

Human Rights, Human Wrongs: Gender and the Affective Dimensions of Sex Trafficking in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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Abstract This article analyses Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* as a socio-political narrative by examining the issue of sex trafficking and the subsequent violation of women's fundamental human rights. First, I will argue that gender is the primary cause of inequality to which African women are exposed, within and outside the continent. The novel's characters are indeed both victims and accomplices of the corrupt patriarchal capitalist system; they are subject to social constraints but also active agents capable of resisting the restrictions imposed on them. Second, I will draw on Sara Ahmed's thesis about the circulation of emotions to discuss how pain, disgust, anger, and hatred 'work' in modern global society and determine the affective dimensions of sex trafficking. I will demonstrate, therefore, how these emotions highlight the power dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism and simultaneously give voice to women's political and ethical demands for reparation and redress.

Keywords Chika Unigwe. The trafficking of Nigerian women. Gender. Emotions. Patriarchy. Global society.

Summary 1 Introduction: Women, Emotions, and Embodied Experiences. – 2 The Trafficking of Nigerian Women: An Overview. – 3 Subjugation, Resistance, and the Politics of Emotion. – 4 Conclusion: A Political Affective Novel.



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1 Introduction: Women, Emotions, and Embodied Experiences

Chika Unigwe is a prominent and distinguished writer of Nigerian Igbo descent who has lived in Nigeria and Belgium and currently resides in the United States. She is the author of several novels, children's books, and essays, published in English and Dutch in numerous journals, magazines, and literary anthologies.¹ *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) is her second novel, which was initially released in Dutch under the title *Fata Morgana*² and was awarded the Nigerian Prize for Literature in 2012.³ The narrative realistically intertwines the stories of four women and their difficult experiences, from their departures from Africa to their stifling lives as sex workers in Antwerp's red-light district, and addresses themes such as migration, loneliness, the objectification of women, the violation of women's fundamental human rights, and the erasure of African culture and identity.⁴ Several contemporary African female writers of the current and previous generations have examined these themes, including Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. Their narratives have often been described as windows into everyday reality as they shed light on the critical issues and challenges faced by marginalized Nigerian women within and outside the continent.

Significantly, the use of the prostitute motif is not new in contemporary African literature. Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel *Trafficked* (2008) chronicles the life experience of Nneoma, her involvement in sex trafficking in Italy, and her subsequent escape and deportation to Lagos, Nigeria. Through the story of Nneoma and that of another lead-

1 For Unigwe's detailed biography, see the websites *Chika Unigwe*, <http://www.chikaunigwe.com/>, and *The Chika Unigwe Bibliography*, <http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/unigwe/cuonline.html>, both maintained by Daria Tunca.

2 The narrative was initially written in English but then translated into Dutch and published by Meulenhoff/Manteau in 2007. The original English version of the novel was firstly released by Jonathan Cape in 2009. Later editions were published by Random House (New York), Vintage (London), and Ohio University Press (in collaboration with Swallow Press). For further details, see the websites *Chika Unigwe*, <http://www.chikaunigwe.com/>, and *The Chika Unigwe Bibliography*, <http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/unigwe/cuonline.html>.

3 See Ogala 2012, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/11/from-nlngs-treasury-chika-unigwe-wins-100000-nig-prize-for-literature/>.

4 In more than one decade since the novel's publication, scholars have analyzed the narrative addressing a wide range of themes. A few examples are the relationship between subjectivity and subjection and neocolonial clichés about Africa (Tunca 2009); central issues of African feminism (Eze 2014); the enslaved body as a metaphor for universal human rights abuse (Eze 2016); consent, agency, and neoliberalism (Barberán Reinales 2019); the construction of blackness in relation to Unigwe's authorial self-representation and the identity negotiations of African immigrant women in Belgium (De Mul 2014); identity issues, women's oppression and their objectification (Sackeyfo 2022).

ing character, Efe, Adimora-Ezeigbo describes the criminal activities and atrocities (i.e. rapes, humiliations, and other forms of abuse and exploitation) that trafficking victims encounter in Italy and London as well as women's resistance and escape from their captors.

Before Adimora-Ezeigbo's narrative was published, Ghanaian writer Amma Darko released her debut novel, *Beyond the Horizon* (1995),⁵ which portrays the story of a girl named Mara Ajaman who moves to Germany to be sold into prostitution by her husband. While *On Black Sisters' Street* narrates the life experiences of four women characters - although Sisi is the leading protagonist - , *Beyond the Horizon* focuses on the story of a single heroine, Mara. In this novel, sex trafficking is related to patriarchal and familial control over sexuality and female labor. Unlike Sisi, Mara is subject to constant abuse by her husband, Akobi (Cobby), who turns her into a sex slave and house help at their home in Germany, where his new German wife, Gitte, also lives.⁶ Through their fictions, Unigwe, Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Darko aim to shed light on the injustices that African women encounter when they are deceived into entering the commercial sex industry. Their novels criticize the different sociocultural formations of Nigerian and Ghanaian societies and urgently argue for the need to improve women's living conditions and counter physical and psychological oppression engendered by male power.

