

**SURVIVAL, MIGRATION, AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE DIASPORA: A STUDY OF CHIKA  
UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET***

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**Abstract**

Migration has become a common reality in many African societies, as increasing numbers of people move across borders in search of better economic and social conditions. Although migration can offer new opportunities, it also exposes migrants to serious socio-economic difficulties. Focusing on transnationalism theory, this study examines how African migrants sustain social, economic, and cultural ties across national boundaries through practices such as remittances, cultural expression, and political participation. Using Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* as a case study, the paper highlights the lived realities of African migrants in the diaspora, including discrimination, employment and housing difficulties, financial hardship, and language barriers. The study further identifies poverty, political instability, and economic decline as key drivers of migration, noting the disillusionment many migrants experience when expectations of a better life confront harsh realities. The paper concludes by calling on African states to address the structural challenges that fuel migration driven by frustration.

**Keyword:** Migration, African diaspora, Transnationalism, Socio-economic challenge, Disillusionment

**Introduction**

African migration literature identifies works of different geographic origins, as they can be defined by their contents, regardless of where they are written. This genre of literature encompasses concepts of dislocation of an individual or even a community within a geographical location to another. It also includes the idea of a homeland, a resident, regions from where the dislocation occurred, as well as the narratives of unpleasant journeys embarked due to socio-economic compulsion. Migration literature therefore implies that the thematic structures or subject matter will broadly center on: migration, displacement, survival, quest for a belonging, exploitation, racism, cultural identity and most importantly their socio-economic challenges in the host community or nation. However, the point is that in spite of the narrations of the migrant issues and the challenges of adapting, plays a crucial role in the comprehension of this kind of literature; although, migrant or diasporic literature can be distinct thematically or even structurally as the case may be. Katie Petersen affirms that:

migrants (diasporic) literature often focuses on the social context in the migrants' country of origin which prompt them to leave on the experiences of migration itself, on the mixed reception which they may receive in the country of arrival, on experiences of racism and hostility, and on the sense of rootlessness and the search for identity which can result from displacement, disillusionment and cultural diversity (Katie Petersen, quoted in Sandra Egbunike, 1).

Migrant literature could also be explained using several key features: it is based on the image of a residence, it provides descriptions of the harsh journeys embarked for diverse reasons and lastly, foresee valuation of another "sense of place" away from homeland. Therefore, when reading migrant (diasporic) literature, we are able to picture from a different lens the motivating factors behind migration of people to another geographic region either voluntarily or due to other reasons, and how they get used to the living conditions in their new "sense of place".

Migration of Africans to other geographical region (country) is as old as man; over the years, Africa has been viewed as a continent with high migration and dislocation resulting from economic meltdown, environmental degradation, political instability, cultural conflicts and others. According to an article by an unknown author in researchgate, an online site:

Migration of Africans has been on a fixed upward trajectory over the last two decades. Based on statistics, approximately over 40 million migrants from African region represents a 30% increment as of 2010. With uprising strong push factors, this trend is most likely to go on in 2023 if migration rate is not checked (web).

Naturally, events do not occur without causes; therefore, African migration is largely driven by factors such as poverty (in search of greener pastures), career advancement, overpopulation, political crises, the pursuit of better healthcare services, education, and social or religious reasons. The economic devastation and failed political systems of many African countries have, over the years, become primary factors causing people to lose hope in their home countries and view migration as an escape from the poor living conditions imposed by ineffective governance. In such situations, people—men and women, boys and girls, young and old—find it extremely difficult to survive within predominantly capitalistic African economies. Consequently, they are forced to abandon their dreams, hopes, and aspirations for a better life in their countries of origin due to harsh realities and limited opportunities that characterize their daily existence. As a result, migration becomes an alternative means of breaking free from a complex web of frustration, unemployment, persistent poverty, agricultural reforms with devastating consequences for rural communities, election-related violence, drug trafficking, extremism, among other challenges.

Moreover, migration plays a significant role in relation to fundamental social structures such as geography and culture, economics, and politics. Consequently, human movement and restlessness have had a profound impact on literature as a form of cultural production. The emergence of this distinctive mode of writing, known as *migration literature* or *diaspora literature*, represents a rearticulation of this influence. Additionally, migration may occur under duress, such as the need to flee conflict, persecution, or economic precariousness. Limited opportunities for young people, food insecurity, environmental degradation, and natural disasters further drive African migration to other regions of the world.

