Sex Work and Female Empowerment: An Open-Ended Question in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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Abstract: Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* charts the lives of four girls who travel to Belgium to act as prostitutes. The grim reality is that substantial numbers of Nigerian women are trafficked transnationally in prostitution networks in Europe. This situation is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. The common denominator remains the precarious situation that prompts the women's immigration out of Africa, and the vulnerable position in which they find themselves as immigrants in the Northern countries. The prostitute trope is particularly illuminating because the text is all about women's social condition and does not equate prostitution to men's degradation of women. By considering these women as active participants in their own personal wealth creation aided by globalisation in a post-colonial space, this study questions the female immigrants and sex workers, a group of stigmatised women who are a symptom of Nigeria's state failure.

Keywords: feminism, globalisation, immigration, Nigeria, prostitution, sex worker.

Résumé : *On Black Sisters' Street* de Chika Unigwe retrace la vie de quatre filles qui se rendent en Belgique pour se livrer à la prostitution. La dure réalité est qu'un nombre important de femmes nigérianes sont victimes de la prostitution à l'échelle transnationale en Europe. Cette situation n'est pas propre au Nigéria uniquement. Le dénominateur commun reste la situation précaire qui pousse les femmes à immigrer en dehors de l'Afrique, et la position vulnérable dans laquelle elles se trouvent en tant qu'immigrantes dans les pays du Nord. Le trope de la prostituée est particulièrement illuminant car l'œuvre traite, dans l'ensemble, de la condition sociale des femmes; il n'assimile pas la prostitution à la dégradation des femmes par les hommes. Considérant ces femmes comme des participantes actives à la création de leur richesse personnelle aidée par la mondialisation dans un espace postcolonial, cette étude interroge d'un point de vue féministe les travailleuses du sexe immigrantes, un groupe de femmes stigmatisées qui constitue un symptôme de l'échec de l'État nigérian.

Mots clés: féminisme, immigration, mondialisation, Nigeria, prostitution, travailleuse du sexe.

Introduction

In her award-winning novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), the Nigerian-born Chika Unigwe chronicles the sexual exploitation of four girls who, hoping to escape the heartbreak, abuse and poverty in Nigeria, end up as prostitutes in Antwerp and Belgium. It problematises the condemnation of prostitution on moral grounds, challenging the notion that women who are prostitutes have no agency. Despite the plethora of derogatory names for sex workers, the narrative only refers to its protagonists as 'girls'. Unigwe's account of the Nigerian economic

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crisis which is in effect prodding some young women to seek alternative methods of 'easy' income within the exploitative sex trade in global spaces, is a narrative that is consciously focused on gendered 'others' operating on the periphery of globalisation and trade. Unigwe's narrative shows the differences in the ways in which African woman writer expounds female sexuality, and whilst not attempting to valorise prostitution, she considers its politics in an alternative and nuanced manner.

Looking at the position of the commodified female body in a globalised economy, how does Unigwe use fictional means to interrogate these gender-specific questions arise? What are the 'tactics' women employ, using the body as a 'tool' to overcome socio-economic marginalisation in various situations within the Nigerian context and beyond it? To what ends are African women's bodies used? And in which spaces are these exoticised/othered bodies able to operate independently as something other than commodities?

This paper examines women's strategy and tactics in the prostitution ring as Unigwe alludes to their poor standard of living in the city and the preoccupation of government officials' failure to provide basic social needs, to fulfil women's interests and aspirations. I will emphasise how storytelling decriminalises sex work and empowers women in a patriarchal space through the prism of globalisation from a feminist point in a post-colonial nation.

1. Consent in the Prostitution Ring: Women's Strategy and Tactics.

Sisi, or Chisom is the main protagonist around whose death the novel is centred. Upon arrival in Belgium she changes her name to Sisi, amid hopes that 'once she hit it big', she would return to Nigeria and 'reincarnate as Chisom' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 44). Chisom is a Finance and Business Administration graduate who spends the better part of two years after obtaining her degree, scripting meticulous application letters for numerous jobs posted in the newspapers but all this is to no avail. Due to the restraints of socio-economic class and the lack of social and professional networks that aid social mobility in Nigerian society, Chisom has witnessed from the sidelines as numerous classmates whom she considers to be less intelligent use their 'long-legs' and 'better connections' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 22) to acquire employment. In the vicious cycle of unemployment and lowered expectations, years after graduating from University on the winged hopes and dreams of her parents, she is still unemployed and living with her parents in a one-bedroom apartment.

