

## Poetic Justice and After-Life Vengeance in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Felix N. Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*

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### Abstract

This article examines Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Felix N. Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze* as two African novels that portray the avenging abilities of hurting souls even when they have bodily departed the world. Both writers deploy characters that have been treated unjustly as trafficked victims, but at death, wreck vengeance on their living tormentors and victimizers as a considered measure of poetic justice. For theoretical framework, this paper adopts the moralistic theory in its analysis. The moralistic theory stresses the author's need to instruct the reader on the need for moral rectitude and avoid the unpleasant and dire consequences of deliberate wrong doings towards others. The paper finds that the dead are able to effect poetic justice by tormenting the living-offenders, by haunting their homes and placing curses on them and their children through the liberated souls as a good measure of poetic justice handed down by the authors.

**Keywords:** Poetic justice, Vengeance, Trafficked women, Hurting souls, Moralistic theory.

### Introduction

Literary works are often imbued with the tendency to judge the actions of their characters by the authors at the end. This is with the intention of awarding them their deserved measures for their

actions and inactions so as to score good over evil at all times, and, therefore, influence the reader as an individual and the society generally to toe the path of righteousness and shun societal vices. It is a writer's deliberate practice of scoring good above evil at all times in any literary work. Its essence is to assist the world that is often times in the throes of injustice and tyranny achieve justice by adjudicating and legislating in his or her works the need for justice in the world. Therefore, in deploying characters to illustrate various themes in literature, the incidents should be such that display the moral position of the characters, their motivations, predicaments weaknesses and strengths such that in the end, they are either rewarded for their good deed or punished for their bad deeds.

This is the only way that a writer can ensure that the society is justice minded and anarchy can be avoided. Hence, in an essay written in 1821, entitled "A Defence of Poetry," the English poet Percy B. Shelley asserts that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (par. 2). The term poets must not be restricted to writers of poetry alone, but to all creative writers who draw inspiration from the world around them and the unseen world. Shelley sees them as those who are the true ones making the laws for the society through their deployment of poetic justice. In explaining this claim by Shelley further, Julian Jay Roux says that so when Shelley argues "Poetry is the expression of the imagination and connate with the origin of man" he is saying Poetry is the production of human values and concepts and so by producing human values is laying down the values and laws the world lives by: in essence Poetry is the legislation of the world (par. 2).

Charles Nnolim is of the same view when he says that the goal of every writer is utopia. He puts it thus:

In sum the writer is a patriot who, for love of his country has taken great risks to ensure that we live in a free and democratic society where no one is oppressed. The ultimate end toward which the writer tends is utopia, for whether the writer is revolutionary or reformist in orientation, every writer is essentially a dreamer envisaging a heaven on earth, freedom from racial, colonial and neo colonial abuse, in short, a golden era of opportunities. (38)

In this line of thought, it is, therefore, the writer's duty to ensure that justice is accomplished and fairly apportioned in literary works. As a legislator, who operates through fictional works, in a literary world, his or her mode of legislating and judgment is poetic and as such, he or she dispenses poetic justice. Poetic justice, according to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpharm was a term coined by Thomas Rymer, an English critic of the later seventeenth century, to signify the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters. Rymer's view was that a poem (in a sense that includes dramatic tragedy) is an ideal realm of its own, and should be governed by ideal principles of decorum and morality and not by the random way things often work out in the actual world (300). It is pertinent to hear a related definition of poetic justice by Chris Baldick at this point before commenting on the foregoing one. In his definition of the term, poetic justice, Baldick says that the morally reassuring allocation of happy and unhappy fates to the virtuous and vicious characters respectively, usually at the end of a narrative or dramatic work...such justice is 'poetic', then in the sense that it occurs more often in the fictional plots of plays than in real life. In a slightly different but commonly used sense, the term may also refer to a strikingly appropriate reward or punishment, usually a fitting 'retribution' by which a villain is ruined by some process of his own making (197).