Furthermore, several writers of African descent have explored the multifaceted dimensions and consequences of migration in their works. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka engage themes of social injustice, including issues related to migration, both within Africa and beyond its borders. This paper therefore seeks to examine this significant yet often neglected theme and to fill an existing critical gap by shedding light on the experiences of African writers entangled in the migration experience, with particular emphasis on socio-economic issues. Through an analysis of central themes and tropes such as estrangement, disillusionment, and isolation, this study opens new avenues for research and draws scholarly attention to texts that have previously received limited critical engagement. By foregrounding the socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual dynamics associated with migration in Africa and the African diaspora, this paper contributes meaningfully to the broader discourse on African literature and fosters a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complex realities confronting diasporic populations.

The heave in sight of the phenomenon of migration has played a pivotal role in the subject of discussion within African literature, capturing the attention of scholars and literary writers from diverse regions of the continent. These individuals have thoroughly explored the diverse aspects of migration, its nature and its profound impact on both the migrants themselves and the communities they settle in. Africa, in particular, boasts of a long-standing tradition of population movement aimed at restoring ecological equilibrium and, more significantly, meeting the basic needs of its inhabitants: sustenance, shelter, and safety. In the pre-colonial era of Africa, "the type of movement now recognized as international migration spanned a vast geographical expanse, limited solely by instances of conflict" (Aderanti, 97). Subsequently, migration has continued to escalate, primarily directed towards Europe and driven by the pressing issues of poverty, violence, and at times, an overwhelming ambition to transcend limitations. Widespread poverty, famine, warfare, and environmental degradation have unfortunately become synonymous with Africa, thereby propelling migration by any means necessary. The persistent pursuit of reaching Europe through any available avenue is now commonly referred to as irregular migration, posing a significant security concern. A notable illustration of this irregular migration is the route from sub-Saharan Africa through the Maghreb, leading to Europe, which has become entangled with the perils of international crime, trafficking, and terrorism, as identified by Flahaux (21).

In addition, African writers possess a remarkable ability to delve into the depths of their people's lives and experiences, addressing the complexities of everyday existence with the aim of enlightening individuals and transforming societies for the better. Through their literary endeavors, they aspire to inform, inspire, instigate reform, and entertain simultaneously. This paper focuses on migration, a theme that profoundly shapes the lives of countless Africans. It is disheartening that many African writers, rather than engaging with this significant issue, choose to explore other themes, some of which may appear relatively trivial by comparison. Consequently, identifying literary works—particularly within the Nigerian context—that critically engage with migration remains a challenging task for scholars. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this does not suggest a complete absence of literary works that, in one form or another, address the subject of migration.

Anthony Ebebe and Augustine Edung, in their article on *Journal of Contemporary Research*, reviewed Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, from the point of "Dynamism of Economism and Human Trafficking"

According to Abou-Bakar Mamah, in his article "Transnational Sex Trade: Prostitution, Identity Crisis and Memories in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" addressed the issue of prostitution as a regular work within the iambic of diasporic communities. In his opinion, "prostitution as a plague in the context of migration, comes in different shapes. There might not even be the need for a mysterious pimp, or it may not be an intimate job, only a temporary practice to survive transit to one's final destination" (Abou-Bakar, 30).

According to Ogbazi and Awaraka, "prostitution occurs in a variety of forms and its legality varies from country to country, thus reflecting different opinions on exploitation, gender, roles, freedom of choice, social norms, ethics and morality" (117). According to Nwahunanya, some countries "see prostitution as a source of income to government coffers, since a number of tourists may find the availability of youthful prostitutes a good reason to travel to those countries where prostitutes operate without legal restrictions" (349). Such country is Italy. With *On Black Sisters' Street*, Chika Unigwe joins a host of African writers in the explication of the theme of prostitution as her chief character (Sisi) is prostituted and sexually abused to the point of death.

### **Transnationalism Theory**

Transnationalism as a concept in migrant discourse that usually describes a social process, whereby migrants operate in social fields that cut across geographic, political and cultural borders. The theory underscores the direct linkages across international boundaries, in which at most one actor is non-state. Example, a non-governmental organization or transnational corporation. The theory of transnationalism theorizes the idea that migrants maintain multiple social, economic and cultural connections across national borders. African migrants in diaspora often engage in transnational practices such as maintaining ties with their home country through remittances, cultural expressions and political involvement. This theory recognizes that migrants' experiences are shaped by their connections to both their home country and their host society. Transnationalism theory highlights the transnational identities, practices and networks that emerge as a result of migration.

