

**Sexism and the Woman's Culpability in Africa Literature:  
a Reading of Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street**

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**Abstract**

Historically and culturally, women have always been represented as submissive creatures. Majority of African society is built on a gender hierarchy that gives birth to what is known as patriarchy. Feminist writers have over the years, portrayed patriarchy as the major and real source of female exploitation and subjugation and have highlighted the concept in their creative works. The aim of this paper is to describe through narrative and characterization in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* that patriarchy, as generally accepted, is not the sole source of female oppression because women seem to suffer oppression in the hands of fellow women especially in the African cultural milieu. Certain practices in the various cultural milieus, which not only demean women but also debar them from having a say in the daily affairs of the society are also exposed. The researcher interrogated some oppressive forces that marginalize women to determine if the factors are only inter-gender. The paper revealed that truly women are subjected to discrimination, oppression and humiliation all

through their lives and that these are both inter-gender and intra-gender. In other words, the need to highlight these issues is what motivates this study. The study is anchored on the post-colonial perspective making the difference between the conditions of women before and after colonialism. To make adequate judgements, critical opinions of some scholars were reviewed. The study recommends love and empathy amongst women. It concludes that the oppression of women by the male gender will greatly be countered by women's collective activism, which can only be possible when they close ranks and unite.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Culpability, Women, Intra Gender, Narrative

## **Introduction**

Subjects of authority, class, gender, and race in literature are, in most cases, so inextricably intertwined that we need to understand all to understand one, hence the need to think inclusively. Now Sexism may be defined as an ideology based on belief that one sex is superior to another. It is discrimination, prejudice or stereotyping based on gender. Gender is derived from the Latin word *genus*, meaning kind. Most Indo-European Languages, namely German, Russian and Latin, always use three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. This is the reason the Germans, for example, have *der Mann* for the man and *die Frau* for the woman. For the girl (neuter), the Germans say *das Mädchen*. In some other languages, like French, Italian, and Spanish we have only two genders. Even though gender is present in every language, it may not be correct to conclude that it is universal. In literature, as it is in this paper, the concern is with gender roles/ relations, oppressions and equity, when talking about gender. These emphases are laid on the pattern of behaviour and expectation that are considered appropriate or inappropriate in the society,

in terms of discussing either the male or female sex. It is at this point that the subject of gender begins to link up with feminist criticism/study. Simone de Beauvoir, the existentialist philosopher, known primarily for her treatise *Le Deuxième Sexe*, ( *The Second Sex* 1949), asserted in Ian Buchanan that “women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the "immanence" to which they were previously resigned and reaching "transcendence", a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, where one chooses one's freedom”(197). She also states quoted in Buchanan that “gender is an identity one adopts or creates” ( 198). It must be stated here that sex cannot be used interchangeably with gender. For purposes of clarification, sex is biological while gender is ideological. Gender is more about ideas that humans create for themselves. It has become the norm now to divide the history of feminism into three phases namely, First, Second, and Third Wave. In all the phases what usually emerges in the words of Buchanan is “the signalling of a different era in the struggle to attain equality between sexes” (166). Feminist writers have over the years portrayed patriarchy as the major and real source of female exploitation and subjugation and have highlighted the concept in their creative works. Men are portrayed as perpetrators of female-oppression and discrimination in a society which is viewed as male-dominated. According to Ibekwe Chinweizu:

Feminist propaganda has sought to persuade the world that women are powerless in society, and that men are natural oppressors of women. It claims that wives are subordinate to their husbands in the home and that outside the home, men have excluded women from political, economic and cultural power (9).

Inasmuch as this paper discusses some oppressive forces that reduce women to second class status, it argues that

men are not the major source of female exploitation and subjugation. The researcher examines the relationship that exists among the oppressed (women) and highlights particularly how African women dominate, abuse, humiliate and oppress other women in some selected literary texts. It observes that gender warfare on women is as exploitative as male domination.