The fragmented structure of Unigwe's novel, characterized by extended flashbacks, reconstructs the life stories of the four main protagonists - Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce. The author describes writing as a "cathartic tool" (Unigwe in Bekers 2015, 32) that she uses to restore a part of her *self* and her protagonists' *selves* because of the sense of loss and social exclusion she and they felt as migrants in Belgium. Writing is also an instrument that Unigwe employs to explore her characters' poor living conditions and sufferings - consequences of what they are exposed to as sex workers in Europe - giving visibility to a growing marginalized minority of women and young girls who are forced to perform this job to survive.

In an interview, Unigwe confesses that as soon as she arrived in Belgium and discovered that sex was "openly up for sale", she had

⁵ The novel was published in German under the title *Der verkaufte Traum* by Schmetterling Verlag in 1991 and dtv Verlagsgesellschaft in 1994, and later released in English by Heinemann in 1995.

⁶ For a comparative analysis between Unigwe's and Darko's novel, see Tomi Adeaga's essay "Sexuality, Resilience, and Mobility in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", included in the volume *African Women Writing Diaspora: Transnational Perspectives in the Twenty-First Century* (2021), edited by Rose A. Sackeyfio. Adeaga analyzes sex trafficking as a form of modern-day slavery in both narratives and explores the themes of sisterhood and magical realism rooted in African traditional cultures in Unigwe's work.

“a cultural shock” (Unigwe in Tunca, Mortimer, Del Calzo 2013, 55). In the acknowledgements section of the book, she emphasizes that the research she conducted in Antwerp, the anonymous Nigerian sex workers she met and the stories they told her helped her to reconstruct the plot of *On Black Sisters’ Street*, covering some gaps in a complex global issue she did not know much about (Unigwe 2010, 297-8). Nigerian scholar Chielozone Eze highlights that, through her novel, which is purposely set in Africa and Europe, Unigwe describes prostitutes’ outright objectification, which urges “a broader thinking about human rights in Africa” (Eze 2016, 145) and enhances “the global understanding of women’s rights and dignity” (146). The narrative therefore provides profound reflections on gender and sexuality from a political and sociological point of view. It focuses on women’s presence and absence, agency and subjugation, and explores their identities and subjectivities, which continually change regardless of temporal and geographic locations.

In the second section of this article, therefore, I will first examine the nature of sex trafficking and how patriarchy and capitalism condemn women’s bodies to the status of mere objects that are meant to serve society’s material needs. I will foreground gender relations and sexuality and show how human trafficking has become a highly gendered business. Although it also affects boys and men, women and young girls account for the highest number of persons trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation and prostitution.⁷ This modern form of slavery has increased under capitalism and globalization, and Nigeria has become the biggest African provider, receiver, and transit point of women to Europe.⁸

Gender and class inequalities, alongside political and economic dysfunctions – often represented by poverty, economic deprivation, persistent unemployment, corruption, environmental disasters, and religious and cultural tensions – are the leading causes of women’s oppression.⁹ Because of their gender, girls are often discriminated against within society and are not entitled to receive an education as boys are. Feeling marginalized and vulnerable, they become the predestined victims of human trafficking.¹⁰ Deceived in familiar en-

7 See “ILO Action against Trafficking in Human Beings” (2008), included in the International Labour Office website, 1-37. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_090356.pdf.

8 In this essay, I will focus on the trafficking of Nigerian women and not women of other African nationalities. As I will illustrate in the following section of this article, this phenomenon involves Nigeria more than other countries in the continent. Furthermore, three of Unigwe’s fictional characters are Nigerian (Sisi, Ama, and Efe), while only one (Joyce) is Sudanese.

9 See Masika, Williams 2002, 2; Okojie 2009, 158; Ladipo 2001.

10 See Masika, Williams 2002, 2; Voronova, Radjenovic 2016, 4-7.

vironments such as the home or workplace under the false promise of becoming models, dancers, nannies, or domestic workers (Olaniyi 2003, 48), or, in other cases, consciously aware of their choices and direct implications, women become involved in sex-trafficking as the easiest way to escape from patriarchal norms and sometimes miserable conditions in their homeland, hoping to gain empowerment and economic freedom, to become visible and find their own voice outside the continent (61).