Richard Huff (89) sees it as "a field of study, that focuses on cross-boundary political space, arguing that states are not the only significant actors. It describes activities that cross state boundaries, such as the flow of ideas, information, money and credit, and people". According to Oxford University Press: Overview on transnational theory, Radcliffe, Laurie, and Andolina, argued that "the crossing of scales (body, local, national, regional, international) is constitutive of transnationalism" (web). In other words, transnationalism is as much about discontinuous space as relational space. Foner, posit that "transnationalism did not just appear with recent formulations of late capital or globalization, but rather has existed as a constitutive, dynamic part of migrant experiences" (29).

According to Miriam Tedeschi et al, "in transnationalism, a broad range of economic, sociocultural, and political cross-border activities and practices, and their various combinations, modify people's sense of belonging to places; affect their citizenship and nationality, change their aspirations, imaginations and decisions in everyday life; and influence their identity" (603). "Connectedness across borders, the formality and informality of frequent cross-border activities and practices and the high intensity and degree of cross border exchanges are the main characteristics of a transnationalism "from below", concerning individuals and civil society". (Miriam Tedeschi et al, 604). Going further, they argued that "in the most relevant and recent literature regarding transnationalism, it was understood as being a component of globalization from which it cannot be separated; however, the two terms (trans and national) are not interchangeable" (605). Klingenberg et al, stated that "globalization refers to all activities spanning social, economic

and political fields that cause greater interaction, and interconnectedness between countries and continents" (2). Since transnationalism has to do with individuals and society's movements across borders and how an up-stick in global connectedness affects those movements, hence, from early 21st century, goods, information, services, financial capital and human beings are flowing across national borders at an ever increasing-accelerating rate.

To streamline the phenomenon of transnationalism, Portes, established four major categories of actions to be carried out across national border: "those conducted by national states, those conducted by formal institutions that are based in a single country, those conducted by formal institutions that exist and operate in multiple countries, those conducted by non-institutional actors from civil society" (185). He called the first two types international, the third type, multinational and the fourth type, transnational. "Transnational activities represent goal-oriented initiatives that require coordination across national borders by members of civil society" (Portes,186). Moreover, "migrants need to regularly maintain these transnational relationships and activities, otherwise they can no longer be considered transnational" (Portes,188). In this sense, individuals' integration into host countries is not necessarily antithetical to the normative and political dimension of integration, but rather to the migrant's adaptation process in the host country. Haven understood this theoretical concept, it is therefore suitable for this research as it tries to examines the processes and effects of cross-border movements and connections among individuals, communities, and institutions. It focuses on how people maintain and develop social, economic, and cultural relationships that transcend national boundaries. In African migration literature, transnationalism theory provides valuable insights into the experiences and dynamics of African migrants and their interactions with both origin and destination countries. Transnationalism theory helps to understand these phenomena by highlighting the interconnectedness and fluidity of migrants' lives and identities.

### **African Migrants Socio-Economic Struggles in the Text**

The socio-economic struggle of African migrants in diaspora refers to the challenges and difficulties faced by individuals and communities who have migrated from their home countries to live in a foreign land. These struggles can be multifaceted and are often influenced by a combination of social, economic, and cultural factors. These challenges ranges from: cultural adjustment, discrimination and racism, employment challenges, limited access to quality education, housing issues, financial struggles, healthcare disparities, language barrier, school isolation etc, amongst others.

In the novel, we see lives of some women from Africa who have migrated to Belgium in search of greener pastures but ended up working as prostitutes. Within the story, several socio-economic challenges are depicted, shedding light on the difficult circumstances faced by these women. This is majorly as a result of failed dreams and hopes; either their expectation about the foreign country is not met or probably is not what they had thought. For instance, Sisi in her disillusionment about Europe still dreamed of furnishing a good life for herself and her parents, and it's evident in this excerpt; "she needed lots of customers if she was going to build the house she wanted for her parents. And give her dreams substance. But the customers were not always there" (p.232).

This desperation to survive in diaspora also cuts across to black men who could not afford the full package that comes with sexual excitement due to financial struggles.

...I'm on a budget. So just a blow job, sugar". The money was in delivering all the works: penetration, blow job, no condom. Black men avoided them, and Sisi initially thought that these men were embarrassed for their "sisters" in the flesh trade. But Ama corrected her on that, too. Many black men here are just struggling to survive. They haven't got the money to pay for sex (p.237-238).

Hence, breaking free from the sex trade is incredibly difficult due to the lack of alternative economic opportunities and the long-term psychological trauma they experience and also the urgency to fulfill dreams and make it a reality. These socio-economic challenges can further be discussed as follows:

**Sex Trade:** The most immediate and pressing challenge faced by the protagonists (Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce) in the novel is their involvement in prostitution. They are propelled to take up prostitution on account of poverty, economic desperation and the lack of viable employment opportunities. Sexual exploitation reflects in the characters of Dele in Nigeria, madam and Segun- both in Belgium. They form a criminal network that lures and hoodwinks young girls with any available mechanism. They are ready to make the girls' lives miserable, denying them the right to life and freedom, unless they comply to their greedy demands.