### ***Scholarship: Female Oppression in Selected Texts***

Although Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Streets* has not received enough critical attention along the line of female on female exploitation one can still make some connections. Feminist novels react to female subjugation and maltreatment in marriage and ultimately project female assertion. And Feminist critics have been in the words of Abrams trying to "reconstitute the manner we read literature so as to do justice to female points of views, interest, worth and value" (95). Literature on violence against women and children suggests according to Watts and Zimmerman that, "it occurs principally because of the subordinated positions of the victims" (1232). Literary critics/theorists trace the origin of feminism to the 16th century, although Josephine Donovan, a feminist theorist, contends according to Chioma Opara that there was an earlier feminist wave in the 15th century (12). Opara also argues that, feminism "sought to resolve issues like rape, sexual harassment and violence against women" (12-13). These are issues that have always been there since the origin of man. The rise of feminist movements/campaigns in Africa can be traced more to protests on issues of violence against women. It is pertinent to note that although the word feminism has its roots in the Latin word *femina* (which means woman), it did not make it to the lexicon of feminist critics and writers until the late 1880s.

The most preferred terms/phrase before the term feminist became popular has been “women’s rights” according to Buchanan (166). Unfortunately the role of African women however seems to reinforce the walls of patriarchy the female writers aim to pull down. The researcher intends to study, the roles and reactions of women, (the oppressed) on their fellow women on issues concerning childlessness, marriage related issues and female circumcision, using some selected African literary texts.

There seems to be a type of solidarity in adversity towards that which causes them so much pain. Taking the issue of childlessness for instance, childless marriage is according to M. A. Anagbogu “a source of grievous disappointment and a major determinant of marital conflict, broken home, divorce and incentive for adding more marriages by the aggrieved husband (7). It is very worrisome that despite people’s exposure to Western civilization and education, attitude towards infertility still remains hostile. Infertility in any African marriage is the woman’s fault and a childless mother is regarded as a failure. Quoting Benjamin Spock “A woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God” (39). Ideally, in a traditional African society, Orabueze has it that a barren woman is:

... expected to marry another wife or wives for her husband. It is preferable that she does that because if she wastes time, two consequences may follow from that. He may either marry another woman with or without her consent or get a concubine who will bear children for him, he has to take one of these measures to restore his ego and prove his manhood. (144)

Apart from this, many unsavoury names like he-woman and witch are attached to a barren woman. Thousands of innocent women are tagged barren in Africa without proof. Efurun

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* confides in Ajanupu without any medical examination, "I want my husband to have children, I am barren" (180). Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Awowa in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Agnes in Nwapa's *This is Lagos and Other Stories*, Ije in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, Nnuego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* among others are victims of that circumstance. African traditional society has in many forms encouraged humiliation of childless mothers, "forcing them to consult various medicine-men", opines Nnolim, "doctors, prophets or leaving their marital homes in frustration" (140). The greatest problem is that the African female writers seem to be silent in the way and manner women maltreat their fellow women over this issue. Women, who ought to understand the condition of their fellow women better, seem to encourage and contribute to the destruction of women. Women seem to be their own enemies. Some are agents of destabilization, violence and humiliation on fellow women. The agony of a barren woman in African society is indescribable. Ernest Emenyonu in his *Tales of our Motherhood* laments:

Speak me to all barren women, she admonished as I strained my ears to hear her faint and dwindling voice. Speak me to all mothers who have only one child in a land and among a people where the value of a woman depends upon her capacity to fill her husband's house with children. Speak me to all who have a daughter as an only child ... speak me to all women who forfeited the love and respect of their husbands because they could not fill the dreams of multiple sons to inherit the men when they have joined the ancestors. (1)

The quotation depicts emphasis on discrimination, gender inequalities, injustice, degradation, humiliation and dehumanization that women experience in an African society. The attitude of mothers-in-law, sisters in-law, girl friends,

concubines remain a source tension and stress and inflict so much pain on barren women. Dozie's mother and Virginia in *Behind the Clouds* are true examples. Dozie's mother's case attracts more concern and worry because Dozie is her only son. Virginia, the loose girl, captivated by Dozie's financial fortunes and prospects, sets a trap for him with her body, with intention of tricking him into a marriage that would guarantee her access to his wealth. After seducing him, she presents herself with a purported pregnancy and accuses him of being responsible. The greedy Virginia aims to displace Ije Appiah from her matrimonial home. This attitude is even more exploitative than male domination. African feminists overlook some of these negative roles played by some women. It is very obvious that women encourage men to humiliate their wives. Omirima in Nwapa's *Efuru* is another backstabbing and evil schemer who destroys other women in the novel. She instigates Gilbert's mother to find another wife for his son, citing Efuru's childlessness as the reason, "He cannot remain childless, and his fathers were not childless. So it is not in the family. Your daughter-in-law is good but childless" (163). Neighbours (including women) could not see any reason why her husband should not marry another woman since according to them two men do not live together. Barrenness is a serious issue in African society and the barren woman expects sympathy not scorn and humiliation. Any woman who despises a barren colleague has in the words of Benjamin Awua "... given a voice to the male's maltreatment of childless woman" (143).

