

FEMALE SEX-SLAVERY IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND CHRIS ABANI'S *BECOMING ABIGAIL*

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Abstract

*Migration is a practice that is as old as humankind. One of the foremost reasons that engender it is the search for a better existence than what is obtainable in the migrant's present domain. This paper critically examines Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* to examine female trafficking as a form of forced migration that is neo-slavery in nature. Female trafficking, otherwise called sex slavery, is maintained on a network of power that subjects the victim to gross inhuman treatment and excessive objectification. This paper, therefore, engages the life of the sex-slaves in the selected texts in their disillusionment and helplessness. The paper will further explore the cyclic violence that is inescapable for the victims of sex slavery.*

Keywords: Sex-slavery, female trafficking, migration, erasure, *On Black Sisters' Street*, *Becoming Abigail*

Introduction

The quest for a better life has resulted in the search for greener pastures. This search often culminates in migrating from one job to another or from one country to another all in a bid to achieve economic emancipation. However, this search for emancipation and greener pasture often turns out to be the exact opposite of what is sought after, in that instead of emancipation, the persons engaged in this search find themselves entangled in the chain of systemic and individual slavery. This is evidenced in organizations where employees are treated inhumanely and with the lowest form of regard. On countless occasions, the media is proliferated with news of severe abuse and sometimes, the death of domestic staff in the hands of their employers. Attention has been drawn to the high rate of transportation of women (and children) to the West. In his work *Narrating the (Im)Migrant Experience*, Bernard Oniwe avers that:

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the growth in number of African women transported from African countries of origin to Europe and North America, hastened *inter alia* by the process of globalization, calls for analysis and interrogation of underlying factors that facilitate movement of human labour from the South to the North through the aid of globalization. (22)

The above observation and call for interrogation, with regards to women, are underscored in Cunningham et al assertion that "one can argue that the focus on women and children as victims reflects reality; official figures do indicate that it is women and children that are most often labeled as trafficked, presumably due to the focus on sex trafficking" (qtd in Gregoriou and Ras 7).

Blaming the bulk of sex slavery on society and betrayal, Florence Orabueze in "The Law and Slave Trade: An Evaluation of Sex-Slavery in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" avers that the Twenty-first century Africans are not different from their forebears of centuries ago, who sold their kith and kin to strangers for very cheap and inferior articles of trade. She further states that part of the reason why women resort to sex slavery is because of their deprived environment, hence, the need to break free from the stifling poverty and the negativities that comes with it. This paper contributes to the discourse of African women, migration and neo-slavery from the literary perspective. It focuses on the representation of women who in the course of seeking a better life or as a result of unappealing circumstances migrate to a supposed greener pasture, and ironically find themselves entrapped in modern-day sex slavery.

The Quest for a Better Life

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (OBSS) showcases the fact that the major reason why women resort to sex slavery in Antwerp is the poverty, economic situation and frustrations they have all faced in Nigeria. Tired of dreams that never come true; first, her father's dream of acquiring a property in the high-brow area of Lagos which never materialized, and then, the family's collective dream that Chisom's graduation and subsequent employment will give a lift to the family's condition crashed like a pack of cards when years after graduation, no good job was forthcoming. Rather, what lay ahead was a deeper sinking into the mire of poverty. Even a possible marriage to Peter did not offer Chisom the vision of the life she had always wanted to have, and she believed that if she remains in Nigeria, her life will probably never amount to anything better than what her parents have. Her frustration with the state of things is captured thus:

Chisom dreamed of leaving Lagos. *This place has no future*. She tried to imagine another year in this flat her father rented in Ogba. Walls stained yellow over time – the colour of pap – that she could no longer stand, their yellowness wrapping their hands around her neck, their hold on her life tenacious. She tried not to breathe because doing so will be inhaling the stench of mildewed dreams. (OBSS 22)

The fact that breathing in the house which serves as her permanent residence would kill her reinforced her leaving Lagos in search of her dreams of a better life.

For another major character in the text, Efe, it is the illusion of finding a source of livelihood that would save her from the constant tiredness of working three jobs without much to show for it, and the desire to make life better for her son, Lucky that drive her into sex slavery. Having been a sex object to a businessman called Titus, and having a son from the affair, a son which Titus refuses to acknowledge, as well as not having a responsible adult in her life to submit to, Efe accepts Dele's offer to go to Belgium and do 'sales' even when his lecherous eyes indicated the kind of sales she will be doing. The mere fact that she will be leaving her tiresome schedule to 'go abroad' seemed like paradise to her.