Michel de Certeau's theories in *The Practice of Everyday Life* explain the distinction between strategy and tactics as two paradigms which interrogate the tension between binaries in regards to power relations. He defines strategy as "the calculation or manipulation of power

relationships (M. de Certeau, 1984: 35).” He goes on to define a tactic as a “calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus… an act of the weak” (M. de Certeau, 1984: 37). Connecting these notions to power relations and metaphors of prostitution demonstrates how these women use the tools available to them in the context of social mobility. In other words, in the absence of a proper locus of power these women have no ability to properly plan or strategise and must then use tactics to overcome situations as they are presented to them. Situating quotidian tactics within the wider body of his work, I argue that they are not, for Certeau, primarily signs of resistance, but signs of absence: living realities that pulse within and against systems of strategies that can never quite contain them. On the other hand, a tactic is “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ [a spatial institutional localization], nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (M. de Certeau, 1984: xix/xlvi).

The narrative describes the squalor of the shared toilets between flats, typical of low income earners in Lagos densely populated residential areas, broken cisterns with pans overrun with squirmy maggots and days load of waste. It is amidst this poverty and seeming hopelessness that Chisom has her chance to encounter Dele. So, “when she got the offer that she did, she was determined to get her own back on life, to grab it by the ankles and scoff in its face. There was no way she was going to turn it down. Not even for Peter” (C. Unigwe, 2009: 23). Peter is the earnest young boyfriend, who has promised to marry Chisom and take her away from all this – but although he is earnest in his aspirations, he lacks the money to achieve her desires. Chisom sacrifices romantic love in favour of securing for herself a better future and dismisses her lover, Peter. The illusion of the glitz and glamour of a foreign country further serves to highlight the get-rich-quick mentality which permeates the Nigerian society [today], fuelling practices of corruption and greed. The problematic aspect of Chisom’s story is that although she has not been directly harmed by any male figures in her life, her hopes, dreams and even her failures are closely linked and bound up in the failures of her father. As he begins to lose faith in her and the prophecy of the sooth-sayer at her birth, Chisom begins to lose faith in herself and eventually she acquiesces in her own degradation by desperately seeking to avoid the ‘why bother’ ‘defeated’ ‘unfulfilled’ (C. Unigwe, 2009: 90) ideology of her father, who ‘could have been a big man’ (C. Unigwe, 2009: 19) she becomes a prostitute largely in order to fulfil not just her own dreams, but the dreams of her parents, too. Through Chisom, Unigwe makes explicit the narrative’s link between women’s exploitation and state failure as Sisi gets dressed for her first night at work:

> She […] smeared on lipstick. Red. Red like her thoughts. Murderous thoughts that made her wish she could smash things. She had a degree for heaven’s

> sake. […] Dark kohl under her eyes masking the sadness that she was scared to see. Obasanjo's own children, were they being forced to do things just to survive? She had heard they were at Ivy League universities in the US (C. Unigwe, 2009: 202).

From the above quotation, Chisom's thoughts expose what for Unigwe, are inadequacies and a form of neo-colonialism under Nigeria's democratic governance. Therefore, it is due to the economic exploitation of Nigeria by the Nigerian elite, that certain bodies are more susceptible to limited choices and exploitation than others.

Efe comes broadly from the same socio-economic background as Sisi and also resides in Lagos. She does not have the familial comfort of both parents, as Sisi does. Unigwe portrays a young girl, who is forced to take on the role of mother and father in the face of a drunkard father who cannot come to terms with the death of his wife. Efe, a girl of sixteen, is left largely to her own devices, as her father is habitually in the beer parlour where he 'faithfully gives her money at the beginning of every month, from the wages he earns as a labourer renting himself out to building contractors'. Efe, in her lust for material gain, is lured into a relationship with an older man – 'It was not just the money, it was the crispness of it, the smell of the Central Bank, the fact that he had drawn it out of a huge bundle of like notes so that she believed all the stories she had heard of his enormous wealth. The forty-six year-old man, Titus, gives Efe money in exchange for sexual favours over a period of time, up until she conceives a child which to him signifies the end or termination of the 'agreement'.

