo, 2008:2). The first question deals with the migration decision process of the individual migrants and the factors that influence their decision, while the second question focuses on the



places of migration and the aggregate flow of migrants. In answering the first question, Hagen-Zanker (2010:1) states that people mostly migrate because they “[...] want to be better off”. However, the meta-question to this one, according to Hagen-Zanker, is that “If migration makes people better off, why do not more people migrate?” The last question is tacitly not unconnected to the negative side of migration which births the concept of modern slavery.

Thus, migration and modern slavery are two sides of a coin. One can hardly discuss one without the other, for modern slavery, like the ancient slavery, is nestled in migration. History records that during the transatlantic slave trade (ancient slavery), Africans were captured, chained and transported to Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States to work as slaves (Ngwe & Elechi, 2012:103). Although the ancient slavery (i.e. the transatlantic slave trade) was officially abolished around 1807, scholars are of the view that slavery never cease to exist. Bales (2007) as cited in Mami (2014:5 & 6) elaborates this when he affirms that:

[...] making something illegal doesn't make it cease to exist; making it illegal only causes it to vanish from view. The abolition of slavery was immensely significant when laws were effectively enforced, but it also blinded people to ongoing slavery. Subsequent generations have been unaware that legal abolition didn't make slavery

go away, that it only masked the problem. Behind closed doors, in remote places and right under our noses, slavery has continued, making people rich, feeding our lifestyles, and burning up lives.

The above line of thought demonstrates that modern slavery is graver and more dangerously complex than the ancient or chattel slavery. This is because “[...] modern slavery is not the exclusive practice of large landowners or multinational companies. It is more acute because one doesn't have to be a banker in order to be a slaver” (Mami, 2014:6). Modern slavery correlates with transatlantic slavery. The two share elements of migration (i.e. internal and external migration), violence and economic exploitation.

Generally, modern slavery, in recent time, has become a cankerworm eating deep in different societies all over the world. It is one of the fastest growing and serious forms of transnational crime in the world today. It is estimated that between 800,000 and 4, 000,000 people, mostly women and children are trafficked as modern slaves across international borders annually (Okoloagu, 2011:4; Ngwe & Elechi, 2012:104). Bales (2005) and Craig *et al* (2007) as cited in Ngwe & Elechi, 2012:104) observe that modern slavery, otherwise known as human trafficking, is a lucrative business whose annual revenue returns is estimated to be between \$9 billion and \$32 billion. And these scholars are of the view that the



volume of human trafficking into modern slavery is likely to surpass that of drug and arms trafficking within the next ten years unless something urgent is done to arrest the situation. Thus, as seen above, this transnational crime has been theoretically linked with international migration by the international community of practitioners and scholars. Okoloagu (2011:4), in her paper, "Modern Slavery: With Particular Reference to Childhood and Widowhood in Nigeria", submits that:

Young girls are being taken from Africa to live with fellow blacks in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world as house helps, while some are taken into prostitution where their wages are handed over to their masters/mistresses who, on arrival, would have seized their passports, leaving them with no option than to accept any treatment or condition meted out to them.

The above assertion suggests that modern slavery which is implicated in the global migration activities is founded on search for employment and self-fulfillment, rendering many a society vulnerable to the business of transnational crime. Presently, there has been a lot of hue and cry on the dangers inherent in youth migration particularly to Europe and parts of the Asia, and the media is replete with crimes committed by and against migrant youth in these distant places. In some cases, the

brutalization, killing, torturing, maiming, sexual abuse and exploitation have been recorded and made viral on the internet for all to see. Today, trafficking in persons (human trafficking) and modern slavery are simply used as umbrella terms to denote both sex trafficking and compelled labour. In tracing why the victims of modern slavery are easy prey, Odiye (2018:40) states that there are socioeconomic, sociopolitical, cultural, historical, and environmental circumstances that encourage the victims. These are manifest in poverty, excessive materialism, lack of good parental background, peer group influence, oppressive cultural tradition and quest for freedom. Odiye further postulates that:

These social issues or problems have eaten deep into the mentality of the common people in society to the extent that their moral conscience and behaviours are deeply affected. This is to say that as a result of economic hardship, many people have descended too low by engaging in sex slavery or human trafficking for one reason or the other; thus having little or no control over their lives, emotions or experiences. Hence, their movements, bodies, aspirations, experiences and emotions are controlled by others. (p. 40).