This same motif of finding a better life is evident in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail (BA)*, a novella that portrays the evils of trafficking. The protagonist, Abigail, a teenager battling with the memory of her late mom is offered the opportunity of going to London. In his description of the 'benefactor' named Peter, her father says "He always takes one young relative back to London as well". He further adds, "Imagine how lucky those children are!" (BA 19) He persuades Abigail to accept the offer saying, "Your life will be better... London will give you a higher standard of education and living" (BA 21). Abigail's father thought that London will offer her daughter an opportunity neither he nor his country could give her. He went to the extent of hanging himself before the departure of Abigail, possibly so that she will not have anything to hold her back from embracing the perceived golden opportunity offered by Peter. In giving a background of the society that pushes the females into sex slavery, Oniwe states that "the postcolonial African society Abigail inhabits is a botched one. Her domestic space is limiting and emotionally choking, the larger Nigerian society that frames her quotidian existence is even more hostile" (34). This submission is in tandem with Orabueze's assertion that

the environment of the females contributes immensely to their journey into sex slavery.

The view that poverty is a key factor in migration is enunciated by the former president of the European commission, Jose Manuel Barroso in his statement that "the problem of immigration, the dramatic consequences of which we are witnessing, can only be addressed effectively in the long term through an ambitious and coordinated development corporation to fight the root causes" (*European Commission* 2005). For Barroso and the commission, one of the ways of fighting the root cause is "to focus much more on ...improving the ...socio-economic situation in a low-income and middle-income countries, and in regions characterized by high emigration pressures." (*European Commission* 2008) It is believed that the improvement of lives in places like Sub-Saharan Africa and Third World countries will drastically curb the pressure to migrate to country with seeming better prospects. However, the continuous absence of the desired development and the obvious inactions of the wielders of political power continue to engender pressure which results in emigration.

This pressure to migrate is apparently reflected in the females in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Abani's *Becoming Abigail* who all emerged from a background of poverty, failed dreams and dashed hopes. Their failed past makes them vulnerable, and the intensity at which their dreams fail increases their desire to grasp any possible opportunity to escape their condition. Ernst Ravenstien, a British migration theorist, in his analysis of issues surrounding migration posits that "unfavourable conditions in rural areas or less developed countries 'push' people away from their temporary places to permanent residences". Some of what constitutes unfavourable conditions for him are: high rate of unemployment, high rate of mortality, wars, conflicts, abuses of human right, food insecurity, lack of good education facilities, most of which are reasons for the migration of the female characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Becoming Abigail*. While the unfavourable conditions push the people away from their cities or countries, the 'pull' factors visualized in the countries that seem to have better prospects engender the emigration of these people. Their desperation to migrate makes them fall for anything with the thought that nothing could be worse than their present condition.

In the case of sex slavery, migration, however, is always facilitated by a controlling power existing in a network of persons (male or female) who are the channels and/or the end recipients of the money accruing from sex slavery. These networks live on the labour of the female slaves.

The Slave Masters/Mistresses

Sex traffickers are known for subtle antics. The traffickers entice the gullible ladies with prospects of a better life. They brainwash their victims into believing that their bodies could fetch them more money for a changed lifestyle. Taking Chisom for instance, whose slavery is masterminded by Dele, resisting Dele's promise to get her life back to the track of success was hard. Visibly ruffled by the amount she is required to pay, Dele entices her thus,

I get connections. Dat one no be your worry. As long as you dey ready to work, you go make am. You work hard and five hundred euros every month no go hard you to pay. Every month I send gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid. My gals dey there. Every month, four gals. Sometimes five or more. You be fine gal now. *Abi*, see your backside, *kai!* Who talk say na Jennifer Lopez get the finest *nyash*? Make dem come here, come see your assets! As for those melons you carry for chest, omo, how you no go fin' work? (42-43)

Being aware of the desperation of the girls, luring them into accepting his offer is usually a seamless affair. He always stresses the fact that they are to pay because he does not run a charity home. His well-furnished office and his self-acclaimed title of 'big man' are gotten from milking the girls he trafficked abroad dry. He is careful to drum it into their ears that there would be dire consequences should they try to double-cross him. Dele takes advantage of the girls who become victims of their desperation to flee from a country that had made them vagabonds and holds no social security for them, through any available means.