Italian scholar Pietro Deandrea describes sex trafficking as a “*new slavery*” (2015, 7; italics in the original). In his compelling study of the modern forms of slavery produced by globalization in Britain since the 1990s (2015),¹¹ Deandrea argues that “new slaveries” involve at least one of the following types of vulnerability: economic exploitation, the denial of human rights, and coercion by violence - in turn, they are related to undocumented forms of migration (2015, 4). He asserts that “the gruesomeness of the sex trade is probably most representative of this wasteland reducing humans to commodities or, again, to beasts” (82). Thus, “the process by which new slaves are animalised, dehumanised [is] a necessary step towards their exploitation” (81). Deandrea adopts the term “*new slaves*” to identify sex workers and other people who often experience similar treatments, such as refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants. Similarly, Nigerian scholar Rasheed Olaniyi uses the expression “slaves of the new millennium” to emphasize how the conditions of sex workers are often reminiscent of slave auctions (2003, 49).

In the third section of this essay, I will delve deeper into Unigwe’s novel and examine the life experiences of the four women protagonists by scrutinizing a few passages in the text that describe their subjugation and resistance and simultaneously analyze the emotions of pain, anger, hatred, and disgust, which are related to these characters and the role they play in the context of sex trafficking.

Gender - described by feminist thinker Teresa de Lauretis as “a common denominator” since “the female subject is always constructed and defined in gender, starting from gender” (1986, 14) - permeates all aspects of social life and becomes the primary cause of inequality to which women are exposed, and is often less prioritized than race and class disparities (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 208). Starting from De Lauretis’s notion of the two senses of a subject: “both subjected to social constraint[s]” and “subject in the active sense of a maker” (1986, 10), I will first analyze Unigwe’s characters as both

11 In his book, Deandrea focuses on the key images of the ghost and the concentration camp in the context of twenty-first century-slavery. Through postcolonial and holocaust critical perspectives, he examines a wide range of works by several novelists, crime writers, film directors, photographers, playwrights, and dystopian artists.

subjected to gender norms and codes of behavior and active agents, capable of resisting or subverting the restrictions imposed on them. Second, I will show how emotions – as cultural and political – work, drawing on Sara Ahmed’s thesis about the circulation of emotions in contemporary society. Indeed, emotions should not be read as essentially psychological states, but they also highlight the power dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism.

In her volume, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), which represents a contribution to emotions in the fields of cultural studies and rhetoric, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are “relational” as “they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to [certain] objects”, which can be persons, events, habits, or ideas (2004, 8-9). An individual can feel different emotions toward “objects”, such as fear, disgust, pain, anger, love etc. Thus, emotions can be defined as “affective orientations” as they shape the configurations of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies. Significantly, Ahmed highlights how emotions are part of the discursive structures of the nation-state and work “through signs and on bodies to materialize the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (2004, 191). In this sense, emotions are inextricably linked to power. The relation between emotions and power is evident when we consider how specific emotional reactions hierarchize certain bodies and spaces in the society in which we live. Therefore, emotions are influenced by “past associations” – i.e. what a subject has felt in similar situations in the past or what he/she usually feels in specific situations – and are performative: they accumulate value and dictate modes of life by working through signs (i.e. ideas, habits, events, words etc.) that are continually repeated and reiterated. Signs generate meaning and have “affective power” (2004). Emotions shape what individuals do in the present and how they can be invested in certain norms or ways of life, and they can also turn into potential sites of activism and political and cultural work.

In her analysis of Chika Unigwe’s novel, Spanish scholar Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez examines the protagonists’ use of the urban space and their social status as prostitutes and draws on Ahmed’s theory to emphasize how the figure of the sex worker stands in contemporary society as the “object of disgust” (Bastida-Rodríguez 2014). In this essay, I will analyze Unigwe’s novel more closely with regard to the circulation of emotions and scrutinize other feelings besides disgust that can be related to women involved in sex trafficking – i.e. pain, anger, and hatred.¹² I will demonstrate how these emotions are not

12 Although other types of emotions can be addressed while discussing the affective dimensions of sex trafficking (e.g. fear, regret, guilt, hope, etc.), I decided to focus on those that Unigwe particularly emphasizes in her novel.

only personal and private but also crucial to understanding the politics of sex and sexism in modern global society.

2 The Trafficking of Nigerian Women: An Overview

The UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* – one of the three Palermo protocols that were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000 and entered into force in 2003 – describes the trafficking of human beings as follows:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.¹³

Sexual exploitation and prostitution are the most widespread forms of human trafficking that involve Nigeria more than other African states.¹⁴ The economic depression that struck this country in the second half of the 1980s, the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programme introduced to regulate the financial situation, and the ensuing massive debt all resulted instead in slower economic growth (Okojie 2009, 155), which can be considered the main reason why Nigeria is currently the primary African provider, receiver and transit point of women to Europe.¹⁵

According to Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), through the elimination of border controls and the free flow of migration, the trafficking of women from the continent to Europe has become easier (Olaniyi 2003, 45), within and across boundaries,

¹³ See “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” on the United Nations Human Rights Office website (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons/>).