Modern slavery is an offence where youths are assaulted and used

as cheap labour with little or nothing to show for it. Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2017:5) shows that on any given day in 2016, 40 million people were victims of modern slavery, 25 million of them in forced labour and 15 million in forced marriage. There were 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every thousand people in the world in 2016. There were 5.9 adult victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 adults in the world and 4.4 child victims for every 1,000 children in the world. Women and girls account for 71 percent of modern slavery victims. And one in every four victims of modern slavery were children.

In Nigeria, people that suffer from trans-border modern slavery come from all parts of the country but some states, according to UNESCO (2006:22), tend to provide more victims of modern slavery than others. These states include Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ebonyi, Kano, Delta, Ogun, Oyo and Lagos. UNESCO further states that West African destination countries for Nigerian trafficked women and children are Republic of Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Gabon and Guinea where trafficked persons are destined to work mostly as domestic servants and on farm plantations. The common European destinations for modern slavery of women and children from Nigeria are Italy, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. The Middle East is another destination, especially Libya and Saudi Arabia. The recruitment of girls trafficked to Saudi Arabia comes

predominantly from the northern part of Nigeria, especially Kano, Kwara, Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, Nasarawa, Plateau, Kebbi, Katsina, Adamawa, Zamfara, Jigawa, Gombe and Bauchi (UNESCO, 2006:23).

In Nigeria, according to UNESCO (2006:27), persons are trafficked both internally and externally into modern slavery for prostitution, to work as domestic servants, bus conductors, and street traders. They are exploited in agricultural work, brass melting, stone digging and scavenging. What this implies is that economic inequalities and poverty across a variety of the world, Africa and Nigeria, in particular, are at the roots of migration and modern slavery. It is against this background that the present work explores migration, modern slavery and sexual objectification of women in Nigerian fiction with specific focus on Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, to demonstrate how these phenomena are captured and represented via the fictional genre.

### **Scope and Delimitation of the Study**

This research explores, via the lenses of Postcolonial literary theory, issues of migration and modern slavery in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. The choice of the primary texts is not only hinged on the fact that authors are all women, but it is also based on the fact that the texts yield themselves easily to the postcolonial theoretical analysis. Thus, the critical analysis of the selected texts draws mainly from

major Postcolonial theorists in the likes of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Spivak. As obviously stated, this work examines a text from which the author offers a diasporic point of view. Generally, the focus of the study is on the literary representation of the realities of migration and modern slavery in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters'* as part of the corpus of Nigerian fiction.

### Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research methodology which relies "[...] primarily on non-numeric data in the form of words, including all types of textual analyses such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses" (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007:23). This methodology aims to provide a detail understanding into human behaviours, emotions, attitudes, and experiences (in this case, migration and modern slavery as human behaviours and experiences). Qualitative methodology also explores the behaviours, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people, and what lies at the core of their lives. The basis of it lies in the interpretive approach to social reality, and in the description of the lived experience of human beings (Ton *et al.*, 2012 and Atkinson *et al.*, 2001 as cited in Mohajan, 2018).

Thus, the primary sources of data for this research is Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* as well as relevant books, journals, articles, library materials and internet sources. The analysis of the selected texts draws its inspiration

largely from the ideas and tenets of Postcolonial literary theory such as ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry and other related relevant terms in exploring the variables of the research.

### Bio-sketch of Chika Unigwe

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian-born Belgian writer who lived in Turnhout, Belgium, but later moved to the United States in 2013 (Chukwudi-Ofoedu, 2017:3). The sixth of seven children, Chika was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. She completed her secondary school education at the Federal Government Girls' College (FGGC), Abuja and later went to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1995. She got married to a Belgian engineer and later moved with him to Turnhout in Flanders, Belgium's Dutch-speaking region. She had her MA in English from the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), and proceeded to earned a PhD from the University of Leiden in 2004. Chika and her family moved to the Atlanta area in the United States, where she now resides (Babayemi, 2018:33, and Tunca, Mortimer, & Calzo, 2013:57).

Before making her appearance on the Flemish literary scene in 2005, she had already successfully debuted with English language publications in Nigeria and Britain. Her poetry was published in Nigeria (Unigwe, 1993; 1995), her short stories won the 2003 BBC Short Story Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Award and were published in *Wasafiri* and a number of anthologies of

contemporary African writing. She also wrote two children's books, *Ije at School* (2001) and *A Rainbow for Dinner* (2003). After her debut in Flanders, Unigwe has continued to publish Dutch as well as English short stories, essays, and translations and editions of her writings (De Mul, 2014:13-14).