Sex workers' bodies in the city stand for an alleged danger of invasion and expropriation coming from without. But the representation of danger – often taking the shape of a military attack – is profoundly connected with emotions and fears surrounding the sphere of sexuality. Prostitute women have traditionally been associated with sexual danger. Their alleged predatory sexuality, transgressing the boundaries of rules and norms controlling women's morality and behavior, is a source of confusion in the eyes of men – namely their actual or potential clients – and of society as a whole, assuming the male gaze as its prevalent stand point. The whore stigma is as such transferable to all women, and particularly to those transgressing those boundaries (O'Neill, 2001; Pheterson, 1993). Indeed, social attitudes towards prostitutes have always been a mixture of disgust and desire, as well-documented by Maggie O'Neill in her study on literary and common representations of sex work. But "the dominant image of a prostitute is a seedy, immoral, lazy, drug/alcohol abuser, a lower-class woman, in fish-nets, cheap erotic clothing and garish lipstick" (O'Neill, 2001: 147): the representation of a life on the margins. Even in discourses on women trafficking and exploitation, where prostitutes are represented not as agents, but as victims of an uncontrollable, insatiable, predatory [male]

sexuality, they are often portrayed as a threat to the conservation of boundaries and of societal order. If, as argued by Mary Douglas, "any structure or idea is vulnerable at its margins" (Douglas, 1984: 122), the orifices of the body tend to symbolize the most vulnerable points, not only of the physical but also of the social body. And because the representation of the prostitute's body is that of the greatest sexual availability, and penetrability, it becomes, especially in the eyes of other women, a source of sexual danger for the entire female population.

In the era of sexual liberation, feminists brought the body to the forefront in their analyses of power relations under patriarchy. Women's bodies get constructed both physically and mentally for procreation or as is widely known, reproduction, and for male pleasure. The consumption of the body for male pleasure forms the basis of the market manipulation of women's bodies (Sabala and Meena Gopal, 2010, p.44). Another term to consider in analysing the power relations at play is one referred to as 'shadow prostitution'. I have coined this terminology from Elina Penttinen in *Globalization, Prostitution and Sex Trafficking*, where she describes the relationship between the client and the prostitute as fundamentally different although both are products of globalisation. She claims that:

> […] whereas the client exists in the domain of subjects of globalization, the [Russian] woman exists in shadow globalization. For her, globalization manifests as corporeal constraints, and whereas the client moves through the landscapes of globalization, taking advantages of new opportunities for consumption, she moves and is moved in the sexscapes of globalization (E. Penttinen, 2008: xv).

In the same way, prostitution as a profession may provide the individual a regular source of income, and a wider exposure to various clients or 'new opportunities' for travel and consumption, where a client is compelled to 'buy' her time, body and services. On the other hand, the girl existing in 'shadow prostitution' may receive only promises of financial gains in return for sexual favours. She is more open to exploitation as the other party is under no formal obligation to fulfil his expected monetary end to the sexual transaction at each occasion, creating a complete imbalance of power. She is only limited to the opportunities that may or may not present themselves to her corporeal constraints and in addition to this, she is still abused and stigmatised by society. This form of 'shadow prostitution' which Unigwe portrays in *On Black Sisters' Street* is not uncommon in Nigeria, where the same 'tactic' theory of Michel de Certeau, regarding the sex trade, reflects the reality of life for women who in times of poverty and socio-economic instability implore tactics of survival against a system which imposes harsh, unliveable conditions on them.

So although Efe is utilising the tactics of a sex worker at this point, I have referred to this as 'shadow prostitution' as this is not her means of daily 'work' or professional employment. When Efe tells her older lover, Titus that she has conceived a child, he takes her to a hotel, where she is told to undress and parade naked, before he jumps on her, drags her into the bed and proceeds to have repeated sex with her in which he falls asleep, wakes up and starts again. When he learns of her pregnancy, he abandons her in a strange hotel in an unfamiliar part of town, leaving her with no mode of transport or money. From this exchange he is linked to power which is contrasted with the protagonist's position. She is of a lower class, has no income and in a sense, this affair is equivalent to her 'job' as it is her only source of an income. Also, at the macro level of the State, this highlights the failure of the system which does not enforce laws protecting the sixteen-year-old girl-child against this form of statutory rape and exploitation. It is on the back of these developments that Efe takes up three cleaning jobs, leaving the care of her son to her younger sister. In the face of harsh economic conditions and receiving no assistance or support from her father, the decision to go into prostitution becomes a means to manipulate life events as they are presented and turned into opportunities.

