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Writing the City Space: Migration, Precariousness and Affilial Relationships

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Abstract

Since independence, Africa as a geo-political space has been experiencing a number of instabilities. One among them is continued civil wars and the accompanied mayhems such as migration, exile, refugeeism and the fragmentation of the institution of the family. Through such underlying forces, the post-colonial subject is subjected to various intersecting dilemmas in terms of socio-cultural identity. Using a post-colonial framework, this paper attempts to explore how literature enters such socio-cultural spaces by interrogating the 'failure' of the post-colonial state. It specifically examines how the selected narrative interrogates rural-urban and diaspora migration in relation to the 'failure' of the post-colonial state, how it represents the precariousness of the city that results in the marginalisation of some social groups such as prostitutes, and it reconfigures the institution of the family by creating an affilial relationship to supress the loss of familial bond. The paper argues that the precariousness of urban spaces provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of marginalised groups and voices from the fringes, and ways in which they negotiate affilial relationships amongst themselves as relegated or displaced characters.

Keywords: *city; precariousness; migration; affilial relationships; migration*.

1. Introduction

Since independence most African countries have been undergoing socio-economic and political instabilities: civil wars, exiles, migrations, refugeeism, etc. Such mayhems can make one question not only the legality of independence, but also the meaning of independence to Africans. It is very unfortunate that even the concept of 'post-independence', which was so popular during the struggle to fight against colonialism, began to disappear in academic cycles immediately after the departure of the colonial masters in Africa, in whichever way—through bloodshed or peaceful negotiation. What came to replace post-independence thereafter was post-colony, which ironically celebrates the master narrative that colonialism is an integral part of the history of Africa. Loomba (2004) precisely qualifies the concept of 'post-colony' over post-independence when she makes a generalisation that the whole world is post-colonial because the subjects of the once colonised states are all over the world. Loomba sees the need for 'situating' the post-colonial notion by accentuating the prefix 'post', which she views in two senses: temporal, i.e., coming after; and ideological as in supplanting. For Loomba the ideological nature manifested in the 'post' notion is contestable and is the one that implies that "… the inequalities of colonial rule have not been erased" (ibid: 1103).

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Along similar lines, Young (2004) ponders as to why most contemporary scholarships in Africa are geared towards interrogating the African post-colonial condition rather than the post-independence counterpart. For Young the post-colonial state is much preferred because of the "… silent incorporation of many defining attributes of the colonial state into its post-independence successor" (ibid: 24). Young's ideas echo the thoughts of Ashcroft et al. (1998), which challenge historians, economists, and political theorists who treat post-colonial states interchangeably with post-independent ones. As they write,

> Independence may come to be seen as superficial […] because the dominance of the idea of the European concept of the nation in the minds of those who led the struggle for independence often meant that the new post-colonial states were closely modelled on that of the former European powers (Ashcroft et al., 1998: 193).

These scholars appear to suggest that the post-colonial label will continue being the defining feature of African states because, in the words of Mbembe (2003: 24), "… the postcolonial regimes have not invented what they know of government from scratch." Thus, the colonial enterprise is seen as responsible in these miseries, whether directly by supporting some groups in war-prone zones, or indirectly through political manoeuvre where African leaders adopted the colonial political system that was, in Fanon's (2008) sense, violent in nature from its imposition to operation in Africa. Related to instability is the mobility of people and their property and its accompanied havocs such as the encounter with precariousness of city space, as well as the (de)fragmentation of the family institution. With this regard, this paper attempts to examine how contemporary African women writers are increasingly assuming the authority to comment on the post-colonial state on matters of national and international politics, as well as addressing cultural contexts and forces of social change. It focuses on the representation of city space because of its pluralistic nature, which can therefore help capture socio-cultural, economic and political dynamics that force characters to negotiate different identities in order to survive in a hostile environment. The paper argues that the precariousness of urban spaces provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of marginalised groups and voices from the fringes, and ways in which they negotiate affilial relationships amongst themselves as relegated or displaced characters.

2. Theoretical Orientation

In theorising family therapy and attachment theory, Hill (2009) offers an insightful description of space that inhabits displaced individuals who are in need of social relatedness to offset family detachment. She points out that "… when children and young children are separated from a nurturing individual with whom an attachment has developed, separation protest occurs in which the child will cry and make attempts to regain the lost relationship" (ibid: 5). In such a context of separation from the biological family, Hill suggests that children develop a "… continuum of attachment styles or patterns identified as affilial relationships" (ibid: 6) to allow them to suppress the feelings of separation from their families. Affilial relationships become a soothing and nurturing space that replaces the biological family bond.