As an important and emerging female Nigerian novelist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century writing in diaspora, Chika Unigwe belongs to what has been identified as the third generation of Nigerian writers who are sincerely concern with the fate of Africa and Africans in the world, because they are historically informed about their place in their struggle to right the wrongs done to women's bodies in their culture (Ladele & Omotaye, 2017:53 and Eze, 2014:89). Unigwe's works, unlike the older generation of female writers who were mostly concerned with the task of defending Africa against Western normative freezing, are basically centred on the theme of sex-slavery as a form of trafficking in women and children as a result of the writers being faced with new circumstances, new situations and new technologies (Nwajiaku, 2012:127 as cited in Orabueze, 2013:48). Chukwudi-Ofoedu (2017:3) describes Unigwe as a writer whose works, like that of other African female writers, deal with thematic concern which is predominantly on women's issues and experiences. She has used her novels not merely for the purpose of entertainment; but through them, she engages constructively with the social

conditions of women of her race in the diaspora. Unigwe is also interested in the conditions occasioned by physical, social and psychological relocation from the continent of Africa to other spaces (Ladele & Omotaye, 2017:53-54).

She is best known for her three novels: *Phoenix* (2007), *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Night Dancer* (2012). These fictional works are preoccupied with issues of migration, loneliness, prostitution and gender relations. As earlier stated, the author has won several prizes for her fiction, including the 2003 BBC World Service Short Story Competition for 'Borrowed Smile' (published in *Wasafiri* 39, Summer 2003). Another short piece, 'The Secret', was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2004 (Tunca, Mortimer, & Calzo, 2013:54).

### **Review of Critical Works on Chika Unigwe Novels**

Most existing studies on modern slavery have been viewed from non-literary perspectives, and the most current literary works on Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* have mostly concentrated on, and narrowed themselves to, the issue and analysis of the representation of migration, especially the representation of migrant women in Nigerian fiction. Thus, this study presents critical views and reviews on Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2010) in order to identify a gap for this present study to fill. *On Black Sisters' Street* has received a variety of criticisms. For instance, Umezurike's (2013)

critique "Sexuality and Subjectivity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" deems the novel to be a chart of the lives of four girls who, hoping to escape the heartbreak, abuse and poverty in Nigeria, end up as prostitutes in Antwerp, Belgium. He discusses it from the perspectives of "Understanding Sisi: Subject through Dreams and Prophecy", "Understanding Efe: Subjection through Fancies and Desires", and "Understanding Alek: Subjection through Familial Norms".

In their study, "Ideational Representation of Prostitution in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", Kamalu and Ejezie (2014, p. 258) conclude that, [...] a linguistic study of ideational meanings in the text under consideration enables the analyst to deduce how the writer's choices serve as a means through which social meanings and experiences can be expressed and understood. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of how the writer's linguistic choices bring about an understanding of the social experiences and ideology that underlie the text under study. Thus, the ideology encoded in the text helps us to discover and understand issues of character depiction, identity, sexual violence and gender roles and asymmetry in Nigeria and Belgium. This clearly shows that Kamalu and Ejezie's study concerns itself with unveiling the linguistic composition of the novel and how it has been able to expose the encounters of the characters and the ideological leanings depicted in the novel.

Eze's (2014) "Feminism with a Big 'F': Ethics and the Rebirth of African Feminism in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" places Unigwe in the third generation of Nigerian writers alongside Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Unoma Azuah and Lola Shoneyin among others. To Eze, Unigwe though recognising the efforts of her ancestors in writing - Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Buchi Emecheta among others - who have fought the women cause in their writings (but which they have recognized as feminism with a small 'f', a saying alluded to Emecheta), Unigwe and her generation has taken the fight to a high level adopting Western feminist ideals which are radical. This then makes their feminist stance to be regarded as feminism with a big 'F'. This means that their form of feminism is a shift away from the "softer" form of the first generation of women writers and it is radical feminism. This is what is found in her novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Ibeku's (2013) article "Sexuality and Diasporic Experiences in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" reveals that the text concentrates on the issue of African women who migrate to Europe with the sole aim of making a living with their God-given endowments. They left in order to help themselves achieve what their government has failed to provide for them. They are aware and accept to earn a living through prostitution as a result of the corrupt practices in their countries. (p.3) Ibeku's view here reveals the push and pull factors for



young women migrating to Europe. The push factors include poverty, unemployment, insecurity, political instability and poor social welfare, while the pull factors are stable life, better source of income and security. However, in Europe, the migrated girls indulge in prostitution as a means of earning a living which they were aware of before migrating.

