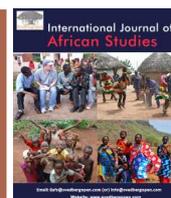




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Transnational sex trade: prostitution, identity crisis, and memories in *On Black Sisters Street*, by Chika Unigwe

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Abstract

Migration phenomena have been at the forefront of transnational issues in recent years. Many African immigrants who are part of the pool set their sights on Europe. If immigrants' purpose and expectations of migrating seem to be the same, the transatlantic mechanisms and the actual outcome may be quite different. In her book, *On Black Sisters Street*, Chika Unigwe dug deep into the complexities of push and pull factors that shed light on one of the contemporary world's pressing issues: the transnational sex trade. Even though prostitution seems to be the dominant theme in the book, I argue that the protagonists' stories are shaped in part by identity crises at home and abroad. This article explores the push and pull factors on one hand, and on the other hand analyses the intersections between prostitution, identity crisis, and memories through the transnational sex trade.

Keywords: *Black, Transnational, Sex trade, Prostitution, Identity crisis, Memories, Chika Unigwe*

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1. Introduction

In her book, *On Black Sisters Street*, Nigerian author Chika Unigwe presents four women: Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce. For them, "Dele is the common denominator in their lives (98)," implying directly why they are bound for the same destiny: to go to Belgium for sex work. However, their backgrounds vary from one character to another. That is how the author portrayed her characters in their singularity using her storytelling skills to deliver to her readers sensational stories intertwining humor, pain, sham, and the marvelous in one single shot. With flashbacks that sometimes serve as a harbinger, Unigwe weaved the personal stories of the other three protagonists around that of Sisi, who remained the central figure of these sisters on the streets of Antwerp. These women's dreams come in different sizes, ranging from supporting their parents and relatives back in Nigeria to glamorous houses, modernized schools, fancy cars, and big shops. However, their common ordeal may raise other concerns, including sexism, considering how Dele approached them, taking advantage of their financial struggles to lure them into the sex trade abroad. In the words of Naomi Nkealah, "Sexism is an obstacle to social progress because it constructs women as inevitably powerless. The term refers to beliefs and attitudes that construct women as sub-human" (Nkealah, 2017a). The use of what is commonly known as "broken English" on Lagos streets and humor contributed to forging the aesthetics of this novel full of memories, laughter and grief. The literary representation of prostitution in this book, as embraced by Unigwe, follows on the long tradition of

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African writers who have discussed that pressing issue in their works. “The narration of these stories is imbued with memories that reveal to what extent protagonists’ migration prospects are unfulfilled expectations.” As Odile Cazenave noted, “There is no need to demonstrate the frequency of the literary theme of prostitution. The prostitute is one of the most commonly treated characters in modern literature, whether in Europe, the United States, of the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the Caribbean” (Cazenave, 1999).

If the transnational sex trade is not a new issue, it is, in the words of Patricia Bastida-Rodriguez, “a very widespread crime nowadays” (Bastida-Rodriguez, 2014). To that end, whether there is a consensus or not around the way woman trafficking should be addressed worldwide, many human rights organizations are stepping up to the plate with sensitive measures that worth credit. The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) commended many organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, UNDP, and *The Lancet* medical journal for their various initiatives intend to either increase awareness or set comprehensive policies that will protect sex workers around the world. Their statement stipulates:

Our members and colleagues in the sex workers’ rights movements strongly believe that decriminalization offers sex workers the possibilities to work together for safety, to screen and refuse clients, to access health and social services, and to turn to the police and the courts should they fall victim to crimes. Often, sex workers are best positioned to detect and report cases of human trafficking or exploitative labor situations. In a decriminalized environment, clients of sex workers can and do report suspicions of abuse without fear of prosecution (Global, n.d.).

That controversy of setting up policies that would govern the sex work industry, either at local levels or internationally is far from having a common ground. *On Black Sisters Street* serves as a testimony of the victimhood of the most vulnerable, and winks out the most hidden causes that would otherwise be tackled at their roots. This is to say that, no one woman would be in a comfortable social status and abandon that deliberately to become a sex worker. Most women are just victims of the poor socio-economic factors that would force them into unwanted alternate directions. Far from getting entangled in a raging debate between the pros and cons of policies that would regulate human trafficking, this article aims to examine the context that forced the protagonists of this book to leave Lagos and allow for their extreme exploitation such as the transnational sex trade and its ramifications.

2. The push and pull factors

Push factors seem to outweigh pull factors in *On Black Sisters Street*. Therefore, there are many factors, some unusual, that forced some characters of this book to seek a better life abroad.

2.1. Push factors

In stark contrast of a common belief about the genuine advantage of education as a tool of social empowerment for both men and women, the characters in *On Black Sisters Street* showed a string of disappointments with their educational expectations. The investment of money and time that parents and students had committed throughout the years were based on the belief that “A university education guaranteed a good job” (211). For that reason, parents would provide their children with all the necessary resources to enable them to do well and succeed in school. According to Sisi’s father, Papa Chisom, “The only way to a better life is education. *Akwukwo*. Face your books, and the sky will be your limit. It’s in your hands” (17). This is what Naomi Nkealah suggested in her article on the issue of women’s empowerment in Cameroon: “An impoverished and illiterate woman is inherently powerless to destabilize the forces of oppression keeping her in a victimized state” (Nkealah, 2017b). This social construction of the magnificence of education can be seen in the life of another character of the book, Joyce, primarily known as Alek, who has survived the civil war in Sudan: “Her dreams of going to university and becoming a doctor buried with a past that she could never get to again” (166). Thus, in *On Black Sisters Street*, one would ask the real value of education or whether it is worth going to school, or how much schooling one would need in life to be competitive in a contemporary Nigerian society that is plagued with corruption and nepotism. As a remnant of the European colonial project, the modern school has become a mirror that reflects a social judgment of people’s ability to demonstrate a great sense of knowledge and acceptance of behavioral norms. Thus, over time, the school became a necessary place to go for every child in society. If education was meant to liberate individuals or alleviate their parents’ burden, this book’s characters educational experiences proved that their education is a dead hope. Their expectations as graduates have never been fulfilled. Sisi, for example, who is also known as Chisom, has made many sacrifices to achieve a coveted social status: “She burned candles when there was a power failure and studied in their light, straining her eyes. What had all that been for? What had all that hard work and straining and worrying about exam results gotten for her?” (211). Indeed, education’s costs assume many different forms: finances, time sacrifice, devotion, emotion, and so forth. In the meantime, all that invaluable investment may fall short from expectations, as is the case with Sisi: “Her education had just been a waste of resources. A total waste of time and funds”

(211-2). For that reason, “Chisom dreamed of leaving Lagos. *This place has no future*” (17).

