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Migration and Identities in Chika Unigwe's Novels

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Abstract

Monumental dispersals caused by the phenomenon of migration greatly affect the identities of people. Much like the process of globalization, migration is highly sexualized and gendered. To this extent, it is necessary to centralize women and their peculiar experiences in migration discourses and theories. Beyond the usual focus on the economics, politics and sociology of migration, which at any rate do not often adequately address gender-specific migratory experiences; this study takes a literary route that considers the fictional representations of migrant women in two of the novels of Chika Unigwe: *The Phoenix* (2005) and *On Black Sisters' Street* (2008). The focus here is to underscore the validity and significance of gender as an imperative analytical premise in contemporary literary debates particularly by African migrants. In demonstrating how the inflections of gender portend different outcomes for men and women, the study significantly uncovers how the woman's body is simultaneously the site of physical and symbolic migration. The essay traces the movement in transition and the impact of these and new environment on the bodies of female migrants and how the embodied motifs of migration ultimately alter the identities and realities of migrant African women in particular. In all, the essay hopes to expand some of the current theorizations on the new directions in the development of the fictional representations of Nigerian women as well as to contextualize the role of the émigré author in these developments.

Key words: Women; Migration; Globalization; Female-writers; Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Look at the children of the land leaving in droves, leaving their own land with bleeding wounds on their bodies and shock on their faces and blood in their hearts and hunger in their stomachs and grief in their footsteps. Leaving their mothers and fathers and children behind, leaving their umbilical cords underneath the soil, leaving the bones of their ancestors in the soil, leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same.

(NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, pp.145-146)

Within the context of globalization, migration and the movement of people across borders is a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of several academics across and within the disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, social sciences, economic and cultural history, international law and even the visual and literary arts. Multi-layered, socio-political and economic causative factors often necessitate migrations. Indeed, the historical antecedents of African migrations predate the present time. The continent has particularly experienced several distinctive and definitive historical waves of complex migrations dating from the period of slave exploitation to colonialism. In addition, from the period of pro-nationalist calls for independence and the end of apartheid, the subsequent self-rule and the disillusionment following that, Africans have participated in mass movements beyond the continent for diverse reasons; including brain drain, and the search for and pursuit of greener pastures. These have been further

intensified by the current spate of globalization resulting in mass migrations to Europe, America and even Asia.

With the free flow of people, goods and services around the world, several divergent factors complexly define and intensify various patterns of migratory movements. While observing that migrations occur in different patterns including forced and voluntary paradigms, Falola et al. (2008) further note that there are cultural and spiritual dynamics of migration in Africa and the African diaspora (p.xi). Traditionally, however, migration on the continent has often been considered in masculine terms (Nedson, 2014). This is essentially because of the stereotypical roles, positions and functions assigned to men and women in many African societies. In more profound ways, however, it becomes clear that the formation of identities may no longer be conceptualized in rigidly fixed terms. In other words, as migrants in new locations/spaces, identities may have to undergo new processes of transmutations as people may have to individually or collectively negotiate social, economic and psychological transformations.

In recent times however, the demographics of migration are fast changing; age, gender, religion and race are altering traditional perspectives on migration and the indices of gender are beginning to intensify theories of international migration. One of such paradigmatic shifts is in the increasing scale of international sex trafficking and trade which complicates migratory experiences of women. Women are also seeking more financial and economic independence, including independence from their husbands. Thus, more and more women are showing up as migrants in host countries; changing traditional configurations of migration in such spaces, it is therefore useful to begin to re-imagine a feminization of migratory realities especially because women's experience as migrants greatly differ from those of men.

African writers have themselves for long been caught in the flux and flows of migration. Particularly in the period of the ferment of patriotic and nationalist calls for self-rule and independence, many writers had to seek safe havens in neighbouring countries or in distant lands in Britain, Europe and America. Thus, from about the late fifties a tradition of exilic writers began to emerge. Writing from the diaspora, such writers were Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Doris Lessing, Alex La Guma, and Dennis Brutus among several others. Characterizing their literary productions were motifs and tropes of alienation, isolation and aloneness. This alienation has recently resurrected in NoViolet Bulawayo's agony as she watches in pain and anguish Africa's "children leave in droves" and which we find as a poignant epigraph to this essay.