Haruna-Banke & Gogo (2022), in their critical work on Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, deploy Realism as theoretical framework to probe the ugly life of four young girls in Nigeria who are trafficked into Antwerp, Belgium, to work as prostitutes and earn income for their traffickers. The research concludes that well placed individuals, parents, civil society organizations and the government should make efforts to improve and secure the lives of vulnerable young women in Nigeria in order to help them escape from their vulnerabilities. Also, the novel's authentic representation of life and society and its focus on character more than plot, including its attention to the lower class, the social and the contemporary issues, fits it into the realist agenda.

These foregoing critical articles on Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* have helped in developing knowledge documents on the novel, thereby adding intellectual value to it and helping scholars and critics have a better understanding of it as a prose fictional work. However, the critical articles have not explored all aspects of the texts. For instance,

they dwell mostly on feminism, diasporic experiences, sex-slavery and realistic interpretation of the text under study. Therefore, there is a gap in the aspects of migration, modern slavery and sexual objectification of women which have not been much explored. Therefore, this study evaluates the selected novel from the postcolonial discourse as its theoretical framework.

### **Postcolonial Discourse as Theoretical Framework**

The choice of postcolonial literary discourse as the theoretical framework of this paper is based on the fact that the concepts of place and displacement (invariably migration and modern slavery) have been featured, most prominently, in post-colonial writings as sites where crisis of identity and other salient issues intersect. Postcolonialism, as a literary discourse, was introduced in the English Department first in the United States, and that was how it emerged in the 1990s or late 1980s as a particular field of discourse (Raja, 2021, February 8). Other scholars also attest to the emergence of the theory as a distinct literary discourse in the 1990s and late 1980s (Barry 2002:192; Dobie 2012:205 & Newton 1997:283).

As a literary theory, postcolonialism gained currency through the works of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978 & *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993); Gayatri Spivak, (*In Other Worlds*, 1987 & *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 1990)); Homi K. Bhabha, (*The Location of Culture*,

1994); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (*The Empire Writes Back*, 1989); Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Chinua Achebe's essay "Colonialist Criticism" (Newton 1997:283, Barry 2002:192 & Habib, 2005:738). Most of these postcolonial theorists, as earlier hinted, aim most fundamentally to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. Also important to it is the examination of canonical works to unveil colonialist assumption; thus, subverting the text for postcolonial purposes (Dobie 2012:207). The postcolonial critics, according to Newton (1997:283), concentrate "either on the representation of the non-European in Western canonic literature or on writing from non-European cultural tradition, particularly writing from countries that have been colonized by Western nation".

### **Synopsis of *On Black Sisters Street***

*On Black Sisters Street* is a novel about African (young women) prostitutes living and working in Belgium. The novel was set between Nigeria and Belgium and follows the lives of Ama, Sisi, Efe and Joyce. It opens after one of the women, Sisi, had been murdered and the story continued through flash-backs. These young African women had left their homeland for the riches of Europe (three Nigerians and one Sudanese). The women journey from Nigeria to the red-light district of the Belgian city of Antwerp, where they work as prostitutes. These young women share an apartment. They keep their

heads down, knowing that one step out of line could cost them a week's wages. They sell their bodies to strangers but their hearts to no one; rather, they focus on earning enough money to get themselves free from the sexual exploitation, to send money back home and to save up for their future. Then suddenly, one of them, Sisi (the rebel among them) is mysteriously murdered (251). The person who brought these women together is Dele (sex trafficker) a supposedly "big man" in Lagos whose wealth comes from selling African women to Western European brothels. Dele charged these women 30,000 euros (32), a debt they would have to repay along with madam's (landlady) accommodation money. In short, the novel dwells on the scourge of human trafficking.

### **Modern Slavery in *On Black Sisters' Street***

In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*, several issues were identified, which include migration, modern slavery and sexual objectification of women/prostitution and exploitation. These issues are often intertwined in the novel.