The term 'contemporary' in this paper is used to mean writers whose narratives were published in the twenty-first century. Such writers are variously labelled as third generation writers, or children of the post-colony [*les enfants des postcolonie*] (see, for example, Waberi, 1992; Adesanmi & Dunton, 2005; Bryce, 2008). This paper draws a particular attention to Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). The reason behind the choice of this narrative is because of the feminist perspective she offers in the understanding of migration, as well as her coverage in terms of the mobility of characters. Unigwe's characters move from rural to urban, and then from Nigeria urban to Europe. Thus, her narrative appears to represent characters who are victims of economic and political pressures that force them not only to be migrants but also to negotiate alternatives to survive by forming affilial relationships.

3. Chika Unigwe Writing About the City

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian writer based in Belgium. She was born in 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. Following her marriage to a Belgian husband, she lived in Turnhourt, Belgium; and in 2013 migrated to the United States. Unigwe has authored fictional works such as *The Phoenix* (2007), *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Night Dancer* (2012) written in English but unusually first published in Dutch translation. This uncommon way of changing the language medium from English to Dutch establishes Unigwe as one of the prominent writers of African descent on the literary scene in Belgium and the Netherlands. In all these writings, Unigwe raises the themes of loneliness, migration, prostitution and gender relations. In her interview with Tunca et al. (2013), Unigwe admits that her writings result from her experiences in Belgium, particularly the migration and loneliness she personally faced and the experiences of Nigerian women working as prostitutes in Antwerp's red-light district, Belgium.

On Black Sisters' Street is a story about prostitution. It is told through four black African women: Sisi/Chisomi, Ama, Efe and Joyce/Alek who are forced by circumstances to be prostitutes in Belgium. The narrative underscores the patriarchal hegemony of the character Brother Cyril, the step-father of Ama, and hardships in Nigeria brought about by 'irresponsible' leaders as the cause of massive unemployment and sexual abuse. Sisi, Ama and Efe—who are Nigerians by origin—and Joyce—a Sudanese victim of civil war that claimed the lives of her family members and who is brought to Lagos, Nigeria, by a peacekeeping soldier who meets her in a refugee camp in Sudan—are the characters who carry the central theme of marginalisation and victimisation. These four women find themselves unemployed in Lagos and struggle to find ways of surviving in this city. In their search for employment, these characters—at different times—fall into the hands of Dele, a human-trafficking dealer, who assures them of getting employment in Belgium. Unigwe captures the theme of unemployment effectively by using characters that vocalise what she really experienced in her research on Nigerian prostitutes in Antwerp, Belgium.

Unigwe centres her narrative on Lagos (an African city) and Antwerp (European city in Belgium) to interrogate the precariousness of these cities and the danger associated with inhabiting those spaces. This paper demonstrates how these female characters are marginalised in their familial homes and Lagos, as well as how Antwerp becomes an 'alternative' space to accommodate them and negotiate their family relationships.

In her narrative, Unigwe maps out how the post-colonial state of Nigeria begins to lose track in fulfilling its ambitions. She depicts the history of Nigeria to track how and when things start 'falling apart', and its impact on the institution of the family. She represents Brother Cyril's house in a compelling way to show time, the 'failure' of the post-colony and its accompanying consequences. In this context, the concepts of 'home' and 'house' are used interchangeably to mean a place that is supposed to provide accommodation and security. Here, one is confronted by questions such as: What is a house in a post-colonial context? How is the house linked to the post-colonial state? To answer these questions, one can begin with Unigwe's description of Brother Cyril's house:

> *[t]he music of the world was to be kept in the world, away from the confines of the house. As were alcoholic drinks. And cigarettes. And magazines with lewd pictures. And bad language. Their house was a house of holiness. And if Brother Cyril had his way he would have had the entire house painted white for its sanctity. But the harmattan wind that graced Enugu from November to around August made such an undertaking impossible. Not only did it carry debris from one part of the town to the other, it turned grass to rust and sprayed dust over houses, so a white house was out of the question.* (p. 129)

Moudouna (2013: 21) considers the meaning of a 'house' as "… difficult to pinpoint but can be contextualised." Appiah (1992) offers an insightful meaning of a 'house' based on the moral disposition and teachings one gets from parents. Using the example of his relationship with his father, Appiah says, "… in my father's house… 'there are many mansions', *and* the biblical understanding that, when Christ utters those words at the Last Supper, he means that there is room enough for all in heaven" (ibid: x). Therefore, it is in his father's house where he learnt to be a Pan-Africanist "… without racism, both in Africa and in its diaspora" (ibid: xi); and to have multiple attachments to his identities: "… as an Asante, as a Ghanaian, as an African, and as a Christian and a Methodist" (ibid: xi). Such multifaceted legacies make Appiah a 'complete' being who is "morally, aesthetically, politically, and religiously" upright (ibid: xi). For Appiah, a house entails parental care. Bhabha (1992) goes further by defining the concept of a 'house' in a post-colonial context and showing how it is depicted in narratives. For him, a house is an image that "… has always been used to talk about the expansive, mimetic nature of the novel" (ibid: 142) that represents the reality about a particular society.