Unemployment as one of the main push factors is central to this book. Through this factor, Unigwe reveals the shortcomings of a society where the same skills do not necessarily guarantee the same chances of success. At the same time, this suggests the cracks of a failing administrative system that does not put in place policies that would enable young graduates to take care of themselves through multiple avenues of self-employment. This serves to reinforce the logic that would not allow these young citizens to abandon the tradition of becoming employed by a company, a bank, or a government institution after graduation to rather consider entrepreneurship as the primary solution. As a skillful storyteller, Unigwe brings humor to the plot unraveling the mystery that lies beneath a staggering number of unemployed Nigerian graduates:

Yet two years after leaving school, Chisom was still mainly unemployed [...] and had spent the better part of the two years scripting meticulous application letters and mailing them along with her résumé to the many different banks in Lagos. [...] But she was never even invited to an interview. Diamond Bank. First Bank. Standard Bank. Then the smaller ones. And then the ones that many people seemed never to have heard of. Lokpanta National Bank. *Is that a bank? Here in Lagos? Is it a new one? Where? Since when?* (20).

Behind this drama is a startling revelation by Sisi who is drawn into a crisis of womanhood that is caused by the worthlessness of her education. As a young girl, growing up with her parents, their social conditions were bad enough to give her a delusional appearance of a mother figure: “I don’t want to become like my mother” (27). But the situation appeared to be untenable enough to force her into uncharted territory. Her many years of all forms of sacrifices, driven by a hope for the warranty afforded by a diploma from a graduate school, will ultimately cause her to fall apart, recalling the title of the famous novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by renowned Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. The job market in Lagos will stay drastic for Sisi. So, will be her dream that will never come true: “There was no longer talk of a company car. Or a company driver. No arguments about a garden with food or flowers. And as the years rolled on, no more letters of application” (21). Education being a norm and a guarantee for success in present-day postcolonial Africa, neither Sisi nor her parents envisioned any other alternative for her while growing up. Also, if her parents had had enough money, perhaps she could have chosen to drop out of school and engage in some form of self-employment. Then, when she runs out of options, she turns to Oga Dele Senghor, the “big man with an office on Randle Avenue” (211). Dele is a pimp in the transnational sex trade in Lagos. He takes advantage of the most vulnerable women to send them to Antwerp in Belgium for sex work. But his first encounter with the educated young woman was enticing: “Do you know I have a university degree? Do you know I am a graduate?” (40), believing that “Social advancement through education is a central part of women’s social empowerment” (Nkealah, 2017b). In *Americanah*, a satirical novel in which Chimamanda Adichie paints with subtlety and humor the racial realities in the United States and the disturbing socio-political conditions of her native Nigeria, Obinze’s situation mirrors the unemployment difficulties that Sisi experiences in her search for a job: “He began applying for jobs listed in newspapers, but nobody called him for an interview, and his friends from school, who were now working at banks and mobile phone companies, began to avoid him, worried that he would thrust yet another CV into their hands” (Adichie, 2013). As such, Unigwe and Adichie both lay bare a social stigma that erodes the future of young Nigerians and pushes them to seek a better future elsewhere, at their own risk.

Besides education that is functioning as the most stressful push factor, there is a plain sight of a daily life struggles in this book, because “Unigwe has a deep understanding of poverty and its hungers” (Eberstadt, 2011). The author has explored the social apparatus of Lagos to demonstrate how misery can contribute to making collateral victims in an environment that became untenable. Sisi’s boyfriend Peter’s social status illustrates the plight that constituted one too many misfortunes in the life of Sisi. She could not imagine fulfilling her dream as a married woman with a man who can only rely on his parents for everything. That uncertainty, in addition to the prospects of becoming a prostitute in Europe, left her wondering: “Staying on in Ogba was biding time until what? Until she married Peter and moved in with him and the rest of his family? That was worse than Dele’s proposition” (40). In an extraordinary turn of events, Sisi found how a fabricated story by Madam could have been used as another push-factor that stood out in the process of filing for asylum in Belgium at the Ministry of External Affairs. Ironically, the story Madam made up for Sisi fits the ordeal of Joyce who experienced the trauma of the civil war that exterminated her entire family, before she made her way to Lagos and then later on to Antwerp. So, even though fictional, this story, underscores, on one hand, the violent socio-political climate, and on the other hand, the complexities of the migration realities that one must navigate in order to be regularized. Whether the asylees would be successful in their bid to get those coveted papers is a mystery. But as entangled as she is in the sex industry practices, a pimp like Madam is used to building those dramatic stories that are beyond any reasonable doubt:

I shall get you a cab that will stop you in front of the center. Tell them there that you are from Liberia. Are you listening to me? Tell them that your father was a local Mandingo chief, and soldiers loyal to Charles Taylor came at night to your house and killed your entire family: father, mother, sisters, and brothers. You escaped because you hid yourself in a kitchen cupboard. You dared to come out only after the massacre ended and the soldiers had gone. Tell them you heard a soldier shout that one family member was missing, that they were under obligation to kill you all, and that they would be back to do just that. Look sad. Cry. Wail. Tear your hair out. White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking off each other's heads in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story, the better. (104)

Another push-factor, that is not uncommon, is Lagos itself. The grim picture of the city of Lagos, as painted in this book, is one of the strong push-factors that would drive people away to seek a better life at someplace else. Amid a mounting pile of misfortunes, after her University degree did not land her a dream job at a bank, and facing the prospect of becoming a prostitute in Europe, Sisi came down to this conclusion about Lagos: "*This place has no future*" (17). Amid the uncertainty, she assumed that "Lagos was a city of death, and she was escaping it" (84). Unigwe also uses anaphora in the book to add emphasis to the mimesis of Lagos regarding its atrocious nature: "Lagos was the most crowded city on earth. Lagos was so crowded that it was impossible to breathe" (171). Some other tropes the author used to further describe the abysmal state of Lagos include personification. As Joyce noted while visiting the city for the first time with her Nigerian boyfriend, Polycarp, a peacekeeper that she met at the refugee camp: "Too many people. Too many houses. An excess of everything. Nothing was organized [...] Houses juggled for space, standing on one another's toes [...] Houses standing lopsided next to one another like wobbly tables knocked together by an amateur carpenter" (183). But, by contrast, Lagos can also be an Eldorado. In that sense, Joyce thought that "Lagos was not all pollution and dirt. It had a splendid beauty that was sometimes enough to make her cry. The first time Polycarp took her to the Bar Beach on Victoria Island, the day was made to order: clear skies and a sun that shone straight onto the beach, a dazzling show of splendor" (186). Mama Eko, Ama's mother's cousin, who ran a canteen in Ikeja had the same admiration about Lagos when she discusses the city's many assets with Enugu: "Lagos is the place to be! Lagos *bu ebe ano*. The happening city" (129).

