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Cannibalising the African immigrant woman: Human trafficking as represented in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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Abstract

In pursuit of greener pastures, African women seek jobs in the West through their trusted kin, including husbands, mothers and close friends, often getting lured into sex work on arrival in diaspora. Through the representation of this situation in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, this paper aims to demonstrate that while mainly it is the men and husbands who enroll and subject unwilling and desperate women, wives and partners into prostitution, conniving women also exploit the precarity and desperation of the newly arrived to recruit and entrap them into sex business that least benefits the entrapped women. The cannibalisation of women by women is underwritten by the status of the newly arrived illegal immigrants. As such, they cannot look for formal employment without risking arrest, detention and deportation. With their passports confiscated, their precarious state and unwillingness to go back home with nothing after heroic departures makes them easy prey for the unscrupulous queens of the underworld who control the economy of pleasure. Using both the feminist and postcolonialist approaches, this paper addresses the disruption of family units resulting from human trafficking.

Keywords: African Woman, Cannibalisation, Human Trafficking, Immigrant Woman, New Diasporas, Old Diasporas, *The West*



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Public Interest Statement

Guided by the feminist and postcolonialist concepts, this paper addresses the woes of African women immigrants who relocate to the West for greener pastures, only to be used by fellow African women immigrants who had the advantage of arriving in the West earlier. Its main arguments are based on the representation of these circumstances by Chika Unigwe in *On Black Sisters' Street* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*.

1.0 Introduction

Opponents of immigration often prefer to ignore the tragic forces that compel people to risk death in order to reach our lands of plenty, not to mention the horrors that often await the “lucky” few, once they do arrive. (Eberstadt, n.pag)

You shall go down into the world,
and you shall be innocent, gentle, well-balanced and faithful,
you shall have an infinite capacity to obey
and an infinite capacity to rebel.
You shall be pure.
Therefore, I curse you.
(Pier Paolo Pasolini 'A Desperate Vitality', 355)

Fernanda Eberstadt's observation in the first epigraph succinctly captures the horrors that await characters in Europe as imagined in the novels of Unigwe and Darko. The diasporic experiences as presented in *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, are characterized by contradictions witnessed as newly migrant characters interact with those who arrived from Africa much earlier. Notably, the two sets of characters occupy marginal spaces in the European metropolises. Unlike the sisterhoods forged between the new diasporic subjects who have similar life experiences, the relationships between the old and the new diasporas is predicated on tendencies that will be called “Canibalisation at the Margins”. Cannibalisation in this regard refers to the misuse and mistreatment of women for both material and pleasure's sake. The openings of the two texts sees the readers through the difficult phase of the women characters in Africa. When, through the mediation of those who have already established themselves in Europe, a chance opens for them to relocate to Europe, both the reader and the characters get a sigh of relief. As the narratives unfold, it becomes clear that the initial benevolence of the old diaspora, seen in their facilitation of the relocation of the protagonists, is based on selfish interest for the facilitators. As the newly arrived soon realize, they have exchanged one form of subjection with another.

This paper demonstrates that both men and women in the old diaspora are a cabal which thrives on cannibalizing the new female diasporas. It aims to demonstrate that while mainly it is the men who enroll and subject unwilling and desperate women to prostitution, conniving women also exploit the precarity and desperation of the newly arrived to recruit and entrap them into sex business that least benefits the entrapped women.

2.0 Literature Review

MaryEllen Higgins in her analysis of *Beyond the Horizon* explores whether transnational or transcultural women's solidarity is possible, focussing on her Ghanaian protagonist, Mara, and her German “sister-in-law”/cowife, Gitte (Darko 22). She also explores the existing contemporary inequities in the

relationships between Ghanaian men and women both locally and in diaspora, and abuse of women in transactional sex trade. She concludes that the text exposes both international and domestic violence against Ghanaian women, thus contributing to international and local discourses concerning abuse of women in transnational sex trade.

Regarding *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sarah De Mul examines how black womanhood entails the struggle of women to recreate themselves and their transnational worlds, and re-describe themselves across cultural limits and societal forces. The text she notes, does not merely present the black woman as exotic and sexualized as in the European perception.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by the Postcolonial theory as articulated by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Stephen Morton avers that Spivak, along with other leading contemporary intellectuals such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by focusing on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalized by dominant western culture, namely the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject. The dominant ideas of the contemporary era, including the perception of the western world as more civilized, democratic and developed than the non-western world have also been challenged by Spivak through championing the voices and texts of such minority groups (1). These postulations summarize the relevance of Postcolonial Theory to this study that focusses on African female immigrants in the western world, their experiences, and perceptions and how these affect their physical and psychological development with regard to their indigenous cultures and the western cultures.