According to Bailey (1990), a house is a "… building which serves as the ordinary dwelling place"[1] whose signification conflates with home, place of birth, a place where one lives, the environment or habitat of a person or animal, a person's country or city. Whereas Appiah underscores the moral composure manifested in the house, Bhabha invites us to read the physical building and its significations. For Bhabha, a house is a "… social space in the organisation and reorganisation" (Rodriguez, 1994:19)[2] of identities. Thus, a house as a socio-political and spiritual space can be conflated with a home to "… reflect forms of sociality associated with and/or peculiar to any given cultural and historical context" (Mallett, 2004: 66) that identifies a particular group of people in a certain geopolitical space or an imagined community.

[1]Bailey is problematising the concept of 'house' and shows how it signifies continuity in the social life of a human being.

[2]Rodriguez speaks about how the majority of women writers deploy the image of houses, gardens and nation to signal on-going struggle and the territorial administration of the globe.

Drawing from these scholars' perspectives on the concept of *house*, it can be suggested that Unigwe represents a house as a contested space with multiple significations. To justify this claim, this paper discusses a house as depicted in *On Black Sisters' Street* in terms of its accommodability, specifically the physical building and parental care; and a house as an image that signifies the expansive and mimetic nature of the novel. Since the focus of this paper is on the 'failure' of the post-colonial states in Africa, it also considers a house as a metaphor for a nation; and centres the discussion on Sisi's, Ama's, Efe's and Joyce's houses in Nigeria and Sudan. Whereas Sisi's house signifies a social space for moral and intellectual development, those of Efe, Ama and Joyce represent a hostile space that exacerbates women's and children's subjectivities. Sisi, Efe and Ama share the same geopolitical space, Nigeria; but Joyce has a different national identity—Sudanese. Their diversity in terms of different qualities of houses within the same geographical space (Africa) is captured by the narrator as the failure to have "… the entire house painted white for sanctity" (Unigwe, 2009: 129). Such differences also communicate the heterogeneous nature of Africa.

Through the house of Brother Cyril, an assistant pastor at the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahwe, Unigwe's novel draws attention to the history of the post-colonial state in Africa, and how it began falling apart. The narrative romanticises and sentimentalises pre-colonial Africa with a 'holy' gaze. The novel seems to suggest that pre-colonial Africa was morally and spiritually a stable space on its own; and if it continued in that way "God would never destroy the earth" (ibid: 131). By so doing Unigwe's novel appears to agree with the historian Walter Rodney who, in his seminal book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Rodney, 1992), considers Africa and Europe to have been at the same level of development up to the 15th century. For Rodney, the incidences of mercantilism in the 16th century, the slave trade, and eventually the colonisation of Africa were the sources of Africans' underdevelopment and instability. Unigwe's novel nuances this historical event—which is also widely explored in earlier narratives by Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ—in a nostalgic gaze. However, by situating her narrative in the post-colonial context, we read Brother Cyril and his wife in relation to Ama as post-colonial bodies representing the second and third generations in the genealogy of a literary family. Therefore, the 'holy' state of Africa has its origins in political independence.

What Unigwe presents as the "harmattan winds that grace Enugu from November" denotes time: the end of the 1970s when African nation-states begin facing a setback in different development sectors. As Young (2004: 37) puts it, "… the post-colonial state was not only falling short of its ambitious designs, but facing a systematic crisis." By the 1980s, most African countries "… were facing negative trends in many primary commodity markets, shunned by much of international capital [and] … had little option but to accept, at least formally, the structural adjustment programme" (ibid: 38). One of the notable causes of the crisis in post-colonial Africa, Young observes, is corruption among African leaders who came to power immediately after independence. They came with a nationalistic spirit to restore the 'holiness' of the African state but ended up being corrupt and selfish, thus failing to allow people enjoy the fruits of independence. They ended up replacing independence euphoria and exuberance with disillusionment.