2.2. Pull factors

When Sisi met up with Oga Dele at his office on Randle Avenue, the pimp didn't care much about Sisi's intellectual capacity as a graduate individual. Rather, he praised her body shape to give her a glimpse of the job she should expect to do in Europe: "You fit sleep on it. No need to decide now. But I swear, with your melons, you go dey mint money anyhow!" (40). So, why is it that Dele could not think of anything different for Sisi other than making salacious comments about her body as a female at their first encounter? This could potentially posit the problem of power imbalance in gender norms where men tend to lure women into a degraded role within society. Nkealah argues that objectification of women is intimately linked to the place that women are given in society, raising the issue of gender dynamics. The man seems naturally to enjoy all the privileges which predestine him in a position of domination over the woman. This situation of unequal balance is seen in her analysis of Fred Khumalo's novel, *Seven Steps to Heaven*, in which "Lettie is portrayed as a woman who has internalized patriarchal values and actively promotes the maintenance of male hegemony" (Nkealah, 2017a, p. 10535). What is disenfranchising in the novel is that, "While Kokoroshe goes off to University of Cape Town to acquire a degree, his sister Lovey stays in Paradise Road selling her body to men and accumulating degrees in home wrecking, whoredom and waitressing" (Nkealah, 2017a). This study adds another layer regarding the way women's education is perceived within society. If Sisi had an opportunity to go to school and obtain a University degree, Lovey was deprived of such privilege at the expense of her brother Kokoroshe. But, the bottom line is, after many sacrifices over all those years, Sisi came down to the "common denominator" with Lovey: prostitution. As Nkealah concluded: "The politics of representation are played out through an insidious chauvinism which deliberately marginalizes women's intellectual potentials in order to foreground their gendered and sexualized bodies. These bodies, like beer, are designated for male consumption, which is why the novel lavishes Lovey and her mother with good looks and a tendency for (sexual) generosity" (Nkealah, 2017a).

Speaking of *On Black Sisters Street*, Bernadine Evaristo asserted that the author unmasked, unequivocally, one of the factors that force African women to head into unchartered territories to become sex workers. The most striking, according to Bernadine, is the unfettered voice Unigwe used to outline the entangled factors that shape the prostitution industry to make it a pull factor for the most deprived: "*On Black Sisters' Street* is a probing and unsettling exploration of the many factors that lead African women into prostitution in Europe, and it pulls no punches about the sordid nature of the job" (Evaristo, 2011). This pull factor, unquestionably, leads to big dreams that are characteristic of delusionary Europe that every potential immigrant sees before making their first foray into the promised land. Sisi did not make an exception: "She would set up a business or two. She could go into the business of importing fairly used luxury cars into

Nigeria” (41). At one point, as she became hopeless to find a job at the bank, and her boyfriend Peter being unable to help her out, Sisi had a second thought, the possibility of training as a nurse. That job has the potential to produce a reverse effect, becoming a pull-factor for immigrants who are returning in Africa in the hopes to tie a knot. This means that, once Sisi had set her sight on Europe, she was determined to do anything she could to make her dream come true. “At Christmas most of the men returning home from Europe and America with wallets full of foreign currency, to scout for wives, always went for the nurses. They said it was easier for nurses to get a job abroad” (28).

Being the “common denominator” for the four women, Oga Dele has a specific way to lure each one of them into his ring. Efe, who suffered her father’s indifference, even after she fell pregnant from a man called Titus, was working at Dele’s office for her third job as a janitor. Although he is a pimp, it took seven months before he suggested that Efe go abroad to make a fortune, instead of juggling between three jobs: “Belgium. A country wey dey Europe. Next door to London” (70). Well aware that Nigerians are historically familiar to London, Dele knew that if he made it sound like twin places, that would facilitate the decision making for Efe to accept the offer. Ama, who was raped by her stepfather, pastor Brother Cyril, at her younger age, met Dele at her aunt Mama Eko’s canteen where she works. Dele is a regular customer of the canteen, and beyond going there to eat, he is able to lure Ama into his business by making fallacious promises to her: “If you wan’ make easy money, if you wan’ go abroad, come my office for Randle make we talk. But only if you dey serious o” (138). The only reason Ama left her village Enugu was to escape her abusive step-father to start a new life in Lagos, so Dele’s invitation sounded promising to her, and she agreed to meet him. Upon Ama’s arrival at the office, after ignoring multiple warnings made by her aunt Mama Eko, Dele takes no detours in explaining the project briefly: “‘I go straight to the point,’ [...] You no be small gal. Na woman you be. Mature woman. I go tell you wetin it be. I need women. Fine, fine women like you make dem go work for abroad for me. For Europe. For Belgium” (140). That is the same strategy Dele uses to recruit girls in Lagos and send them to Europe as prostitutes. But the perplexity of the Dele’s words left Ama hesitant. Nevertheless, Sisi who already has a mindset about her plans for Europe envisioned a

future in which she would have earned enough to buy her father a car, buy her mother a house in Ikoyi, and buy herself a good man who would father her children and give her parents the grandchildren they had always dreamed of before they were too old to appreciate them. With the amount of money she imagined she would earn, there would be no limit to her purchasing power. She would even be able to buy her father a chieftaincy title in their village. Buy him some respect and a posture that belonged to a man his age. *Back home, everything is for sale.* (146-7)

Yes, everything is for sale, including people, love, and hegemony. In some African communities crippled by poverty, one can even buy chieftaincy, thereby causing an abrupt reversal of traditional values, as seen in *Blue-White-Red*, by Alain Mabanckou. In this chronicle of clandestine migration, Mabanckou portrayed Charles Moki, nicknamed *The Parisian*, who at the mercy of the fallout from his immigration to France, manages to impose his authority in the village. First of all, “A year after the villa was built, we saw two Toyotas arrive. Moki had chartered and sent them from France so his family could make a profit off them as taxis. That protected the family from utter destitution” (Dundy, 1998). This kind of materialistic prowess will ultimately lead to the hegemonic one, where Moki will successfully rewrite the community council’s laws, buy some privileges for his father, and coerce others into silence: “The old man saw his life change in one fell swoop. He was never himself again. It was as if he had followed a calling. His social promotion caught everyone off guard. It was like an unobstructed arrow in flight: he was put on the village council and shortly thereafter unanimously elected its president” (Dundy, 1998).