This exploitation takes a toll on their physical and emotional well-being. It was never the wish of the four ladies to engage in prostitution; they all came with dreams of earning plenty of money and return back home to utilize their savings into different business(es). They are willing to make it by all means even through sexual tendencies, as they see sex work as a way out of poverty and powerlessness. They open up their body to complete strangers and newbies but their heart is connected to no one in particular, as each is more concerned on how to earn plenty of money to buy herself freedom, and as well send some home and save up for her own future.

This sexual exploitation stems from the point of disillusionment of all they had dreamed of and soon realizes that their travel abroad in pursuance of a better life has been a serious mistake of their lives.

Do you know I have a university degree? Do you know I am a graduate? She expected that her anger would give her the courage to slap his fat face. She expected to want to smash his mobile phones through his double-glazed windows. She held on for the hurricane of anger that would drive her to start breaking things and shout, "stupid, useless man"...Oloshi! Old man wey no get shame (p.39).

One might even pause to ponder If the ladies did not have a choice between prostitution and making money through morally justified way? The truth is that they had no choice- on getting to Belgium, they are subjected to submit and handover their passport to Madam, which means that they cannot travel anywhere outside Belgium again; thus, they live at the Mercy of their traffickers and yield to the demands of sexual exploitation.

I am your madam, she said as a way of introducing herself, walking down to the window to open up Sisi's blinds... today you start work. We haven't got any time to lose... hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it (p.117-119).

Due to poverty and lack of economic opportunities, these women were sexually exploited to sell their bodies for the profit of another (Dele and Madam). This of course has become the plight of many Africans in diaspora who are deceived with a promise of a job as nannies, cooks and the likes; only to get there and be exploited. And in such situations the victims according to Odinye, "are mandated to sell sex as negotiated by their traffickers without considering their state of mind or choice of men" (47).

**Human Trafficking:** Many of the women in the story are victims of human trafficking. They are lured to Belgium with promises of better job opportunities, only to find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt and exploitation, unable to escape. These trafficking stems from vulnerability of the victims. Dele is so smart that he reads through the minds of the victims to see their depressed and frustrated lives back in Nigeria. It's quite unfortunate that most Africans are the perpetrators of human trafficking of their fellow Africans in diaspora. Within the context of the novel, Dele and Madam are Africans, but making money at the expense of these black women who fell victim of their human trafficking due to frustration and economic meltdown in their home country. They are provided with passports—often fake ones—and their names are changed. They are also required to remit a percentage of their supposed earnings to him; however, in reality, this payment represents his share of the proceeds from their prostitution and is transferred through Western Union by the first Friday of every new month.

The fat man nodded at Alek and said, "the name has to go. Alek sound too much like Alex. Man's name, we no wan men. Oti ooh! That man's name has to go, one time. Give am woman name. Fine name for fine girl like her". He laughed...(p.209).

From the laughter and pickiness about name in the excerpt above, one could smell an atom of deception or even question what job description pays so much emphasis on one's name rather than their qualifications. Even Alek is surprised at the change of name since the supposed job was to babysit children (p.211).

The climax of this is that the victims are usually stripped of their travel documents and other necessary documents that contains their bio-data.

hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it" (p.117-118). "Now you belong to me. It cost us huge sum of money to organize all this for you...until you have cleared up every single penny, kobo, and cent, that belongs to us, your passport and other travel documents will cease to be yours and continue to be in our possession, (p.165).



Upon realization that the supposed work for which they are trafficked was a trick on their intelligence, these victims become disillusioned, which further culminate into their socio-economic struggles to pay off the debt they owe Dele and earn some to send home and for their personal needs. This disillusionment caused Alek to say;

As soon as she stepped into the house in the Zwarte Zusterstraat and saw the long thin mirror, she started to have doubts about the sort of job she had been brought in to do...where are the children I am supposed to be looking after? And madam laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face, then she said, which children? Which yeye children...? (p.180).

By this excerpt, it simply shows the rate at which African migrants are trafficked under the guise of better jobs and comfortable lives in diaspora; and only to discover that the hell (problems) which they were running away from at home is similar with even a pinch of sweetness (opposite meaning).

Sisi is sent to an early death due to trafficking. Her death in turn makes the other girls to realize their own vulnerability; they realize what it actually means to have been trafficked, that it deprives one a fair place and that one's existence has its essence attached only to the money it pours into the purse of the man or woman in charge of their accursed lives. They understand the pains they have to go through on the streets; they understand what it means to lose one's identity and dignity of self. This death, becomes the only thing that binds them.