The African woman carries a double yoke: to have plenty of children and to have male children in the majority. The woman also bears the blame of not bearing male children since the African society, despite Western civilization still holds on to a fallacy that has been debunked by science that a woman determines the sex of a baby (Orabueze). M.A.Y Lewu equally highlights that:

due to the preference for boys in most cultures, a woman without a male child is almost regarded as barren. This is borne out of belief in male physical, psychological and social superiority. Only the male child is regarded as capable of perpetrating the lineage, while the female gets married into another family. Consequently, girls are treated as temporary members of their families, sometimes denied equal access to education, feeding and inheritance (564).

The rights of a woman in her husband's home depend on the number of male children she has. Unfortunately, this outright humiliation is also aided by woman. Adaku in Flora Nwapa's *Wives at War and Other Stories* laments:

I have seen girls brought into my home by my mother-in-law for my husband. When I objected, she reminded me that she had four sons, and said that if I did not like what she was doing, I should go back to my parents with my band of girls (45).

According to Nawal El Saadawi in her *Women at Point Zero*, marriage was a system built on the most cruel suffering for women" (87). Wifehood is portrayed as the worst status of a woman. The women are subjected to physical violence and emotional turbulence. Yet a girl's training from the onset is geared towards marriage. Emphasis is laid more on good behaviour, cleanliness, obedience and hard work. Some women humiliate other women more in marriage. Mariama Ba recounts in *So Long a Letter*, with agony that there is nothing as humiliating as when a younger woman displaces an older woman from her matrimonial home. Binetou's mother pressurizes her daughter to destroy the happiness of another woman. She encourages her to marry an already married man because of materialism. The sisters-in-law are not left out. They consider their brother's homes as theirs and the wives of their



brothers as slaves or strangers. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramaloulaye's sisters-in-law leave their marital homes and live in their brother's home.

These women subvert the legitimate roles of the wife and refuse to respect and obey their brother's wife in her own marital home. Modou, in *So Long a Letter* remains faithful to his wife until another woman lures him into another marriage. He then abandons his wife for a younger one. Polygamy would have phased out if women could respect the feeling and integrity of their fellow women and as such refuse to accept any marriage offer from an already married man. Ibiyemi Mojola sums it, "... every woman who gets married to another married man and every woman who accepts the advances of a married man stands condemned as an oppressor of another, a usurper"(133).

Female circumcision is another type of injustice perpetrated on the woman. Nawal El Saadawi records, how Firdaus' thighs were pulled wide apart, and that each of her lower limbs was being held by steel fingers that never relinquished their pressure till a piece of her flesh was cut off from her body. Tradition has made the women to believe that to become a woman, one must accept the knife. Indeed, the clitoris severed from the body is a telling symbol of female status in phallocratic culture. What is the attitude of women, the depressed, oppressed and massacred in these societies? Their attitudes seem to confirm full support and endorsement of the act. The circumcision is performed by women in the presence of other women. According to El Saadawi, "I did not know what they had cut off from my body... I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side" (8).

According to El Saadawi, female circumcision is part of the patriarchal package that involves cutting the sexual organs of female children, especially the clitoris to guarantee their virginity before marriage and their fidelity after marriage. As a medical doctor and a psychiatrist, she emphasizes that female circumcision has nothing to do with the morality of women; it does not make them more monogamous or more faithful to their husbands. On the contrary, cutting the clitoris increases women's sexual desires, for two reasons, because the brain is the main site of sexual desires and because circumcised women have difficulty reaching sexual satisfaction with their husbands, they look for this satisfaction outside marriage (194). Having reviewed a few works on this area of scholarship, it is stating the obvious that none of these eminent critics have subjected Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* to an investigation of the woman's culpability in the oppression, objectification and suppression of the African woman in African literature

