

## The struggles of the modern woman as portrayed in Unigwe Chike's *on black sisters' street*

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### Abstract

Oppression of women is not a new phenomenon in African Literature. The older generations of writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Margaret Ogola, Chinua Achebe among other African writers have addressed the issue of women oppression in African societies. Their works primarily focused on the traditional African woman who was the symbol of African culture. Times are changing and the contemporary African writers are addressing the issue of women oppression in modern times. Literature has revealed that women now undergo different forms of oppression that stem from the inequalities in power relations and gendered power brought by patriarchal societies, failed national systems and policies. One of the modern African writers who addresses the challenges facing the modern African woman is Chike Unigwe in her book *On Black Sister's Street*. An analysis of the book is done using the African feminist perspective and the de Certeau's tactic and strategy theory. The four protagonists are victims of broken national and societal policies, repressed religious beliefs, modern slavery and poverty and violence.

**Keywords:** chike unigwe, modern woman as portrayed, women oppression

### Introduction

The issue of the status of women has been addressed by several writers who assert that there is a pervasive and significant sense where societies oppress women (Ngendahayo & Wasajja 2015; Ingrey, 2016; Bruneau, 2018) <sup>[7, 2]</sup>. There are many cases where men actively and consciously set out to oppress the women, but this does not cover the scope of the women's oppression in the society (Bruneau, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. Female writers in countries such as Nigeria are currently conducting a vibrant movement of voicing the oppressions facing women in today's contemporary society while others such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie whose female protagonists enjoy their sexualities in ways other than solely biological processes or for solely reproductive reasons (Tugba, 2014) <sup>[12]</sup>. The new approach towards women oppression points towards a new awareness by the contemporary writers who understand that sexualities are socially constructed and deeply influenced by the economic, social, political and cultural forces (Tugba, 2014; Bruneau, 2018) <sup>[12, 2]</sup>. Ingrey (2016) <sup>[7]</sup> argues that oppression is the effect of the social processes of gender relations that institutionalize and reproduce certain norms of gender which provides privileges for the dominant groups while marginalizing, causing harm or excluding the others. In Africa, women receive unfair treatment where they deal with different forms of oppression and abuses such as the sexual, physical, mental, verbal and economic abuses (Ngendahayo & Wasajja 2015). Robert Barker (2003) further argues that oppression is the social act which restricts, covertly or formally, individuals or groups of people to be exploited and limit their ability to equally compete with other social groups. Consequently, these people are deprived exploited and their privileges deprived by those with more power. Bruneau (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> claims that oppression of the modern woman has been reinforced by patriarchy and capitalism which marginalizes women while

giving the men the most influential spheres culturally, socially, politically and economically.

Oppression of women is not a new issue in the society, but in contemporary society, the forms of female oppression have changed and come in different forms. In African Literature, several writers have addressed the issue of oppression of women including Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, where oppression of women comes from the superior masculine characters such as Okonkwo savagely physically abuses his wife. Similar oppressions are evident in Ngugi WA Thiong'o's (1965) book where polygamy, female genital mutilation and wife battering are its common themes. Margaret Ogola's works such as *The River and the Source* have also identified form of female Oppression including forced arranged marriages. In these cases, the girls were viewed by the family as a source of wealth once her bride price is paid. However, Margaret Ogolla's views on the oppression of women shift towards modern form of oppression like the women fight for equality in terms of more education, employment opportunities and freedom (Ogolla, 1994). Modern forms of oppression are identified by Fallon (2008) <sup>[5]</sup> who claim that modern women are forced to surrender to cheap prostitution due to the lack of economic, social and political equality. Moreover, the lack of fair employment opportunities for women has been turned by those with power, such as men and fellow women, to force women into prostitution. These unfair opportunities lead to women being exploited through sex trafficking, sex slavery among other forms of oppression related to sexual exploitation (Shulze, Canto, Mason, & Skalin, 2014; Bouilly, Rillon, & Cross, 2016) <sup>[10, 1]</sup>. Shulze *et al* (2014) <sup>[10]</sup> argue that prostitution involves the purchasing of children and women and sold in criminal circles where they are exploited by those who control them.