Governmental dysfunction in *On Black Sisters' Street* is fictionalised through the depiction of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Recounting the story of Ama's failure to enrol at a university, the narrator says,

> *If she'd had the money to pay someone to take the examination for her she would have. […] She knew people less deserving of a place at the university than her who had either bought examination papers from corrupt JAMB officials and practised at home, or who had paid others to sit the examination for them"* (p. 146).

Here, the inadequacy of the post-colonial state to combat corruption is laid bare by fictionalising the corrupt JAMB officials to represent the inefficiency of government officials. This matriculation board is depicted as a centre where the dreams of the upcoming youngsters are being shut down. In this context, one is persuaded to agree that the 'debris' and 'dust' that came with the 'harmattan wind' communicated corruption and other forms of mayhem that make Africa, through its governments, a hostile space for its people. Besides, it is through the depiction of corruption that readers get what Bhabha calls the 'mimetic nature' of the house in a post-colonial context in relation to the 'reality' about bribery in Africa. This reality about corruption in African governments has become a serious agenda in fiction because it widens the gap between people in the same geopolitical space, and women are victimised more than men.

In a similar vein, the story of Sisi, whose parents' given name is Chisomi, tells how the post-colonial state shatters the dreams of women by making them "… agents of insurrection and change operating within an oppressive situation" (Nnaemeka, 1997: 4). Sisi has a Bachelor's degree in Finance and Business, Administration and expects to get:

> *… a job with a bank, one of those new banks dotting Lagos like a colony of palm trees. She might even be given a company car with a company driver […] expected also to have a house with room enough for her parents […] a large coloured TV […] A garden with flowers and food. (pp. 20-21) 'I don't want to become like my mother.* (p. 28)

Here, the counter-narrative becomes the dominant discourse to the older generation's narratives that emphasises formal education for boys, leaving girls with childcare and house chore activities. But, as Mbembe (2001: 78) argues, "… the state as a productive structure has failed in Africa" to create a good environment for women to explore their potentialities and, consequently, they are pushed into another form of gender oppression, mostly being unemployed and ending up being prostitutes. Despite a number of application letters for jobs, "… no envelopes came addressed to her […] [but] less intelligent classmates with better *connections* worked" (Unigwe, 2009: 22). When her ambitions fail, she begins to dream of leaving Lagos: *"This place has no future*" (ibid: 18). In this context, *On Black Sisters' Street* interrogates the subsequent patriarchal control that affects contemporary African women who have battled to get educated. It suggests that the failure of the post-colonial state to combat corruption has concretised the patriarchal system. As such, the narrative seems to agree with Boehmer (2005: 22) who argues that "… the new postcolonial nation is historically a male constructed space" that operates in favour of patriarchy. Thus Sisi's departure for Belgium does not only communicate the failure of Nigeria as a post-colonial state in offering a better environment for women to exercise their rights equally with men, but also a continued struggle against all forms of female subjectivity.

In Efe, we see female subjectivity from her childhood. Following the death of her mother, she has to live with her irresponsible father who spends much of his time drinking, and does not care about his family. Efe has to drop out of school and concentrate on taking care of her siblings Rita, Faith and Nicholas. As Eze (2014) tells us, Efe "… began trading her body for cash with Titus, a forty-five year-old man" (Unigwe, 2009: 98) as a way to get money for herself and her younger brother and sisters. She becomes a sexual object to sustain the well-being of the family. When she is pregnant, Titus rejects her and she has to do menial work that enables her to support her siblings and her baby. A meeting with a human trafficker, Dele, and his promises of a 'better' life abroad make Efe think of nothing else apart from terminating her menial work to go abroad where she ironically becomes a prostitute. The narrative makes readers sympathetic towards Efe by making them understand the circumstances that force her to become a sex worker. It underscores the tyranny of patriarchy in her father, Titus, and the post-colonial state for failing to create a better environment for women to exercise their rights, such as the right to education, in the same way as their male counterparts.

Joyce, whose other name is Alek, gives another dimension on how the house in the post-colonial context is imagined. Her migration from Sudan to Belgium via Lagos does not only communicate the mimetic and expansive nature of the novel in a Bhabhalian sense, but also the instability of the post-colonial state in Africa. Unigwe takes us to Darfur in Sudan to show how the disintegration of the institution of the family can come in different guises. The novel alludes to military coups and civil wars that happened between the 1980s and the 1990s in Darfur. Although political instability in Sudan pre-dates that of President Omar al Bashir, Flint (2009) says the notable war was that of 1989 when the National Islamic Front (NIF) seized power in Darfur, when a number of villages were burned on suspicion of having helped the invaders. Unigwe captures this mayhem by depicting Joyce's family in a plan to leave their village, Daru, for a refugee camp so that "…. they could get resettled somewhere close to Khartoum. And eventually a migration to the United Kingdom or America" (Unigwe, 2009: 187). This suggests the migratory routes that post-colonial subjects are forced to take because of instability in their home countries.