### **The Woman: a Factor in the Fate of Women**

On Black Sisters' Street tells a story of four black women (Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce), African prostitutes working in Antwerp, Belgium in order to survive and irk out a living for themselves, and fulfil their wish to satisfy their own aspirations which relates to the expression of their subjectivity. The women in the novel, are brainwashed to believe that there is a better chance of making it as a prostitute abroad, than living in poverty in Nigeria, where they were faced with a high rate of unemployment and hardship, a system of nepotism and godfatherism. Unigwe's works deals with thematic concern similar to other African female writers. Their works are predominantly on women's issues and experiences. Her

characters are also described in stereotypical roles alongside their revolutionary features. She particularly views women in On Black Sisters' Street as the perfect symbol for sexuality. The novel is studied from a post-colonial perspective making the difference between the condition of women before and after colonialism. The post-colonial debate works to decipher cultural ideology still influenced by colonial politics. Although societies modernize and establish independence according to Ashcroft, "post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to ... subtle forms of neo-colonial domination" (1-2).

What characterizes a sexist society is the dominance of its men over its women. It is not surprising to find abundant examples in *On Black Sisters' Streets* of subjugation and even suppression of women in the male dominated Nigerian society. One aspect that indicts the woman that is illustrated in Unigwe's novel is the lack of sisterhood. Women are enemies to each other in a society, where pleasing a man is an obligation to survive peacefully. It is one common reason that we find among the four protagonists of the novel that push them to flee their home country.

The first story to which readers are exposed is Efe's. She is a girl who loves fancy things; however she is poor and needs money, so she becomes a 'sugar baby'. Titus is old enough to be her father, but most importantly, he is rich (49). However, after the man puts his offspring in her, he leaves her; "I'm pregnant Titus' was all it took to get him out of the bed" (59). He is a man with a big reputation. Afraid to be humiliated and misperceived, he chooses to flee the responsibility in a society where men are the leaders leaving Efe feeling like damaged goods (75). So, when she appears to be pregnant, Efe's neighbours (women especially) despise her, "the women especially who pointed at Efe and laughed out loud whenever they passed her" (64). They even forbid their daughters to talk to her. Instead of being there for her and support her since she

has no mother and is young, they marginalize her and ignore her.

In addition to the neighbours, Titus's wife participates in the loss of sisterhood. The way she chases Efe out of her home instead of yelling at her husband shows it all. She treats Efe as "useless girl. *Ashawo*" (70). Eisenstein says that "in a bourgeois class position, family relations are reduced to a mere money relation" (10). This is the case for Titus and his wife. She accepts her husband's infidelity as long as he has enough money to provide her with what she needs. This is according to Zillah Eisenstein a form of oppression, she says: "women's oppression is her exploitation in a class society through bourgeois marriage" (11).

Ama's mother who is a traditional woman enslaved to a traditional world view about religion and marriage betrays her daughter. She trafficks her to her pedophilic husband, and sends her away unceremoniously "... before I am thrown out of my husband's house because of you" (150). The narrator shows that the worst type of sex-slavery is trafficking in very young girls. Hypocritical Brother Cyril who wears white clothes all the time as a symbol of his holiness is a ruthless pedophile, who defiles his step-daughter for three years. It is obvious that he does not have any sexual contact with his wife, but with Ama, whom he rapes from the day she is eight years until she starts seeing her menstruation at eleven years. Ama's mother's silence in her daughter's defilement makes her a conspirator to Brother Cyril's offence, because:

When she got older and wiser, she would think that her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness. Otherwise she would have seen into her heart and asked her, 'Nwa m, my daughter, what is the matter? She wished her mother would ask her, so that she could tell her, but she never did, choosing instead

to complain about Ama's hair being as tough as sisal (133 – 134).

The silence of the women encourages domestic sex-slavery, and they turn around to blame the minors, who are victims. One of Ama's mother's friends tells the others that a housemaid "... seduced and slept with the husband of the woman who had employed her" (125). However, from Ama's experience with the step-father, the minors are like lambs being led to the abattoirs, as seen in:

Over the next days the walls heard how he ignored her when she said that he was hurting her inside. They heard of how she tried to push him away when he lay on top of her, but he was a mountain and she did not have the strength in her to move a mountain (13).