2.2 Cannibalising the African Immigrant Woman in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Beyond the Horizon*

The cannibalisation of women by women is underwritten by the status of the newly arrived illegal immigrants. As such, they cannot look for formal employment without risking arrest, detention and deportation. With their passports confiscated, their precarious state and unwillingness to go back home with nothing after heroic departures makes them easy prey for the unscrupulous queens of the underworld who control the economy of pleasure. The old established female diaspora thrive financially by cannibalising the life of the new arrivers. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the protagonists, Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce are all protégés of Madam, a brothel owner and fellow woman of Nigerian origin. In the name of offering them a chance to make money, Madam recruits them to work in her brothel. However, Madam is more interested in the proceeds from their prostitution than their personal welfare. As their pimp, Madam forcefully dresses them skimpily despite the cold weather. She does not provide adequate meals for them, instead keeps warning them against defying the rules of the brothel.

The novel is pivoted on the horrific murder of Sisi, the only daughter and hope of her impoverished family. Upon graduation, and without connections in high places, she fails to secure a job. Because “she was never even invited to an interview” (Unigwe 20) in Nigeria, her life is thrown into a “crisis of womanhood that is caused by the worthlessness of her education” (Mamah 26), she decides to move to Antwerp Belgium. As she works at Madam’s brothel, she falls in love and moves in with her Belgian boyfriend. This becomes a calamitous move since it means she can no longer make her weekly remittance to Madam. Sisi’s consequent horrific death, orchestrated by Dele and Madam, simultaneously exemplifies Madam’s cannibalistic tendencies as well as “how people live and die alone, unmourned, without the sustenance of family and neighbours” (Eberstadt, n.pag). Madam’s callousness is witnessed when, upon learning of Sisi’s murder, she neither mourns nor allows Efe, Joyce and Ama time to mourn their fallen sister. Madam also has connections with Dele in Nigeria, through whom

she smuggles innocent and naïve young Nigerian women to her brothel in Belgium, on the pretext of 'greener pastures'. Evidently, the immigrant girls, all focused on "European heaven", are not aware that they are entering into a pact with human cannibals. As Mamah notes:

On Black Sisters' Street reveals that Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce were not born into prostitution, nor did they choose to venture into the sex work industry voluntarily. They were trying to escape life constraints in Lagos and take control of their agency. Their job as sex workers can be seen as a footbridge to a better life, for they have big dreams and strong plans to go back to Nigeria and invest the money that they would have earned in various businesses (32).

Sisi, is particularly envisioning how "She would set up a business or two. She could go into the business of importing fairly used luxury cars into Nigeria" (41). Like the other girls, on her arrival at Madam's brothel, reality dawns on Sisi that she has to change her identity right from the name to her appearance. Their passports are confiscated, and they are made to lie to the authorities about their reasons for immigration so as to acquire citizenship. This lie that is fronted by Madam is sure to fail and they thus become 'her property' until they cleared her and Dele's fees for enabling their relocation from Africa.

The cannibalistic duo, Dele and Madam, use pretended generosity towards the arrivars to ensnare them and veil the self-interest which informs the importation of girls from Nigeria. For instance, Oga Dele, the trafficker, tells Ama: "If you wan' make easy money, if you wan' go abroad, come my office for Randle make we talk. But only if you dey serious o" (138). With this assurance the choice to fall for the trap is easy, but the degrading nature of the work they are to find themselves in is signalled by Madam's crude language to Sisi on arrival. Crudely, Madam hands her new clothes befitting the work: "Here. Your work clothes. Tonight, you start" (157). This is to be followed by other rules that Madam enforced through threats such as constant reminder that they have no papers and, as such, they remain at her mercy. Defiance of the rules may be one of the ways to "take control of their agency" as Mamah reminds in the above excerpt. However, refusal to obey and move on is paid through the ultimate price as Sisi's murder reveals. Despite this, Madam's routine remained unaffected, and the other girls felt so bitter that she could eat such a "hearty" breakfast.