Chika Unigwe is one of the new generations of female writers in Nigeria. Chika is a Nigerian-born Belgium writer

who was born in 1974 in Enugu. She went to the Federal Government's Girl's College before pursuing a bachelor's degree in Arts in English Language and Literature from the University of Nigeria. She then bagged her Master's degree from the Catholic University of Belgium. Later, she pursued her PhD at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands for a degree in Literature. She has several awards, such as the BBC Short Story competition and the Commonwealth Short Story Award in 2004. Other awards include the 3<sup>rd</sup> prize in the Equiano Fiction Contest in 2005. Her novel, *On Black Sisters Street*, was valued at \$100,000 and won Nigeria's Prize for Literature in 2012 (Unigwe, n.d). At the time, the novel was considered as the largest literary prize in Africa. Since completion of her thesis, on ' "In the Shadow of Ala; Igbo Women Writing as an Act of Righting" in 2004, her works have been primarily on the plight of the African women. She explores issues such as grief, illnesses, and loneliness. In the novel *On the Black Sisters' Street* Unigwe addresses the struggles of the modern woman in today's contemporary society. Four women are the major protagonists in the novel and all of them as struggling to overcome the challenges and constraints imposed on them by the contemporary society (Unigwe, 2009) [13]. The stories of these women transcend the national boundaries covering both Africa and Europe. Unigwe is a standout voice as a contemporary African writer in this book. She takes a raw, vivid and inspirational tone throughout the novel to illuminate the challenges that transcend time and place. She illuminates the dream's illusion and annihilation seen through the eyes of the African woman. However, rather than portraying the four women as 'good girls gone bad' she paints them as the women who are determined, in a world dominated by men, to carve out social and economic independence. In this paper, the African Feminism theory is used where assertions on gendered stereotypes and patriarchy (Eagleton, 1986). In the novel, Chika challenges the notions that prostitution is a prerogative of the immoral woman. She takes on a critical approach of the national and transnational patriarchy rather than making the woman a symbol of notational moral decay where men are excluded (Gqola, 2015) [6]. Unigwe shows the women as the products of a failed political system that is commandeered by men. The unusual political situation in Nigeria results in instability leading to imbalances in the economic power of women as compared to men (Unigwe, 2009) [13]. De Certeau's (1984) [3] theory on tactics and strategy is used to analyze the circumstances under which the societal characteristics drive to influence the situations facing the four protagonists.

### Poverty and Violence

Feminists argue that there is a need to re-theorize violence of vulnerable bodies outside of the discourse of the familiar. Gqola (2015) [6] addresses the issue of the location of rape in discourse as the focus on the victim which has rendered the act of rape meaningless. In her work, she examines rapes as the cycle of complicity that makes it hard to hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions. The direct engagement of feminists with rape as it circulates in the public has provided a platform that can be used to dismantling the power structures that sustain it including patriarchy and religious beliefs. In Unigwe's book, violence and rape are addressed through the characters of Ama and

Joyce who are the victims of a patriarchal society, poverty and broken political systems.

Ama is a rape survivor who has been repeatedly raped by her father since when was eight years old up until she was thirteen. Her character is quite different from the other girls in that she comes from the idle class family in Nigeria unlike Sisi and Efe (Unigwe, 2009) [13]. She has a beautiful house with maids, her bathroom and bedroom while Efe and Sisi share these facilities with others. Unigwe uses Ama's character to demonstrate how abject poverty is rampant in many Nigerian families. She writes that not many children her age have their beautiful rooms to themselves. Ama is not pressurized by the desire for material lust. She struggles with the extreme religious and repressive environment. She is constantly trapped indoors and forced to read biblical instructions. Her parents discourage her from having friends leading to be an introvert. She talks to the walls and plays with her sandals- she flogs them until she hears them crying (Unigwe, 2009, p. 122-123) [13].