3. Prostitution as a regular work

The protagonists of *On Black Sisters Street* did not anticipate going to Belgium for the sex trade when they first started looking for ways and means to make ends meet in Lagos. However, what ushered the four women into a new form of slavery were the push and pull factors discussed above. They created a set of circumstances that contributed to the materialization of the transnational sex trade as depicted in *On Black Sisters Street*. The four women who made their first foray into unchartered territory seemed to have chosen their destiny voluntarily, which brings up the problematic notion of consent and lack of agency. Laura Barberán Reinares, in a bid to clear the conflation when associating the term “consent” to the term “agency” in the context of transnational sex trafficking, noted that “Unigwe crafts four trafficked characters endowed with depth and subjectivity who, regardless of their circumstances, speak for themselves and act upon their desires. For different reasons, they ‘consent’ to be trafficked to Europe in hopes of a better future, three of them fully cognizant that they will be doing sex work” (Reinares, 2019). This is to say that Dele made those women aware of the nature of the job before they left Lagos for Antwerp where his counterpart, Madam, awaits them, which indicates that they implicitly consented to the deal and decided to move on. Their sense of agency is constructed within the scope of underlying harsh circumstances that left them with no alternative. That is what Unigwe brilliantly illustrates, for example, through the worthlessness of Sisi’s university degree, at a time using her sense of humor to expose some of

Lagos' flaws to the reader: "It was as if her resumes were being swallowed up by the many potholes on Lagos roads" (21). As Fernanda Eberstadt argues, "[Unigwe] insists that we regard her four central characters as cool-eyed gamblers, not passive victims" (Eberstadt, 2011).

However, the fact that Sisi's unsuccessful bids for a job at banks, alongside other societal issues, forced her into sex trade abroad, is not different from what would happen to African women already living in Europe who end up entwined into prostitution for one reason or the other. This is Ken's story in the autobiographical novel, *The Abandoned Baobab*, by the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul. After traveling to Belgium to attend University, Ken ended up becoming a prostitute due to her inability to keep up with her studies and her living conditions that became unbearable. She never anticipated being in such a strange setting while she was leaving Senegal, nor consented to do it as a last resort to overcome challenges that arose. Nevertheless, Ken is introduced to two Arab brothers who run restaurant and hope that Ken will perform a decent job according to her ethical standards, just for the sake of making enough for herself to survive: "Other people wanted me to work, to earn my living. But I was already living. I didn't need what others needed. I had life; I wanted to be living it" (Jager, 2008). Somehow, her interview took a dramatic turn yielding to questions that alluded to the degradation of her identity and objectification of her body as a black woman:

Oh, Ken, don't start looking for considerations where there aren't any, where there shouldn't be any. A woman can be nothing other than a consumption. People haven't stopped asking us where we discovered you; you make a bond of femininity and intelligence and *you are Black*. So, if you want to make money, stop discussing metaphysics, Sumer, and poetry with the customers. We aren't poets here (Jager, 2008).

In the above statement made by the proprietors of the restaurant that also included a nightclub, it is remarkable to note that Ken's intelligence was devalued as was her body that became an exotic object to be discovered by nightclub clients. But the four women that Unigwe presented in her book, as Laura Reinares put it, were "fully cognizant that they will be doing sex work" in Europe, signed the contract, before taking off. Prostitution then came to them as a pull factor, at a particular moment of each individual's life when they were desperate to escape Lagos that's mired with poverty. So, under normal circumstances where they had better options on the table, these young women, some as single moms, could not have chosen a job that is considered "One of the great evils of the twenty first century and as a frequent aim of global networks of human trafficking, a very widespread crime nowadays" (Bastida-Rodriguez, 2014). But with the gender dynamics that play out in the book, women who engage in the sex trade abroad are victims of the combined effects resulting from the power imbalance and the abuse of economic disadvantage that predestined them into victimhood. Chielozona Eze stressed that "We should look at the socioeconomic realities that create the objectification of humans and how patriarchy views women's bodies as mere objects that are meant to serve society, that is, men" (Eze, 2014).

The first instruction Sisi received from her host was nothing short of a command. Even though startling, it is a warning that would put Sisi in confidence, and change her perception about the new environment she just landed in: "Not nervous, are we? You can't afford to be. Not in our business" (102). Then Madam mandated to Sisi: "Ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of your passport" (102). Obviously, Sisi should know that she is no longer in Ogba, her village, and not even in Lagos. She was sent to Antwerp for work, and she has to face her new life, the threads of which are being weaved by two pimps, Dele and Madam. In this unknown land, far away from Nigeria, how could she not be submissive? Madam is holding all the cards and plays them in the manner so as not to lose one single game. Whether Sisi chooses to play smart as a graduate girl or be stubborn, she has embarked on a path of no return. And whether Madam is being authoritarian or not, all that matters to her is her business and her work ethic. There are a certain set of rules that no one should shy away from, including Sisi:

My dear Sisi, it's not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you are told, and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. You understand? Three days ago, I gave Joyce the same instruction. She did not ask me questions. She just listened and did as she was told. I expect the same of you. Silence and total obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. *Capisce?* (103)

3.1. Workplace: dress code and the contract

When Sisi arrived at Antwerp, she could not use her own clothes she brought from Nigeria, for they did not match the dress code that is in line with the job she will perform. There was no need for her either to spend her money to purchase new clothes. Madam has a bag with a set of clothes that she threw at her: "Here. Your work clothes. Tonight, you start" (157). That is another layer of the trap that was set up by Oga Dele in Nigeria. This defines the oppressive nature of the sex trade environment where women are muzzled and reduced to commodities for men to consume. As such, prostitutes are exposed to all kinds of risks and men of all stripes. Eager to dip into the nights of the streets of Antwerp, Unigwe's

curiosity sheds light on clients parading in front of the windows of prostitutes, and how diverse they could be. The narrator gives a full portrait of those clients who come from different backgrounds:

The street starts filling up at around nine o'clock. Young men in their thirties with chins as soft as a baby's buttocks and pictures of their pretty wives in their leather wallets, looking of adventure between the thighs of *een afrikaanse*. Young boys in a frazzled eagerness to grow up, looking for a woman to rid them of their virginity. Bachelors between relationships, seeking a woman's warmth without commitment. Old men with mottled skin and flabby cheeks, looking for something young to help them forget the flaccidity time has heaped on them. Vingerlingstraat bears witness to all kinds of men. (152)

This panoply of customers come "*On Black Sisters Street*" with various sexual desires. So, what kind of work would customers be looking for when they pay their monies to the prostitutes? Their investment can very well serve many purposes: "The money was in delivering all the works: penetration, blow job, no condom" (223). However, there are nights where Sisi will only have a few customers, or customers with insufficient funds to pay for full service: "I'm on a budget. So just a blow job, sugar" (223). And for one night, "When business was good, Sisi did an average of fifteen men" (223). The novel is entitled *On Black Sisters Street*, which is racially graphic. The prostitution being run by black girls, "Black men avoided them, and Sisi initially thought that these men were embarrassed for their 'sisters' in the flesh trade" (223). That is not the case in the opinion of all black sisters who are in the sex trade industry, and who might probably understand black migrant men's situation much better than Sisi. As Ama corrected her friend: "'Many black men here are just struggling to survive. They haven't got the money to pay for sex'" (223). This means that they might have other priorities that are more pressing than paying for sex. For instance, "In all her years, Ama said, she could count the number of black customers she'd had on one hand. 'And they are mainly visitors, tourists from London and America. One of them was not even proper black. He was Caribbean or something'" (223). Some customers, like Etienne, can be nice to prostitutes, and show some generosity, and even familiarity based on the frequency of their visits: "Etienne is a generous tipper, but you would not tell just by looking at him. [...] He is one of Joyce's regulars. He calls her 'Etienne's Nubian Princess'" (153). But, like in any other job or market place, there may also be complaints from customers who visit the booths. Sisi's first customer disliked her performance to the point where he had a second thought about her: "The girl who used to stay here, she knew her job. You just waste my money! Today I have no release. No release! I have to masturbate" (210).

