

**YOUTH IN CRISIS OF SURVIVAL: THE QUEST MOTIVE AND DIASPORA EXPERIENCE IN
GEORGE NDUBUISI'S *WOES OF IKENGA* AND CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET***

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Abstract

The problem of identity and greener pastures have become the major concerns of Africans in diaspora and a major theme in literature. The state of identity crisis is seen as one affecting the psychological conditions of a person or group, a situation of internal contradictions within the individual which could lead to different forms of disequilibrium. The conflict and search for identity and survival have to do with various factors such as the new versus the old, modern versus conservative or migration. Most times, writers are often individuals in search of their identities, and it is no wonder that the major characters possess basic similarities with the authors. The intention of this research, therefore, is to explicate the search for identity and survival in Ndubuisi's *Woes of Ikenga* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*. The duality with the nostalgia of the main characters obviously for different reasons originates from their contact with the different worlds they found themselves in. The resolutions of these conflicts and dualities are naturally not the same because of differences in both cases. However different they are, the ultimate disillusionment in exposure of identity crisis is inevitable in every society as portrayed in the works under study. The data for this study is from both primary and secondary sources. The theory that guided this study is that of Trauma. It was discovered that hardships, unemployment and quest for greener pastures necessitated the different humiliating situations, fates and actions taken by the various characters out of desperation and keenness to survive against all odds.

Keywords: Crisis, Migration, Racism, Migrant, Integrity, Humiliation, Youth

Introduction

Migration of people from one part of the world to the other remains a recurrent decimal in cosmos history. Ever before the slave era, many Africans also travelled to other parts of the world like Europe, Asia and the Middle East for adventure and for other purposes related to commerce, in the same mien, Europeans also travelled to Africa and other parts of the world for other animus too. The Asians, Latin-Americans and the Caribbeans also migrated to Europe. Today, there are gobs of cases of hegira.

People move to the extreme to ensure that their survival is achieved even if it means giving up a certain uncomfortable location for another one which they perceive comfortable. It is therefore not surprising to find people moving from one geographical locus to another to fulfill their requisites. Migration is any residential movement which occurs between administrative units over a period. Human nature is dynamic and receptive to change. This change could be voluntary or involuntary. Therefore, in its quest to ensure that basic needs such as shelter, food, security are affirmed, all efforts are deployed towards the achievement of these goals. The migrants believe that the centre signifies realms of possibility, fantasy, wish fulfilment where identities and fortunes might be transformed. The migrants did not know the centre was also a place of banishment, unlawful practice, oppression, social disgrace and frustration. In Nigeria for instance, migration occurs because migrants believe they will be more satisfied in their exigency and avidity.

Over years, citizens of the world have arrived in the West with a dream of a better life. The promise of freedom and opportunities continue to lure Africans to the West and other parts of the world, even though stories of hardship and isolation are obvious in many African migration literatures. Having reached the Promised Land, migrants find themselves faced with unimaginable obstacles. Even the whites who have had a chance to adapt and become successful according to the traditional definition of material success as defined by the American dream, experience feelings of cultural isolation and otherness. Refugees, those who go to the West seeking protection from war or political or religious persecution, face entirely different problems. Many of these people long for home and do not necessarily crave the rewards promised by the American dream. Despite the myriad reasons that push them, African migrants share a sense of isolation that, in some ways, define their life experiences. Migration is the cosmopolitan movement of people into a country of which they are not aborigines or where they

do not possess citizenship in order to settle or reside there, especially as immutable residents or naturalised citizens, or to take-up employment as a migrant worker or temporarily as a foreign worker.