Despite her father being a pastor, with serious religious routines which are in contrast with his violent tendencies towards his daughter. His behavior only stops once she reaches puberty and starts receiving her period. The situation facing Ama was characterized by the patriarchal community, where despite her mother likely knowing that her child was being molested, she failed to speak up for her or protect her. By implying that Ama's mother knew of her abuse, but failed to do anything about it, she present the scenario as both violent and ordinary. Ama's life is tainted, but her mother's reaction is a reflection of how much such violence is part of everyday life. Her view is that Ama stirs up trouble and quickly finds her an alternative home in the city. her father is a suffocating patriarchal figure. According to the writer, the devil did not belong anywhere near the house of which he was head (Unigwe, 2009, p. 128) [13]... the things of the lord were not to be abused nor slighted. Nor ridiculed. Ama knew that her father would flog her with a koboko, the cowhide cane he called 'discipline.' Her mother would watch her from the corner as her father puts her across his knee. In the case of Ama, Brother Cyril's control extends to the mother. She walks around hunched whenever the clothes came out dirty and her sin was expiated through beating (Unigwe, 2009, p. 144) [13]. Ama's mother is expected to conduct her life adhering to the religious patterns, as Brother Cyril has a Christian wife, virgin and a virgin rose to ease his journey in the world (Unigwe, 2009, p. 131) [13]. In this sense, Ama's mother was an extension of Cyril. She lacks self-esteem which leads her to remain as the submissive wife even at the detriment of her own daughter.

The writer describes the first rape claiming that on Ama's eight birthday, her father floats into her room in a white safari suit and rapes her (Unigwe, 2009, p. 132-133) [13]. To force her submission, he uses the biblical teachings and commandment asking her "What's the fifth commandment?" to which Ama then replies, "Honour thy father and thy mother", her voice muffled by the collar of her nightgown in her mouth. Patriarchy in the novel further manifests itself even in Europe as the girls are doing prostitution. In Europe, the clients approach them with 'arrogant swaggers, pictures of their pretty wives in leather wallets, looking for adventure between the thighs of een afrikaanese,' (Unigwe, 2009, p.178) [13].

This shows the men's view of the girls as prostitutes who are a form of adventure for them. moreover, 'the customer was king even when he was being obnoxious' (Unigwe, 2009, p.275) <sup>[13]</sup> signifying the utter control that the men had over the girls who were tools for the men's pleasures and could not speak up for themselves even when their clients were acting in an unbecoming manner. Sadly for these women, these behaviours were not new to them. Back in their home country, the highly patriarchal society has rendered them second-class citizens; hence they are already used to such treatments from the male-dominated society.

### Modern Enslavement

Joyce is also a victim of atrocious violence who at the age of fifteen becomes a victim of political wars and militia murders. The civil war in which the *Janjaweed* militia murders her family in front of her (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. The militia gang rapes her and leaves her unconscious. She makes her way to the refugee camp where she meets Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier whom she falls in love with. However, despite being deeply in love with Polycarp, her mother-in-law outs her out claiming that her son cannot marry a foreigner (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. Polycarp then organizes for Alek to be brought to Antwerp to 'work as a nanny'. This is where her name changes to Joyce. Polycarp pays all the instalments to Dele to clear her debt, unlike the other girls who have to pay Dele a monthly installment. Through her, Unigwe, addresses the issue of modern slave trade where the women are trapped by the promise of economic independence and empowerment in Europe. Unigwe shows modern slavery where the girls are forced to parade naked in front of any prospective buyers or madam with names representing their identities (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. They are stripped of their identities as they are given new names by those who buy them. The aim is to ensure that the white clients can pronounce the new names.