Ama is then sent to Lagos to live with an aunt, Mama Eko, where she listens to 'Devils music' and gains her first taste of freedom in a glass of dark ruby liquid, with a layer of white foam on the top. Ama lives with her aunt, who becomes 'almost like a real mother' to her, but the predictability of her new life, its circular motion … nibbled at her soul that still yearned to see the world (C. Unigwe, 2009: 159). Ama approaches the decision to go into prostitution with less desperation yet more pragmatism than Efe or Sisi. She reasons that Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted no questions asked. Discarding her when she no longer sufficed. 'Strange men taking and paying for her services, not even in Lagos, but overseas which earned you respect just for being there', (C. Unigwe, 2009: 166) was not so bad. After all, she would never be able to save enough money, and hence sets up her own business by working in Mama Eko's buka. Mama Eko realises that Ama is determined to go, but she cannot stop her. She admonishes Ama to look after herself, which is in stark contrast to the portrayal of Chisom (Sisi) whose parents did not show much interest or resistance to her departure. Before Ama leaves Lagos, she is also abused by Dele, continuing the cycle of user/ abuser that she has grown accustomed to when dealing with men:

> 'I shall sample you before you go!' he [Dele] laughed. The sound that stretched itself into a square that kept him safe. Lagos was full of such laughter. Laughter that ridiculed the receiver for no reason but kept the giver secure in a cocoon of steel. It was not the sort of laughter that one could learn. It was acquired. Wealth. Power. Fame. They gave birth to that kind of laughter' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 168).

In line with de Certeau's theory, each of the girls is seemingly after a temporary economic strategy to help her achieve that 'kind of laughter'. Ama hopes to accept this as a means to an end, and does not hesitate to admit that she made the choice to go to Belgium with 'eyes wide open' as she cannot see herself doing any other menial job such as cleaning, that many other migrant women might find themselves doing (C. Unigwe, 2009: 114), and at the same time cannot pass over the 'golden ticket' to Europe.

Alek is the youngest of the girls. Her family are brutally murdered by the Janjaweed militia when they come in and ravage her village. She is gang raped by the soldiers and left for dead. Eventually, she ends up in a refugee camp, where she finds it difficult to adapt to the camp life, and resents the other women for 'the ease' with which they adapted to their new environment. Three months later and a week before she turns sixteen, Alek meets a Nigerian peacekeeping soldier who is deployed to Sudan as part of the African Union peacekeeping exercise. She falls in love with the soldier, Polycarp, and two months after this, he is re deployed to Lagos, taking Alek with him. Alek eventually settles into married life but is then ousted by a mother-in-law who refuses to allow her son to marry a foreigner. It is then that Polycarp arranges for Alek to be brought to Antwerp to 'work as a nanny'. Her name is then changed to Joyce on her new passport and this is the first and the only elusion Unigwe gives to Benin City as a place linked with the transnational prostitution stereotype:

> Joyce Jacobs.
> Nationality: Nigerian.
> Place of Birth: Benin City (C. Unigwe, 2009: 232)

Of all the girls, Joyce is the only one who gets to keep all that she earns because Polycarp faithfully pays a monthly instalment to Dele to clear her debt. This is unlike Sisi, Ama, and Efe who have to pay 500 Euros in a monthly bid to gain their freedom. Auction houses, with girls parading naked in front of prospective buyers or 'madams' holding numbers as their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy enough for white clients to pronounce (C. Unigwe, 2009: 278). Efe would buy numbers five and seven (C. Unigwe, 2009: 279).

Sisi is so disenchanted with the life in Antwerp, the derelict buildings, neglected houses with peeling paint and broken windows, looking like life had been hard on them that she decides to cut loose, and it is this yearning for freedom that ultimately leads to her death. She falls in love with a young Belgian man, Luc and feels that 'the world is definitely as it should be'. She had the love of a good man. A house. And her own money-still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green-the thought of it buoyed her and gave her a rush that made her hum' (C. Unigwe,

2009: 1) This opening paragraph to the novel could summarise the crux of the ambition of the protagonist which the reader may not come to understand until engaging deeply with the story. In analysing this paragraph, I realise that it was indeed the love of money as opposed to the love of a man that buoyed Sisi and gave her 'a rush'.