Sisi's death got Ama, Efe and Joyce wondering which one of them would be killed next, "To lie like a discarded rag unnoticed on the floor? Unmourned. Unloved. Unknown. Who will be the next ghost Madam will try to keep away with the power of her incense?" (Unigwe 39). Joyce remembers when Madam told them of Sisi's death, "she did not even have the decency to assume the sad face that the gravity of the news demanded . . . She just told of the discovery of the body", and added that "The police might want to talk to you but I shall try and stop it. I don't want anything spoiling business for us". This coldness in the wake of Sisi's death reveals the true face of the "business". This angers Joyce so much, the narrator says: "When she added, 'Another one bites the dust,'- in a voice that she might have used to talk about the death of a dog or a cockroach-Joyce felt the urge to slap her. Or to stuff her mouth with dust until she begged for mercy" (Unigwe 39).

The cannibalistic nature of the business is clearly not reserved for Madam. Efe, who later becomes a 'Madam', comes to understand her former Madam's detachment, coldness and overbearing nature. She explains this to Joyce thus:

'If you're not like that your girls will walk all over you,' she will tell Joyce. 'If you become too involved, you won't last a day. And it's not just the girls. The police too. If you're too soft they'll demand more than you're willing to give. *Oyibo* policeman are greedy. They

have *big eye*, not like the Nigerian one who are happy with a hundred –naira bill. They ask for free girls. A thousand euros. Ah!’ (40)

This rationalisation enhances the continuity of the cycle of cannibalisation of new diasporic arrivars by the older ones, as the latter sacrifice the dreams of the former by capitalising on their precarity.

The case of Mara in *Beyond the Horizon*, is an exemplification of how old male diasporas prey on the new. However, Mara’s case is a notch higher because the cannibal is her own husband who is ironically supposed to protect her in the new terrain. From the outset, Mara is mesmerized by the thought of following her husband, Akobi, to Germany. While she held Akobi with the traditionally sanctioned esteem befitting a husband, Akobi perceived her as a desperate, illiterate and ugly woman only fit for prostitution. This, despite having borne two children with him, Akobi supervises the gang raping of Mara, alongside his confidante, Osey. Mara is also forced to pretend to be Akobi’s sister in Germany, while residing at his German wife’s residence. Besides this, Akobi uses Mara’s sex work returns to smuggle his Ghanaian girlfriend, Comfy, whom he admires and considers modernised, to Germany. As he insults and abuses Mara, he ironically treats Comfy with a lot of dignity, an indicator of his disdain for Mara. Through this complexity, it becomes evident that not every African woman smuggled by Akobi into Europe is turned into a prostitute, rather, he carefully selects the naive ones for this purpose.

In a seemingly copy-paste narrative situation, Vivian, Osey’s wife also suffers a similar fate as Mara. She is turned into a prostitute, and Osey uses the proceeds to please his German wife, Ingrid, with whom he sired a child, expecting Vivian to be the nanny. She tells Mara, “Ingrid even asked if I could come and live with them when her baby arrived and help her take care of it”. Osey had promised to move them to a bigger apartment, and that he could afford the payments. However, in an ironical twist, Vivian realizes that she was to facilitate this movement through her income as a prostitute. Vivian asks Mara, “why do you think he can afford the rent, Mara? Because I was there, Mara. I was there to work for him” (Darko 129). She explains to Mara that she did as Osey ordered because she loved him, thus it took her time to realise that she was only being used as a source of income: “ ‘...I did what Osey ordered me to do. I was his property then, Mara. I loved him, Mara. I really did...’ ” (Darko 129). Both personal needs and deceit lead these female characters to their preys’ traps. They end up as victims of the cannibalistic cabal that stifles women’s lives while enhancing the dreams of their husbands.

The cannibalisation of womanhood by men and fellow women is seen through the degradation that women are put through and the harrowing lives of drug abuse as they try to make ends meet. Owing to the nature of their jobs as sex workers, the protagonists in the selected texts consume soporifics and stimulants to keep their bodies going and to have a grip over their emotions. They also need to distract themselves from the daily frustrations they face emanating from both from their clients and bosses. Some of them have children and parents in Africa to take care of, and this fuels the need for more clients, most of whom kept exerting more physical and mental strain.