### Power relations: A Failure of the National and Societal Failures

In the *On Black Sister's Street*, the issue of prostitution is condemned using moral grounds. Unigwe attempts to challenge the notion that the prostitutes lack agency. Throughout the text, the author refers to the protagonists as 'girls' though there are many derogatory names for sex workers. In the African literature, the women are portrayed as a representation of Mother Africa (whose values, behaviours and beliefs are in line with the cultural and societal values of the African communities) or as immoral whores (those who go against these values and norms) (Bouilly, Rillon, & Cross, 2016) <sup>[1]</sup>. These views are explained by Stratton who claim that African literature operates against the interests of the women (Stratton, 40). She uses allegory 'male and female', 'subordination and domination' 'subject and object' to argue that these definitive situations are conventionally patriarchal. In most African literature, the male literary texts have primarily paid tribute to the female bodies as the African man's landscape to explore and discover. Such books include the *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (, *Mongo Beti's* *Pepetua*, *Season of Anomy* by Wole Soyinka among others (Tunga, 2014). In these texts, the representation of African women as the 'unchanging African essence and the heritage of African values. However, when she serves as an allegory of the embattled state of the nations, she becomes a whore.

Unigwe presents the sex workers in a manner that critiques the national and transnational patriarchy rather than making them a symbol of the national moral decay from which the men are exempt. However, Unigwe's text is illuminating because unlike the male writes she distances her texts from the national allegory of women's bodies. She recognizes prostitution as a by-product of the nation's failure due to the male-dominated institutions. In this manner, she unmasks the subordination of women in the patriarchal socio-political systems in Nigeria and internationally.

Unigwe presents contemporary Nigeria as a patriarchal society where the bodies of women are governed by the cultural, religious and effective state policies (Tunga, 2014). The women's choices are largely limited and subjected to masculine interpretation. The choices of women are limited and often subject to the male interpretation leading to marginalization of the women in different situations. However, Madam, despite being a woman also occupies the space of the masculine figures in the novel. She sees herself as superior to the girls and exercises her powerful individual. She aligns herself to the men and exploits and controls the protagonists. At some point she tells the girls "... until you have paid back every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back. We expect five hundred euros from you every month" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 183) <sup>[13]</sup>. She further uses her henchmen to punish the girls whenever she feels they have displeased her. Just like the male who capitalizes on the power that the gender position offers them, she alters the working environment at whim, banishes them, relegate their duties and provides them with poor living conditions. Therefore, even after the girls seek to escape the injustices and oppression of the highly patriarchal Nigerian society, they move to Belgium to experience further oppression at the hand of Madam who has irrevocable control over their lives. Her detachment from the lives of the girls is seen in her comment following the death of Sisi, she casually claims "Another one bites the dust" implying that Sisi is not the first girl to be harmed under Madam's care.

A good way to analyze these power relations is using Michel de Certeau's theory in *The Practice of Everyday Life* where he focuses on differentiating between the strategy and tactics to interrogate the tensions between the binaries related to power relations. The strategy is defined by de Certeau (1984; 35) <sup>[3]</sup> as the 'calculation or the manipulation of the power relationships.' This is the calculated action or an act of the weak (1984; 37). Therefore, in using this approach, prostitution shows how women any tool available to them in social mobility. The women lack a proper locus or power limiting their ability to properly plan or strategize; hence, they are forced to use any tactics or strategies that can enable them to overcome any situation that faces them. de Certeau further argues that everyday practices serve as an investigation onto ways that can serve as operational logic that makes up culture (1984;474). Everyday operations serve as victories for the weak over the strong. The weak are often unable to escape from the impositions of the unbearable system and they are forced to work within the system to manipulate and turn the events and circumstances into opportunities. They capitalize on their tactics to create advantages, prepare its expansions ad also secure independence. The arguments presented by de Certeau can be used to examine the situation facing the girls in Unigwe's books has forced them to see their vagina as a means of

economic empowerment. She writes the girls view their vagina as a 'God-given trump card wedged between their thighs' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 26) <sup>[13]</sup>.