Furthermore, the depiction of the Janjaweed militia and their atrocities—killing villagers, including Joyce's family and raping her—makes the story interrogate political and socio-cultural boundaries. The fighting of the government regime shifts to the family level, and women are more traumatised than men. Joyce experiences the ruthless death of her parents and other villagers, and she is also brutally raped by several soldiers. Like Ama's, Joyce's home is a space where she is raped and where she witnesses the death of her entire family. Joyce goes to a refugee camp where she "… scrubbed the dust off her feet … until it seemed they would bleed" (Unigwe, 2009: 195) to signify the purification and forgetting of the bad memory captured in her thinking that "… sometimes she wished the soldiers had killed her" (ibid: 196). Through the story of Joyce, readers are made to think about the parallels between the post-colonial state and the family. It is through this traumatic war experience and the tearing apart of the family institution that Joyce is forced to marry Polycarp, an African Union peacekeeper who 'sells' her to Dele, before she eventually becomes a prostitute in Belgium. Since Joyce—like Sisi, Ama and Efe—is 'sold' to Dele in Lagos, the novel invites readers to interrogate the dangers associated with

inhabiting this space. It is in this city that women are marginalized and forced to renegotiate alternative identities in Europe for their survival. Thus, Joyce also becomes a subject victimised by the post-colonial state and falls into the hands of a human trafficker, Dele, with the aim of commodifying her body in Belgium.

4. Discussion

In his discussion on Nigerians' involvement in narcotics and human trafficking, Osiki (2010) notices the extent to which the business has taken huge profits from the 1980s where "… major cities in Africa became major supplying, transit and destination points" (Osiki, 2010: 127). Women in Nigeria began actively entering the business in 2008 because "… they were subjected by traffickers to the dual roles of victims of human trafficking and as couriers for the movement of hard drugs across international borders" (ibid: 127). According to Osiki, besides political instability, militarism, civil unrest, internal conflicts and natural diseases, one of the notable reasons behind the escalation of women's role in drugs and human trafficking is:

> … the failure of existing economic, political and social structures to provide equal and just opportunities for women to work [that] has contributed to the feminization of poverty, which in turn has led to the feminization of migration, as women leave their homes in search of viable economic options. (ibid: 128).

Clifford (1997) shares a similar view with Osiki when he asserts that women have their own histories of migration linked with, and distinct from, those of men. Osiki's reasoning supports our argument on the failure of the post-colonial state to create a better environment for women to compete equally with men in the job market. In this sense, *On Black Sisters' Street* portrays women as both victims and agents of drugs and human trafficking.

Tunca (2009) looks at the characters' movement from Nigeria to Belgium in terms of subjection and subjectivity. To illustrate her point, Tunca underscores the pressure from society and the demands of powerful members that accelerate women's subjection. On the other hand, the characters' wish to exert agency to satisfy their own aspirations relates to the expression of subjectivity (n.p). Arguing about the change of names (from Alek to Joyce, and from Chisomi to Sisi; as well as the selling and parading of girls in Belgium), Tunca considers the novel to be invoking the slave trade markets of the past. Tunca's argument resonates with Hooks' (1981) idea on the loss of identity among Africans victimised by slave trade. In theorising the slave trade in Africa, Hooks elucidates the traumatic experience and subjectivity women faced. To signify 'dismemberment', she observes,

> … in the preparation of African people for the slave market [there was] the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement of groups so that there would exist no common […] sign of an African heritage (Hooks, 1981: 19).

However, the co-operation between Dele and the character Madam in transporting girls to Belgium to work as prostitutes under the guise of economic struggle shifts our attention from a slave market narrative to human trafficking. As Osiki observes in a different

context, it is a new trend of earning money that involves deception, illegality and controlling women's "… lives through coercion, abuse or physical violence, debt bondage or threats to reveal their illegal/illicit status and activities to the local authorities or their families back home" (Osiki, 2010: 128). The narrative's use of Dele and Madam as key human traffickers reminds us of the institutionalisation of the illegal business, and the intersection between patriarchal and matriarchal control over women's bodies. In fact, "… Madam has the police in her pocket" (ibid: 290), and she organises with Dele to hire the police who kill Sisi in her attempt to escape from her brothel. Such a well-plotted incident echoes Osiki's assertion that some government ministers in Nigeria were alleged to be involved in the human trafficking business. Therefore, apart from accusing the government system of failing its people, the narrative also seems to suggest that solving the human trafficking problem is not isolated from the other problems facing Nigeria. The novel appears to concur with Rotimi (1998), who maintains that Nigeria should not be treating the symptoms of human trafficking by punishing the dealers; rather it should go deeper into the root causes such as unemployment, the lack of political stability, executive lawlessness, a seriously depressed economy, corruption and the weak value of the Nigerian currency (Rotimi 1998: 325).

