

## MIGRATION AND FEMALE EXPLOITATION IN TWO SELECT NOVELS BY AFRICAN WOMEN

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### **Abstract**

As debates on feminism, gender consciousness and human rights continually dominate discussions of women writers globally, it is generally upheld by feminists that the political, socio-cultural, economic and religious discrimination that stifles women's growth are as a result of stringent repressive patriarchal structures. As such, the feminist angst is targeted at pulling down chauvinistic walls for the emancipation of the women folk. However, true as this may be, this paper attempts a deconstructive re-reading of Akachi Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* to argue that violence, injustice, slavery and brutality are also being meted out by women against their fellow women. Thus, using the novels as an expose of this contemporary malaise, the paper critically interrogates the violence that surrounds migration and the trafficking of women, particularly, the girl child. This paper is vehemently critical of the actions of their 'madams' who, despite being in positions of privilege and power, are complicit actors in the truncation of the destinies of their fellow women. This paper also analyses the authors' use of language and imagery to explore the issues of migration and exploitation in their respective novels.

**Key word:** Migration, Feminism, Sexual Exploitation, Civic Rights.

### **Introduction**

In postcolonial African states, where citizens are disillusioned by the wanton decrepitude and the failed leadership policies of inept governments, many Africans have opted for exodus from the continent in search of greener pastures in European metropolitan cities, where it is rumoured to be swathed in gold. Sadly, for many of these immigrants, fate has been so cruel. Stripped of their identity and dignity, without legal documentation, they end up either settling for menial jobs or submitting

themselves as sex slaves for the economic benefit of their ‘sponsors’. Thus, disturbed by this trends, Unigwe’s novel presents the harrowing experiences of four young African ladies, Ama Joyce, Efe and Sisi, who have been coerced into a life of prostitution in faraway Brussels, Belgium. Similarly, Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* charts the horrendous experiences of Nneoma, Alice, Fola and Efe as victims of sexploitation in Italy and in the UK.

### Migration

The central axis of Unigwe and Ezeigbo’s novels is the transnational migration of female bodies in the sex industry; obviously for sexploitation. “Human trafficking” as Ezeigbo defines in the novel. *Trafficked*, “is the movement of people from place to place within and across borders and through force, coercion or deception and into situations involving their economic and sexual exploitation” (56). Nonetheless, human trafficking points at the downside of migration which in itself has a myriad of benefits to both individuals and society. Migration, therefore as Maureen Azuike puts it, is “the free and unrestrained movement of people from one place to another” (254). Migration, like prostitution is as old as mankind and associated with a plethora of merits and demerits as well as causes and effects.

Undoubtedly, the major reason people migrate is tied to material wealth. Primarily, humans migrate in search of better job opportunities, which could be from the rural area to the urban or from developing countries to developed countries. Alternatively, the downside of migration is brain drain, exploitative labour, over population, overstretched facilities, alienation and human trafficking. Be that as it may, self-expansion remains the primary objective humans migrate which is not limited to economic growth, educational advancement, health conditions or general well-being. Unanimously then, migration as a human phenomenon is certainly carried out to improve the quality of one’s life.

Thus, faced with bitterness, unemployment and grinding poverty, the girls in Unigwe and Ezeigbo’s novels make their way to Europe in search of better opportunities. Europe becomes a haven from which they can escape unfulfilled dreams, the clutches of hardship and the stifling conditions in their home country, Nigeria. Alas, having embarked on the trip and returned, the ladies in both novels are not any better. For one, their hopes and aspirations are dashed. And Europe becomes a nightmare they never wish to relieve. But what is of utmost importance in their migration is

the psychological progress witnessed in these heroines, as they move from a state of naivety to that of knowledge.