The process of legislating over conflicts and characters' actions and serving appropriate rewards to these persons is central to literature. Abrams, Harpharm and Baldick sound clear that poetic justice is an ideal legislation and that such ideal may not really be found in the real society. Their definitions however, succeed in identifying and upholding the need for poetic justice in literary works. In both novels under examination (Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* and F.N. Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*), the two writers adopt the techniques of revenge by dead characters who spiritually inflict pain on the living as good compensation for the wrong deeds meted to them while they were alive, and in fact, before they were directly or indirectly killed by them. Their actions which is to extract a pound of flesh is considered a just punishment by the writers and as a proper measure to achieve poetic justice in the bid to moralize the reader to the effect that even dead victims

can pull back vengeance on the living. J. O.Ejim elucidates on the nature of these dead characters who avenge their deaths from the other world. Ejim says of the living-dead thus:

The living dead are those who have died but whose memories are still fresh in the minds of their relatives. But in the African cosmology, there is a group of dead relatives who have not retired into the home of the ancestors. The spirit of such people will hover around the world. Sometimes, they appear to their relatives and friends. They are recognized by those they appear to. Some of such people are those who died prematurely or those who died childless or those who died well but are not yet given befitting burials. The common factor about the group is that they are not yet at rest. It is often believed that they often disturb the lives of their loved ones because they are not yet fulfilled, they cannot be reborn into their families to live fulfilled lives. (38)

This lucid exposition of the status of the living-dead is a popular belief in Africa. Its relevance to our current enterprise is that both texts further strengthen this belief when Sisi in *On Black Sister's Street* and Ameze in *The Return of Ameze* carry out their vengeance against their tormentors shortly after their death. Sex trafficking has grown to become a multi-million dollar business undertaken by merciless traffickers and cartels whose only interest is to make as much money from the sale of sex offered by largely unwilling women. Most of the women are recruited from Africa and Asia, two continents that are largely populated by poverty-stricken people who would do menial jobs to earn a living. As a result of their deprived states, sex traffickers easily cash in and by offering them non-existing jobs in Europe, the unsuspecting men and women, especially the women are lured into prostitution. By the time they realize what they are into, it is late and they can no longer back out of the sex slavery and camps they find themselves in thousands of miles away from home and relatives. They are, therefore, forced to adapt to this miserable living and build dreams of better days ahead. Some of them are subjected to deadly oaths of allegiance to the terms of forced contracts with their 'owners' as they must pay back the sums invested in them before they can regain their freedom. *Publishers Weekly* comments on the writer's art when it states that "Unigwe gives a powerful voice to women

of the African Diaspora who are forced to use sex to survive. The author's raw voice, unflinching eye for detail, facility for creating a complex narrative, and affection for her characters make this a must read. Bernadine Evvaristo, in her review of Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*, comments on the characters in detail when she says that

*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. Four naïve young women, Sisi, Joyce, Ama and Efe fall under the money making spell of pimp daddy "Senghor Dele" in Lagos. Rich vulgar, ruthless, he specializes in exporting girls to work in Belgium for a modest fee of 30000 euros. This they must pay back in monthly instalments over many years of turning tricks ten hours a day. They don't all know that this is what lies in store but, fake passports withheld, the consequences for those who try to escape are dire... Men in the novel are generally drunks, murderers, rapists, weak, cold-hearted, pathetic. (23)

Evvaristo's comments are not out of place as they capture the facts of the matter of sex slave traumatic experiences in Africa. Asomwan Adagboyin approves of Ogoanah's art in *The Return of Ameze* when he writes thus: the essence of literature as the wellspring of our survival as a people also points in the direction of the complexion of the present and the future even as it is in the memory of the world. Lying within the lexico-semantic geography of memory is the fact that literature never forgets. In the hands of a visionary creator and skilled craftsman, it is a good reminder. It is in the mould of literature as a reminder that I would like to cast Felix N. Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*, a novel, which in my humble opinion, has the potential of stamping its authority on the Nigerian literary landscape sooner than later. This is not only because of its topicality, but also the sheer virtuoso and pathos with which events in the novel are woven.