Through Dele and Madam one reads how prostitution is used as a weapon of power to suppress women who are desperately looking for jobs, and who are victims of economic pressure. Prostitution, from the vantage point of Dele and Madam, is a manifestation of subjectivity and oppression of the female body; but also on the part of the 'prostitutes'—Ama, Efe and Alek—prostitution communicates professionalism and subversion against the older generation represented by the prostitutes' parents. Such twofold and contrasting approaches to prostitution challenge the facts raised in scholarly debates on prostitution and prostitutes. Tamale (2009) maintains that scholars such as Rubin (1975), Dworkin (1981, 1993), and MacKinnon (1987, 1993) view prostitution as gender-based violence; and sex workers are vulnerable victims of systematic patriarchal exploitation. On the other hand, Bell (1994), Law (2000) and Kotiswaran (2001) view prostitution as a legitimate labour that needs to be recognised. For example, Sisi, Ama, and Efe are forced to send Dele "a minimum of hundred [euros every month] without fail" (Unigwe, 2009: 42). Alek is exempted because her former boyfriend, Polycarp, will pay for her. Unlike her fellow prostitutes, Sisi is a character who unmasks the subjectivity of prostitution through her interaction with Dele and Madam; the rest are forced by circumstances and they accept prostitution as a profession, and as a way to solve financial problems (Tunca et al., 2013).

Sisi's rejection of her body when she discovers that she is subjected to prostitution in Antwerp suggests the subjectivity of the female body. She cries in her first encounter with a man who "… inaugurates [her] into […] new profession" (Unigwe, 2009: 213): *"This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in another body. Not mine. This is not me. This is somebody else* (ibid: 212). This mood continues surfacing throughout the novel. The narrator says, "… she had never been comfortable in her job" (ibid: 247). According to Tunca, Sisi "… loses all humanity and becomes mere merchandise" (n.p) for consumption: "… she learned to stand in her window and pose in heels that made her two inches taller. She learned to smile, to pout, to think of nothing but the money she would be making"

(Unigwe, 2009: 237). And she has to wear earrings and short skirts, which she "… could never get away with in Lagos" (ibid: 203). Thus, a smile and expensive dresses become Sisi's trademark. In other words, Sisi is "… socially constructed through exotic, sexualized codes of black womanhood" (Mul, 2014: 20) to nourish the sex industry. As a way of re-defining herself, she begins going to the Pentecostal Church for solace and wandering along the Antwerp streets alone. Sisi's creation of her own space independent of her fellow prostitutes, Madam and her co-worker, Segun, communicates a form of resistance against prostitution and a struggle to repossess her body.

Reading Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce against the backdrop of voluntary and involuntary involvement in prostitution, we find it was only Joyce "… who did not enter prostitution voluntarily" (Tunca, n.p), thus implying that the rest entered the institution of prostitution naively. Whereas Sisi represents women's educated class (she has a Bachelor's degree in Finance and Business Administration), the rest have not gone beyond secondary education for various reasons linked with patriarchal hegemony, family responsibilities at home, and civil war. Against this backdrop, one can perhaps view Sisi's struggle to resist female oppression through prostitution as a manifestation of the value of education in empowering women to have a voice in the public sphere. In contrast, Ama, Efe and Joyce have accepted it because of their obsession with living abroad, and their ambitions to be successful economically in future. For example, Ama is happy about "… being in Europe [and] earning [her] own money" (Unigwe, 2009: 177), and plans to build a mansion for Mama Eko, her aunt and "the only person [she] really miss[es]" (ibid: 177). As the character Joyce says, being in "… Europe and go[ing] back empty-handed" (ibid: 177) seems unthinkable. As a result, she has a plan to open a boutique on Allen Avenue in Lagos (ibid: 235) in memory of Sisi because they once shared this dream before her death. Efe, on her part, looks for money to take care of her child and allow her younger sister, Rita, go back to school. These dynamics communicate some of the circumstances that force someone to be a prostitute. Thus the narrative invites readers to see prostitution from different viewpoints rather than only from the negative side. As exemplified by Ama, Efe and Joyce, prostitution becomes a weapon of solace and power for desperate and victimised women in the post-colonial context.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Lagos city is portrayed as a chaotic space with mixed sadism and beauty, a place with broken infrastructure, a central point in transnational networks in circumstances of failure to achieve the desired socio-economic needs, and a discomforting environment that unsettles those who have already arrived from rural areas (Kurtz, 2000; Kehinde, 2007; Ndi, 2007; Samuelson, 2007; Dunton, 2008; Muchemwa, 2013). This explains why human trafficking and the longing to go abroad under the pretext of seeking a 'better life' has become a recurring motif in this narrative. The narrative takes us from Lagos to the red light district of Antwerp city in Belgium where "… many of the African prostitutes […] were from Nigeria" (Tunca et al., 55) so as to interrogate the roles of the city in a transnational context. The narrative charts the journey of the characters in a celebratory mood because they are leaving the 'city of death' (Unigwe, 2009: 98). For example, Sisi's refusal to take a pumpkin that her mother insists she should carry implies border crossing and cultural negotiation, as well as a temporal disavow of traditions. She likes pumpkins but she is going to a community where people eat bread. As a result, she throws the pumpkin into the dustbin at the airport.