Mara, in *Beyond the Horizon*, for instance, abuses drugs to retain her sexual drive and temporarily forget the shame associated with selling sex and avoid slipping into depression. Her best payers and spenders bit and scratched her body, leaving her with horrendous scars that extended beyond the back of her ears, neck and down her spine. The horrors of the trade thus translate into indelible pain etched on her body. When her little finger is deformed, she emotionally explains how:

The injury was done to me by one of my best spenders, a giant of a man but who always, when he comes to me, cries like a baby in my arms, telling me about his dictator wife

whom he loves but who treats him so bad she makes him lick her feet at night. . . he imagines me to be her, orders me to shout I am her, and does horrible things to me like I never saw a man ever do a woman before in the bushes I hail from. But I bear it because it is part of my job. I listen attentively to his talk and comfort where I can. And even when he puts me in pain and spits upon me and calls me a nigger fool I still offer him my crimson smile and pretend he's just called me a princess, for I've got a job to do, and I've got to put my all in it (Darko 2-3).

To imagine that her trust in her husband, Akobi, would culminate into this is to begin to appreciate the cannibalisation that has no limits. The graphic language used in the above excerpt helps the reader to empathise with Mara, the situation she finds herself in and her recourse to drugs.

To retain her sanity and sexual prowess, the two preliminaries of her trade, Mara resorts to using cocaine if only to retain her clients. When he notices that memories of her mother and sons back in Ghana affect her performance, her boss, Oves, introduces her to drugs. As Mara reports:

So when I am down, when any of us is feeling down, Oves gives us 'snow' to sniff, to make us high. Now I can't go through a day without sniffing 'snow'. I am hooked on it. I am fast sinking into a place hotter than hell. But I know this. And that is why I have decided that before I sink too deep I will make as much money as possible for my mother and sons back home (Darko139)

That Mara no longer does prostitute herself for her sustenance but for others signals how her former self has been cannibalised by the diasporic situation and its actors. Her degraded self mirrors that of Ama in *On Black Sisters' Street*. Ama is addicted to alcohol, and drinks hard from morning to evening (Unigwe 25). She is also addicted to cigarettes (Unigwe 94) all in a bid to hide her real self and remain courageous. Madam, the brothel owner is a heavy smoker (Unigwe 117, 121,181). This helps her maintain a strained relationship with the women she 'owns', as she disregards their woes while entirely concentrating on the income generated. It is noteworthy that Madam would also prostitute under special circumstances.

The physical and emotional damage experienced by the protagonists has led to their addiction to drugs for reprieve. Maximum productivity as prostitutes cannot be realised in sobriety, thus, their use of drugs for temporal psychological escape. As discussed, their bosses and brothel owners both introduced and got these female protagonists hooked to the drugs and substances for their business' benefit. These protagonists, in the eyes of their bosses have ceased to become human beings, but mere bodies for hire.

Consumable Bodies: Trafficking Women and the Selling of Sexual Pleasure in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

Every year, hundreds of thousands of women and children are abducted, deceived, seduced, or sold into forced prostitution, coerced to service hundreds if not thousands of men before being discarded. These trafficked sex slaves form the backbone of one of the world's most profitable illicit enterprises and generate huge profits for their exploiters, for unlike narcotics, which must be grown, harvested, refined, and packaged, sex slaves require no such "processing," and can be repeatedly "consumed" (Kara 1).

There are few subjects that garner more interest and intrigue than prostitution and other forms of sex work. This interest, however, often takes the form of sensationalist or inflammatory reaction to concerns – real or imagined – about who is participating, where it is happening, and the particular form it takes (Muelen Durisin & Love 1)

Sex trafficking, a central theme in Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* has been variously read by different interlocutors who use various theoretical frameworks. The novel, according to Abou-Bakar Mamah "explores the push and pull factors on one hand, and on the other hand analyses the intersections between prostitution, identity crisis, and memories through the transnational sex trade" (24). It is also a novel, as Cheolozona Eze opines "that belongs to the new generation of African women's writing that recasts feminism as a moral issue of our times" (90). All these interpretations meld well with Chika Unigwe's own view on what her book is all about. In her interview with Elisabeth Bekers, Unigwe responds that her books generally touch "on issues such as labelling, home, language, and colonization, she openly speaks of her frustrations with racism in Belgium, her therapeutic motivations for writing" (26). As will be seen shortly, most critics of the novel agree on the centrality of the discourses of "diaspora" "transnationalism" and "prostitution" in unravelling the multi-layered semantics raised in the novel.