### **Modern Slavery of Women and Prostitution in *On Black Sisters' Street***

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, trafficking is the act of buying or selling usually illegal goods. An illegal trade of trafficking of women as goods is explicitly depicted in the text. The four protagonists (Sisi, Efe, Joyce, and Ama) in the text are victims of

trafficking as they are trafficked from Nigeria to Belgium. Unigwe uses the character of Dele and Madam as key agents of human trafficking. They engage in the illicit trade of transporting young girls to Europe to work as sex slaves under the guise of aiding their economic struggle, 'If you wan' comot from dis our nonsense country, come see me make we talk' (32). Unigwe uses the character of Sisi to project how a capitalist society serves as a tool of making young women fall prey into the hands of traffickers who promise them a life of luxury. Such is the case of Sisi (alias Chisom) who couldn't get a good job after graduating from the university; she was so frustrated with her situation that she had to submit applications for jobs she was hardly qualified for:

An air hostess with Triax Airlines (must be an excellent swimmer; Chisom had never learned to swim), an administrative assistant with Air France (excellent French required; Chisom knew as much French as she did Yoruba, which was not much, if anything at all. (23)

Even at that, she could not even get an interview from any of these organisations. These led her into accepting Senghor Dele's offer as she sees it as the only way of helping her family financially that heavily depends on her in having a comfortable life:

So when she got the offer that she did she was determined to get back on life; to grab it by the ankles

and scoff in its face. There was no way she was going to turn it down. Not even for Peter. (23)

The high monetary return from selling women and children makes this trade attractive as there is an increased demand for commercial sex workers. These traffickers live a life of affluence due to the huge profits they gain in the business of trafficking, as seen in the character of Dele (pimp):

He always wore rich lace suits and left her huge tips. The other regulars knew him as he would sometimes offer to pay for their food and drinks, shouting across the table... 'Mama, I dey declare today! For everybody. Even you! Eat! Drink! Senghor Dele is paying'. (161- 162)

Most of these young women are transported to Europe to work as prostitutes, where their female body is being subjected to subjugation and exploitation. This is a modern-day form of slavery, in which a woman is transported to a new environment where she does not know anybody and so becomes an object of sex. Prostitution serves as a strong thread that ties these women (Ama, Efe, Joyce and Sisi) together in the world of trafficking. Sisi, out of desperation to have a better life and support her family, went into prostitution. This also applies to Efe who was abandoned by her sugar daddy with a child to care for and has the responsibilities of her siblings to shoulder and had to





accept the offer of Dele (81) to travel abroad to work as a prostitute.

She would be Dele and Sons Limited's export. L.I. would get a better life. Go to good schools, become a big shot and look after her when she was old and tired. L.I. was a worthy investment to encourage her to accept Dele's offer. And even though leaving him would be the hardest thing she would ever do, she would endure it for his sake. (82)

Traffickers send so many young women to Europe and have deeply rooted connections. This makes it very easy for them to transport girls successfully without encountering any problem. This tends to boost their confidence in this illicit trade as Dele boastfully displays this to Sisi; 'I dey get girls everywhere. Italy. Spain. I fit get you inside Belgium. Antwerp. I get plenty connections there. Plenty, plenty!' (34). The high demand for women and young girls in the destination countries drives the trade in human trafficking. The police force also have bad eggs among them who serve as accomplices to this heinous crime of trafficking women, as Ama attests to this "Ama laughs. 'Madam has the police in her pocket. You heard her. We tell the police and then fucking what?' (290). When these women get to their place of destination, their passports are collected by the pimps or madam, thereby withholding any sense of identity from them in a strange land; This is what madam does to the four women in the text

'Ah, hand over your passport. From now, until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it' (119).

In order to have these young women under absolute control, they instill fear in them by threatening them and dealing with anyone who tries to escape without paying all the money (debt bondage) the traffickers demand from them. Fear and deception are used by madam and the pimp to keep the girls passive. Likewise, the fear of being arrested and deported as illegal immigrants serves also as a form of keeping these young women under control, as their passports are being taken away from them.

Now until you have paid up every single kobo', she pointed the cigarette at Sisi, 'every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back...Every month you go to the Western Union and transfer the money to Dele. Any month you do not pay...' She let the threat hang, unspoken, yet menacing, her left hand plucking at a tuft of hair under her chin. (183).