John Arthur et al's *Africans in Global Migration: Searching for Promised Lands* traced the migration of Africans in three waves. According to them, the first period started in mid-to-late 1950s up to 1970s. Those who migrated comprised of Africans who left the continent for the West upon being sponsored by their home governments to study in Arts and Sciences. This was after the end of colonisation and there was need for well-educated civil servants and skilled workers in the private and public sectors. The second period of Africans to migrate was in the mid-1970s when African countries like Ghana and Nigeria experienced political turmoil and economic conflicts and these forced many Africans to flee their countries and most of these Africans ended up in the West. The last phase started at the millennium and is still unfolding. This group is mainly out searching for greener pastures in the West. So, migration, exile, globalisation and the environment are some of the pressing issues in contemporary African discourse that writers have explored in their narratives. Both Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* have presented characters whose quest for better living conditions that are sadly lacking in their homelands eventually make them migrate to the West. The allure of or hope for Utopian existence becomes a driving force behind the outgoing form of migration and resettlement beyond one's natal land. This study shall hinge only on the examination of the outgoing in the form of migration from Africa and the incoming in the sense of reverse migration of Africans from abroad, in contemporary African narratives as exemplified by the novels selected for study.

Significantly, certain conditions in the USA attract contemporary Africans to migrate there just as some conditions in Africa drive them away. Conversely, Africans who have lived long enough in the USA to understand the social system tend to long for their African homes and are driven back to Africa by their negative experiences of America. This research will thus, also examine the concept of home as well as what constitutes contentment in the individual, material well-being without consideration of material comfort in their pursuit of the European, Asian or American dream, having a house, a nice car and living a middle-class life of earning a reasonable annual income and living good money in one's bank account. The European, Asian or American dream guides the lives of migrants while some will succeed, the dream may remain unrealisable for others. The protagonist, Ikenga in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* found his dream illusory; his dream of becoming a rich man in Germany was never realised, he was rather reduced to a pauper by circumstances of life and later deported back to his home country, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study will adopt trauma, psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories as theoretical anchors. Trauma theory is explored across different disciplines such as literature, critical theory, history and historiography, social sciences, legal studies, psychology and psychiatry, etc. Thus, it has influenced and affected many areas of human experiences. Felman (2002) attributes the contemporary interest in theorizing about trauma to "three interrelated twentieth-century occurrences" namely; the discovery of psychoanalysis, the discovery of trauma as a new type of understanding of historical causality and of historic temporality. According to him, a traumatic experience occurs too immediately for the consciousness to record, but its mental or unconscious images (memory) come back to the victim belatedly and repeatedly when such action repeats itself. Therefore, memory helps the victim to recall his or her experiences in the form of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations etc. **Psychoanalysis** is an extension of trauma theory. Felman explains that literature is appreciated, and literature traumatic experiences remain open with all horror, nightmares, silence both cognitive and linguistic breakdown. Psychoanalytic theory is pertinent to explain that the actions and attitudes of characters in literary works (both from fictional and non-fictional dimensions) in many ways are reflective of their experiences, inner struggles and conflicts with forces largely against their control. Events come and go behind, their indelible marks and shades of experiences on characters and individuals which however way it goes, can affect the characters in the positive and most cases, in the negative ways. However, the concept of **Post-colonial** theory is often associated with ideas, experiences, happenings and philosophies of what come after colonialism. Post colonialism simply means after independence. Therefore, when postcolonial theory is brought to literary discourse, it aimed at reviewing the literary texts: novel, poetry and drama to see how each genre reveals the experience of a society, nation or country after their independence. It is therefore the interest of this school of thoughts to see how political, religion, economic, and educational institutions were able to carry out their duties after their independence. This tells that this theory focuses on the experiences of oppression, struggles for freedom and political domination in post-independence countries, especially Africa; where political and economic mismanagements are mostly found among their leaders. Thus, the more reason the youth move out to the west is for greener pastures.

However, trauma differs between individuals, according to their experiences. Memories associated with trauma are implicit, pre-verbal and cannot be recalled, but can be triggered by stimuli from the environment. Many

contemporary African literary scholars such as George Ndubuisi, Chika Unigwe, and others have depicted the ugly and bizarre experiences of their characters in their search for better life. These horrible experiences affected them psychologically, socially, economically, morally and otherwise.

The Plight of Illegal Immigrants in Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*.

Woes of Ikenga is an intriguing novel that delves into the crisis of experiences that African immigrants encounter in a foreign country. Through the protagonist, Ikenga and other minor characters, Ndubuisi George gives the reader a sordid and profound insight into the ordeals and inhuman experiences often undergone by young African men and women who perceived the Western country as the destination and the promised land. Ndubuisi's experience in faraway Germany ignited special interest in international migration and its effects on African migrants.