This study's intervention in these debates is to demonstrate how the four key women in *On Black Sisters' Street* are used by the author as a criticism and critique of the way transnational migration of African women to Europe opens room for the devaluation of women through the objectification and commercialization of their bodies. The study demonstrates that choicelessness in the diaspora leads the characters to the sale of sexual pleasure as the only alternative left for them by Dele, an "unscrupulous Nigerian trafficker" (Bekers 28). Dele, by confiscating their passports, makes the sale of sexual pleasure a matter of life and death. In fact the story of the novel is inaugurated by the murder of Sisi, who refuses to prostitute her body to pleasure male patrons in Madam's brothel. Her murder demonstrates to the other "gals" that they must abandon their original dreams of making it big in Belgium, and sell sex until they clear the monumentous debts they owe to Madam and Dele for the privilege of being in Europe. Until then, their bodies are bonded to be consumed by pleasure-seeking clients who come in different shades.

The four women involved the sale of sex in the text are: Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, who are of Nigerian origin. Through these characters, the narrative delves into issues to do with legacies of colonialism, corruption and globalization as revealed through the lens of international sex trafficking and sex slavery. For all of them, Nigeria is a geography of pain, filth, joblessness, poverty, lack of opportunities and disillusionment. With this backdrop the four imagine Europe as a continent full of opportunities and wealth, a place to be desired. This leads to their grabbing of the slightest opportunity for relocation which in turn, turns them to objects of sexual desire. Their bodies, particularly, become sites for fulfilling the sexual desires of the male clients, and the material desire of the brothel owners with whom they are bonded.

Through these protagonists, the narrative explains their engagement in prostitution, which, as Elizabeth Bernstein illustrates, is a "criminalized" and "illegalised" form of labour (92). For the four characters, to use Bernstein's phrase, "the criminalised status of prostitution" (92) in Belgium makes their lives both precarious and disposable. Unigwe deftly links the characters' predicament with the absolution of their initial vision in Europe to draw empathy from the reader, especially those who perceive prostitutes as sinners and criminals. Notably, all these characters desire a life of legitimate intimacy, but their past and present lives account for their choicelessness in the hands of agents who subject

them to prostitution instead of enabling them to fulfil their vision. Be they guardians, fathers, military peacekeepers, boyfriends, potential husbands, all have to a large extent ushered, though differently, the four women to the nightmare of working as sex slaves in Europe. Through a discussion of the four characters and the individuality of each, it is noteworthy that different forces collude to denigrate their womanhood, devalue intimacy, and turn their bodies into merchandise and sites of sexual oppression and exploitation.

The first character is Ama whose initial home was Enugu, where she lived with her mother and step-father. The guardian step-father repeatedly defiles her sexually since the age of eight. Later she realises that he was not her biological father. One of the encounters that show the traumatic effect of the rape is the instant we see Ama trusting inanimate things instead of human beings:

The girl liked to run her hands on the walls. When she got older and wiser, she would think of it as making love to the walls with her hands, feeling their silky smoothness, letting her hands glide, a lover's hands, over silky-smooth skin. Those bloody walls were her best friends (Unigwe 195)

It is through her apostrophic address to the walls that we learn of the different forms of pain that engulf her and that drive her silent desire to escape from the home that allows and effects the defilement of her body, childhood, and womanhood. The eponymous chapter 'AMA' presents her as a character who is depersonalized from her social interactions, and to whom "[the]bloody walls were her best friends. Silent, constant friends whom she could trust" (Unigwe 195).

It is important to note that her badly fractured personality is predicated on the sexual defilement by her stepfather and her own mother's consequent refusal to act when she, Ama, discloses this fact to her. As Chielonoza aptly puts it, while the bodily harm by defilement significantly defines Ama's future interaction with others, "[perhaps] more painful than the actual sexual abuse was the fact that her mother did not believe Ama when she eventually told of her experience" (98). Refigured with images that highlight the bodily pain, Ama tells the walls of her gruesome rape. On her eighth birthday, a day when "Everything was sam-sam perfect" (96), her stepfather, Brother Cyril who "was an assistant pastor of the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh, Jehovah El Shaddai, Jehovah Jireh" "arranges a birthday party for her. She had thought that "Nothing could go wrong today" (96), but after the party, the event that turns her life around happens. Ama tells the walls how:

her father floated into her dark room. . . The next night he floated into her room again. Ama told the walls how he held her nipple between his fingers and squeezed. She told the walls of the pain of the squeezing and the coldness of her father's hands. Over the next days the walls heard how he ignored her when she said that he was hurting her inside. They heard of how she tried to push him away when he lay on top of her, but he was a mountain and she did not have the strength in her to move a mountain. She told of the grunting and the sticky whiteness like pap that gushed out of him. "It's warm and yucky," she complained to her walls. "I'll never eat pap again!". (97)

As she narrates different episodes to the wall, the reader glimpses into the life of a child which is destroyed through bodily harm. Unable to escape because of her tender age, visions of escape dominate her dreams.