Ironically, the Belgium (Antwerp city) that Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce are yearning for accepts them with antipathy, annoyance and with different forms of subjectivities. In the words of Sarah, they enter "… a social imaginary […] a discursive space where subjects are already imagined, constructed and treated as 'African' by hegemonic discourses" (ibid: 13). In other words, according to Mbembe (2003) these female characters become perfect figures of a shadow subjected to a triple loss of home, loss of rights over their bodies, and loss of political status (ibid: 21). The novel captures precisely this loss of identity through the conversation between Madam and Sisi: "… my dear Sisi, it's not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you're told and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. *You understand*?" (Unigwe, 2009: 120). Thus, they are muted and objectified. They become 'things'; less human and mechanically driven by principles of silence, total obedience, and to be seen but not heard. Therefore, it is right to support Kehinde in the belief that the characters jump "… from the frying-pan of one agony to the fire of another trouble" (ibid: 240); and the Zwartezusterstraat house becomes a centre for the commodification of female bodies.

It is in the Zwartezusterstraat house that the narrative invites us to question the familial relations among the migrant inhabitants. Caged like animals, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce are excommunicated from different social realms. Instead, as objects of production they are "… thrown together by a conspiracy of fate [by] a loud man called Dele" (ibid: 26) and Madam. They have become objects of men's desire by being displayed in "glass windows" (ibid: 178) and sexualised through their dress, for example, by putting on skimpy and short skirts. More importantly, the pornographic pictures that Madam displays on the walls of the Zwartezusterstraat house orient and further expose these women to the sex industry. From a post-modern perspective, these pictures "… reveal a slice of the moral decadence" (Kehinde, 2007: 238) and the manipulation of the social body for sex business. As such, the Zwartezusterstraat house, which metonymically represents the Antwerp city, becomes a social space for moral decadence. Since Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce have different backgrounds in terms of family and migratory routes, the city thus becomes a space for collective identity, and recollection of memories about the past.

Joyce has no family anywhere apart from Sisi, Ama, and Efe, as well as Madam. She feels comfortable being in the Zwartezusterstraat house together with her fellow 'prostitutes' as her family. The novel maps out this idea by introducing communal domestic spaces such as a kitchen and a living room that these women share. It invites us to read these domestic spaces in relation to how they contribute to identity negotiation and re-construction, apart from life-giving interaction. Through these spaces Joyce does not feel like an isolated orphan anymore but a part of a community where she can positively interact with others. Because of the atrocious death of her family members in Darfur, Joyce finds solace and new meaning in these new surroundings, as the narrator explains: "… the women in the house on Zwartezusterstraat were the only family Joyce had" (ibid: 235). In other words, they help her establish a reconstituted family to suppress the loss of her biological one.