¹⁴ See “ILO Action against Trafficking in Human Beings” (2008), included in the International Labour Office website, 8. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_090356.pdf/.

¹⁵ See Osezua 2013, 18; Okojie et al. 2003; Okojie 2009, 150.

cities, regions, and continents, by road, sea, and air, both in the import and export trade.¹⁶ Because of globalization and the constant movement of capital and labour, the sex industry has considerably expanded.

With the promise of secure employment, a large amount of money is offered to sex workers, an enormous debt they must pay back to madams - i.e. older women who work in collaboration with Nigerian pimps and manage prostitution establishments or escort services abroad. Madams monitor prostitutes' movements, destroy or confiscate their false passports and teach them how to behave, dress up, and satisfy clients in order to receive back substantial payments (Olaniyi 2003, 48; Okojie 2009, 153). As Chika Unigwe chronicles in her novel, prostitutes cannot trust anyone, talk about their past lives, or disclose their real names or the names of madams or madams' agents, and they are not allowed to inform their families about what they are doing abroad.¹⁷ The debt that women have to pay off, the confiscation of their documents, the rigid rules that they have to respect, and the denial of their true identity represent the oppressive conditions of control, subjection, slavery, loss of freedom, and violation of human rights that they must accept in order to survive and avoid being beaten or killed.

During the last decades, the Nigerian government has attempted to address the issue of the trafficking of women through a considerable number of interventions.¹⁸ Moreover, several NGOs and anti-human trafficking associations¹⁹ still work in Nigeria to combat the trafficking of both women and children. Despite all these measures,

16 Nigeria's major exit points are the cities of Lagos, Kano, Katsina state, and Edo State (i.e. the metropolitan Benin City, known for being one of the largest markets for cross-border commercial sex work) (Okojie 2009, 152; Osezua 2013, 14; 2016, 38). The specific route of trafficking chosen depends on factors such as safety, costs, and how victims have paid to leave. Women are mainly taken from Nigeria to West African countries, such as Ghana, the Ivory Coast, the Benin Republic, Togo, Mali, Niger, and Senegal, or transported to transit points located in Algeria, Morocco, and Libya to be finally transferred by air to Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Norway, the Balkans, or the Middle East (Olaniyi 2003, 47; Okojie 2009, 151-2).

17 See Olaniyi 2003, 49; Okojie 2009, 154; Lo Iacono 2014, 117-19.

18 The *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* mentioned earlier is the most significant intervention signed and ratified by Nigeria, which aims at preventing and combating the trafficking of human beings, protecting and assisting the trafficking victims with respect for their human rights, and promotes cooperation among state parties to achieve these goals.

19 A few examples are Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF, <https://wotclef.org.ng/>), Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON, <https://www.womenconsortiumofnigeria.org/>), Pathfinders Justice Initiative Inc. (<https://pathfindersji.org/>), Devatop Centre for Africa Development (DCAD, <https://www.devatop.org/>), and Edo State Taskforce Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT, <https://etaht.org/>).

however, the trafficking of Nigerian women for the purposes of sexual exploitation and prostitution has reached huge transnational dimensions (Okojie 2009, 150) and has become a severe barrier to achieving gender equality. If, according to the Protocol, transit and destination countries and Nigeria cooperate more in improving the educational system and employment opportunities,²⁰ the human value and self-confidence of women will be enhanced, discouraging them from becoming involved in prostitution.

3 Subjugation, Resistance, and the Politics of Emotion

Before arriving in Belgium, the novel's four protagonists – Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce – have met in Nigeria a powerful pimp named Senghor Dele, who is known to offer women “a passage to Europe” (Unigwe 2010, 247).²¹ His company, called “Dele and Sons Ltd: Import-Export Specialists” (78), helps women and young girls escape the miserable economic conditions in their home country by charging them 30,000 Euros each – a debt they have to pay off by working as prostitutes in Antwerp. The four girls meet for the first time in Belgium, where they start sharing the same flat in Zwarte Zusterstraat, a street in the city's red-light district. Joyce – born Alek – is the only woman who has been deceived into becoming involved in prostitution. After seeing her entire family be barbarously killed by the soldiers of the Janjaweed militia and being raped by them in South Sudan, she becomes part of a UN refugee organization, where she meets and falls in love with Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier on a peacekeeping mission in the country. In her case, gender discrimination happens at both interracial and intraracial levels. Since she does not belong to Polycarp's Igbo ethnic group, and under pressure from his domineering mother, he decides not to marry Alek and tricks her into working for Dele as a nanny in Belgium. Conversely, Ama, after being sexually abused by her devoutly Christian stepfather, flees from home and starts working as a waiter in a small restaurant in Lagos and eventually decides to migrate to Europe and work as a prostitute. Similarly, Efe, after her mother's death, begins a clandestine relationship with an older married man named Titus, with whom she has sex in return for money. When she becomes pregnant, Titus abandons her; thus, she moves

20 See “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” on the United Nations Human Rights Office website (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons/>).

