Chika Unigwe

On Black Sisters' Street

Presented by: Isabella Villanova

Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* may be read as a political exploration of two interconnected themes within contemporary society: the commodification of migrant women through sex trafficking and the entanglement of patriarchy and capitalism in producing gendered and racialised forms of exploitation. The narrative addresses related issues such as migration, racism, the objectification and dehumanisation of women's bodies, and the denial of their fundamental human rights. Gender emerges as a central axis of inequality, shaping women's experiences as both victims and participants within structurally oppressive systems. The novel thus exposes the configurations of power shaping social relations while simultaneously giving voice to women's political and ethical demands for justice and reparation.

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian-Igbo writer born in 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. She was educated in Nigeria (BA in English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1995), Belgium (MA in English, KU Leuven, 1996) and the Netherlands (PhD in Literature, Leiden University, 2004). She lived in Turnhout, in the Flemish region of Belgium, for almost two decades before relocating to Atlanta in the United States, where she currently resides with her family. *On Black Sisters' Street* was first released in Dutch translation as *Fata Morgana* (2007). It was subsequently published in English (2009) and translated into several languages, including Italian (2008), German (2010), Spanish (2014), Polish (2014), and French (2022). The novel was awarded the Nigerian Prize for Literature in 2012, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Africa and widely regarded as one of the most significant on the international literary scene.

On Black Sisters' Street is set in the early 2000s in Antwerp (Belgium), with extended flashbacks to the last two decades of the twentieth century in Enugu and Lagos (Nigeria) and in Daru (Sudan). It centres on four female protagonists—Sisi (born Chisom), Ama, Efe, and Joyce (born Alek)—and focuses on their difficult experiences, their departure from Africa, and their lives as sex workers in Antwerp. The text is narrated in the third person and adopts a multiperspectival approach, granting access to each character's point of view. The present-day storyline in Antwerp functions as a framing device that connects the protagonists' trajectories and foreshadows future developments, while flashbacks operate as embedded narratives reconstructing their individual pasts in their countries of origin. This structure contributes to the novel's political dimension by foregrounding multiple, intersecting female experiences.

The novel may be framed within social realism, with the characters' stories offering insights into everyday reality and addressing issues experienced by women in Africa and beyond. In the book's acknowledgements, Chika Unigwe states that she interviewed anonymous Nigerian sex workers to develop the novel's plot (Unigwe 2010: 297). She also incorporates her own sense of loss and social exclusion as a migrant in a predominantly white Flemish society (Unigwe in Bekers 2015: 32). As Chielozona Eze argues, Unigwe portrays the outright objectification of sex workers, which prompts "a broader thinking about human rights in Africa" (Eze 2016: 145) and enhances "the global understanding of women's rights and dignity" (146). *On Black Sisters' Street*, therefore, offers

reflections on gender and sexuality from a political and sociological perspective, examining women's (in)visibility alongside their agency and subjection.

The four protagonists meet for the first time in their shared flat on Zwartezusterstraat, in Antwerp's red-light district. They had previously encountered Senghor Dele, a Nigerian pimp known for offering women "a passage to Europe" (Unigwe 2010, 247). In Lagos, Dele runs the company "Dele and Sons Ltd: Import–Export Specialists" (78), which appears to help women escape precarious conditions in their home countries and move to Europe. In reality, he charges them a debt of 30,000 euros, which they must repay through sex work. Once in Antwerp, the protagonists' movements are controlled by Madam Kate (Madam), Dele's associate, who confiscates their passports and enforces strict rules. For all four women, gender inequality, poverty, and unemployment emerge as key drivers of migration to Belgium, where they seek to improve their living conditions and support their families in Africa, as exemplified by Sisi and Efe.

Joyce is the only woman deceived into prostitution. After witnessing the massacre of her family and being raped by Janjaweed militia soldiers—who committed widespread atrocities and ethnic cleansing against non-Arab communities in Sudan's Darfur region in the early 2000s—she joins a UN refugee organisation. There, she meets Polycarp, a Nigerian peacekeeper, with whom she falls in love. However, because she does not belong to his Igbo ethnic group, Polycarp, under the influence of his mother, refuses to marry her. Instead, he arranges for her to travel to Belgium under the pretext of working as a nanny for Dele. After being sexually abused by her stepfather, Ama leaves home and works as a waitress in a small restaurant in Lagos. She later moves to Europe, where she becomes a sex worker. Likewise, following her mother's death, Efe enters a relationship with an older married man, Titus, in exchange for financial support. When she becomes pregnant, he abandons her, and she relocates to Antwerp, where she engages in prostitution to provide for her son. Despite holding a university degree, Sisi is unable to secure employment in Lagos and turns to sex work to achieve the social status she has long aspired to.

The novel culminates in Sisi's tragic death. As the most openly defiant character, she rejects sex work and stops complying with Madam and Dele's demands. She is eventually killed by Segun, Dele's subordinate. Her death functions as a unifying element in the novel that brings the protagonists together. Joyce openly denounces the way Dele and Madam treat the women as dehumanised beings. While sharing their past experiences, the female characters develop a sense of mutual empathy and solidarity.

Through her work, Chika Unigwe continues a literary tradition established by earlier generations of Nigerian women writers, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. These authors often engage with themes of sexual exploitation and the objectification and dehumanisation of women, highlighting their persistence in contemporary society. The novel exposes the mechanisms of power embedded in patriarchy and capitalism, as well as the gendered and racial hierarchies that shape relations of sexuality, class, and race. Thus, it shows how, within the context of sex trafficking, women are reduced to disposable commodities, whether through coercion or constrained choice. At the same time, the narrative addresses the conditions under which agency remains possible within intersecting regimes of structural power, foregrounding women as resistant agents capable of challenging restrictive norms and behavioural codes imposed on them.

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