In any case, the economic decay, crime failed policies, poor leadership, underdevelopment, ritualism and tribalism, like most third world nations, has set Nigeria backwards economically, hence making it almost unsustainable for human and material development. Thus, these hapless young Nigerian ladies represent the droves of Nigerian youths who are consequently coerced by all means to search for alternate and better spaces abroad. Ired about the sorry state of the nation, a customer at the phone booth in *Trafficked* riles. “I’m tired of this country: nothing works – constant power cuts; infernal heat; robbery with violence; bribery and corruption; strikes; student unrest, religious riots...” (196-297), undoubtedly, these are factors that reinforce the mass exodus of Nigerians from their country. In *On Black Sisters’ Street* Ed, a young bachelor, just back from London reveals that “the British NHS depends on our fucking nurses” (29). Apparently, this form of migration portends a detrimental effect to the Nigerian economy however, it also poses positive benefits for the individual(s) involved as it promises self-expansion. Conversely, migration unfortunately also serves as the linchpin for human-traffickers in the sex industry which has become a money-spinning business.

Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* opens by reporting the repatriation of fifteen ladies to Nigeria, having spent endless years enriching their pimps and madams. This is a small fraction compared to the huge number of girls trafficked on a daily basis. The Pathfinders Justice Initiative records that “4.8 million victims of sexual exploitation globally are women and girls.” ([www.pathfindersji.org](http://www.pathfindersji.org)). Gory as these statistics are, Ezeigbo and Unigwe uses it as a launchpad for their stories. *Trafficked* is a story that centres on four young Nigerian girls who, barely out of their teens are unwittingly trafficked abroad. Nneoma and Efa are tricked into prostitution having fallen victim of a pseudo advertisement promising juicy teaching careers overseas. Whilst Alice is directly trafficked for prostitution, Fola, is trafficked for domestic labour.

In the minds of these migrant characters, Europe cuts an image of peace, jobs, stability and wealth unlike Nigeria which is taunted in a popular song as Unigwe depicts in her novel, “jaga jaga, everything scatter scatter” (82). Little wonder everyone was moving. Through Efe’s thoughts, we espy Unigwe’s authorial musings: “who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition” (45).

Thus, when Dele brings up the proposition of going abroad to Efe, the excited Efe mutters “If I wan’ go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody de ask pikin if de pikin wan’ sweet?” (81) for Efe, Europe would provide economic empowerment to support her son and immediate family.

Undoubtedly, the pull of Europe’s glamorous cities, the lure of earning big money to support their families, the opportunity to escape the doldrums in their lives, or perhaps, the possibility of even meeting a life partner are usually the main attractions. For Ama, going abroad was her greatest dream. As a little girl, Ama had always wanted to travel abroad at least to escape her step father’s molestation and hypocritical attitude. In the solidarity of her room, she tells the walls that she wants to go to London. She had seen pictures of London bridge on TV. Her other choices were Las Vegas. Or Monaco she heard the names once in a song playing from the music store across the road” (135). This was not only the lure for Ama, she also reveals that the image of wealthy female customers at Mama Eko’s restaurant propelled her to leave in order to fulfil her dreams- “... young women slinging expensive handbags, coming in from the bank on their lunch break. Sometimes they came accompanied by eager young men in suits and ties. But mostly they came alone, bringing into the buka the sweet-smelling fragrance of perfume and freedom. And the elegance of perfectly groomed nails and expensive hair extensions... she saw the life she could live/ she had a right to it as much as the women did, didn’t she?” (160-161). However, a stronger reason which propels Ama to accept Dele’s offer is her lack of self-worth. Grossly abused and eroded of her pride and dignity as a child, brutalized and raped at a tender age by her step father, estranged from her mother and with no future ambition, Ama exudes a rage that veils her low self-esteem, just like Nneoma’s fellow deportees at the rehabilitation centre. Ama hopes that with the money earned from the sex business, she would be “respected and build her business empire” (169). After all, she knew “people who would give their right arms for an opportunity to work abroad” (165). Hence, Ama’s decision to migrate is formed on her myopic outlook towards life and the bitter experiences of the past.

For Chisom aka Sisi, the reasons are quite similar. Sisi is a graduate, well aware of her rights and worth. However, “...Chisom dreamed of leaving Lagos because this place had no future.” (28). Constantly pummeled by malnutrition, cantankerous nagging, unemployment, squalid surroundings, and all the conditions of privation, Chisom laments that “the entire economy was in a mess so that her father had nothing to show for his

many years in the civil service” (82). Like Nneoma and Efe in *Trafficked*, these ladies are well educated but unemployed. Thus, the parlous conditions in which they find themselves prompt them to willingly accept the offer of going abroad to teach. Hear Efe’s lament; it was a struggle to put our meals on the table” (*Trafficked* 98). As such, when Efe and Nneoma stumble upon the advertisement of a teaching job abroad, they thankfully jump at it, hoping to fulfil their dreams of teaching.