The study believes that sexism is the reason for loss of sisterhood; Martha Gimenez explains that in patriarchal societies, even social groups are themselves divided into classes (27-28). In the narrative, when Ama goes to Mama Eko's, she receives the love and affection she needs because the woman is independent. Contrary to her mother who "walked in a deliberate state of blindness" (133) and is a silent extension to her husband (145) as Ama desperately realizes later.

The story of Ama demonstrates not only the tyranny of her step-father, but also the prevailing sexist ideology in African society, notably with the man in the Eggzecutive bus. Patriarchal/male violence against women and dominance are institutionalized, and this can be seen through power relationships between male and female characters in private as well as public spheres. When Ama is in her way to Mama Eko in Lagos, a woman with a baby in her hands begs for money in the bus station. The conductor cries "ga, go and tell the man that got you pregnant to look after you. Anu ofia. wild animal.

If you spread easily like butter, you get what you deserve” (139).

The man treats the woman as a wild animal, for them, if a woman is not married and has a child, she is an animal. The woman sitting next to Ama makes a feeble attempt to defend her, but the majority of the passengers, women inclusive contradict her saying that it is in man’s nature to desire a woman, and it is up to the woman to control herself (139). By saying this, Unigwe means that in a society where men rule, women are the only victims, and only few know that should the women have the backs of their fellows they will seize to be the dominated gender. Guyatri Spivak says that “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” (82). In the sense that, women’s subordination is an ideology indoctrinated in men and society as a whole. It is a part of their culture. She also adds that in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism, the subaltern (as the proletariat) has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female, for her, is more deeply in shadow (83). This means that if the colonizers have silenced their colonies, the ideology in these colonies have silenced women even more. And this is, in fact, what we see through Unigwe’s novel. What is sad in the story is that many women are unconscious and passive like the woman sitting across the aisle from Ama. She confirms the ideology by telling a story of her neighbor’s daughter who is raped. She says proudly: “why would she not be raped? . . . Dresses that showed her thighs. Blouses that stuck to her” (139).

Instead of being supportive to the girl and blame men who are perverts, the woman puts the blame on the girl who shows some skin. The woman beside Ama simply replies that men are the ones to blame, but the majority is against her. Her reply reproduces misogynist stereotypes. Here, in the talk of the women beside Ama, we feel like it is Unigwe’s voice that defends the dignity of women that is despised for years in a society of men transforming women into silent properties that

take the blame for what irresponsible men do. Everyone is against the woman, just as the majority of writings about women by men who portray them as dolls of the house and sex objects.

There is also the example of the woman who sits next to Ama in the bus on her way to Lagos who thinks that her son should have a boy because “it was his duty to perpetuate the family line, to live up to his name” (142). The importance of boys in the family is crucial because women have no voice, no identity, and no existence in the eyes of their parents and men in general. In fact, they are not praised for their personalities even. Being a good domestic housewife is what imports more than having a personality as Mama Eko tells Ama about her maid: “any girl who cooked the way she did was sure to end up with a good man. That was how the world worked’ ” (159). Women are praised for their domestic chores and skills or in bed for giving boys to their husbands; they are not liked because of their qualities as human beings.

Loss of sisterhood can also be felt through the character of Alek (Joyce) when she arrives at the refugee camp after being savagely gang-raped by soldiers. She tells that a United Nations female worker “did not blink as she listened to [her] story” (194). Alek is also disappointed because she thinks that someone would pity her, but she finds out that in the refugee camp everyone is victim and prisoner of her/his own story. It is not only the UN worker who despises Alek, but also her boyfriend’s mother. Polycarp’s mother represents the traditional woman who strongly believes in social hierarchy and supremacy of one race over another. She does not love Alek because she wants a local wife for her son. The greed in the women fires their imagination to dream of making it in Europe. Sisi rejects Peter’s marriage proposal because she abhors the type of life he lives. As she accepts Dele’s unilateral contract of sex-slavery in Antwerp, on her way to the airport, she crumples Peter’s letter unread, and “...reached behind her