In the novel, the protagonist Ikenga, symbolically represents the strong breed that can withstand all forms of social challenges, hardship, persecution, prosecution, intimidation, harassment and suffering. In a review of the novel, Ifejirika describes Ikenga as a strong man. According to him;

“Ikenga symbolizes the shortest of the five fingers, but the strongest and the Most indispensable. Ikenga is indestructible and invincible. He represents the spirit of the Igbo man who survives wars, peace, discrimination, marginalization and alienation” (7).

Over the years, the economic situation and hardship in the country has made African youths continue to leave in torrents. Often, many youths relocate to foreign lands as a result of joblessness therefore seeking better opportunities there. Again, some relocate as a result of the lack of basic social amenities like good schools and hospitals, offices and also well-structured roads, while others leave for the mere reason of wanting a change of environment, but in all, the highest percentage of those that migrate are those in search for greener pastures. The lack of lucrative jobs is one major reason why some people (African youths) just like Ikenga fight tooth and nail to be in a foreign country. These set of people take unimaginable risk by traveling through deadly and dangerous rivers, seas, oceans and deserts just to be in their destination country. Most of the times, these people die while in transit and unfortunately their dead bodies nibbled clean by vultures, fishes and other wild animals. Those that survive and are able to reach the destination country discover to their chagrin and utmost disappointment that all that glitter is not gold, as they face stiff immigration laws and challenges with particular reference to the near impossibility of obtaining Permanent Resident Permit (PRP); a paper that guarantees holders, the freedom and opportunity to move about, work and earn a living without tears, fears and police harassment.

In the story, Ikenga after saving some money from the fishing company he works with at Port Harcourt decides to leave the shores of Africa for Germany. Although his decision to travel abroad isn't a bad idea, the problem is he is travelling illegally through the sea. For Ikenga to resort to travelling through the sea, it means that he intends living in Germany as an illegal immigrant. Many Africans are unaware of the fact that most Western countries have strong immigration law procedure that foresees the outgoing and incoming of immigrants unlike most African countries where people move about without fear of being questioned about their identity.

Ikenga leaves his village in Umuafor to Germany (permit me to describe it as a journey of crossing the seven seas and forests as it was quite an ordeal) to meet his cousin who lives there and ironically is believed to be studying medicine whereas, he is spending time in prison. Ikenga spends close to a year moving from one country to another so he can land in Germany. More horrifying are the dangers he puts himself into going through the deserts and sea of which he almost loses his life by boarding a ship that was overloaded. If you think these problems would pass as soon as he lands in Germany, you are wrong. These were the beginning of sorrows.

Ikenga begins to search for means by which he could obtain a residence permit but first he starts by seeking for asylum and changes his name in his claim that he was from war-torn Sudan and lives off the monthly allowance given to asylum seekers. His friends don't help matters as most of them are also trying all crooked means to get the residential permit called *kpalli*. They sell drugs like Mascot (Ikenga's friend) or marry women who are citizens only for most of them to be humiliated and kicked out of the marriage before they get the *Kpalli*. This is the plight of Ikenga when he marries Vanessa and even fathers a child with her only for her to kick him out of the house before he lays his hands on a residential permit. Others like Eze, who is briefly mentioned in the novel, get a minor pregnant, all in his bid to secure a residential permit, and are arrested. Mascot deals with drugs and Uncle Ray who is the cousin of Ikenga, opens a church to feed on the ignorance of other illegal immigrants after he also has been in prison and would not want to return home without a penny in his pocket. Ikenga spends twenty-two years in Germany practically living as a vagabond always running from the police and *woes-of-Ikenga* basically feeding from hand to mouth. He finally breaks down mentally and returns home with just a handbag.