Within the present context of the globalized world, the Nigerian experience of migration and the subsequent emergence of émigré writers may very well be a recent development in the very young literary devolution of

the country. In a recent study, André Kaboré (2016) offers a critical and stylistic analysis of Adichie's works to demonstrate how the writer deals with the theme of migration. Without a comprehensive insight of other female Nigerian writers on the subject, Kaboré states in error that "at the opposite of her contemporaries, she is interested in women migrants" (p.1). In order to avoid such slips it may perhaps be too early to attempt any significant definition of Nigerian migratory literature. Still, migratory fluxes and experiences have been portrayed in Nigeria's developing literature in many interesting and divergent ways and this essay may be read as a preliminary adventure in that direction. Since the turn of the millennium, many contemporary young Nigerian writers are practicing their trade in many locations outside the country in several locations in Europe, Britain and America. Such writers include Chris Ubani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and Chika Unigwe who have joined other mature voices such as that of Niyi Osundare and Buchi Emecheta in speaking to the world from the diaspora.

The very act of migration is itself often complexly defined by profound political, social and economic currents implicating the individuality of the writer and, as a matter of course, the materiality of his/her art. Further complicating the demographics of their art are such issues as marginality, liminality, hybridity, identity, inter/cross-cultures, home/motherland and the intersections of these as they resonate in various degrees in the art of these writers. In this regard for instance, Sudarkasa (1997) notes in that early study, that migration in Africa in general, and in West Africa in particular, has mostly been seen from an overwhelmingly male perspective, especially because of the male predominance in this process.

Christopher Ian Foster (2015) also sees the negotiation and navigation of African women in the process of migrating as an important dimension. How do they attain these? Through their bodies and through their relationships. As Sassen suggests in her book, *Guests and Aliens*,

Migrations does not simply happen. They are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combinations of countries. They are patterned... Although it may seem that migrations are ever present, there are actually distinct phases and patterns over the last two centuries. (p.155)

1. MIGRATORY JOURNEYS

Chika Unigwe is an important and emerging female Nigerian novelist of the 21st century writing in the diaspora. And just like her precursors and her contemporaries on the African literary scene, she has used her novels not merely for the purpose of entertainment; but through them, she engages constructively with the social conditions of women of her race in the diaspora. Unigwe is also interested in the conditions occasioned

by physical, social and psychological relocation from the continent of Africa to other spaces. She is like Adichie, a member of the class of female African writers who crisscross the continent and other diasporic locations as they write and publish in the west thereby reaching a wider and global audience.

Ojaide (2008) also an émigré writer, makes the crucial point that:

African writers have become part of the worldwide phenomena of migration and globalization with the attendant physical, sociocultural, psychic, and other forms of dislocation, which permeate their individual writings. Migration, globalization and the related phenomena of exile, transnationality, and multilocality have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of the literary production of Africans abroad. (p.43)

But writing and publishing in the west have not precluded Africans and women from being the subject and focus of fiction by female diasporic writers of African descent Chika Unigwe inclusive. As a Nigerian-Belgian writer, Unigwe has found herself writing about the varying gender-specific migration experiences of female African migrants in Belgium, a country she herself relocated to upon her marriage to a Belgian. In an early 2008 interview with Azuah published in the important *Research In African Literatures* journal, Unigwe says to the interviewer “it is important to me that I write here and now. And it is important to me that I tell our story.” (p.110). This assertion is further reinforced by the striking similarities between the protagonist of her debut novel, Oge in *The Phoenix* (2005) and Unigwe herself. The protagonists of the two novels in focus here *The Phoenix* and *On Black Sisters' Street* (2008) are women who have emigrated to the “West” for different reasons. As revealed in these novels, the conditions necessitating the need to migrate are not particularly homogenous.

In a recent study, Adeyanju and Oriola (2011), list some of the reasons for the desperation of Africans to emigrate to the west in contemporary times as: The grinding poverty and social disorganization that have befallen many African societies; fewer economic opportunities in the continent and a huge disparity between the West and Africa in terms of development (p.944). But beyond the economic substructure of many societies in Africa that motivates Africans desperation for emigration to the West, Adeyanju and Oriola also state some extra economic factors like the presentation of lives overseas by African migrants as alluring and fascinating and the tendency to portray themselves as sophisticated, upwardly mobile and people exposed to savoir faire of modern life (p.945). Unfortunately, the ugly aspects of immigrants' lives such as unemployment, racism, loneliness and other unsavory issues are often concealed by those who have emigrated.