and stuffed it into the wedge between the backrest and the seat” (48) of the taxi. She also dumps the pumpkin her mother insists she carries with her in the huge airport dustbin. In her imagination, “Lagos was a city of death and she was escaping it” (98). She believes sex-slavery abroad is a vista to her dream of opening a boutique, a car export business and internet café in Lagos and wearing gold rings on all her fingers like Madam. Madam who sells the girls to customers at Antwerp has an air of affluence around her. She is described thus, “Her fingers sparkled with the glitter of rings. She even wore a ring on her thumb: a thick coil of metal with a broad tip that rested on her nail” (104). However, the sex-slaves who generate the wealth cannot afford to buy rings as the “gold earrings and necklaces on the Pelikanstraat were still beyond her [Sisi’s] reach, yet she was one of the hardest workers in the industry” (274). The other sex-slaves also have their dreams. Joyce has the dream of opening a boutique or a “huge supermarket in Lagos” (243), and Efe dreams of owning her own sex-slavery cartel.

### **Sex-Trafficking as a Consequence of Sexism in Male Dominated Society**

Mano Avekadavie defines sex trafficking as a business oriented activity that has the intention to “secure maximum monetary rewards through the exploitation of vulnerable people” (40). Many committed Nigerian women of the twenty first century are writing about the conditions of women in Diaspora, especially women who are hoodwinked by traffickers and live the ordeal abroad. This is, in fact, what Chika Unigwe represents in her novel *On Black Sisters’ Street* through the stories of Sisi, Ema, Efe, and Joyce. The narrator says: “Before Efe came to Belgium, she imagined castles and clean streets . . . but now . . . she describes it as a botched dream” (24). Efe knows the nature of her work in Belgium; however, she does not really know what is waiting for her until she arrives there. Sisi too is disappointed when she discovers



how the “ZwarteZusterstraat wore a look of a much maligned childless wife in a polygamous house . . . the house itself was not much to look at either. Truth be told, it was a disappointment” (99). She tells herself that “she had no choice but to leave” (118). Nothing good is left for her to do in her home country. If we take it that the three girls (Sis, Efe and Ama), out of greed and naivety accept to prostitute themselves, the question remains who pimps them: Madam!

On one occasion, she tells Sisi “not nervous are we? You can’t afford to be. Not in our business . . . ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid I am in charge of it” (118-19). We get to know the fate of the four room-mates through Sisi when Madam tells her: “all you need to know is that you’re persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here”. This is what Madam tells Sisi when she comes back from the Ministry of External Affairs where she tells a fake story to an agent about her being in Belgium. Madam continues her insults towards Sisi by looking at her like a commodity, “now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you” (182). By the “you” I think she addresses not only Sisi, but also Efe, Ama, and Joyce. She later adds: “Now, until you have paid up every single kobo’. ‘Every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back” (182-83).

Another important reason that fosters sex trafficking is the greed for money. The four protagonists in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are weak; their liability and excitement for a better life lead them astray. As a consequence of their poverty, lack of alternatives, and values, they are trafficked by Dele to work as forced prostitutes in Belgium for a huge sum of money. Dele tells the four women: “so it go cost you tatyt’ousand euro it go cost you o” (34), and he continues saying that “No when you get there, begin work, you go begin dey pay me. Installment payment we dey call am! Mont by mont’ you go dey pay me” (35). Bishop explains that prostitutes live in fear of their pimps

which helps explain why these girls do not try to escape (128). And this is what we can really find in Unigwe's novel.

When Sisi falls in love with her Belgian boyfriend, Luc, he asks her to quit her job telling her: "we could go tell the police. This man has no right to make you work for him. It is against the law even. He has broken rules. He got you a false passport" (269). However, Sisi is afraid because "she heard Dele's 'no try cross me o. nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!'" (271), so she gives up the idea of denouncing him to the police. She remembers his threat and she is afraid. This situation makes the girls prisoners who can do nothing that can contradict their trafficker's words and will because they are in constant observation as Sisi notices.

Mano further explains the reasons why girls are easy victims for the traffickers; he writes that "poverty, lack of income-earning opportunities, having dependents, being single mothers" (49-50). This is the situation to which Unigwe answers through Sisi's lack of job opportunities, and having her parents depending on her. Efe, too, is a single mother and also having her child and siblings depending on her.