The eventual demise of Sisi for refusing to pay her mandatory quota to Dele was never is not thoroughly investigated by the Belgian police. The author draws similarities between the developing world and the developed Western world, in the depiction of the similarities between Antwerp and Lagos, and more sinister still in the corruption of the police and state officials. There is some collusion between government officials and the traffickers (C. Unigwe, 2009: 120) when the 'madam' sends Sisi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to declare her an asylum seeker. The request is denied and the document stamped but Sisi is never deported. The madam only slips the paper into her handbag and says, 'All you need to know is that you are persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 182). Leaving Sisi to wonder why the Madam always went through the process of sending new girls to the 'Castle.' Here the narrative highlights the corruption which is found in all governments, Western or African. So although corruption is widespread in Nigeria, the narrative suggests the weightier issue of corruption amongst the police force in Belgium as well:

> 'It's not just the girls. The police too. If you're too soft they'll demand more than you're willing to give. Oyibo policemen are greedy. They have big eye, not like the Nigerian ones who are happy with a hundred naira bill. They ask for free girls. A thousand euros. Ah!' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 40)

Through the narrative all the girls reveal their respective motivations behind their tactics: the want of a better quality of life either for family or solely for themselves. Through prostitution, the four girls engage in modes of revolt against their various situations, but still have lower level of agency than the men – the clients – in their lives. Efe would be "Dele and Son's Limited's export, and L.I [her own son] would get a better life (C. Unigwe, 2009: 82). Sisi dreamed of starting her own car export business (C. Unigwe, 2009: 238). Even though they are not privy to each other's dreams they are all 'bound by the same ambition and drive' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 177). While working as prostitutes, they engage in modes of revolt against their various situations, but still have lower level of agency than the men [clients] in their lives.

In this regard, Black female bodies in the post colony have been disempowered to the point that those with less socio-economic capital are unable to gain much agency. Young women, in these groups, are amongst the most vulnerable, and while sex, marriage or men may be used to gain agency, these also prove futile against the backdrop of the larger gendered inequities in patriarchal post-colonial society against the female body. By distancing the text from national

allegory written on women's bodies similar to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta, Unigwe divides her time between Belgium and Nigeria, and produces much of her work about Nigeria from the West. In recognising prostitution for what it is – a by-product of national failure and a result of male dominated institutions – Unigwe unmasks the subordination of women in patriarchal socio-political systems both nationally and internationally.

2. Decriminalising Sex Trade: Women's Empowerment in a Patriarchal Space

As strong as Unigwe blows the whistle on Black women's sex trafficking, be it legal or illegal, she critically challenges the postcolonial Nigerian ruling system. Instead of blaming sex workers, Unigwe not only pleads guilty, but she also hints at the possibility of decriminalising prostitution. In line with Open Society Foundations[2], Unigwe is militantly against sex trafficking. Rather, she calls for a change in decriminalising sex work. Through *On Black Sisters' Street*, the reader ponders why decriminalising sex work is the [best] policy for promoting human rights for sex workers. However, decriminalising sex work could mean sex workers are more likely to live without stigma, social exclusion, and fear of violence. That is say regardless of their reasons for engaging in sex work and the nature of their work, all people should be treated with respect and dignity. Women have always received contradictory messages about their bodies. When expedient, it is glorified by ideal images of goddesses; honour of the nation/family/community and sometimes the same body is projected as shameful, embarrassing, vexatious, fearful and disgusting. Women have constantly struggled to maintain this ideal "body" and project themselves as "good women" or have been afraid to confront the negative aspects of being portrayed as "bad women" (Sabala and Meena Gopal, 2010: 44).