Unigwe also reveals how brutal and heartless these pimps and Madams can be to these women (victims), especially if any of them attempts escaping; such person is brutally killed. This is depicted in the character of Sisi who was killed by Segun under the instruction of Madam (293) because she attempts to leave the business of working as a prostitute. Unigwe depicts human trafficking and prostitution as

unethical. They are businesses that people have manipulated to make it useful for their future lives. Thus, in this sense, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce can be labelled as victimised characters who are forced by circumstances to seek freedom through prostitution in which the novel appears to condemn the circumstances (classed society) that necessitate prostitution, rather than the individuals concerned.

The characters of Dele and Madam, as key agents of human trafficking, portray the oppression and absolute control of the bourgeoisie (traffickers) over the proletariat (women) who are victims of economic pressure in Nigeria.

### **Modern Slavery and the Objectification of Women**

Objectification can be referred to as a way of treating a person like an object without showing any form of regard to their personality. Orabueze (2004) in her article "The law and slave trade: An evaluation of sex slavery in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, narrows her own analysis to objectification in terms of sex-slavery, whereby the woman is subjected to all forms of sexual abuse. She describes it as "an organized transnational criminal business empire in Africa, particularly Nigeria" (44). She also comments that "the narrator portrays that the worse type of slavery is trafficking in very young girls" (p.55).

The four trafficked women in *On Black Sisters' Street* were objectified through their body; they were seen by men as sex objects

used to satisfy their sexual desires. Unigwe reveals how women are sampled and auctioned as commodities, bought and sold with no respect for their body. 'They often talk about it: the standing and waiting to be noticed by the men strolling by, wondering which ones are likely to tip well, and which not. From their glass windows, they watch the lives outside, especially the men's' (178).

The stereotype of women as sexual object is strongly cultivated in the novel, 'Those who know where they are and why they are there walk with an arrogant swagger and a critical twinkle in their eyes. They move from one window to another and having made up their minds, go in to close a sale' (178), thereby projecting the woman as a commodity. Unigwe uses her protagonists to reiterate how women are deprived, exploited and objectified in the world of trafficking.

Traffickers see women as goods which they buy and sell to gain more wealth, as these powerful individuals (bourgeoisie) see this illicit trade as a normal legal business without considering the fact that these women are human beings who deserve self-worth:

Villa Tinto. The queen of all brothels. Even has its own police station. It just opened a few months ago...I hear the girls who work inside have panic buttons beside their beds, to press when a customer gets out of hand. They have Jacuzzis. Sauna. That kind of thing. Too costly for us...This is where the

ministers get their girls from!  
The girls here are top class.  
(204)

Women who are forced into the business of prostitution and those who willingly go into prostitution are treated as sex slaves. While enriching their traffickers, these women are subjected to the worst forms of dehumanization, exploitation and sexual violence. The female body is reduced to nothing but a commodity, attractive to men and a sexual tool from which men derive pleasure.

Sisi learned the rates pretty quickly. She had always had head for figures. Fifty euros for a P&S, a blow job. A bit more if a French kiss was required. Twice the price for half an hour of everything: P&S, French kissing and full penetration. With a condom. Without a condom, the client paid thirty euros extra. Sisi did not like to do *without*, but thirty euros was not something she found easy to turn down. (237)

The above excerpt clearly shows how these women see themselves as sex tool, 'when business was good. Sisi did an average of fifteen men' (260) who can be used by men the way they deem fit. They see their body as an asset in making money and fulfilling their dream. 'Just money counted out, and girls were lucky a tip thrown in. And on such nights...all the dreams filling her head. The dreams

expanding to make sure nothing else came' (238). The society (classed) has not only patterned the victims (women) as sexual objects, but some of them have also viewed themselves as such.

## Conclusion

Unigwe uses Sisi's narrative to embody the collective narratives of women who have been subjugated by hierarchies of local and international political and economic exploitation. The character of Efe was also used to depict Nigeria as a society that does not favour the lower class, due to constant exploitation by the powerful individuals in the society, 'People knew the risks and people took them because the destination was worth it. What was it the song said? *Nigeria jaga jaga. Everytin' scatter scatter*. Nobody wanted to stay back unless they had pots of money to survive the country' (82) Also, Sisi's representation in the text can be used as a reticulated of the narrative representations of other Nigerian female characters like Ama, Efe and Joyce. The push and pull factors contribute to the growth of trafficking, as Unigwe uses the story of Sisi to reassert the tragedy of a neo-colonial Nigerian state, where the leaders are inconsiderate to the plight of the masses and how the powerful individuals (bourgeoisie) exploits the struggling ones (proletariat) economically.



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