This novel exposes to us the truth that traveling outside the country to the white man's land is not the solution to every man's problem. Ikenga learnt this the hard way. The weight of responsibility and the love for his family keeps him struggling to make a living in Germany but it fails. Ikenga had known what it meant to be poor. The hard conditions he faced in Umuafor pushed him to desire to succeed even if it meant damning the consequences and getting outside the country. Even if it involved cheap labour, lies, humiliation and sexual escapades with foreign women, Ikenga wanted to pay the prize to be free of poverty. As the novelist laments:

It is hard to figure out the rationale behind a man abandoning his friends, relatives, and in some cases, wife and children for an unknown world, armed with only faith and determination... Why would anyone risk his or her life and leave everything he or she is accustomed to, for a dangerous trip across the dry deserts of North Africa and the treacherous Mediterranean Sea with very little or insufficient means of a safe passage (299).

The novel is so real as the novelist paints the grim pictures of the lives of illegal immigrants in Germany and one can boldly generalise as the plight of most illegal immigrants in other countries. Due to the incompetence of African leaders in fixing their nations, youths run to the West. They desire at least a slight touch of what it means to be wealthy and just be comfortable. The drive to be better and be reckoned with in society more so, if you are a male, it pushes some to do terrible things. Though females are not left out as Stella in the novel is also encouraged to go into prostitution just so she can feed her seven siblings in Nigeria. However, the man especially in the Igbo culture is saddled with the enormous responsibility to be a man and manhood is mostly determined by wealth. The weight culture places on the man drives Ikenga to become less than the man he could have become.

The very few survivors who get to the "promised land," discover to their chagrin and utmost disappointment that all that glitters are not gold, as they face stiff immigration laws and challenges with particular reference to the near impossibility of obtaining Permanent Resident Permit (PRP); a paper that guarantees the holders, the freedom and opportunity to move about, work and earn a living without tears, fears, and police harassment. The extreme difficulty in getting the permanent resident permit compels aliens or migrants to embark on drug trafficking and usage, prostitution and many ill-fated, unsuccessful and catastrophic marriage arrangements with young girls from the host and hostile countries. The ultimate results of the social and economic challenges on the migrants or aliens include: constant police surveillance and harassments which consequently lead to frustration, dejection, lawlessness, isolation and loneliness, loss of focus and identity, drug addiction and abuse, emotional and psychological deterioration and degeneration. It is on the basis of the above that the novelist informs the reader that, "Life outside one's country can be adventurous but life as an economic migrant in the Western World is best understood by those who have lived it" (104). As a further accentuation of the main message of the novel, the novelist tells the reader that:

The impact of the inglorious adventures across the Atlantic might be difficult to access among adventurers, and those who made the journey and still lived to tell it admit that one's components in their cerebral hemisphere had been tampered with" (220).

One notices that characters such as the Law Professor who had overstayed his welcome in Germany and went about speaking "grammar"; Pastor Raymond who started "Ray Power Miracle Fountain Church" as the last resort for economic survival in Germany; Eze, who went to the office of Pastor Ray and nearly strangled him for using religion to exploit him and Ikenga, who was declared a psychiatric patient and thrown into the prison at Balthazar, all gave obvious symptoms of emotional and mental breakdown and degeneration.

Among the outstanding messages in *Woes of Ikenga* is that the selfish, inhuman and poor leadership of African political, economic and religious "Rulers" is squarely responsible for the brain-drain and mass exodus of African Youths and intellectuals to Europe and other continents, where leaders are altruistic, humane and achievement inclined. It is therefore not surprising that the novelist informs the reader that "Life in Balthazar (the German maximum security prison) was far better than freedom in their own (aliens) countries. There was no issue of lacking the basic three square meals and there was the pleasure of having a television or a radio set for contact with the outside world" (98). This is an indictment on African leaders who act as rulers. The objective is to expose Africans and African Youths to the hard, sad and unsafe realities of life in Europe and other Western Nations as it concerns aliens or migrants, who perceive the West as the Promised Land and the Eldorado where dollars and pounds are littered on the streets and can be freely picked by anyone who cares. The essence is to discourage African Youths who die in transit, suffer in silence and perish unsung in their bid to graze in greener pastures that harbour lots of poisonous snakes, deadly grasses and inedible herbs. By reading the fictional truths of the unenviable experiences of African Youths who perish in their adventures in foreign lands, many would be positively discouraged from embarking on suicidal trips to unknown lands.