21 This expression can be read as Unigwe's deliberate allusion to the transatlantic slave trade.

to Antwerp to provide better living conditions for her little son. Despite her university degree, Sisi – whose real name is Chisom – is unable to find a job in Lagos and decides to be involved in sex work, too, to earn that social status she has always dreamt of. Therefore, gender issues and other push factors such as poverty and unemployment urge these women to resist the different forms of oppression they are exposed to in their home countries and migrate to Belgium with the hope of enjoying a life of privileges and making enough money to financially support their families back in Nigeria.²²

The four protagonists are perfectly conscious of the restrictions imposed by the oppressive capitalist society to the point that Joyce openly condemns prostitution. De Lauretis argues that being conscious of being a woman is a particular configuration of a person's subjectivity and subjective limits, which constantly change. It is grounded in an individual's identity and is produced at the intersection of meanings existing in society with his/her personal experience (1986, 8). When Joyce begins working as a prostitute in Belgium, she is conscious of being a woman in a different way than before. This is emphasized in Madam Kate's numerous conversations with the four girls. Once, she says to Sisi, "All you need to know is that you're persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here. [...] 'Now you belong to me'" (Unigwe 2010, 182). If the protagonists had never become sex workers, they probably would not have discovered that they could be considered commodities or animals. Joyce shows anger and frustration while speaking about women's subjugation:

'We're human beings!' [...] 'Madam treats us like animals. Why are we doing this? [...] Madam has no right to our bodies, and neither does Dele [...] I don't know what will happen to us, but I want to make sure Madam and Dele get punished'. (289-90)

Joyce criticizes Madam's behavior toward them and feels anger, which does not dissipate in a single moment but manifests whenever she thinks about something Madam has done or said. As Sara Ahmed points out, anger, like any other emotion, is expressed through "signs" that can disclose the scars of the past on the surfaces of the body and shape the "contact zone" (2004, 194). During the moment of contact, a subject (Joyce in this case) considers the "object" (i.e. Madam) as "threatening" (194). Anger shapes Joyce's body and the world around her and represents the weapon she uses to defend herself from what

22 I refer only to Nigeria and not to Sudan (Joyce's home country) since one of Sisi's and Efe's goals in working as prostitutes in Antwerp is to financially support their relatives. However, this is not the aim of Joyce and Ama – Joyce loses her family in Sudan, as noted earlier, while Ama denigrates her parents, as I will explain later in this essay.

hurts her. Anger – described by bell hooks as “a catalyst for individual liberatory resistance and change” (2000, 34) – often implies adopting a language “to respond to that which one is against” (Ahmed 2004, 176). In this passage from the novel, the expression “get punished”, which refers to Joyce’s expectation that Madam and Dele will be punished for sticking to the “rules” of the capitalist system, is an example of an angry speech act. Joyce knows that Madam works with the police, and this fact represents a further obstacle to her possibility of escaping. Joyce and her roommates are aware that prostitution leads to dehumanization, the total loss of freedom, and the denial of their dignity. Her angry statement can be read therefore as a response to the injustices of the corrupt patriarchal and capitalist system and a way to reclaim their rights as human beings.

Sisi is the character Unigwe focuses on the most to discuss women’s feelings of disgust toward sex work. The author stresses Sisi’s rebellious attitude and resistant subjectivity in different passages in the narrative. While Joyce uses sharp, angry words to express her disappointment, Sisi rebels through concrete acts. First, she decides to leave her job as a sex worker and start a new life with her Belgian lover, Luc (Unigwe 2010, 269-70), confident that, in a few years, she will finally live the life she wants to: “They would marry and [...] she would be a bona fide Belgian. She would have her own children. A different life” (271). Second, Sisi defaults on her debt payment to Dele and secretly meets Luc in Edegem (277). Finally, she pretends to be a tourist in Antwerp, trying on gold and diamond rings in the shops, buying cheap souvenirs, and talking with neighbors. By wandering around the city and randomly meeting Luc, she hopes to deny her status as a sex worker and find her true self. As Tunca observes, this is a habit Sisi “[has] already developed in Lagos [that] also seems to testify her wish to escape her own existence” (2009, 12). Sisi’s imaginary reality, the apartment she shares in Zwarte Zusterstraat, her workplace in Schipperskwartier, and Lagos, her hometown in Nigeria – or “[*the place [which] has no future*” (Unigwe 2010, 18; italics in the original) – are the four spatio-temporal dimensions that reconstruct her life journey and shed light on the challenges to which she is continually exposed. Her attitude to acting like a tourist in the streets of the Belgian city she lives in and her silent tears are her strategies to expiate suffering and exercise her agency through self-awareness.