Dele is not in business for humanitarian reasons. He is in business to make a profit, and for that reason, the price tag to involve a girl as a commodity can be egregious: "He grunted and continued talking to Chisom. 'But I no dey do charity o. So it go cost you. Taty t'ousand euro it go cost you o'" (32). That is the contract three of the four women, Sisi, Ama, Efe, though not Joyce, signed before leaving Lagos for Antwerp. As manipulative as this could be, Dele knows that there must be some payment plans to alleviate the pain of his clients. Because, Chisom for example, was completely out of her mind after learning that she has to commit to a €30000 deal: "Was this man serious? (32)," prompting Dele to reassure her: "You tink say na one time you go pay? No be one time oo" (32). Elaborating on his payment plan, Dele clarified that "Na, when you get there, begin work, you go begin dey pay. Installmental payment, we dey call am! Mont' by mont' you go dey pay me" (32). But, once in Belgium, and after Sisi started working, the contract she signed with Dele became monstrous in her life. Under the coercion of her precarious life in Lagos, she could not foresee €30000 being the source of a nightmare in Antwerp. She was completely blindsided by her dreams that forged the backbone of her determination to leave Lagos. But, in front of the disillusion, "The amount she was supposed to pay every month echoed in her head. *Five hundred. Five hundred. Five hundred. Five hundred.* She tossed and turned. She lay on her side, her hands between her thighs, her eyes still shut. *Five hundred. Five hundred. Five hundred. Five hundred.*" (157). This money has to be paid directly to Dele in Lagos. Now that she has become Madam's property, she is subjugated to the dialectic of the master and slave with clear and threatening instructions about how to deal with her debt: "But I understand that sometimes you may not be able to, so we have set a minimum repayment of one hundred euros. Every month you go to the Western Union and transfer the money to Dele. Any month you do not pay up ..." (157). Not finishing the last sentence is not a simple warning. It is an unspoken threat that has the potential to dissuade Sisi from showing any lack of good behavior to fulfill her commitment. But, her options are very limited given that she has too little in her wallet for so many things that she should care for: "Sisi had barely any money left for herself after paying off Dele. And paying her part of the rent on the Zwartzusterstraat. And paying rent on the Vingerlingstraat room she was subletting from Madam. All of Madam's girls sublet from her. Five hundred and fifty euros a week they paid. She did not see how she could do this job long enough to save anything" (217).

Prostitution, as a plague in the context of migration, comes in different shapes. There might not even be the need for a mysterious pimp, or it and may not be an ultimate job, only a temporary practice to survive transit to one's final

destination. Julius, the narrator of *Open City*, by Teju Cole, recounts the startling bitterness of a Liberian migrant, Saidu, who is imprisoned for more than two years in a detention facility in Queens, New York, a multiracial city where the book is largely set. Saidu confessed to Julius that “Those were the longest two years of his life. He slept in a crowded living room with ten other Africans. Three of them were girls, and the men took turns with them and paid them, but he didn’t touch them, because he had saved almost enough for the passport and his ticket” (Cole, 2011). So, this prostitution was happening not on the streets of Queens, but in an enclosure that is supposed to be presumably a safe environment for men and women waiting to go through some migration administrative protocols.

3.2. *Dangers of prostitution*

On Black Sisters Street reveals that Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce were not born into prostitution, nor did they choose to venture into the sex work industry voluntarily. They were trying to escape life constraints in Lagos and take control of their agency. Their job as sex workers can be seen as a footbridge to a better life, for they have big dreams and strong plans to go back to Nigeria and invest the money that they would have earned in various businesses. The four women are well aware of the decency of life and its social implications. Going to Belgium for a “flesh trade” was a compulsory step and could be a revolt against social stigmas to which they fell prey in Lagos. However, the sex work industry is a complex world with unknown consequences. Some may be just the regrets while one reflects on the past life that was deemed decent. That is the case with Sisi: “She had slept with only two people in her entire life. Kunle, her boyfriend before Peter, when she was eighteen and experimenting, and Peter. What would Peter think if he saw her now? Tears found their way to her eyes. She was not doing this because she liked it, she reminded herself. But she was here now, and there was no going back” (178). Of course, Sisi will never get to go back to Nigeria to see her parents. With the abusive Madam, and being fed up with her sex work, Sisi starts a romantic life with Luc, a “thirty-year-old banker. He stood out because he belonged to that rare breed of white Belgians who attend services at African Pentecostal churches” (226). As their romance got merrier, Sisi moved to his place in Edegem. At that point, with assurance from Luc, she sought to claim a total agency of her new life: “What exactly do I have to lose? What am I afraid of?” (233), knowing exactly that “She was an illegal immigrant, after all” (235). As resolute as she could be in her plans to free herself from Madam’s grip and enjoy her new post-prostitute life, Dele’s warnings started crisscrossing Sisi’s mind: “No try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!” (233). This severe injunction will ultimately lead to the scenario that Madam orchestrated to have her houseman Segun go after Sisi and murder her in Edegem. Sisi did not know that she had embarked on a perilous journey that started from Lagos all way to Antwerp and Edegem. When she received an unannounced visit from Segun at Luc’s, she appeared to be in total control of the situation: “What harm will it do? Nobody can make me go back to the Zwarte Zusterstraat. That part of my life is over. And certainly not this wimp of a man. This man with only half a brain whose mouth always hangs open” (251).