In Unigwe's novel, contemporary Nigeria is represented as an intrinsically patriarchal society where women's bodies are largely governed by cultural, religious, and state policies, and women's choices are easily limited and subjected to masculine interpretation. In order to focus more on the characters in the novel as women who have been exploited, yet have also made a conscious choice of movement in order to participate in the sale of sex, I will not be reading these women as victims of illegal trafficking, but rather as gendered victims of limited choice. In the novel, the female protagonists' choice of going to Belgium to prostitute themselves amount to tactics designed to counter the workings of social inequality and patriarchy. The women in Lagos despite some advantages, have an inferior economic existence

[2] *The Open Society Foundations* work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. http://www.soros.org/topics/sexual-health-rights

to the women in Belgium. In addition to this, they run the risk of being recognised and shamed by family and friends which is less desirable compared to the women in Belgium who have the ability to remain hidden. Whatever material gains they make, the prostitutes of Lagos or Antwerp sacrifice a great deal in terms of emotionally driven love for financial mobility. Although Nigeria is independent of colonial rule and also free from military rule, the exploitation of the Nigerian economy and its people for selfish interest by largely male dominated governments still continues. The women in the novel represent particular bodies in a particular place at a particular time.

Ama comes from a slightly different socio-economic background than Sisi and Efe, she is by no means a member of the rich elite. Ama is the character most representative of the Nigerian middle class elites. She has a nice house, housemaids, her own room and bathroom, unlike the other two protagonists that share communal facilities and do not have hired help, which is the norm in Nigerian middle class family settings. The writer makes the reader aware that not many children her age have their own 'beautiful bedrooms all to themselves' and Ama unlike the others does not seem pressured by constant naggings of material lust. Her struggle is in part connected to her extremely religious and repressive environment, constantly trapped indoors with verses of Biblical instruction. She is a young girl who is discouraged from having friends, and as a result of this becomes introverted, spending her time talking to walls and playing with her sandals – flogging them until she was sure she heard them cry' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 122-123). On Ama's eighth birthday, her father, Brother Cyril, floats into her room in his white safari suit (C. Unigwe, 2009: 132-133) and rapes her. He forces her into submission by demanding "What's the fifth commandment?" to which Ama then replies, "Honour thy father and thy mother", her voice muffled by the collar of her nightgown in her mouth. Brother Cyril is the suffocating patriarchal figure who is an 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. The abuse continues for three years until Ama reaches puberty at eleven and the father no longer has any use for her. Years later, as Ama struggles to pass her university entrance exams, as a way to escape the oppression of the home, having failed in her attempt to attend a boarding school, the ugliness of corruption rears its head again. Here also, Unigwe highlights the failure of the Nigerian educational system to reward hard work and diligence, spaces for pupils who had bribed their way into the universities replacing spaces of those who had not paid the corrupt JAMB[3] officials (C. Unigwe, 2009: 146). It is on the back of this

[3] Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board is a Nigerian entrance examination board for tertiary-level institutions.

frustration that Ama sees herself as stuck in the middle of a 'one-way tunnel' and she explodes: "You call yourself my father? You call yourself a pastor? You disgust me! I naaso m oyi' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 150). It is here that Ama distinguishes herself from her mother, a woman too timid to flout patriarchal authority.

Sisi's death begets a network of sisterhood which enables the other women through a temporal strategy of sharing stories, to form a cocoon of support around each other. Each of the women's histories and present is fraught with some form of harm enacted upon their bodies by a male figure. 'Madam' also occupies a masculine space in the novel as she self identifies as superior to, and detached from the women (C. Unigwe, 2009: 40). She occupies a position of agency and aligns herself to the men, exercising her position of power and control over the women at will. She informs them, "… until you have paid back every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back. We expect five hundred euros from you every month" (C. Unigwe, 2009: 183). Madam, is able at any moment of her displeasure with the girls, to order their harm through her henchman. She is also able to alter the comfort of their working environment, banishing them from their booths and relegating them to bars where they must 'service' clients on a 'tight budget' in dinghy hotel rooms or bar room toilets (C. Unigwe, 2009: 8). Madam is unequivocally in control of their fate in Europe and her comment at the news of Sisi's death, "Another one bites the dust" suggests that Madam has participated in the harm of other girls prior to Sisi. Though Sisi's history does not include masculine physical violence, it is ironic that her end is met by a man's hammer which is in a sense, Madam's hammer, operating in the 'beautiful, soft, feminine' hands of Segun.