Similarly, the same thought runs through Chisom’s mind in *On Black Sisters’ Street* – going to Europe will put an end to the endless application letters she submitted to offices regularly. For her, Europe should be a gateway to hit it big in life – “she would set up a business or two. She could go into the business of importing second-hand luxury cars into Nigeria” (44-45). Ironically, Europe would be a place where dreams are warped also, because in trying to undercut the syndicate she loses her life. Ezeigbo’s Nneoma in *Trafficked* is luckier to have escaped from the syndicate’s hold alive, Like Chisom, most of the young ladies being trafficked are murdered brutally or destroyed with hard drugs if caught at attempting escape. Nonetheless, whilst, the trafficked girls in Ezeigbo’s tale are unaware of their actual mission in the UK the girls in Unigwe’s novel are fully aware of their mission abroad. Hence, Ama, Efe and Sisi voluntarily approach Dele to ferry them to Brussels. Joyce is an exception.

For Joyce, her passive approach can be understood within the context of her age and frail frame of mind - having witnessed first-hand the brutal murder of her parents by the Janjaweed militia, Joyce is psychologically shattered. But more painful is the psychological trauma inflicted whilst her body also is physically battered, violated and dehumanized by the militia who take turns raping her. Still very much a teenager, she is literally sold into slavery by Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier who brings her to Nigeria with the intentions of marriage. Thus, bereft of any strength, Joyce “had no energy left for anger at Polycarp’s betrayal (23). Disempowered financially, practically homeless with no relatives and humiliated emotionally by her suitor, Joyce is left with no choice but to toe the path of a prostitute in Brussels – that is detrimental to her overall wellbeing.

These ladies, as Unigwe depicts literally become cargoes exported by Dele and Sons Ltd. Thus, stripped of their identify, dignity and legal documentation, they become Madam’s property – objects of sexual exploitation and profiteering, mandated to compulsorily payback the sum of thirty thousand euros before they are liberated. Of course, it takes several

years of revulsive sex, regrets and bitterness to gain their freedom. Albeit, not for Sisi who in trying to undercut the syndicate meets her untimely death. For the other ladies, a greater part of their useful years was spent despondently trying to pay off the huge debts they owed their ‘sponsors’ in the sex industry. Overused and damaged, they return home in their old age to make sense of the remainder of their lives. So having witnessed firsthand the dehumanization and exploitation inherent in the sex trade, these ladies ruefully re-chart their life-courses. Thus, in a bid to reclaim their effaced dignity and to earn societal respect, they set up business ventures to empower them financially. Ama sets up a boutique and Joyce sets up a school in honour of Sisi – the brutal memories of their time in Brussels wrapped up in the past as they forge ahead through life. For Nneoma and the other deportees in *Trafficked*, they try to pick up the pieces of their lives in the Oasis Rehabilitation Centre. Nneoma gains admission into the university to study Business Education, while Efe finds a job as a hair dresser.

### **Exploitation**

Unigwe’s novel, no doubt brings to the fore the horrors of modern days slavery finely orchestrated by a well-oiled organization with agents within and outside Nigeria. Operating an intricately woven network, these human traffickers working in collaboration with the police operatives are ruthless and unsparing in their enterprise. Insensitive yet self-assured, Madam in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, has a master’s degree holder in Business Administration, yet, is a ruthless slave driver. Like the slave masters in the long forgotten antebellum plantations of America, she is in possession of the girls. She provides shelter and work apparels for them and also controls their earnings and contacts. Just like Madam Dollar and Madam Gold in *Traficked*, who seize Nneoma and Efe’s passports respectively as soon as they arrive, Madam also seizes the girls’ passports as soon as they arrive Brussels and puts them to work. When she seizes Sisi’s passport, she quips “now you belong to me” (182). Significantly, the act of seizing their passports connotes the cessation of their fundamental human rights, the cessation of their lives and liberties, the erosion of their humanity and the objectification of their lives.