In her two novels studied in this essay, Unigwe is determined to present with clarity a picture of the realities

of female migrants' lives and expose the harrowing difficulties experienced by black migrants in the West. The writer in very riveting strokes, illustrates how the identities of migrants become easily altered in their new environments thus corroborating Ladele's (2010) position that: If, previously, questions of identities were more clearly understood and easily defined, every indication in the current global re-territorializations suggests deeply rooted contradictions, tensions, pluralisms and paradoxes in any attempt at defining personal, group, ethnic or national identities (p.460). Thus, as shall be demonstrated in this essay, identities are subject to transformations in the new spaces in which migrants find themselves.

Unigwe's debut novel, *The Phoenix* is one that chronicles the experience of the protagonist-narrator, Oge, who struggles not just with the reality of the tragic loss of her five year old son in a school accident but subsequently has to contend with a devastating cancer diagnosis. It is thus, a novel of grief, pains, loss, and of loneliness of a black woman married to a Belgian, living in far- away Belgium. In contrasting the reality of her existence in Belgium, Oge, the protagonist often juxtaposes her new life in Belgium with life in the old homestead of Enugu in Nigeria the familiar place of her birth. As Akani (2007) surmises, the main issue in this debut work by Unigwe is the portrayal of “the hostile condition that some Nigerians live in foreign countries” (p.299). His essay includes the realities of the host/home nations as important indices in the study of gender roles in the era of globalization. In all, there seems to be some instances of self-inscription by the novelist in this text as many personal experiences of the author have been woven into that of the protagonist of the novel.

On Black Sisters' Street is also a novel about the emigration of four young ladies to Belgium in search of the proverbial “greener pasture” addressing as it does the consanguineous issues of globalization, prostitution, slavery, alienation, racism, human trafficking and transnationalism among others. This fictional work is borne out of the author's daring research of Belgium's red light district. It is the sordid story of trafficked women namely: Sisi, Joyce, Ama and Efe to Belgium where they find themselves as co-tenants in the same apartment on Zwarte Zusterstraat. These four young Nigerian women have all been assisted to Europe by a Lagos-based pimp, Senghor Dele, to whom they must all pay huge debts of several thousands of Euros.

Taking the form of faction, the novel dramatizes the traumas of the three surviving prostitutes following the gruesome murder of one of them, Sisi. Almost in a surreal blend of fact and fiction, the novelist captures the sweat and blood that pulsate through Antwerp's red light district, and as observed by Kolawole in her inaugural lecture of 2005, the genre categorized as “faction”, is not only becoming popular among many African writers, she

asserts that in such works “the veil of fiction is becoming thin” (p.20)

2. ALTERED IDENTITIES, ALTERED DESTINIES

Oge, in *The Phoenix*, is a lady of privileged background in Nigeria. Daughter of a psychiatrist father and a nurse mother, Oge, is plunged into a mixed-marriage and subsequently relocates to Belgium, her husband’s home country. Armed with a university degree, it is assumed that a slew of opportunities are opened to Oge in Nigeria and that she is likely to have been an object of envy of many ladies not only for her education, but for getting hooked to a white man. On getting to Belgium, the reality of her “otherness” immediately dawns on her and she expresses this in the opening pages of the novel:

Everything here is different. I had expected it but the magnitude of the difference still unsettles me. And now my life is changed. Completely, I feel like I am invisible. An unseen vapour floating odourlessly by. It is as if I do not exist. The feeling is so strong that I pinch my nose; I want to know if I still possess the sense of touch. (p.12)

The protagonist’s identity could not have been more skewed realizing that her university education could only attract the job of a cleaner in Belgium because she is not only an immigrant; she is black and female. She finds herself lamenting to Gunter, her husband, about her inability to secure an office job. She says of the employment agency:

Once, as soon as you entered and said you were looking to register with them, the woman behind the desk gave you a smile that spread as wide as Julia Robert’s and said that there was a vacancy and you could start that very day if you had a bike and could find your way to Vosselar. A villa there needed a cleaner and it was not far. You told her you had a degree in Banking and Finance and that your degree did not clean villas (p.163)