These trafficked girls are vagabonds based on Zygmunt Bauman's categorization of mankind in his work "Space War". According to Bauman, mankind is categorized into two – the tourist and the vagabond. "The tourists are those who are on the move because they want to be. They are attracted by something, find it irresistible, and move toward it. While vagabonds are those who are on the move because they find their environs unbearable, inhospitable for any number of reasons" (Paul Obi-Ani et al 13). The females in the texts clearly fall within the category of vagabonds which makes them preys for perpetrators like Dele.

In Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, Peter is the slave master. Like Dele, he shows no remorse to the young children he traffics from Nigeria. The fate of the ones he took to London before Abigail and their plight in a large city, without a passport or any means of identification can only be imagined. When asked after

them by Abigail, he dismissively explains that “all the other kids had fallen in with bad crowds and run away” (21). He also sees Abigail as a dog. He tells her, “You want to bite like a dog? I’ll treat you like a dog... That’s my dirty dog ...Dirty dog” (30).

Sex slavery is also replete with slave mistresses. In *On Black Sister’s Street*, Madam is symbolic of slave mistresses who survive at the detriment of their sex victims. They consider the life of their victims not worth jeopardizing their sex trafficking business. So they are willing to trade with their victims. In Madam’s case, the of Sisi, one of the sex girls is nothing to worry about. The other girls – Joyce, Efe and Ama – are dismayed that she could go on to have a hearty breakfast, and equally maintain a calm disposition amid the loss they have experienced. In announcing Sisi’s death to the girls, she passively says, “Another one bites the dust.” (40) Worse still, she says it in a voice that could be used to relate the death of a dog or a cockroach. She carries an air of detachment, coldness and superiority. The interest of the slave mistress is in having a sex worker for money-making business. From envisioning a Europe that will enable her “earn enough to buy her father a car, buy her mother a house in Ikoyi, and buy herself a good man who would father her children and give her parents the grandchildren they had always dreamed of”, Sisi ends up in the most tragic way, dashing her own dreams of attaining financial freedom while puncturing the high expectations of her parents. While the victims experience different shades of abuse and erasure, the traffickers revel in the wealth and luxury they have amassed through the pains of the females and regard them as less than animals.

Objectification and Ghostification (Erasure)

The sense of objectification and erasure is prominent in cases of economic migration. In instances such as migration for sex slavery, the victims are objectified and forced into a compulsory identity erasure. By identity erasure the victims of sex slavery are ghostified. Ghostification could be defined as a condition of existence with false identity. For the ghostified sex slave, a relationship with life is only permitted from another realm; that which is controlled by another. On Sisi’s inability to get asylum from the Antwerp government, Madam collects the document stating her rejection and tells her, “this paper is no concern of yours. All you need to know is that you are a persona non grata in this country. And you do not exist. Not here.” She goes further to say, “Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all these for you” (152). Madam emphatically informs her just like Dele did that

until she pays up every kobo she owes them, she will not get her passport. This arrangement makes Sisi a property of Madam and Dele, and being unwanted and unwelcomed in Antwerp means that Madam can do whatever she wills with her.

Similarly, Abigail in Abani's *Becoming Abigail* has no identity in London. Every search carried out on her turned out that she does not exist: "it was like she didn't exist. And she didn't because Peter had used a fake passport and a forged visa to bring her into the country and she was registered everywhere under that fake name, a name she had forgotten. She was a ghost" (36). By this act of erasure, the traffickers ensure that their victims could have no way of wriggling out of their grasp as tools without dignity meant only for the satisfaction of the lecherousness of some male folk. In the same vein, Peter sees in Abigail, a twelve-year-old girl, an object for his sexual gratification, and also, as someone fitting to satisfy strange men and enable him to retain the façade of a big man in the eyes of his relatives and other people.

The level at which the trafficked girls are objectified is horrifying. Like Peter, Titus, the businessman who got Efe pregnant as a teenager, preys on girls to satisfy his libido. He would, "drag her into the bed ... undress her, and then have her parade around the room naked before jumping on her and dragging her into bed again" (55). When Efe visits his family house with the unwanted baby, she is informed that she is not the only one; there were others like her who Titus used and discarded. For these men, the essence of the females does not lie in their personalities. They do not see them as having any value other than gratifying and financial value. This is why they are cast off once sexual and financial transaction can no longer hold.