Woes of Ikenga by Ndubuisi George obviously is an intense moving narrative used in exposing the level of struggle Africans pass through in order to survive in the Western World. He applied narrative form which keeps the readers feeling the pains and trauma of the characters and struggle for survival in a foreign land. The novelist exposes the life of diaspora citizens and also critically portrays the place of literature as an important tool for social, economic, political change in a society. He also of vastness in traditions and culture as appropriately represented in the novel with the right words as well as rich proverbs.

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

On Black Sisters Street is Unigwe's attempt at recording the stories and experiences of four African women who depart the shores of Africa to Europe of uncertainties. Their quest to survive in Europe, by empowering themselves economically, spawn lot of conflicts in the novel. Characters created, seemingly, as their helpers in the novel end up being the ones that will swindle them instead. To Sisi (Chisom), Efe, Joyce, (Alek) and Ama, Europe (Belgium in particular), is the place where they will find solutions to the economic hardship they are face back in Africa. Things turn out differently, as they finally come in contact with the most difficult challenges in Europe.

Opponents of immigration often prefer to ignore the tragic forces that compel people to risk death in order to reach our lands of plenty, not to mention the horrors that often await the "lucky" few, once they arrive. Unigwe focuses specifically on the very precarious situation of women, particularly on the issue of sex-slavery. *On Black Sisters' Street* renders an account of how four African sex workers in the city of Antwerp strategically relate to exoticist definitions of African womanhood that are central to the sex industry, while it is simultaneously conveyed that their personal histories surmount these.

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

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

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

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

"sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance of highly charged feminine gender codes" (Pendelton, 183), to which we may also add racial codes, then the novel portrays the four protagonists in the process of performing these highly charged exotist codes of black femininity.

Different branches of feminism have provided analyses of sex work that disempower and marginalize sex workers. One of the projects of liberal feminism has been to recuperate these "fallen women" in the name of "equality". Those who refuse to conform to these conventions remain feminism's "other." Radical feminists continue to call for the elimination of sex work and pornography under the guise of protecting whores from male exploitation of their sexuality.

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

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

Reading the novel as a narrative of community reveals how the text structurally resonates with ongoing mobility and circular movements of migration, rather than with linear-chronological notions of progress and plot development. Also, *On Black Sisters' Street* can be seen to defy exotic notions of black female identity and community, notions which define the four women when they are at work in the public space in Antwerp. The chapters entitled "Zwartzusterstraat" render an account of events that occur in the present, and are geographically situated in the city of Antwerp - more precisely in the house in Zwartzusterstraat. These chapters are interwoven with chapters focusing on the individual life stories of the women and bring into view their separate, idiosyncratic pasts and futures. Eventually, Ama and Joyce return to Nigeria, Efe stays in Belgian prostitution but moves up on the social scale as she now employs African women. Sisi's ghost leaves her body and travels back to Nigeria too. Their individual stories follow the ongoing movement back and forth between Nigeria and Belgium. Similarly, the basic story line prioritises circularity and ends where it begins, with an account of Sisi's death.

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

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

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

Unigwe's description of her is not really short. At least, she's not much shorter than who described her height as 'average'. 'Average' translated in her passport to five feet seven. But of all four women, Efe was the shortest and this gave her a complex (ii).

Efe begins by narrating how she first discovers sex at sixteen at the back of her father's house. She had felt cheated, in her own words, *like pikin wey dem give coin wey no dey shine at all at all* (49). Efe loses her virginity to Titus, a man old enough to be her father, in exchange the necessities of life for herself and siblings; denied them by their father after the untimely death of her mother. The reader learns of the pedophilic nature of Titus through his wife on the day Efe goes to show him his son, a product of their love affair. Titus fools and deceives the naïve Efe into believing that his wife is old and has creaky bones.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She gets the job, which happens to be in Dele's office after a series of questions from him "interview". Dele turns out to be the most generous of her three bosses, giving her huge bonuses at holidays and even complimenting her. She secretly nurses the hope that Dele would one day ask her out. He never did, and it is not until seven months

later when she starts to complain about finding a good nursery school for L.I., so that Rita could go back to school, that Dele asks her if she would like to go abroad.