Henceforth, the desire to seek another home, mainly London, which she knew from watching TV grew stronger. The phantasmal London as a refuge is contemplated alongside Las Vegas and Monaco as magical places full of riches and well-dressed people. Such places would free her of her father as she would drink and smoke “in defiance of her father’s rules, shaking and twisting to the Devil’s music” (Unigwe 135). However on leaving home after thirteen years of being raped and silenced (147), she moved to Lagos to restart her life at Mama Eko’s, her mother’s cousin. However, all the songs about Lagos bore a reminder that it was a no-man’s land, in which she should not enter completely penniless thus:

*Lagos nna no-man’s land, Lagos na waya.
For Lagos, man pikin n get sista or broda.
For Lagos, na orphan I be. Lagos na waya aaa. (Unigwe 137).*

In Mama Eko’s house, Ama felt she had her freedom and got everything that Enugu had failed to provide (Unigwe 156). The journey motif is later conjoined with entrapment in Belgium where the hellish brothel life will depend on how fast her body could generate enough to pay off her bondage. Pitted against the choice of life or death, reality dawns on her that freeing her body from the brothel by running away would make her life as disposable as Sisi’s.

Sisi’s first home was Lagos, a place she considered as having no future. The lack of opportunities in Lagos turns her life into ‘mildewed dreams’ full of stench (18). As the central character in the novel, her murder becomes a conduit through which to contemplate the various instances that mark her own vulnerability both as a woman and as a sex worker. As Eze notes “Sisi’s death, the ultimate marker of her humanity, brings her former colleagues to reflect on their own humanity and their dignity. Her death becomes cathartic as well as catalytic, especially with regard to stories and recognition of our humanity and that of others” (99). While Sisi’s former colleagues realise that to their traffickers, their bodies mattered more than their lives, they also realise that their bosses were not bothered by the death of Sisi, nor any other worker who betrayed them. Such realisations informed their decisions henceforth.

After studying so hard at school and graduating with a degree in Finance and Business Administration from University of Lagos (Unigwe 20), the hopes of her father, mother and herself of securing a job at a bank, being assigned a vehicle and a driver and earning a good salary all get thwarted by years of joblessness. Two years after her graduation, which she spent scripting meticulous letters of application to various banks in Lagos including Diamond Bank, First Bank and Standard Bank yielded no fruit (Unigwe 22). She therefore takes up Dele’s offer of relocating to Belgium for greener pastures, only to realise that she had been trafficked for sex work. In due course, Sisi gives up on her job as a sex worker to settle with Luc, a Belgian. Initially, she doubts his sincerity but over time, she realises that his pursuits were genuine. For the short period they were together before she was murdered, Sisi experienced happiness and economic liberation which she had not achieved with Peter, her Nigerian lover, or with Dele, the Nigerian trafficking agent. Because of Luc, Sisi realises the poverty that had led her to sex work was escapable through other means. She understands from experience that forced sex work was instead an apparatus for enslaving the vulnerable and choiceless female African immigrants.

Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, craftily assembles different women’s stories that demonstrate verity of what Adichie titles as “*The Danger of a Single Story*’ which call for an understanding of people’s predicaments through different optics instead of adopting a judgemental stance based on single moments transplanted from other connective moments. Through the different voices of different women working as sex workers in a brothel, Unigwe unveils the individuality of the circumstances that lead the

“gals” to become merchants of bodily pleasures.