Two other critics who have examined the novel are O.A. Ikediugwu and E.N. Ugwu. They focus on poverty, ignorance and greed as the major concern of the author. Both critics devote ample space to the study of these vices and their effects on the various characters. Summarily, *On Black Sisters Street* dwells on the pitiable

plight of African women who are trafficked into Europe for the immoral sex slave trade. It is a detailed exposé on the bitter experiences of girls recruited in Lagos and sold to women business entrepreneurs in Austria who hire the girls out to men to satisfy their sexual cravings for monetary rewards and profits on their investment. Sisi is one of the female characters recruited for the trade. She is, however, not interested in the business and would love to quit. She tries to escape from the Zwarte Zusterstraat, the slave camp having found love in Lucy. But it does not work out that way as Madam orders that she be killed as she has fled without fully defraying the cost of procuring her and the interest and profit accruing therefrom. She is put to death in a gruesome way. The pain of loss on her parents who have built a living on her remittances, her lofty dreams to settle down in marriage and raise her children lovingly heighten the reader's empathy for Sisi, such that her "helplessness" in death does not undermine her vengeance and the actualization of poetic justice. As the writer reports her death which saddens the reader, she is quick to give her life through the liberated soul which travels from Antwerp to the home of Ade in Lagos, the trafficking kingpin for swift vengeance.

Unigwe captures the death of Sisi and how her spirit flies out immediately to seek vengeance very vividly when she writes thus: she was not scared of Segun. He was harmless, everyone knew it. So the hammer hitting her skull had come as a shock. She did not even have time to shout. She was not yet dead when he dragged her out on the deserted road leading to the GB and pushed her into the boot of the car, heaping her on top of a purple-and-grey plaid blanket, her ankle-length green dress riding high up her legs to expose her thighs. One of her leaf-green flat heeled slippers fell off and Segun picked it up and threw it nonchalantly into the boot. It landed beside Sisi's head (293). Segun, before now, is shown as brainless, a piece-of-furniture character in the novel whose clear-cut duties are not defined. He occupies a functionless space in the hostel and no one really takes note of him as a serious character. His killing of Sisi, however, reveals his true functions in the set-up. He is set out as a watchman over the girls and is assigned the duty of getting rid of any of the sex slaves who tries to escape into freedom without paying off the investment in her. So, when Segun offers to discuss with Sisi, the innocent girl does not expect any harm from this innocuous character, since, according to her,

"[Segun] is a whimp of a man. This man with only half a brain, whose mouth always hangs open"<sup>293</sup>. She sits in his car and her reward is a gruesome death. Shortly after the blow that knocks her down and out, her soul is liberated from her body and she becomes a living-dead, who by Ejim's position above, is in a state between the living and the ancestors. Her soul is able to hover around her loved and hated ones, making contacts with the living. In the process, she taps her mother's hand, causing the water to spill and the glass to shatter. She does not harm her parents, but proceeds to the house of the man who treats her as mere merchandise. Her soul flies to Dele's home in quest of vengeance. Unigwe writes further that,

In the instant between almost dying and stone-cold dead, the instant when the soul is still able to fly, Sisi's escaped her body and flew to Lagos... Her soul zoomed around the bar, flew beyond it, went through a door and found itself in a stairway. It went up the stairs and through the second door on the right of a wide corridor. In a room, there was a bunk bed. On the beds, two little girls lay asleep in pink cotton nightgowns, their braided hair at either side of them like miniature angel wings. They were chubby, the way angels were drawn in children's Bibles and Sisi almost felt sorry for them. But then she saw the likeness of Dele in them, remembered whose daughters they were and she went to them. First to the girl in the upper bunk, and whispered something in her ear. Then she went to the lower bunk, lifted the hair to get to the ear and whispered the same in her ear. Anyone who knew Sisi well might say that she cursed them. "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." For Sisi was not the sort to forgive. Not even in death. Sisi's soul flew down the stairs and began its journey to another world". (296)

Sisi's avenging soul is projected like a guided missile. It blasts off in Antwerp for its targets in Lagos. Upon entry into Lagos, it is digitally guided through streets, into houses, hall ways and bedrooms in search of its victims for vengeance. In Dele's house, the soul of Sisi places some hideous curses on the children of the man who is responsible for her travails. She thus avenges her death by condemning the futures of Dele's children to irreparable ruins.