In the case of Sisi or Chisom, her arrival in Belgium leads to her adoption of the name Sisi with the hope that 'once she hit it big' she will 'reincarnate as Chisom' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 44) <sup>[13]</sup>. Chisom graduated with a degree in Finance and Business Administration. She spends more than two years of meticulously writing application letters for jobs in newspapers. She doesn't get any of the jobs which are attributed to socio-economic constraints and lack of social and professional networks to help social mobility. Consequently, Chisom witnesses several of her less intelligent classmates using their 'long-legs' and 'better connections' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 22) <sup>[13]</sup> to secure employment. She undergoes a cycle of lowered expectations and unemployment. Her hopes and dreams shatter as years after graduating, she remains unemployed and living with her parents in their one-bedroom apartment. The description of the living conditions portrays the poor living conditions such as shared toilets which is typical of the low-income earners in Lagos. Loads of waste, broken cisterns with pans with squirming maggots are used to describe the part of the city. Unlike the rich who have installed generators to augment for the power cuts and water tanks to relieve the shortage of water, the poor families are the mercy of the state that remains largely unacceptable (Tugba, 2014) <sup>[12]</sup>. The debilitating conditions are described by the narrator as walls of the shared kitchens which are 'blackened by the kerosene smoke' for the families who do not afford cooking gas. Therefore, amidst the abject poverty facing her and her family, her meeting with Dele offers her a chance to get away from the oppression brought forth by the broken state. She seeks to get control over her life and claims that there was no way she was going to turn it down 'not even for Peter' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 23) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Efe's socio-economic background is similar to Sisi's. She resides in Lagos but lives with only her father as she lost her mother. At sixteen years, she plays the role of both the mother and father as her drunkard father fails to come to terms with his wife's death (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. Efe is largely left to her devices as her father spends the better part of his time in the beer parlour. He 'faithfully gives her money at the beginning of every month from the wages he earns as a labourer renting himself out to building contractor.' However, Efe's lust for material gains leads her to a relationship with Titus, a forty-six-year-old man. She claims 'It was not just the money, it was the crispness of it, the smell 50 of the Central Bank, the fact that he had drawn it out of a huge bundle of like notes so that she believed all the stories she had heard of his enormous wealth. The smell was enough to make anyone giddy.' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 50) <sup>[13]</sup>. Titus gives her money in exchange for sexual favours until she conceives her child which signified the end of their 'agreement'. In Efe's story, Unigwe presents the gendered power relationship portrayed through the exploitation of a teenage girl by an elder man of means. All these come from the desire of Efe to counter the workings of social inequality and patriarchy characterizing the Nigerian society. The male dominance and patriarchy are further developed by Unigwe through Efe, where once she tells Titus that she has conceived a child, he takes her to a hotel in an unfamiliar part of town, asks her to undress and parade naked before him. He then jumps on her, drags her into the bed and

proceeds to repeatedly have sex with her (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. He falls asleep, wakes up and starts again. Upon learning of her pregnancy, he abandons her in the strange and unfamiliar hotel and part of town. She has no mode of transportation or money. In this exchange, the issue of power and dominance over the females is evident where Titus has all the power while Efe is from the lower class with no income. However, the government also fails to protect the young girl from Statutory rape and exploitation. The government lacks a social welfare programme or system to cater for the needs of single mothers and their children. This leaves them vulnerable and ripe for exploitation by those with means and power (Unigwe, 2009; Tugba, 2014) <sup>[12, 13]</sup>. In the wake of her child's birth and no viable means of surviving, going into prostitution seems to be the means for her to manipulate the life events and turn them into opportunities.