At Madam’s, Sisi and Segun were closer to each other than to the rest of the other girls. That was a mark of trust, and that there was no reason at this time for Sisi to fear any harm that Segun could inflict on her, at least not at Luc’s place. But, the peril of the moment lies in the nature of her contract with her pimps who only mind their business. Besides Dele’s warnings, Madam also uttered that she has to abide by the rules to “have an easy ride”. Still, Sisi maintained an illusion and thought she has gained as much power as she might need to live by her own rules: “There was no turning back now. She had defied Dele, cut all links with Madam, and the house on the Zwarte Zusterstraat. She was ready to deal with whatever the consequences might be” (245). So, whether Segun was a “wimp of a man” or not, he is part of the ring, and ready to enforce or execute any mission Madam asks him to carry out. But, Sisi, as Madam and Dele’s property, would not know that, and given her boyfriend Luc’s naivete, she would fall victim to her poor judgment on Segun’s appearance as an inoffensive man: “She was not scared of Segun. He was harmless, everyone knew it. So, the hammer hitting into her skull had come as a shock” (251). Segun doing Madam and Dele’s job showed how dangerous pimps can be in targeting their subjects. Quoting researcher Anne Rasmusson, Barri Flowers argues that this drama is a “power relationship in which prostitutes are subject to domination, violence, and torture by their pimps, as well as theft of their earnings” (Flowers, 2011). Violence appears to be a characteristic of the sex work industry, and that pitfall and the pursuit of economic attainment cannot be dissociated. In the words of Willie Thompson, “Violence and economic exploitation are closely intertwined” (Thompson, 2015). Sisi’s situation is similar to the stories of the protagonists in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, by Laila Lalami (2006). In this book, the author highlights how immigrants expose themselves to the dangers they never suspected in the pursuit of their objectives going to Europe by all means and to succeed at all costs. This also proved Sisi’s vulnerability and how limited her autonomy was vis-à-vis Madam who claimed total ownership of Sisi and other girls under her authority. Sisi underestimating the aggressiveness of Segun and, more importantly, thinking that she is henceforth independent economically, only to be coldly murdered, meant that her “apparent autonomy rests on a very fragile power balance, as the dynamics of the job are necessarily complicated by the illegality, criminality, and therefore heightened vulnerability of the trafficked person” (Reinares, 2019).

4. Identity crisis

Matthew Hornsey's social identity approach as a "theory with a strong focus on how the social context affects intergroup relations" (Hornsey, 2008), helps in understanding that circumstances and the idea of belonging are some of the many factors that influence people in their quest of the new identity. This implies an identity crisis that can be lived in many ways and at different stages of someone's life. Sisi, around who reverberates the entire plot of *On Black Sisters Street*, has experienced the trauma of self-representation from her home all way to the streets of Antwerp. As a girl, growing up with her parents, she apparently did not see anything compelling from her mother: "I don't want to become like my mother" (27). This disavowal is the result of the misery that mired her parents to the extent that her mother was not able to provide for her as she would have liked. This form of identity, which alludes to a cathartic effect felt from an actor of a play, was only the beginning of a series of identity crises that shaped the personality of the protagonist all along. After giving up hope to get a job at a bank with her degree, Sisi met with Dele to discuss the prospects of going abroad. When she realized that the job abroad would be sex work, Sisi felt a sense of degradation of her personality, which prompted her to vehemently ask questions to the pimp: "Do you know I have a university degree? Do you know I am a graduate?" (40). This shows that, even though the university degree did not fulfill Sisi's expectations in terms of employment, that degree became part of her identity, and contributes to building her personality. In other words, she would want society to judge her according to her new standard: college graduate. This identity crisis involves a self-denial by others.

The name change is one of the mysteries of the migration process, more particularly for immigrants who attempt to cross European borders without proper documentation. They are the ones known as illegal or clandestine immigrants. The rationale behind the pursuit of forging a new identity is mainly related to the migration protocols that could put immigrants' residency in jeopardy. But, the fortuitous acceptance to bear a new name will force an immigrant into a double-exile once on the promised land. Therefore, it is a social construction that is embedded in the collective imagination as a *sine qua non* abdication leading to the rebirth of another self whose real nature cannot be conceived of in advance. "In Europe, when she would no longer be Chisom" (27), this is the narrator talking about the prospect of the name change for the character who later in Belgium is known as Sisi. The theory of double-exile plays out between Chisom's physical presence in Belgium and the change of her name from Chisom to Sisi once in Belgium. The narrator sarcastically pointed out that "She would rename herself. She would go through a baptism of fire and be reborn as Sisi: a stranger yet familiar. Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while, and in her place would be Sisi. She would earn her money by using her *punani*. And once she hit it big, she would reincarnate as Chisom" (41). This identity crisis involves self-denial by oneself. Later at Antwerp, Sisi realizes not only that she wasn't questioning why people call her Sisi, but she became very well accustomed to her new name that she would call herself such a name in her most distressful moments: "Sisi. Funny how she had started to call herself the name even in her thoughts. It was as if Chisom never even existed. Chisom was dead. Snuffed out. A nobody swallowed up by the night" (88). The fact that Sisi was able to overcome her anxiety and find the new self that she is accustomed to, follows a process of self-identification in Kristeva's sense. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theories of the foreigner within the national boundaries, Fiona Barclay noted that "[Kristeva] argues that through psychoanalysis we can become aware of and reconciled to our own strangeness, which inhabits us through our unconscious" (Barclay, 2010).

Although Sisi left Lagos with her passport and visa, in the illusory hope of enjoying a legal residency in Belgium, she has to apply for asylum based on not having any form of identification while she arrives in Antwerp, the "city that was full of strangers" (103). Even though she can still remember her fake name in front of asylum officers who are interviewing her, the instructions that Madam gave her were firm: "She was sure her name was Mary Featherwill. Yes. She was Mandingo. Yes. Her family had been killed and there was a price on her head. [...] She knew no one in Belgium. [...] Yes. She was born in Monrovia. No. She did not have a passport because she had left the house in a hurry and was really scared for her life. No. She did not have any form of identification" (149-50). Sisi's attempt to be granted asylum has failed. The officer told her that "We are not satisfied with your story. This paper here says that you have three days to leave the country" (156). When Sisi reports to Madam with the refusal-stamped paper, she takes it from her and states: "This paper is no concern of yours. All you need to know is that you're a persona non grata in this country. And you do not exist. Not here" (156). To Sisi, it seems like she is lost. Her internal migration process, which constituted leaving Chisom to become Sisi, and later Mary Featherwill, comes to an end. Nevertheless, the name Sisi will stick to her, making her a new individual in Belgium, different from Chisom as she is known in Nigeria. That otherness is what led to Sisi's double exile, in a "constant yearning to escape herself" (104). Unigwe's exploration of Sisi's battle with herself is not different from the observation Cazenave made about the protagonist of *The Abandoned Baobab*. As she explained, "Bugul stresses the importance of the protagonist's internal journey as opposed to her journey to Europe" (Cazenave, 1999). Sisi's identity fallout, as a prostitute, took a toll on her. The anguish she feels is no longer related to her stay in Belgium, a foreign country to her, far away from her family and her cultural realities. If she overcame that physical

journey, Sisi's new struggle has to do with her new self that she sees as deteriorating from her complacency: "While she had never been comfortable in her job, there was now a certain aversion added to the discomfort. She could no longer bear to look at herself, not even when she was alone. When she took a bath, she sponged her body without once looking at it. Regrets assailed her day in, day out" (212).