As for Dele, the originator of her travails, she decrees for him a future of long suffering, loss and pain as her father's whose life is worth naught without her. With this technique, Unigwe attempts to assuage the thirst for justice in the reader who feels broken at the unwarranted and gruesome death of Sisi. She gives some form of compensation to Sisi through her dispensation of justice as a poetic legislator. Hence, poetic justice in the novel *On Black Sisters Street* is an accurate dispensation of justice according to the considered measure of the legislating writer. Dele who earns an ostentatious living by trafficking girls for sex labour and murders them at will is left with a curse that will land him in sorrow ultimately. Alongside this, his heirs, his beautiful daughters' lives that are kept and pampered with the sweat of the laboring and brutalized sex slaves he sends abroad are put under a condemning curse.

As for Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*, Ameze, the trafficked character equally dies in the practice of sex slavery. She however avenges her death by tormenting the people who pushed her into the illegal business leading to the attainment of poetic justice by the legislator/writer. On the death of his daughter, Ameze, Chief Okoro resolves to find the killer of his daughter. He is instructed by a witch doctor to look into the mirror in his room where the slayer of his daughter will appear. He does not suspect that he is the one he seeks. Despite the massive incantations he deploys, no one appears in the mirror apart from his distraught image. Ogoanah narrates Chief Okoro's ordeal thus: behind him, Ameze stood like a rock, immobile. Suddenly, a strange wind upturned everything in the room, including the pictures on the wall, smashing the huge mirror into a thousand pieces... He sat helplessly on the floor, calling for his wife, but his voice was only audible to himself. Maria was oblivious of her husband's struggle in the room. She was on her way downstairs to see her visitors. Midway on the stairway, she collapsed. She had just sighted Ameze walking up the stairs. The visitors ran to her rescue. They took her back to her room. 'Please, don't kill yourself', Lucy said. 'You still have two children and a husband to take care of.' 'You don't know what is happening here, do you?' She exclaimed.' Ameze is right here with us.



She has refused to go.' The guests looked at one another in astonishment. Soon after, they began to leave; one after the other...Chief Okoro and his family sat huddled together in a sofa at a corner of his palatial sitting room. They were afraid to go into the bedrooms, as the doors kept opening and closing at will. The question of who killed Ameze continued to grow bigger and bigger in their minds...Maybe we have to leave here for a while,' Okoro suggested. He pressed a button and soon, Eric was at the door. 'Go and arrange for a lorry for tomorrow morning. Make sure it arrives here before daylight,' he ordered (296). Ameze, through her liberated spirit, torments her parents to the point that they proceed to evacuate the house. This is the only way they feel they can escape from the haunting experiences they encounter in the house. Her avenging spirit assures the reader that she is not without ability to pay her parents back. Her ability to make the house unlivable to her parents, their discomfort and unsettledness constitute the writer's idea of poetic justice in the story.

### **Conclusion**

Both novels are instructive through their moralistic persuasions. One of their successes is the ability to warn of the repercussions of evil. The traffickers get their due in Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*, while Ameze's parents, who heartlessly enabled Ameze's trip to Europe to sell her body by offering sexual pleasures to men are haunted and socially dislocated in Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*. The entire essence is to discourage participation in this obnoxious and inhuman business. As it is the duty of every writer to score good over evil, the writers have contributed to this mandate by legislating against the sex slave business by punishing the guilty. Both Unigwe and Ogoanah have successfully condemned sex trafficking in their renditions through adroit presentations of events in their lurid and vivid descriptions that present colorful images to the reader, thus enhancing believability and effecting the requisite emotional responses as desired by the writers.

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