Invariably, it is this absence of identity and self-worth that reduces these girls to slaves, to be moved around like property, sold, controlled, owned and traded for financial returns. Baron, a mulatto pimp claims he bought Nneoma (16) and madam Gold also sells Efe to a pimp in Palermo

as Ezeigbo depicts in *Trafficked*. Automatically, their bodies become sexual objects, to be ravished and abused arbitrarily. Unigwe writes that, they “make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs” (26). They simply become money making machines for their Madams and their cartel. On good days, Unigwe reports that Sisi did an average of fifteen men (260), which was good business for the cartel. However, she is only good business as long as she raises their bank balance. So it is that, Sisi’s death means nothing but plummeting accounts to the cartel, business must go on and a replacement is on the way. Hear Dele: “Na good worker we lose but gals full boku for Lagos. I get three lined up. Latest next week, dem visa go ready” (295). This is a clear demonstration of the elites taking advantage of the plight of the poor. The poor become the mules which enrich the nouveau riche. Nneoma would conclude that “illegal aliens were expendable” (*Trafficked* 4). And so, Ama cries out bitterly against their ill treatment in *On Black Sisters’ Street*: “We’re not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals... Madam has no right to our bodies, and neither does Dele” (289).

Again, exploitation is projected strongly in the terms and conditions that govern their job description. Oaths are sworn with Bibles and before sacred shrines (*Trafficked* 128) to discourage the girls from reneging on their payments. highly strident and laced with threats, Madam enlightens: “Every month we expect five hundred euros from you. That should be easy if you are dedicated. But I understand that sometimes you may not be able to do so, 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...” (183). The threats don’t just end with Madam. Dele also stridently warns the girls: “No try cross me! Nobody de cross Senghor Dele! (42). Even Madam Dollar in *Trafficked* threatens fire and brimstone too: “You must pay me back every kobo I used to buy you” (*Trafficked* 130). Surely, the cartel works closely with the police and the girls understand that reporting Madam is pointless. Ama reveals that Madam has the police in her pocket (290).

On another level, we recognize female oppressing other females in Unigwe’s Efe. Upon gaining emancipation, Efe becomes a Madam, detached, cold and superior, just like her former Madam. She buys girls from the action block to start her own business and she does well in it. One would have thought that having gone through the pains of prostitution, Efe would have been a strong advocate against sex-trafficking. However, Efe

joins forces with the oppressive chauvinistic system in truncating the lives of her fellow women in order to enrich herself. Thus, giving birth to an endless cycle for the oppression and trafficking of young women. It is this oppression of young women by older women that Ezeigbo foregrounds in her novel. Nneoma confesses to the Immigration officers that she “went to Italy with a woman who promised to help me and some other girls to get jobs” (15). She further elaborates on Madam Dollar’s inhumane treatment to her: “she keeps us prisoner in her flat... we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners... as soon as we arrive, she sells my friend” (128-129) evidently, it is this auctioneering of girls that Efe in *On Black Sisters’ Street* become involved in – selecting humans like objects on a shelf. One would have thought that by their motherhood status, Unigwe’s character, Efe in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Ezeigbo’s Madam Gold in *Trafficked* would have abhorred the act of trafficking young girls.

The general outcry of feminism is the marginalization, subjugation and oppression and the fight for liberation from cultural norms and practices that impeded women’s progress. Grace Okereke sums it thus: “feminism exposes women’s struggle for liberation from male domination and patriarchal oppression in the society” (Abuja Journal 12) 162). But unfortunately, women are said to be their worst enemies (Yakubu 9) as these women form allies with a chauvinistic male society to retard the progress of younger women. Invariably, both authors create Madams, who connive with the men to betray their fellow women. Jayne Owan tellingly reveals that”... saddening as it is, there is a sizeable number of women out of three who enhance gender inequality and oppression of women by aligning with men to work more agony, torment and victimization on their fellow women” (265).