If Oge, ever thinks that her experience of “otherness” in Belgium is an isolated one, she soon discovers it is the reality of all migrants. She observes that fellow blacks always ignore her when she tries to fraternize with them and concludes that Europe has probably changed them. She only realizes the truth from a fellow Nigerian female migrant while out shopping that many black migrants may appear hostile as “many of us are here under false identities” (p.108). A certain migrant that goes by the name Charles confirms to Oge that his real name is Anthony which has been concealed as an asylum seeker and he affirms that some black migrants work in consonance with the Belgian Police hence the need to be careful who they make friends with. The communality of the African society is thus completely eroded by the realities of migratory life in the West. The impact of the new environment is so catastrophic that the female migrant’s “alterity” not only becomes glaring but sticks

on even after the naturalization of Oge. Migrant alienation is also captured in an instance when Lisa, Oge’s white Belgian friend condescendingly tells her: “You are a good one, Oge. You are the sort of foreigner we want in our country” (p.180). This statement is coming three years after Oge becomes a citizen, a moment celebrated and in which she is welcomed as a citizen. The protagonist herself confesses that even with the naturalization, she is not sure if she really feels Belgian.

Identity alterations also occur in the four female protagonists of Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. This occurs at very profound, visceral levels in a harsh and hostile environment. Sisi, whose story turns tragic as she gets murdered for trying to escape slavery and the grip of her pimp, is born in Chisom, but she is made to change her name. On landing in Belgium, Sisi is shocked when her supposed guardian and chaperone tells her “Ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid I am in charge of it” (p.119). She is first made to assume the identity of a Liberian fleeing the civil war in her home country and with this contrived story she files for asylum in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the words of Madam, her chaperone: “White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking each other’s heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts” (p.121). This begins the process of psychological alienation in Chisom as she transforms to become an anonymous “Sisi” in a foreign land. Sisi realizes too late that “Not only would she be Liberian, in the next months she would be other things. Other people” (p.120). To show their powerlessness and their new fringe’ existence in Belgium, Madam instructs the four ladies that until their debts to Dele is liquidated, they remain his property. She demands for their ‘silence and total obedience’ and this innocuous oath to secrecy redefines each one of the ladies.

The assumption of false identity ensures the strong grip of their pimp; they not only become anonymous, they are rendered faceless and devoid of any legal rights. Eventually, Sisi murdered and this goes uninvestigated because of her illegal status and she is thereby denied justice. Joyce, who is not Nigerian, is used by the author to reinforce the global dimensions of sex trafficking. Joyce is born Alek has been a victim of civil war and rape in her native Sudan. Alek’s name is changed to Joyce at the whim of Senghor Dele before she is sent to Belgium, a name he considers more fanciful than the latter.

The protagonists of *On Black Sisters’ Street* are all strong characters with tragic backstories in Africa which have forced them into accepting Dele’s offer of trading in their bodies. Their identities become so altered that they become reduced to commodities and are displayed behind windows in the red light district for the delight and preying eyes of men-their clients. Sisi gives a description of one:

Huge windows like showcases, the edges of the windows lined with blue and red neon lights, and behind the windows, young

women in various poses. Mostly poses that involved their chests being pushed out, eyelids fluttering, a finger beckoning. Pretty girls all in a row. Bodies clad in leather or half dressed in frilly lingerie. Boots way up to the thighs. (p.203)

Their full objectification does not end with their display at the windows; they are always subjected to close scrutiny of their chaperone, Madam, who ensures they dress and look attractive as if they were wares; she inspects "their underwear, as if they were schoolgirls in boarding school, checking for signs of dirt or wear..." (p.272). She tells Sisi rather crudely "Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you" (p.182). Daily on their job posts, they have to haggle constantly for fees to be paid by their prospective clients. The situation is so exasperating, it is a frustrated Sisi who laments that at times she does an average of fifteen men a day. For the four protagonists in this novel, the Belgian environment has rendered them without a genuine identity, they have become faceless, voiceless and as mere commodities to be traded in. While Sisi rejects this stifling and demeaning existence she has been reduced to in and ultimately pays the price for her quest for liberty with her life, Efe decides to own her own girls once she pays off her debt. It is gratifying that Joyce and Ama on regaining their freedom make a clean break from this life.

By and large, the impact of the new environment on the female black migrant is such that she loses her vivaciousness and sense of self, and becomes lonesome, Oge puts it succinctly: "You had become familiar with the smell of loneliness. It secretes a stench that clings to you.... Before you came here, you never thought it possible that anybody could be this lonely. You used to have friends" (pp.37-38). Lisa, the closest person to a friend that Oge has in Belgium makes her realize that "loneliness was one of the many reasons people committed suicide. Especially in the winter" (p.75).