Sisi's death brings their own mortality close to them. The questions going through their heads was- who will be the next victim? Who will be the next to get rid of like a piece of rag, unnoticed on the floor, unmourned, unloved, unknown. Who will be the next soul madam will eliminate and keep in the dark with the influence of her incense? (p.39).

From this excerpt, it is glaring that these self-indulgent traffickers do not think about the physical, psychological and emotional damage inflicted on their victims.

**Debt Bondage:** The four ladies are indebted to human traffickers like Dele and Madam who have financed their journey to Belgium. Against their wish, they are compelled to work as roadside prostitutes to repay these debts, creating a cycle of bondage that is difficult to break. They are often withdrawn from their loved ones, families and communities by the seizure of their travel documents, making it challenging to seek help or escape their circumstances. This bondage also added to their socio-economic struggle in diaspora.

Dele is a big man back in Lagos whose wealthiness emanated from the African women he sells to western European brothels. He boasts of how he sends girls every month (four girls, sometimes five or even more per month). Dele's bid is extremely upfront and the charge he collects from these girls for trafficking them into Belgium is over thirty thousand euros (30,000), a huge sum that when put together with what they will owe madam as rent, will not only take them several years to pay up but leave them perpetually in debt. Yet, each of these women consents to Dele's excruciating terms and conditions because the alternative options available to them are even worse.

These young women who are putting their lives at risks based on the nature of their jobs do not make enough for themselves because "madam and Dele" are shortchanging them. The people and family they left at home are also choking them with financial pressures which can be mentally and emotionally draining.

When business was good, Sisi did an average of fifteen men. She was diligent about her payment, walking down to central station every Friday (first Friday) of the new month to send a payment via western union to Dele...when she called home, she talked in a monotone, her eyes diverted from the single bed in her room to a cigarette clutched between her finger...I shall send some money home, she would say (p.238).

From the above quote, Sisi had barely any money for herself, not after she pays Dele every month, pays her part of the rent on the Zwarte Zusterstraat. And paying rent on the Vingerlingstraat room she was subleasing from madam...she did not see how she could do this job long enough to save anything (p.231). Ama, conversely has been in Antwerp for nearly six years, while Efe is going to seven. They had repaid quite a huge amount of their debt to Dele. Efe believes that within the next two years she would be free of debt (p.254). This, to a large extent shows how long these women have to labor to offset debt they did not incur. Working and laboring for another to enjoy the dividend of their labor and sweat.

It is maddening to know that many of them spend years repaying a debt that is exorbitant; and when they do, they are either too old to find a better job or they have debilitating health issues- knowing this fact further begs the question of legalizing prostitution so that it becomes a fair trade that requires humane treatment and consideration to those who wishes to engage in it and the likes of madam and Dele will be discouraged from exploiting young women and putting them into excruciating and exorbitant debt bondage.

**Exploitative Employers and Pimps:** The women's employers and pimps take advantage of their vulnerable positions, exploiting them financially and subjecting them to physical and emotional abuse. Their employers, the operators and owners of the brothel exploit their vulnerability and desperation. They are subjected to harsh working conditions while taking a significant portion of their earnings. This exploitative employers and pimps (Dele, madam and Segun) pay no attention to their workers' well-being and overall happiness- all they are concerned about is their own share of the women's earning and bargain. Madam particularly does not even care that Sisi is Dead, all she thinks of is business, and instruct the girls by saying "tomorrow, I want all of you back to work. I have to find a replacement for Sisi...she disappears into her bedroom, saying that she does not want to be disturbed" (p.264).

These pimps seem to hypnotize these women to the point that they are tossed about disrespectfully. Sisi as a worker, ought to be mourned, rather madam (their employer) treats them any way she wants and they are left with no other option but to accept whatever is thrown out to them like dogs. The exploitative employers and pimps put these women in a state of unhappiness and trauma and force them to work hard to make somebody else rich, and in-turn, they are treated like animals; "We are not happy here. None of us is..." (p.264).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Chika Unigwe presents the root causes of migration among African migrants and the diverse socio-economic experiences they encounter in the diaspora through the characters of Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce. Although these women face different challenges that necessitate or motivate their migration, they experience socio-economic struggles in distinct ways and respond differently to them. The text also serves as an urgent call to action for African states to confront the reality that much remains to be done within their home countries to curb migration driven by frustration, economic failure, political crises, insecurity, and other structural factors that propel Africans toward other regions of the world.

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