Sisi can also be described as what Sara Ahmed terms “a feminist killjoy” (2008; 2017). Ahmed argues that happiness works as a feeling but also as a wish that orientates a person toward “those [happy] objects that affect us in a good way” (2008, 4). Indeed, “[w]e judge something to be good or bad according to how [an object] affects us, whether it gives us a pleasure or pain” (3). Sisi “refuses to share an orientation” toward what is considered “good” or “right” (Ahmed 2008, 6) – i.e. the very act of performing the job of the sex

worker. Because of her “disobedient” behavior toward authoritarian figures, such as Madam and Dele, Sisi cannot be described as a “happy object” as she “sabotages” their “idea of happiness” (Ahmed 2008; 2010), which is based on the expectation that women act as mere commodities and serve society’s material needs. Sisi’s deliberate choice not to comply with the norms she is expected to conform to can be read as a way to question the power dynamics of the patriarchal and capitalist system.²³

In several passages in the novel, Unigwe analyzes the objectification of women’s bodies and stresses their feelings while they are subjugated. The most meaningful example is when Sisi meets her first client and tells herself:

This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else. Another body. Not mine. [...] ‘I don’t need this. Stop!’ [...] And she baptised herself into [her new profession] with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain. (Unigwe 2010, 212-13; italics in the original)

This quote is perhaps the one that captures Sisi’s pain and disgust toward her new job most vividly. As Sara Ahmed points out, “pain can be felt as something ‘not me’ within ‘me’: *it is [therefore] the impression of the ‘not’ that is at stake*” (2004, 27; italics in the original). Sisi knows she is disgusted by what she must do, but she also hopes to be not the person suffering that pain. The use of the full stop, which fragments the first sentence of this quote into shorter periods, destroys the flow of language. As Elaine Scarry argues in her acclaimed volume *The Body in Pain* (1985), the destruction of language has political consequences because it sheds light “precisely [on] what is at stake in ‘inexpressibility’”, whether verbal or material (1985, 19). Although Sisi’s pain is made clear and distinct through these sentence fragments, what Unigwe describes in this passage is what Sisi feels and does not express in words – a silent cry for help that reveals her trauma and her way of resisting communication. Her thoughts and tears convey her suffering and raise readers’ awareness about the psychological effects of sex trafficking.

Deandrea emphasizes that because of their status, prostitutes become “spectres”: they are invisible and “willingly embrace silence and disappearance” to protect themselves (2015, 57). Even when they are free, “they are not willing to speak out, out of fear or shame at their brutalisation” (57). In this respect, Bastida-Rodríguez suggests

23 For a detailed analysis of the figure of the feminist killjoy and her role in contemporary society, see Sara Ahmed’s work *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

that the lack of communication between the novel's protagonists justifies their feelings of disgust toward their profession (2014, 208). Ahmed highlights that "[t]he relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchising of spaces as well as bodies" (2004, 88), which, as Bastida-Rodriguez argues, in the context of the novel are prostitutes' bodies and the places where they perform their activities (2014, 208). These bodies and spaces are judged by a "collective disgust" (Ahmed 2004), which consists of people's judgments and feelings of disgust toward prostitutes and their profession. These negative thoughts and sensations represent the primary cause of prostitutes' sense of insecurity and isolation.

Ama shows a similar feeling of disgust toward her stepfather, who constantly abused her, and toward her mother, who has always defended her father's deplorable acts: *"But he's not my father. He's just the useless man my mother married. I'm well rid of him. I'm well rid of them both"* (Unigwe 2010, 136; italics in the original). Likewise, Efe feels disgust toward the child she has given birth to. As she emphasizes:

The baby was shrivelled and small with scaly dry skin that made her think uncharitably of a reptile. He was about the ugliest thing she had ever set eyes on and she could not believe she had birthed him (68).

The feeling of disgust is always directed toward an "object", thus, a person, an event, or an idea that a subject repels. As Ahmed underlines, disgust *"over takes the body [and] it also takes over the object that apparently gives rise to it"* (2004, 85; italics in original). Disgust is "dependent upon contact[;] it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects" (85). The proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive and unpleasant by the subject. In being disgusted, Sisi, Ama, and Efe are "affected" by what they have rejected. Like anger, disgust becomes a speech act. The words that Unigwe uses to describe her characters' feelings, such as "stop", "useless man", "well rid of him", "well rid of them both", "reptile", and "ugliest thing" express what these subjects repel. Disgust works performatively as it relies precisely on considerations that the characters repeatedly make about "disgusting objects" - i.e. Sisi toward her job, Ama toward her parents, and Efe toward her child. The fact that Unigwe deliberately decides to include Sisi's and Ama's intimate and poignant thoughts in italics stresses the impact these negative feelings have on their lives even more.