Through the subliminal portrayal of male characters in the two novels, the author demonstrates that irrespective of the society in which a black woman finds herself, the tentacles of patriarchal structures including religious institutions also impinge on her freedom. For instance both pastors in these two novels studied here prey on the emotions of their female congregants. This is seen to be a continuum of the counter- hegemonic poise of many female African writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Tess Onwueme and Mariama Ba among several others. For instance, in *The Phoenix*, Oge's husband, Gunter, is portrayed as selfish and insensitive to the feelings of his wife. When Oge announces that they are expecting a child, he never shows any enthusiasm; he crushingly states "I had not known we were trying for a baby" (p.87), thus dampening Oge's enthusiasm. When their son Jordi dies, he is quick to have him cremated, an uncommon burial practice in Africa that vexes Oge. Also, throughout Oge's battle with

cancer he is not seen to be sympathetic and caring of his ill wife.

Senghor Dele and Segun are both male characters who lend credence to male-hegemony and patriarchy in Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*. Almost inescapable is the reality of the complicity of the Belgian Police establishment, almost entirely controlled by men and heavily compromised due to monetary inducement by the pimps who run the sex trade. Sisi seems to have underestimated the reach of Dele when she retorts: "What could Dele do to her from Nigeria?" (p.270) As she fails to heed his earlier warning: "No try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!" (p.271). Segun who is presumed to be harmless and whose usefulness is only in fixing things in the house and running errands for Madam, will be the one to snuff life out of Sisi by hitting her skull with a hammer. One can only imagine how many ladies he has taken down in such a gruesome way.

3. BLACK FEMALE BODIES: PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF MIGRATION

As stated in the preceding section, the embodied motifs of migration and dislocation are profoundly etched into the bodies of black female migrants thus altering their personalities, and identities physically and symbolically. When Oge is, for instance, diagnosed with cancer, a ravaging disease that she views as alien to Africans she seems to enter a denial mode dissociating herself from the disease. Symbolically, migration is compared to cancer which is seen as being corrosive of fundamental African values and way of life. Her determination to fight the disease and ensure her survival is a spirited fight for her quintessential self; her essence and her Africanity. Just as the Greek myth of the phoenix to which the novelist owes her title, Oge is determined to survive her ordeal in the new world by rising from the "ashes" of the unsavory experiences of migration.

The loss of Oge's son, Jordi, due to a school, playground accident is equally symbolic. Jordi is of mixed parentage and he is seen as a hybrid; belonging neither to the white race nor to the black race. Even though Franz Boas, the great American anthropologist and several of his students, consider race as an invalid concept, by extensive miscegenation as embodied in the racial mix of Jordi, is significantly aborted in the novel. Jordi's death symbolizes the abhorrence of miscegenation in the "West" and his father's decision to have Jordi's body cremated without taking Oge's feeling into consideration is an attempt to have memories of the boy completely erased.

As for the four protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street*, migration has untoward negative effects on their bodies. Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce have to endure selling their bodies to numerous men in exchange for money day in day

out in order to keep abreast of their financial obligations to Dele. These women are openly given to lewdness and devoted to all sorts of base sexual acts. The engagement of female migrants in the vulgar, misuse of their bodies in the sex trade utterly dehumanizes them. Further compounding their degradation is their consignment to skivvy positions in their host countries regardless of their previous academic qualifications and capabilities.

CONCLUSION

It may be right to suggest from this study that there are some migrant experiences that are gender specific and this has been the preoccupation of Unigwe as we have demonstrated in this essay. For instance, black male immigrants are hardly ever victims of sex-trafficking and never are there any mention of an instance in the two novels in focus here where they are put in windows to be showcased like their female counterparts. This is not to say the male black migrants do not face their own challenges and identity crises in the West. Unigwe, as a very realistic writer portrays the extremely degraded life of female black immigrants' existence in the West. In the theatre of their lives, nothing is hidden. Unigwe takes out the stories of these women from the blood-curdling, red-light zones of Antwerp or So-Ho but brings the chilling orgies that characterize the lived experiences of these women for close scrutiny of her reading public.

Their unnerving experiences of dislocation, displacement, alienation, and racism places the women on the fringes of life in their host countries. Such locations do not portend much good for them as they are in positions that are the most vulnerable in society. Unigwe thus belongs to a new crop of African writers who are based in the West and are still preoccupying themselves with experiences of Africans in metropolitan centers of the west. In her own words she says: "I find it easier writing from experience... and I do believe in writing as therapy, so I tend to write a lot about Belgium, about Africans in Belgium, about African women in Belgium" (p.111).

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