The death of Sisi communicates the novel's rejection of prostitution. Based on moral ethics manifested in her parents' subscription to Christianity and their asking for God's blessings for her safe journey, one can be obliged to agree with Kehinde's (2007) reading

of Sisi's death as a curse, and the narrative's refusal to endorse prostitution. The narrator says, "… her mother thanked God in a voice that brought in the neighbours from both sides" (Unigwe, 2009: 45); and Sisi's parents kept on "reminding her to pray" (ibid: 261) while in Belgium in order to continue abiding by Christian moral ethics, which, among others, condemn prostitution. This is why she is unmourned, and the narrative ends without telling us how or where she is buried. Besides this, the narrative depicts Sisi as a crucible figure in the unification and intensification of other 'prostitute' alliances in the Zwartezusterstraat house. Her death galvanises other characters who feel as one solid family. In fact, they go as far as to threaten to overthrow Madam's power, as one of them reacts: "… we're human beings! Why should we take it? […] We fit go to de police" (Unigwe, 2009: 289). It is because of the terror and enmity Madam has imposed on them that their "… different thoughts converge and meet in the present, causing them to share" the grief and feel the sense of familyhood (ibid: 40). As the narrator says, "Sisi's death has re-enforced what she [Joyce] already knew that the women are all that she has. They are all the family that she has in Europe" (ibid: 41).

It is worth noting that even Madam regards them as sisters who constitute one family away from home and, therefore, they have to respect each other. Ironically, these women, stirred by the spirit of Sisi, team up and become a formidable force to fight for the rights of their bodies. In other words, they become a family of revolutionaries that want the two culprits (Madam and Dele) punished but they fail because the duo has their own police. As discussed above, this implies that human trafficking is institutionalised and practised by leaders or those with immense power in the post-colonial states. Thus, this business has become a means of power to control women through the commodification of their bodies.

The fact that Sisi is forced to enter the profession of prostitution out of desperation for employment makes one think of other characters and their acceptance of prostitution because of family dynamics back home. Ama is a victim of rape and patriarchal control by her 'father' Brother Cyril; Efe is jilted by her boyfriend, Titus, who leaves her with a baby to care for; and Joyce is a victim of civil war in Darfur and is also abandoned in a foreign land by her boyfriend, Polycarp. In other words, Ama, Efe and Joyce are traumatised characters and, therefore, the Zwartezusterstraat house acts as a place where they recollect their past memories. However, the narrative becomes complicated when—at the end—we see Efe dreaming of "… becoming a madam herself" (ibid: 278), by buying girls and using them as prostitutes in brothels; Joyce plans to "… set up a school in Yaba […] [and] call it Sisi's International Primary and Secondary School" (ibid: 279) to commemorate Sisi; and Ama plans to "… open a boutique" (ibid: 279). Apart from Efe, the other two 'prostitutes' think of positive outcomes from these traumatising experiences. Efe, on the other hand, appears to be trapped in this kind of life and will perpetuate it by luring more victims into it. In other words, the outcome of traumatising experiences is not uniform.

As a matter of fact, one can misread the narrative as if it is celebrating human trafficking and prostitution, but in actuality it does not. The novel, apart from problematizing prostitution, wants us to pay attention to the circumstances that force these characters to enter this misery, but not how they assert themselves to hope and dream once they

are in it. Being victims of multifaceted and overlapping forces, these women cannot get access to education, and if they do—as is the case of Sisi—they are denied an opportunity to thrive as professionals. In contrast, Madam has a Master's degree in Business Administration, a higher qualification than Sisi's Bachelor's degree in Finance and Business Administration, whose involvement and ulterior motives in this nefarious trade have to be explained differently. Thus, the decision of these women (Ama, Efe and Joyce) to get involved in prostitution simply implies a counterbalance to offset their loss of education or job opportunities. For example, Efe plans to send her young sister, Rita, to school using the money she generates through prostitution. Therefore, the narrative invites us to consider the circumstances that force people to take decisions that are not necessarily ethical in a particular society. The business of human trafficking and prostitution is used by the characters as a weapon of struggle and familial maintenance, and as a weapon that non-educated women use to offset the loss of education. Thus, in this sense, Ama, Efe and Joyce can be labelled as a family of victimised characters who are forced by circumstances to seek revolution through prostitution. And the novel appears to condemn the circumstances that necessitate prostitution, rather than the individuals concerned.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, *On Black Sisters' Street* represents how the 'failure' of the post-colonial state in Africa has resulted in the creation of marginalised groups of drug traffickers and prostitutes. Focusing on the institution of family, the novel images how post-coloniality and patriarchal hegemony intersect, not only in marginalising women, but also in disintegrating the institution of the family. Related to the disintegration of the family is what Kehinde calls the 'antithetical to love' nature of urban centres to which the victims of family instability migrate and their encounters. The narrative appears to suggest re-constructing the post-colonial state by prioritising employment regardless of sex and gender, combating corruption and other misdeeds that are likely to cause instabilities. By so doing, problems of migration, prostitution, and human trafficking will automatically stop.

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