The episode of the gang rape in which Joyce was involved in South Sudan is perhaps the one that describes her physical abuse and her subsequent feelings of anguish and uneasiness most brutally and most vividly:

Her grief raising her wails to a crescendo that made Alek's lungs clog up as if she was inhaling dust. Alek wished she could block it out, this sound that was horrific in its peak. *I wished I could just wipe off the day and start again.* [...] *All I wanted was to be able to attack these men who had just blown my life away, as if it were a handful of dust.* [...] Alek felt a grief so incomprehensible that she could not articulate it beyond chanting, 'This is not happening, This is not happening.' [...] She wanted to scrub between her legs until she forgot the cause of the pain. (Unigwe 2010, 189-92; italics in the original)

As Scarry observes, the experience of pain is often felt as if something from outside presses upon an individual and even gets inside her/him (1985, 15). In this passage, pain is recognizable through the flow of Alek/Joyce's feelings and sensations. Ahmed suggests that "[t]he affectivity of pain is crucial to the forming of the body as both a material and lived entity" (2004, 24). Furthermore,

The differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told, and between those that are told and those that are not, is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power. (32)

Joyce's body and feelings are agents of her agony. Her pain is not only personal and private but also public and political. The language of pain that Unigwe uses to describe Joyce's physical and psychological sensations aligns her body with other bodies that have suffered similar abuses. Testimonies of pain like this one give flesh to feelings that cannot be easily understood or internalized and encourage readers to reflect on how violence against women is rooted in the abusive power and harmful norms of patriarchal society.

In the capitalist and sexist society that Unigwe depicts in her novel, women's defiant behaviors are punished with death. Segun, the brothel's handyman and one of the prominent members of Madam's business who was suspicious of Sisi's fidelity to Madam, arrives to murder Sisi. Ahmed points out that while anger does not necessarily require an investment in revenge, hatred generally does (2004, 174). Drawing on her personal experience of racial discrimination in the United States, Audre Lorde similarly argues that hatred can be conceived as "an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will" (2007, 152) or "the fury of those [...whose] object is death and destruction" (129), like the killing of a person. In perceiving Sisi as an "object of hate", Segun feels anger and hatred toward her to the point that he decides to expel these emotions from his body. His bodily reactions toward Sisi turn into the conscious and deliberate performance of a hate crime. The hatred Segun - and, in a large sense, the patriarchal society he represents - addresses toward

a “rebellious” woman like Sisi can be described as an “entrenched loathing” (Lorde 2007, 151).

Women like Sisi have often been marked by “unlikeness” (Ahmed 2004, 52) or “againstness” (49) because of their effrontery in daring to presume they have any right to live. In the novel’s final part, readers discover through a phone call that Dele makes to Madam Kate that he was the person who ordered the killing of Sisi:

‘Yes. Yes, Kate. I trust you. I trust say you go take the necessary steps. Dat gal just fin’ my trouble. She cost me money. How much money you pay de police? I know. Yes. Tell de gals make dem no try insubordinate me. I warn all da gals, nobody dey mess with Shengor Dele. Nobody!’ (Unigwe 2010, 295)

Sisi has threatened Dele’s monolithic authority and “privileged” position as a pimp. Sisi’s murder can be interpreted as Dele’s will to punish her resistance and escape attempt.

Over the past few decades, because of episodes like the one Unigwe describes in this novel’s passage, women’s massive anger has become political and reinforced their bonds in their individual and collective struggles against violence, crime, and injustice. Empathy and solidarity have represented, and represent in the context of this narrative, a positive response to women’s feelings of anger, disgust, and pain. As Ahmed points out, it is important to break the seal of the past and move away from attachments that hurt us, as “the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present” (2004, 33). Sisi’s death becomes a unifying factor as it brings the other African girls closer; feeling such an affinity, they begin to tell each other their hidden personal stories, which free them from their dark pasts and the life choices they were forced to keep secret. As the novelist asserts in an interview, “Fiction gives one more room to empathize, because you cannot write good fiction without empathy” (Unigwe in Barberán Reinares 2020, 420).

The concepts of empathy and solidarity have been widely discussed in gender theory by several distinguished scholars, including Robin Morgan, Chandra Mohanty, Alice Walker, and bell hooks, who particularly focus on women’s commitment to political activism. bell hooks emphasizes that solidarity can be described as “the will to form a conscious, cooperative partnership that is rooted in mutuality” (2003, 63), which means that women “have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood” (hooks 2000, 67). Sisi’s death implies storytelling, which enhances her friends’ empathy, common sharing, emotional value, and solidarity. Solidarity can be interpreted as their way of maintaining agency and their resistance strategy. It does not exclusively happen on the basis of “shared victimization” (hooks 2000, 46) but

also on the basis of “shared strengths and resources” (46), eventually urging protagonists to hug each other and prompting Ama to say: “Now we are sisters” (Unigwe 2010, 290).