In discussions of power and subjection, Michel Foucault defines the subject in terms of its relation to the dominant power and also in relation to self-knowledge in terms of oneself. He posits that "The subject means subject to someone else by control or dependence and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. This kind of subjection shows how "in our culture human beings are made into subjects" (M. Foucault 1983: 208). For it is through increased global connectivity and movement in the context of a 'globalised world economy' that a transnational trade in bodies is made possible. As such, the novel's protagonists are subjectified by patriarchs, pimps or Madams. Nevertheless, they are also exercising a form of agency. Because the girls have not been kidnapped, or forced into prostitution they are also complicit in their exploitation. By subjecting themselves to Senghor Dele and also to the Madame, the girls are enacting a form of agency described by Judith Butler as 'the willed effect of the subject' (J. Butler, 1997:14). In other words, this is a subordination that the 'subject

brings on itself', which is a precondition for agency. They have willingly subjected themselves to Dele and Madame's power, because through this process they come to gain their own agency. In this respect, the feminist critic Elina Penttinen's questioning involves,

> "Where are the women in globalization?" focusing on the gendered impacts of globalization as in the marginalization and relative impoverishment of women […] The feminist criticism is extensive, for [it] argue[s] that globalization […] could not have happened, had not the women been the silent contributors in "maquiladoras" and sweatshops […] Therefore, it is exactly women's cheap labor that has enabled globalization to take place as female workers have been essential for transnational corporations that want to maximize profits. However, exploitation of women as cheap labor is based on masculinist bias and the institution of patriarchy (E. Penttinen, 2008: 4).

Such women adapt to globalisation by subjecting to sex work and by appropriating and enacting the position of the exotic erotic girl. This position of the Eastern European girl has emerged as a site that can be appropriated by someone who is both from Eastern Europe and a woman as a product of Western imagination. It is a position that enables also the appropriation of the truly masculine and Western subjectivity. She is an abject body that listens, which mirrors back the masculine subject so that he can gaze at himself in her. These findings are also applicable to Unigwe's novel which depicts the ethnic eroticized body. The ethnic eroticized body is pure physicality, often in a semi-nude state to attract the western male. Her status is that of an aesthetic, sexual object, a 'dream maker' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 202) in lacy bras and racy thongs. It is a demanding job and 'from their glass windows they watch the lives outside, especially the men's' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 178) because the men are their source of income. It is firmly a masculine space in which all the girls are interchangeable. It is the very fact of their ethnicity and othered position that gives the girls some form of visibility. The girls' bodies are a 'swirling mass of chocolate flesh; a coffee coloured dream luring the men in with a promise of heaven' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 237). Sisi is baptised into her new profession with a rape in a toilet cubicle in a bar. The man examines her closely running his hand over her neck and breasts all the while muttering 'beautiful' in the manner of which one would examine an object for purchase. His lust for her allows her temporal power over him for her to be able to negotiate financial gain. He signals for Sisi to follow him into the bathroom, at which point she decides that she 'does not want to do this anymore' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 212). However, she has come to the end of her power and is returned to the domain of subjectivity. Because she has already been objectified or commoditised by the client, she has no voice. Even though she clearly tells him to "stop" her voice is "swallowed by his moans". The man exercises his temporary power over her and rapes her:

> Eyes open, she saw his face, his mouth open and his jaws distended by an inner hunger. Stop! His moans swallowed her voice. His penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus […] (C. Unigwe, 2009: 213)

He 'pushes her' against the wall, his hands 'paw' at her, and he ' licks' her skin so that she is left 'feeling intense pain wherever he touched, like he was searing her with a razor blade that had just come off a fire' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 213).

Throughout her time in Belgium, Sisi continuously separates her 'self' from her body. She spends her spare time wandering in the shopping areas of Antwerp pretending to be varying people/personalities on each occasion; 'somebody else, with a different life' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 255). The post-colonial text with its affinity for mythology, abiku[4] and 'juju' surrounding good fortune and bad fortune (C. Unigwe, 2009: 253) allows Sisi to continue to use her spirit, even after her body has been brutally murdered – her skull hammered. She does not die – her body is hammered, but her voice stays alive: In the instant between almost dying and stone-cold dead, the instant when the soul is still able to fly, Sisi escaped her body and flew to Lagos (C. Unigwe, 2009: 293). Sisi is able to visit her parents as a spirit, tapping her mother on the shoulder and causing the glass to slip out of her mother's hands and shatter. 'The cold breeze' that entered the house is the moment her daughter must have died. In the same way Sisi is also able to travel Senghor Dele's house and place a curse on his daughters. The same as every 'curse' she has suffered in her own life: May your lives be bad. May you never enjoy love. May your father suffer as much as mine will when he hears I am gone. May you ruin him (C. Unigwe, 2009: 296).