As a matter of fact, the crave for materialism and money can make a woman leech a fellow woman from seeing that her fellow underprivileged woman needs to be protected, loved and kept afloat from sinking. But, instead of lending a much-needed helping hand, the woman exploits the situation and maneuvers it to her advantage, for her economic and material benefits” (271). The insatiable desire to accumulate more money propels Madam Gold to sell Efe. Efe recounts that she “sold me to a pimp – a white man – after four year of slaving for her, I worked for my ‘new owner’ for two years before I escaped” (100).

Yet again, we can point at an instance of women against women in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, we see it when Ama’s mother slaps and cuts Ama short as she tries to narrate her ordeal in the hands of Brother Cyril. Mama

Ama would rather prefer her daughter thrown out than lose her marriage. She would rather protect her husband's image than face up to the truth. So, by rejecting and sending Ama away she unwittingly destroys her daughter's life.

In sum, Unigwe and Ezeigbo's novels both bring to the fore the horrors of modern-day slavery and vehemently warn younger women seeking economic freedom in the West to be wary if so called sponsors or blue collar job offers, for more often than not, they are deadly prostitution traps.

### **Language and Images in the Novels**

In crafting her tale, Unigwe weaves in coinages from a variety of Nigerian languages; predominantly, Igbo and Yoruba such as 'isiakwukwo' (19) in Igbo which stands for brilliance and "umu nuoke bu nkita (135) for men are dogs. In Yoruba language uses words like "oloshi" (43) for a foolish person and "owo" (34) to mean money. She also intersperses her novel with Nigeria proverbs riddles and pidgin which add humour and sarcasm to her work. A few includes "it was like been thrown out of a cage, only to land on a bed of thorns" (149) and "count your teeth with your tongue" (164). Clearly, it depicts the educational level of the characters and the multilingual nature of Nigeria itself.

Her uses of specific images in the novel helps foreground her message. For instance, the crucifix pendant around Ama's neck (7) is ironic. It is a parting gift from Mama Eko to Ama, who like the crucified Jesus is the only person who shows her love. On the flip side, it is a reminder of her past. It constantly foregrounds Brother Cyril's sanctimonious lifestyle which Ama rejects alongside the Christian religion. Another striking image of import is the hammer. At the side of Dele's neck is a small dark drawing of a hammer (32). The hammer which is a tool for destruction depicts death and danger in the tale. Wielded in the hands of Segun, the handy man, the hammer becomes the tool for Sisi's murder.

Akachi Ezeigbo in *Trafficked* use language to describe the horrifying experiences of African young women who are trafficked and exploited in foreign lands. Ezeigbo describes the exploitation of women against women through Nneoma who states that "I went to Italy with a woman who promised to help me and some other girls to get jobs. She said it was easy to get jobs there and that we could migrate to Britain after a while if we wanted" (15). The narrator adds thus "the horrors in Rome, the disorientation and savagery in London flat, the humiliation of arrest and

detention plagued her mind” (14). This shows how African young girls are deceived and humiliated as they migrate in search of greener pastures by fellow women like “Madam Dollar” (15) in collaboration with the men like “Baron” (15). Rather than show sympathy on the deportees, the female immigration officers taunts them “Shame on you...What a disgrace to to country” (17). The author’s deliberate use of dream to frighten Nneoma is the inform the reader of the precarious situation the girls go grow “She was soon embroiled in a nightmare. She wheeled round and saw Baron grinning in that cruel manner that always preceded a beating and a rape” (53). Ezeigbo also used images like oranges, mangoes, bananas and pure water (25) to represent the struggles of average Nigerians on the street to irk a living. Unigwe and Ezeigbo use images and language to present a burning contemporary issue in the society.

### **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that African leaders have continued to share the common wealth of African nations with their cronies as beneficiaries instead of putting in the financial and material resources into meaningful development for the wellbeing all. This ineptitude occasioned by the lack of good education, basic amenities, and jobs for the young school leavers has pushed many to migrate illegally to different Western countries where they are used as sex slaves, menial labourers and drug pushers. So many have either died, escaped or deported. The greed and crave for material wealth is also strong enough to use a woman against her sister or fellow woman. It is pertinent for African / Nigerian leaders to eschew corruption and build a nation where its citizens will work and contribute its to development. Perpetrators should of trafficking and female exploitation should be exposed and punished for this wrong done to women and humanity

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