4 Conclusion: A Political Affective Novel

By making women the undisputed protagonists of her novel, Chika Unigwe continues a tradition started by Nigerian female writers of the previous generations, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. As discussed in her narrative, sexual exploitation, male objectification, and the dehumanization of women are unfortunately still alive in the present, and novelists need to address these issues in their fictions from a political and sociological point of view. Additionally, the general understanding of the context of sex trafficking is enriched by a discussion about migration, mobility, displacement, and the quest for identity. American scholar Rose Sackeyfio stresses how these themes “[have] reconfigured the direction of the African novel in the global age” (2022, 41). Like Unigwe’s narrative, other fictional works by prominent African women writers of the third generation analyze these issues, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* (2012), NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Happiness, Like Water* (2013), and Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016).

Unigwe sheds light on the often-silent phenomenon of sex trafficking and its aftermath on women’s lives in modern global society. In establishing a parallel with the transatlantic slave trade, the literary trope used, “a passage to Europe” (Unigwe 2010, 247), encapsulates the idea of women’s slavery and their subsequent human rights abuse. Furthermore, as Adeaga points out, the issue of sex trafficking “interrogates the historical significance [of] the vulnerability of African subjects to exploitation” (2021, 36). Women are complicit in their objectification by patriarchal and capitalist society - represented in the novel by the characters of Madam Kate, Senghor Dele, and Segun. They agree to the limited conditions imposed by the system as an attempt to escape oppression in their home country and start a new life in Europe. As Eze highlights, characters’ oppression becomes “transnational” as it disrupts any geographical and cultural boundary (2016, 150). Gender profoundly shapes their identities and represents the leading cause of inequality they are exposed to and doggedly fight against. Gender discrimination and gender-based violence are the direct results of the patriarchal structure of capitalist society, which strengthens the oppression and exploitation of women upon which the system thrives. As Olaniyi argues, under globalization,

patriarchy has crossed the frontiers of public space into the international arena. [...] Globalisation has [therefore] pauperised women by its expansion of the sex industry, keeping them in perpetual slavery and penury. (2003, 46)

Furthermore, transatlantic sex trafficking has become a source of income and survival for several African countries and has emphasized the absence of adequate measures to prevent its development.

Human trafficking deprives people of their fundamental human rights, dignity, and agency. As Jack Donnelly puts it,

human rights are not just abstract values such as liberty, equality, and security. They are rights, particular social practices to realize those values. (2003, 11)

Nigerian feminist and sociologist Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie points out that it is not only women's liberation movements that should liberate women, but it is above all the ideology of patriarchy and capitalism rooted in the minds of people, and often actively and unconsciously perpetuated by women themselves, that must change (1994, 82; 229).

In the novel, women protagonists are not passive victims but active agents that challenge the stifling rules and codes of behavior imposed on them through any means at their disposal. Their pain, anger, and disgust denounce their inner suffering and emphasize their unwillingness to accept passivity and helplessness. The most eloquent examples are Sisi's rebellious attitude to acting like a tourist in the streets of Antwerp, her deliberate default on her debt payment, Joyce's angry statements toward Madam and Dele and her desire that they should be punished for the way they treat girls. Their resistance represents therefore responses to the problematic issues that Unigwe analyses, through which she reclaims women's rights, worth and sense of dignity. The characters' feelings give insights into the negative affective value of the figure of the prostitute - or "new slave" - and the role she plays in contemporary society. The empathy and solidarity discussed in the concluding part of the novel counterbalance their pain, disgust, and anger. After Sisi's brutal murder, their sense of unity, care, trust, and civility contributes to building sisterhood. Solidarity is therefore a support system or, in the words of bell hooks, "[a] shield against reality" (2000, 46), which encourages the protagonists to find the means to face unpleasant situations and confront social injustices.

My analysis, however, did not aim to romanticize characters' emotions or to create stereotypical images of victimhood. Conversely, it mainly attempted to highlight the cultural and political roles of emotions in modern global society. Emotions shape the contours of the social space: they are not just personal and intimate and reducible to

single subjects – like the characters of Unigwe’s novel – but disclose the power dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism. They encourage us to see how gender hierarchy is implicated in the power relations of sexuality, class, and race and allow us to reflect on the ways women are continually exposed to systemic oppression.

To conclude, *On Black Sisters’ Street* is a testimony to the conditions and situations in which African sex workers live and work. It condemns the sexual exploitation of women by or not by their choice and denounces how, in the specific context of sex trafficking, women are perceived as replaceable and disposable commodities and, accordingly, relegated to an inferior social status within society. The emotions of pain, anger, hatred, and disgust and their direct implications, which Unigwe describes vividly in her novel, help to capture and understand the gendered and affective dimensions of sex trafficking. They highlight precisely how the domains of power of the male-dominated industry work and simultaneously give voice to women’s political and ethical demands for reparation and redress.

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