Ama's sexual and physical abuse by her father also has lasting psychological effects on her. In a sense her body had saved her from the nightly molestation from her father, because as soon as she started her period, aged eleven he no longer came into her room (C. Unigwe, 2009: 145). She is left with extreme anxiety and insomnia. She tells the walls 'of the pain of the squeezing' and the 'hurting inside' caused by Brother Cyril. Ama has distrust for men and the church which is largely organised around rules that can be manipulated in favour of misogynistic men. This experience of bodily harm forms Ama's general outlook which is that she would rather trade sex, previously freely taken from her, for money than take up any alternative form of domestic labour.

Joyce also suffers gang rape and violence at the hands of the male soldiers in Sudan. They slap her about and proceed to rape her one after the other, so that she feels a 'grief so

[4] The word 'Abiku' is Yoruba for 'spirit child' and refers to a child who must die and repeatedly.

incomprehensible that she could not articulate it' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 191). Psychologically she is silenced, while somatically she continues to experience 'layer upon layer of searing pain' as the men go in and out of her. Joyce is an interesting and complex character, because although she is harmed in a traumatic experience suffered at the hands of Janjaweed soldiers, ironically she is also healed by the hands of a Nigerian soldier and then is subsequently emotionally harmed by him again. The narrator tells the reader that Polycarp touches Joyce 'delicately as if she were fine porcelain that might shatter' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 199) and how he 'touches her neck so gently that she almost missed it' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 198). Touch is an important part of the narrative for Alek in particular. The night before Alek's family are slaughtered by the soldiers, her mother has a discussion with her regarding kinds of touching:

> 'Touching … in a different way. Do not let them [boys] touch you. […] Girls who let boys see them naked are not good girls. Nobody will give any cow to marry them. Save yourself for the man who will marry you. Marriage first. And then the touching. […], be a good girl, my daughter. Promise me" (C. Unigwe, 2009: 186).

Although her mother is long dead, Alek still speaks to her and is able to conjure up her mother's face in her mind's eye. She confesses to her mother that she has slept with a man outside of marriage 'because the rules have all changed now' (C. Unigwe, 2009: 199).

Like Joyce, Sisi also finds emotional love and sexual healing through Luc in Antwerp, whom she describes as one of the few people who makes life in Antwerp bearable for her (C. Unigwe, 2009: 261). Although the narrative is an interrogation of gendered power relations, and male versus female subjugation, it does not hold all men as the source to underlying problems for African women simply because they are Western men. Also, the use of prostitution as a method of resistance is problematic from a feminist point of view. The complicated interplay between the female protagonist who decides to take autonomy over her own body as a form of resistance fails. The novel then leaves the reader with the unsettling question: resistance to what end? The protagonist's resistant action does not enable her to grow or change, but counter effectively her resistance destroys her. The non- action of the other protagonists allows them to 'serve out their sentence' with limited risks, and eventually make something of themselves in future. Undoubtedly, this is due to the histories which the women have now shared, forming a new bond of solidarity as a means of empowerment.

Conclusion

Although prostitution is not totally uncommon in most societies, the debauchery of the act and the debasement of sex workers in the West leave them totally stripped of any dignity.

Whatever feminists' position on the issue of prostitution, literary work on "sex work" is an open-ended question in the fictional representation of reality. Black female prostitutes are socially constructed as an 'othered' class of persons. As such, they are vulnerable to varying degrees of abuse and violence. As Julia O'Connell notes in her essay, 'The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution', the vast majority of those who enter prostitution without being coerced into it by a third party do so for economic reasons, and that prostitution therefore represents a form of work. At the same time, […] none of the data from my research have made me want to celebrate the existence of a market for commoditized sex; rather the reverse (J. O'Connell Davidson, 2002: 91).

This work does not aim to argue the rights or the wrongs of prostitution, but simply to interrogate the possibility of corporeal strategies and tactics to overcome socio-economic inequality beyond African borders. My study does not condemn nor glorify prostitution ring of third world women in the Western metropolis, but rather it seeks to decriminalise the female sex workers in a patriarchal space while removing biases and prejudices of sex trade by speaking for the experience of African women in their own right.

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