With no passport to be identified as Nigerian born and being mandated to leave Belgium, there is no way out for her. At this particular moment, she becomes merchandise, "a commodity for sale, a piece of choice meat, a slab of meat at the local abattoir" (156) that Madam can sell at any price to anyone. Her denial of a new identity, carefully orchestrated by Madam, places her on the stage of objectification. She is deprived of her personhood at a place and a moment when no one or nothing could come to her rescue. The scheme tends to be common for other women as well. In the word of Eze, "It is much more about the outright objectification of women" (Eze, 2014). On the other hand, Madam gained more power to exploit her. This shows the other side of the coin in the prostitution industry. Sisi is now under pressure to abide by every rule that Madam will set up, per her counterpart in Lagos, Oga Dele, for more productivity and profitability. To that end, Madam claims total ownership of her: "'Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you'. [...] 'Until you have paid up every single kobo' [...] 'every single cent of what you owe us, you shall not have your passport back. Every month we except five hundred euros from you. That should be easy to do if you are dedicated'" (156). Alluding to the transatlantic slavery, Eze thinks that "Her utterance brings the process of dehumanization that was begun in Africa full circle" (Eze, 2014).

Alek is another emblematic character, who before changing her name to Joyce, has experienced multiple misfortunes. From war-torn Sudan to Lagos, the "city of death" (84), Alek was apparently destined for a tumultuous life. Evidently, her romance with Polycarp, a Nigerian national who brought her to Lagos after falling in love with her at the refugee camp, ended due to ethnic bias. After their relationship fractured because Polycarp's mother didn't want him to marry a stranger, Polycarp took Alek to the pimp Oga Dele whose "office was as wide as the man himself" (139), to arrange a trip for her to Belgium. As vicious as he could be in exporting human beings as goods on behalf of "Dele and Sons Ltd: Import-Export Specialists" (78), Dele thought that "The name has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. [...] Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her" (196). That is when both, Polycarp and Dele started juggling various names that would suit Alek's new identity even before she gets to take off from Lagos to Belgium. Scrapping a real name Alek and replacing it with a fake name without Alek's consent is another instance of self-denial by others. So, Dele suggested: "Make I see ... Cecilia? Nicole? Joyce?" (197) before making his final decision: "Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name wey dey always jolly. Joooooyce!" (197). Alek suffered another defeat through that painful experience. First, she was treated as other by Polycarp's mother for not being a Nigerian born woman. Second, she lost her identity through a name change that she did not ask for. Additionally, she lost her entire family to the violence of civil war, which forced her to flee her home country to seek refuge someplace else. The accumulation of these identity crises led her, as a stranger herself, to a foreign country "full of strangers". In fact, the four women living together in the Vingerlingstraat room were strangers to each other. Crippled by the death of Sisi, they made a space, "opening up the lives they always kept under wraps, telling the truth (153)," that brought up interesting revelations. To her friends Ama, Efe, and Joyce would disclose her real identity: "'I was not named Joyce, you know. It's not my real name. And ... and I am not even Nigerian.' [...] 'My real name's Alek'" (154). That confession unveiled the suspicion that Ama has held about Joyce's real identity: "I always thought you did not look very Nigerian" (154). This conflictual statement from Ama is a testimony of the depth of identity crises that engulf immigrants whether internally or externally, and that show the degree of mistrust which exists among them in their new environment where they are bound by the same fate.

The problem *On Black Sisters Street* posited through the realm of identity crises is the idea of belonging in a transnational context. Writing constitutes the paradigm that leads back to memories and multiple identities that are fractured between two geopolitical landscapes. In the experience of Fatou Diome, who migrated to France from Senegal, writing becomes a refuge where exile, memory, and identity intersect to create a sense of freedom and repossession of self. That is how Salie, the main protagonist of her novel, *The Belly of the Atlantic*, expresses her relief whenever she is confronted with identity dilemma: "Writing smiles at me knowingly for, free, I write to say and do everything that my mother didn't dare say and do. Identity papers? All the folds of the earth. Date and place of birth? Her and now. Identity papers! My memory is my identity" (Norman and Ros, 2003).

5. Memories

Memories are mostly expressed through remembrance. They may be constructed at an individual or collective level through a process channeled across various events with a sense of sorrow or happiness, failure or great achievement, deception, or pride. Memories can also be photos or art works. In the fictional universe of Unigwe's protagonists, the

last hypothesis seems to me the most plausible, because it bears factors, both internal and external, that forced Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce to find themselves in the sex trade. One of the most powerful memories in this book is the unavoidable thoughts about Sisi's death and the sorrow that comes with it. What makes this remembrance so lethargic are the aesthetics of the narration that Unigwe used in her book. She announced Sisi's death early on, way before the reader got to know the circumstances surrounding that tragedy: "And now, with the news that they have just received, they have become bound by something so surreal that they are afraid of talking about it. It is as if, by skirting around it, by avoiding it, they can pretend it never happened. Yet Sisi is on their minds" (25). As the main protagonist of the for women with a similar fate, Unigwe did not want Sisi's to be forgotten, and for that reason alone, her story, whether in life or after death, is disseminated throughout the book. This convoluted narration contributes to a sensitivity regarding the protagonists' ordeal and prostitution itself as an outcome of their migratory journey to Europe. Memories about Sisi's death come with a great deal of sadness and bewilderment, as her friends Ama, Efe, and Joyce do not know what to do with her body, nor which family member to reach out to, and feel lost in the midst of such uncertainty: "'What do we do now?' Joyce mocks. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes up to the ceiling. 'What can we do, Efe? What on earth can we do? You know her people? Who will you send the body to? And even if you know her people, can we afford to pay for her body to be sent back to Nigeria? What can any of us do? What?'" (36). They are asking many questions with no single answer. The four girls came to know each other at Madam's and sympathized due to the nature of their work under the authority of the same powerful woman. Moreover, they came to Belgium, all the way from Lagos, by the same channel, and for all those reasons, they were bound to share a common space that became their new home. But, given that they did not know each other nor their families in Lagos before arriving in Belgium, Sisi's death fractured their memories and put them at a loss.

The narrator gave a glimpse of Ama's childhood event, with more or less precision regarding the date: "It was 1987 and she was turning eight. Her father was throwing a party for her, a big birthday party with a clown hired to entertain her guests and a cameraman to capture the laughter on her face and the love of a father who would lay all these out" (106). The year alone is a vague recollection. But it does recall painful memories in Ama's childhood. That was her first encounter with her stepdad, pastor Brother Cyril, who raped her on her eighth birthday in her room with all the walls painted in pink color:

After Ama had blown out the candles on the cake and the cake had been eaten and the clown had made the children laugh and the cameramen had captured all the joy and laughter on video, after the guests had gone and Ama had been sent to bed certain that this was the happiest day of her entire life, her father floated into her dark room in his white safari suit. [...] That was the first time it happened. The next morning, unsure whether she had dreamed it or not, Ama spoke to the pink walls (113).