In Nigeria and the Guinea countries, Modupe Adeleye explains that most of the victims of trafficking are attracted by the luxurious image that traffickers draw to them to convince them accept their offer (30) as Dele does with Sisi, Efe, Joyce, and Ama by attracting them just by names of celebrities or European cities. Okolie O. James adds into this, patriarchy, gender inequality, and sexual assault as reasons opening the gates for sex trafficking (102). Devin Brewer in "Globalization and Human Trafficking" suggests that the traffickers build their fortunes over the backs of vulnerable victims. Their bodies are exploited and they are not considered as human beings who have rights. Unigwe gives voice to her protagonists to express this injustice. Ama says "somebody has just died, a human being..."(38).

The narrator writes: "nobody says it but they are all

aware that the fact that Madam is going about her normal business is upsetting them” (39). Unigwe gives voice to Joyce to say: “we’re human beings! Why should we take it? Sisi is dead and all Madam can think of is business. Doesn’t Sisi deserve respect from her?” (283). Then she adds, “Madam has no right to our bodies, and neither does Dele” (290). They state openly that they do not want to do this anymore but they have no other choice but to stay because they know no one will help them. Not only this, but the girls are afraid to even give their opinions to Madam and express themselves.

The narrator writes, “Here, their grief has to be contained within the four walls of their flat. No matter how much it becomes for them they must not let it swell and crack the walls” (95). They do not have any right to speak, even mourn the death of Sisi like the death of Efe’s grandma. Efe decides to have a party for her grandma’s death but Madam is really upset, “Madam’s anger manifested itself in laughter that was dry . . . ‘Ah, so you’ve earned enough money now to waltz into work whenever you want?’ for a week she refused to let Efe use her booth. Instead, Efe had been forced to work in bars” (8). In fact, “Madam is not one to be contradicted” (110). Housemaids are procured by the women as domestic slaves, but their husbands use them as sex-slaves. Both domestic and transnational sex-slaves are regarded as inferior beings by their traffickers. There is no difference between the treatment Madam gives to the trafficked in Antwerp and Ama’s mother’s friend’s treatment of her housemaid. Joyce complains severally that “Madam treats us like animals” (290), just as the woman talks about her ward, “that girl is very foolish. Atulu. She’s a sheep” (124). These domestic slaves are not paid unlike the ones abroad.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates one thing; it is that patriarchy and the attendant women’s inaction are analogous and even entwined. Both degrade and oppress women by reducing them into objects. The researcher, aimed

at demonstrating the various social and economic constraints African women face in their societies especially by fellow women despite the contemporariness of time. Feminists aim at fighting the sexist societies that indulge women in complete ignorance and passivity. Their ultimate end is to achieve equality between the two sexes.

Nevertheless, they ignore other forms of oppression of women that we can find in the On Black Sisters' Street, mainly the economic one. By relying on this genre, we have attempted to prove that Chika Unigwe is an activist with excellence. Even if she did not suggest solutions in her novel, she successfully succeeded in introducing a new theme to the world of literature. Girls are seen as objects for commercial benefit. Indeed, Spivak explains the oppression that women suffer from. She says: "the question of 'woman' seems more problematic in this context [to agree with Unigwe's view], clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways" (90). This is to mean that a woman is not oppressed through her race only, but also through her class. Hence, for Spivak as hard as may a woman try to speak herself in the realm of imperialism or patriarchy, they need more efforts from feminists, thus, "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (90). This is why the author esteems it necessary to eradicate these harmful practices as soon as possible because the creation of prostitution culture is harmful to the health and happiness of girls and young women. Fortunately, as she assumes, "many countries have introduced legislations penalizing male buyers such as Norway, Sweden, South Korea and others" (319).

The present study further proffers that Women should employ their God-given outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviours as well as love for one another and team up to achieve a desired gender justice. Women have the capacity to become architects according to Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh of their own destinies and decide whether to be included or excluded in the scheme of things (150). A woman has all it

takes opines Chinweizu to run her world “by running the man who runs the world for her” (75). Women exercise the most effective sanction against misrule in some African traditional societies. For instance, when a king becomes intolerable to his subjects, a procession of grandmothers will march naked to his palace. The Lagos women’s protest of 1909 was against the introduction of water rate; the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929 was basically a fight against the colonial authority, these women rejected the idea of being counted because they give birth to children. In recent times, there have been other protests like the ones mentioned above. It is only when women stop persecuting one another that they can redress the very many prejudices that have reduced them to second-class status.

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