### Fighting Against Oppression

Ama goes through oppression in terms of patriarchal and repressive religious beliefs. However, years later, as she attempts to join the university, she fails her JAMP exams pointing towards the failure of the national education system to offer fair opportunities to deserving students (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. People bribe their way through corrupt officials. Ama explodes after all the suffering and frustration she has gone through. She feels stuck in a 'one-way tunnel'. She then distinguishes herself from her mother. She is no longer a timid woman afraid to flout patriarchal authority. She asks "'You call yourself my father? You call yourself a pastor? You disgust me! I naaso m oyi. (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>.' In so doing, Ama gains freedom from the repressive traditions and religious control her father had over her. In contrast, her mother kneels on the floor with her palms facing up. However, despite her standing up for herself, Brother Cyril, with his toes big and masculine plants himself in front of Ama and tells her that he is not her father. Patriarchal societies term women who give birth out of wedlock as 'whore' or 'other' as earlier explained. Therefore, in denouncing Ama, Brother Cyril rescues Ama's mother from social exclusion acting as the selfless benefactor. In so doing, he proves himself in the eyes of the mother as an exemplary man who out of the goodness of his heart, saves her from being driven out of the house (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. She tells Ama "'just shut up, shut up, Ama before I am thrown out of my husband's house because of you. Mechie onu kita.' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 150) <sup>[13]</sup>. All these factors drive Ama to go into prostitution with more pragmatism than Efe and Sisi. She reasons that since Brother Cyril has already used aggression to take what he wanted without question, nothing was preventing her from letting strange men pay for her services (Unigwe, 2009, p.166) <sup>[13]</sup>. However, even though she fights against the control of her father, he perceived 'savior' Dele who also abuses her before sending her abroad. He continues the cycle of abuse that she has grown accustomed to among the men. Dele tells her "'I shall sample you before you go!' he [Dele] laughed (Unigwe, 2009) <sup>[13]</sup>. The sound that stretched itself into a square that kept him safe. Lagos was full of such laughter. The laughter that ridiculed the receiver for no reason but kept the giver secure in a cocoon of steel. It was not the sort of laughter that one could learn. It was acquired. Wealth. Power. Fame. They gave birth to that kind of laughter.' (Unigwe, 2009, p.168) <sup>[13]</sup>. However, in line with de Certeau's argument,

Ama views this as a chance for her to achieve her dream of wealth, fame and power. She claims, that the men she slept with like Dele were tools and since her dreams were expansive, she could accommodate all of them (de Certeau, 1984) <sup>[3]</sup>.

In the case of Sisi, her attempt to fight against their situation is through falling in love with Luc, a young Belgian man. Sisi feels that the world is as it should be. She is now in love with a new man, with a house, and her own money (Unigwe, 2009, p.1) <sup>[13]</sup>. The thought of her own money makes her hum reflecting the ambition of the protagonist. Falling in love with Luc holds the promise of a life away from her previous struggles such as the challenges of living in a one-bedroom apartment she shares with her siblings and other family members. There is hope for a better future where she has independence in terms of money, love and power. As the novel continues it becomes evident that she loved the money more as opposed to the love of a man. However, her untimely demise, after failing to submit her mandatory quota to Dele, further demonstrates the failure of the national system to safeguard the interests of the protagonists. Her death is never sufficiently investigated by the Belgian police. Unigwe successfully draws a similarity of oppression of the women being overlooked in both the developed and developing countries. Corruption is rampant even in the developed country where the traffickers collude with the government officials.

### Conclusion

On the Black Sister's Street, Unigwe brings out the reality of the disadvantaged groups. They suffer when the country's deteriorates economically, politically, socially and environmentally. The disadvantaged group are also the last to gain. In this book, the inequalities of the characters are brought about by the society-constructed or generated aspects such as the division of labour, the double burden of productive and reproductive responsibilities, reinforced discriminatory ideological and systematic practices entrenched in the development policies and exclusion from education, training and employment. None of the national development goals and policies prioritizes the problems facing women. No resources are allocated to them which leads to the exploitation of women as they attempt to cater for themselves and their families. In the case of the four protagonists, their ambitions in life were driven by the desire to overcome the constraints of life brought on the societal and national policies and beliefs. Sisi dreamt of starting her own car export business. Similarly, Efe dreamt of starting her export business with her son. In pursuit of these dreams, they engage in prostitution to revolt against their different situations. However, despite their commitment towards achieving their dreams, they remain the victims of the patriarchal society, broken national systems and policies, modern slavery and repressive religious beliefs.

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