It is often assumed that lack of education is one of the basic reasons that make females susceptible to sex trafficking, however, the character of Sisi in *On Black Sisters' Street* proves otherwise. It is rather, a result of economic instability, dissatisfaction with the way things are, and the possibilities of what it could be that beclouds the reasoning of even the educated to take decisions that get them lumped together with the ignorant and illiterate. Furthermore, the inability of graduates to be gainfully employed turns them into vagabonds. It also contradicts the general view that education guarantees emancipation, since the reverse was the case for Sisi who instead of being emancipated becomes laden with frustration. Frustrations ultimately drive these victims into an uncharted territory, and in most cases, they sustain enormous trauma that turns them into perpetrators of violence.

The Cycle of Violence: Victimhood to Perpetrator

Unfortunately, the vicious cycle never ends. The record has it that most sex slaves graduated into becoming slave masters and mistresses themselves. The trafficking system indoctrinates its victims to see the continuation of trafficking as the only alternative for self-emancipation. Efe who is a victim of sex slavery for seven years sees her forthcoming freedom in terms of owning sex workers. She plans on:

acquiring some girls and becoming a madam herself. She would buy girls from Brussels because it was more convenient...she would indeed buy from an auction presided over by a tall, Nigerian man ...the women would be called into the room one at a time for the buyers to see and admire. They would all have numbers, for names were not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce...nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with the odd combination of consonants that make African names difficult for fragile tongues. (229)

Efe plans through the prism of what she knows; erasure, objectification and domination. Thus, for her freedom implies replicating the harm she suffered, becoming a part of the wolves that desecrate and treat females like an object of pleasure. She joins in propagating a cause that stripes females of their identity, 'ghostifies' them and leaves them as nothing but a tag, a tag for identity. Uchenna Uwakwe believes that sometimes moving from victimhood to becoming a perpetrator of similar violence as one is suffering is inevitable. He submits that "while it might be argued that the characters are not left with positive alternatives given their earlier mistakes, they are also seen to succumb wholly to the challenges that confront them afterwards" (403). One may tend to excuse these victim-turn-perpetrators on the basis that staring at a future that holds no promise of brightness and with already desecrated bodies, they seem to have no alternatives better than their present predicament. However, this is not enough basis for continuing the cycle of violence given that most of them return to the trade of sex hawking pushed by greed to amass illegal wealth, while others are enticed by the power one could wield as a slave master/mistress. Looking at these characters – Madam who herself is a retired sex slave, Efe who hatches plans of buying girls from Brussels when she gains her freedom and Abigail, one sees a continuous ploughing back into the system minds who after suffering as trafficked becomes traffickers themselves.

In some other cases, victims of sex slavery met out violence is meted on their actual perpetrators. This happens at the point when the victims snap, having been stretched to the extreme of elasticity. This is evidenced in Abigail. She goes through the lowest form of degradation in the hands of Peter, who not only gives her out as a teen prostitute but handcuffs her to a chain in a dog's house behind the house, not minding the cold and wetness of the ground from dew and frost. Her condition is captured thus:

Filth. Hunger. And drinking from the plate of rancid water. Bent forward like a dog. Arms behind her back kneeling. Into the mud. And the food. Tossed out leftovers. And the cold. And the numbing of limbs that was an even deeper cold. (30)

This dehumanizing condition coupled with Peter's constant sexual molestation brought out the dog she has always been treated as in her. She tore off Peter's penis. Urged on by Mary, she ran out half-naked with the severed organ in her hands. Beyond becoming a perpetrator of violence, tearing off Peter's genital, which is a symbol of patriarchy and power, underscores an upturn of power and an exposition of the need to overcome the evils of patriarchy and capitalism that is the bedrock on which the inhuman act of sex slavery thrives.

Conclusion

From trying to disentangle from poverty and failed dreams, migrants who later fall prey to sex slavery envisage a life of luxury outside the shores of their primary domain. When forced by enticements to migrate to the supposed country of green pastures, they discover that they have been caged in a slavery network that leaves them greatly disillusioned and helpless. Their identities are erased and their bodies defiled to the extent that those who survive are forced to replicate the violence meted on them. By exposing the loss of identity, dehumanization and the transgression of their bodies which is the everyday life of a sex slave, this paper argues that the grass is not always greener on the other side. It further presents the place of fictional narratives in presenting the details of sex slavery and calling for action to end it.

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