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

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

The focus moves over to Ama, another victim of the pedophilic act of her step-father. Ama allows her past control her as a person, to the point of attitudinal changes and mood swings. Ama is portrayed as an aggressive character with a short temper, which can be understood by the reader as a psychologically, mentally and sexually abused character. Even her flat mates complain about this, especially Efe, where she confronts her, after Ama picks up a bottle of Leffe beer and starts to drink. After drinking, she flings the bottle onto the floor. Efe eyes it as it rolls, slows down and finally stops: 'Isn't it too early to be drinking, Ama? Day never even break finish!' Efe tells her. 'It's early and so fucking what?' Ama burps. Tugs at her crucifix. 'You dey always get ant for your arse. Every day na so so annoyance you dey carry around.' 'Fuck off' (25).

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

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

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

So for Ama, instead of the kind of music she heard from across the street, their house was infused with music from Voices of the Cross, the Calvary Sisters, Jesus is the Savior Band, Ndi Umuazi Jesu. Voices that grated on her nerves. She never thought of telling her father that the voices irritated her. She knew what would happen if she did. The things of the Lord were not to be Abused. Nor Slighted. Nor Ridiculed (128)- She would be flogged with 'Discipline', the cowhide cane. Brother Cyril is portrayed as a self-righteous man who uses his self-righteousness as a yardstick for determining a good or bad person. For instance, whenever he sees a lady whose cloth didn't cover her knees, the sight would throw Brother Cyril into a righteous coughing fit, coughing out curses on 'the daughters of Eve who destroy the reputation of women', and always ended with him calling for his wife,

'A woman fit for Christian eyes," to soothe him and get him a glass of water.(130) He always insisted on wearing white safari suits and dashikis which his wife Rose had to always boil, in a pot of water just to ensure that the cloths' whiteness glowed and this is, because of his anticipation to meet the Lord, at any given moment. (131)

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

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

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

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

Things in *On Black Sisters' Street*, is portrayed as happening all at once. The novel simultaneously divulges the backgrounds of the four women, how they got into sex work and how they collectively cope with Sisi's murder. This method is effective in reinforcing the prominence of the women's past in their decision-making. For example, Sisi's decision to become involved with sex-work is very much tied to her parents' inability to fulfill their dreams, whilst Efe's is in a bid to provide a bright future for her son and siblings.

Though the reader knows the death of Sisi beforehand, the circumstances that lead to her death are also the conflicts of the theme of the book. In the book, Sisi's demise is an image about what may have gone wrong with the lives of the characters before their arrival at Antwerp. The novelist gives four faces to two corrupt systems, the sex industry in Belgium and the hierarchy of dishonest wealth in Nigeria.

Conclusion

One of the numerous areas which these African writers have sought to bring to the fore is issue of home, belonging, identity renegotiation and how it will help to foster peace, unity and development in a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria which is one of the features of the African society.

The novelists artistic response to the experiences of the migrated individuals has benefited from their own considerable experiences. Being immigrants in some of these countries, explains their narrative passions, and physical and psychological proximities with the characters and what happens to them. Their investigations of

many aspects of the diasporic experiences provide different perspectives and images of the countries involved, ranging from the depressingly negative to the endearingly positive.

The novelists portrayed the life of Nigerians who had been overseas and tried to imbibe the western culture more than the whites so as to survive in the hostile environment. The exposed how the self-conceited ones become in their attempt to even speak like the white man, dress like the white man, even acculturate themselves in the white man's life style.

They become what the Igbo man would call *usu*, the bat, which, according to folktale, does not belong to terrestrial animals nor to birds. Having lost their pride of place and they have to pass through much difficulties, including deaths, as they have to survive which would place them in their rightful positions. The search for their identity narrows down to the quest for survival and efforts to fulfil their responsibilities. The principal actors we come across try to show how determined one can be in search for one's identity and pride of place.

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