The story of Joyce manifests such complexity. Her story lays bare the process of dislocation that “uproots” her out from home and “re-routes” her life through different cartographies before we meet her at the brothel in Belgium. Joyce’s original home was Sudan, a war torn state from which she fled after her parents were killed and she got raped repeatedly. The massacre of her family by the Janjaweed militia haunted her. Conjoining her geographical location in the present with the historical reality of her past elsewhere, the narrative helps readers to humanise her life as a prostitute in Belgium where we meet her. The narrator narrates the ordeal that occasions her initial displacement by focusing on her body and the ruptures that its rape occasions:

The soldier on top of her slapped her. . . .No energy to fight back as he spread her legs. He tore off her underwear. She imagined that she saw her mother cover her face with her hands so that she did not have to watch. When he thrust his manhood inside her, when he *touched* her, Alek felt a grief so incomprehensible that she could not articulate it beyond chanting, ‘This is not happening. This is not happening.’ A mantra to keep away the layer upon layer of pain that seared through her as he went in and out of her, groaning like a dying man. One by one the other men came and thrust themselves into her, pulling out to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was protein. Good food. Fit for African slaves. (191)

This interaction with violence and violation of her body foreshadows the sex “slave” life in which we meet her. The life changing violation happens when her family had high hopes for her:

[After] leaving Daru for a refugee camp. Her father, Nyok, hoped they could get resettled somewhere close to Khartoum. And, eventually, a migration to the United Kingdom or America (298).

The rape that happens is described in graphic detail and it not only usurps her being, but also unsettles the hopes of reconstructing her life. Framed in the actual backdrop of the Darfur War which Mahmood Mamdani informs “began as a localised civil war (1987-1989) and turned into a full scale rebellion (beginning in 2003)” (4), many sought refuge in refugee camps such as the one Alek speaks of in her story.

After this incident, Alek relocates to Nigeria with her boyfriend, Polycarp who was one of the UN peace keeping soldiers of Nigerian origin. The violation keeps haunting her even in Nigeria where she sees the dilapidated state of the building that housed their flat which made her feel claustrophobic. As elsewhere, she still feels vulnerable, because her Darfur experience of government neglect of its population. Here in Nigeria, Polycarp invites her with: “‘And this is Lagos in the twenty-first century! Lagos in 2004! All our government is good for is stuffing their pockets. They don’t care what happens to the people they’re supposed to be ruling’” (214). Her vulnerability is further accentuated by the fact that Polycarp’s mother did not embrace her.

On their first meeting, after she had lived with Polycarp for over a year, Polycarp’s mother rejected her hug:

“with a ferociousness that landed Alek on the floor, buttocks first. *Pwa!* The humiliation! The shock! And when she looked at Polycarp he averted his eyes and said something in Igbo to his mother. Mother and son walked into the spare bedroom and left Alek sitting

there, like a scene from the film, her mouth opening to form a surprised silent ‘O’”. (223)

This animosity led to Joyce’s yielding to relocate to Belgium, where she thought she would be embraced without reservations. In reality, Polycarp had sold her off into prostitution in Belgium through Dele under a new identity “Joyce Jacobs”, instead of sending her back to Sudan (232).

In the end, Joyce and Ama, after clearing Dele’s debt, relocated to Nigeria. Their dreams, as they discovered, would comfortably be actualized in Nigeria, not Europe. In contrast, Efe chooses a different future in Belgium.

Efe’s life is the case of what one would say has been lived as a useable body. Efe’s first home was Nigeria, where she grew up, got pregnant at sixteen by a married man and gave birth to her son. The man called Titus was old and experienced, with a vast fortune. To coax her into sleeping with him, Titus ‘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. . .He called her Miss Nigeria” (49). Efe even imagined herself driving Titus’ car, having new clothes of her choice and expensive extensions, strutting down the road in high-heeled shoes, being called a “*senior chick*” of Lagos (51). However, on the announcement of her pregnancy, her body now unpalatable as a source of pleasure, Titus left her never to return (59). This made her a laughing stock of the village, and a good example of reference for girls who behaved badly. In a common narrative of women who are unsympathetic of other women, the married man’s wife blamed her for getting pregnant, insulted her, shielding her husband instead and warning her never to step at their door for any reason. The urge to protect and provide for her son and family drove her into relocating to Belgium through Dele. It is here that the reader meets her wallowing in life, bartering her body for money under forced circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of human trafficking, narrowing down to the trafficking of African women from Africa to the West. As evidenced, the trafficking process is not entirely etched on patriarchy, as women also ironically participate in the smuggling of fellow women, despite their knowledge and experience of sexual exploitation. This makes the key idea of feminism that is women supporting women for posterity and prosperity counterproductive. The dehumanizing sex work these women characters are subjected to negatively impacts on their esteem and femininity.

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