The birthday celebration that could have been one of the Ama's best childhood memories became a nightmare. As the only child in her parents' house, she did not have anyone to talk to in an effort to alleviate her pain. This is the reason why her pink walls became her best friends that kept her memories: "The walls could sketch her stories. They could tell how she wished she could melt into the bed. Become one with it. She would hold her body stiff, muscles tense, as if that would make her wish come true" (113-4). In the sex trade industry, there may be an oversight about memories, whether voluntarily or unconsciously. When that happens and there is a need to talk about it, one can make up a story. That is the scenario between Sisi and her friends: "They talked about their childhood. Sisi made up hers. She was sure the Albanian woman did, too. They were people without any past, people with forgotten pasts, so whatever was said would have to be made up of air" (203). Forgetting memories and oneself are summed up by a fall into a spiral of wandering and a loss of emotional and ideological landmarks. As stated earlier, oversight of a particular time in someone's life may happen deliberately. Joyce did not want to reflect on her distant, bruising past as the sole survivor of the war that decimated her entire family: "Joyce does not like to think about her past, preferring to concentrate on the future, on what her life will be once she leaves Madam's establishment" (153). This is because Joyce has been inflicted with so many wounds. The trauma of the devastating civil war, the trauma of her short-lived romance with her Nigerian boyfriend, Polycarp, and the trauma of being a prostitute. However, memories are not easy to forget. That is what the narrator emphasized regarding Joyce's behavior: "But the past is never far away. She has discovered that it never leaves us completely, no matter how hard we try. The past is like the juice from a cashew. It sticks. And whatever it stains, it stains for good" (153). The narrator's statement can be supported by Dinesh Bhugra's analysis on the intersections of "Migration, Distress and Cultural Identity," and how an individual's cultural heritage shapes his or her perspectives on a migratory journey: "When individuals migrate, they do not leave their beliefs or idioms of distress behind, no matter what the circumstances of their migration. Their beliefs influence their idioms of distress, which influence how they express symptoms and their help-seeking behavior" (Bhugra, 2004).

Many factors pushed Sisi's out of her native Nigeria. However, once in Antwerp, an estranged place that she would henceforth have to call home, she cannot stop remembering people and some of the circumstances that drove her out of Lagos to seek a better future abroad. But, things are not exactly what she had anticipated. Madam, Oga Dele's accomplice at Antwerp, is a smoker. She is Sisi's host, and that alone bothers Sisi to the point where her thoughts go out to her family in Nigeria: "The smoke irritated her. Her thoughts wandered to her parents, and she asked herself how they were, what they were doing. Her thought of Peter, almost wishing that things had been different. He would have made a good husband, a considerate one, the sort who would wash his wife's clothes if she were indisposed, maybe even cook for her. She cashed away thoughts of him" (102). Joyce leaving her hometown amid the civil war to join the refugee camp was not an easy move either. It was a departure that came with melancholy and uncertainty about whether she would ever be able to see that place again. Of course, it was a trip, and she could not cheer for anything. She left with grief while mourning the loss of the most precious part of her life, her entire family: "A silent goodbye to her city. She did not know when she would be back. Or if she would ever return. She let memories of the past play in her head. She edited the past. Clipped the horror. Kept only the laughter and the smile" (165). The narration of these stories is imbued with memories that reveal to what extent protagonists' migration prospects are unfulfilled expectations.

In their book, *Designing Prostitution Policy*, three authors, Hendrik Wagenaar, Helga Amesberger and Sietske Altink discuss the "complex and intricate relationship between migration, prostitution, trafficking, and exploitation," under many perspectives in order to identify the difficulties that policymakers come across in their initiative to strike a balance in warranting human rights of sex workers or worsening their situation. The point they hope to make clear in their research is that "prostitution is a complex system" (Wagenaar, 2017), and that the "challenges of prostitution policy put local policymakers in a difficult position" (Wagenaar, 2017). One take away from their study of the prospects of local authorities and policymakers being able to regulate sex work is that, "It is not just that policymaking in such circumstances can only be reactive and, as a result of the intrinsic lack of reliable data, myopic; there is also a real risk that, as a result, it will be confused, latching onto the wrong aspects of the problem, in the process worsening instead of alleviating the problem" (Wagenaar, 2017). The uncertainty that prevails around possible legalization of prostitution partly shows the hypocrisy of the Western authorities who, in reality, see African prostitutes in their streets as cheap commodities, which by analogy sheds light on the victims of the migratory phenomenon: illegal immigrants, designating those who have no legal residence or who arrive in Europe without a visa or proper documentation. These are people that Westerners hate on the beaches of Lampedusa but cherish in their factories and farms for cheaper labor. If there is a need to take any action, either to slow or to forbid human trafficking, sex of flesh trade, transatlantic sexual slavery, prostitution, or whatever the name might be, driven solely by the pursuit of profit, a trial in the city of Lyon in France against a network of Nigerian pimps stands as a great starter. The Prosecutor required "dix ans de prison pour les deux têtes présumées du réseau et une multitude de peines en majorité comprises entre six et dix ans de prison, avec une interdiction définitive du territoire français" (Olivier, 2019). [Ten years in prison for the two presumed heads of the network and a multitude of sentences mostly between six and ten years in prison, with a permanent ban from entering French territory].

I argue that Unigwe belongs in the literary canon of African women writers with a "Burden of Commitment" in Cazenave's sense, for taking on a contemporary issue that is still yet to have a universally accepted policy. Bernadine Evaristo contends that "Unigwe gives voice to those who are voiceless, fleshes out the stories of those who offer themselves as meat for sale, and bestows dignity on those who are stripped off it" (Evaristo, 2011). Stressing a similar argument, Chielozona Eze affirms that "Unigwe dramatizes modern sex trafficking in Africa in hopes of rousing people to indignation" (Eze, 2014), taking the same stance as Naomi Nkealah who states with un-ebbing confidence that, "narrative voice should be sympathetic to the plight of black (migrant) women who are subjected to social oppression" (Nkealah, 2017a). Developing her examination of *The Abandoned Baobab*, Cazenave insists that "Through the amount of psychological suffering that the author expresses, through a new awareness of her body and the sensations that pass through it, through fear of going over the edge, she opens up a fierce and violent new style of writing that can be subsequently found in the works of Beyala, Rawiri, and Tadjó" (Cazenave, 1999). To this list of "Rebellious Women," I would add Chika Unigwe whose writing style flutters between humor, sarcasm, and distress that enables her to depict a pressing contemporary issue, such as the transnational sex trade, with sensitivity and clarity.

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