

Sexual Objectification and Abuse of African Migrant Women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

Ikechukwu Asika

Department of African Literature, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli, Anambra State, Nigeria

Corresponding author: Ikechukwu Asika, Department of African Literature, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli

ABSTRACT

This paper examines sexual objectification and abuse of African migrant women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. It explores the dehumanising impact of sexual commodification and the nuances of abuse rooted in societal stereotypes and patriarchal power structures—an intersection to which scholars have given inadequate attention. The paper employs a qualitative research approach, involving close reading and textual analysis. A postcolonial theoretical framework is used to interrogate how African migrant women in the selected novels are commodified as objects of male sexual pleasure and subjected to prostitution slavery and the sex trade for profit. The study reveals that the abuse and sexual objectification these women suffer at the hands of men stem from patriarchal and societal stereotypes and produce poor self-image and identity alteration.

Keywords: *sexual objectification; abuse; African migrant women; stereotype; Chika Unigwe; Amma Darko; postcolonialism*

1. Introduction

The objectification of African migrant women and the nuances of abuse are central issues in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Each of these novels tells the story of African women who migrate in search of better opportunities, only to become trapped in cycles of sexual objectification, abuse, exploitation, and dehumanisation. The narratives critically explore how the intersection of gender, race, and economic vulnerability subjects these women to systemic abuse—physical, emotional, and psychological—while simultaneously questioning their agency within oppressive global structures.

In each novel, the women's migration, initially motivated by the hope for a better life, leads them into situations where their bodies and emotions are commodified, whether through prostitution, domestic labour, or forced exploitation. These women are reduced to sexual objects for the benefit of others, their worth measured solely by their ability to satisfy others' sexual desires or fulfil labour needs. The abuse they endure is multifaceted owing to their gender and migration status. These experiences reflect the broader dynamics of gender inequality, social discrimination, and exploitation that govern their lives.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe follows the stories of four Nigerian women—Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce—who travel to Belgium with hopes of a better future but instead become trapped in prostitution. Their bodies are commodified, and their identities are disregarded as they endure both physical and emotional degradation. This study engages postcolonial theory to examine sexual objectification and nuances of abuse

in these African migratory fictions. Postcolonialism probes issues such as migration, cultural colonisation, identity crises, and the dehumanising effects of these experiences.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification may be viewed as treating a person, typically a woman, as an object for sexual desire rather than recognising them as a complete individual with thoughts, emotions, and autonomy. In this context, a person's worth is reduced to physical appearance or sexual appeal, often disregarding personality, intellect, or abilities. Heflick and Goldenberg (2014) observe that "scholars have long argued that women are denied a basic sense of humanness—are objectified—when focus is directed toward their physical rather than mental qualities" (p. 1). This agrees with Kant's (1797/1991) claim that sexual love can make of the loved person "an object of appetite," after which "the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry" (p. 163).

The sexual objectification of women specifically involves viewing them mainly as objects of male sexual desire instead of acknowledging them as whole individuals. This objectification is frequently seen in advertising, media, pornography, and professions such as stripping and prostitution, as well as in public events such as beauty pageants. This is the sense in which sexual objectification is used in this paper.

2.2 Abuse

According to the UN Refugee Agency, sexual abuse and exploitation means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. It includes exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex, and any situation where sex is coerced or demanded by withholding goods or services or by blackmail. Abuse more broadly refers to the intentional mistreatment or harm of another person, typically involving power, control, or dominance, and can take physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial forms. In this study, the focus is on abuse directed at women, which stems from gender inequality and manifests across relationships, families, workplaces, and society at large.

2.3 Migrant

A migrant is a person who moves from one place to another, typically across borders, either temporarily or permanently, in search of better living conditions, work opportunities, safety, or escape from hardship. Hossain (2001) describes migration as the relocation of one's residence for a specified period, driven by different factors. Tostensen (2003) offers three criteria: significant demographic change, sustained duration, and transformation of the social environment. Sassen (1999) insists that "migrations do not simply happen. They are produced" and "are patterned" (p. 155). The United Nations defines an international migrant as any person who has changed their country of residence, regardless of legal status or motive. This paper views African migrant women from that perspective.

3. Postcolonialism: A Theoretical Clarification

This study uses postcolonial theory to examine sexual objectification and abuse in Unigwe's and Darko's novels. Postcolonialism addresses migration, cultural colonisation, identity crises, and the dehumanising effects of these experiences. Shaped by scholars such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Bill Ashcroft, it centres on migration, slavery, and responses to European imperialism. According to Tyson (2006), postcolonial criticism "seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies" (p. 365).

A central concept is cultural domination, which aligns with Dobie's notion of cultural colonisation or hegemony: colonisers impose cultural practices, values, laws, and beliefs, often displacing indigenous cultures. Hybridity, associated with Homi Bhabha, refers to the fusion of cultural elements from coloniser and colonised, generating identities marked by conflict, tension, and change. In the novels selected for this study, the lives of many female characters are deeply impacted by their encounters with the Western world. Many migrated believing that Europe was superior to Africa, only to face disappointment.

4. Sexual Objectification and Abuse of African Migrant Women

Beyond the Horizon and On Black Sisters' Street highlight how patriarchy, gender, and societal stereotypes intersect to make migrant women particularly vulnerable to abuse and sexual objectification. These women are marginalised not only by their gender but also by their race and social class, which makes them targets for traffickers and exploitative systems. Both novels critique global systems that commodify and dehumanise migrant women. Olaniyi (2011) links the rise in "commercialization, commodification of sex, family disintegration, rural–urban migration, decline in access to education and income generation, and massive clandestine movement of people" to economic globalisation, noting that poverty and unemployment in Nigeria pushed women migrants out when they were unable to find lucrative employment (p. 112).

Some of these African women who work as sex workers are offered significant sums with the promise of stable employment, which they must repay through a large debt to madams—older women who work alongside Nigerian pimps and oversee prostitution rings overseas. These madams track the movements of the women, seize or destroy their documents, and instruct them on how to behave, dress, and satisfy clients in order to repay the amounts owed (Olaniyi, 2003; Okojie, 2009). Examining Unigwe's novel, Ladele and Omotayo (2017) note that the protagonists of On Black Sisters' Street are resilient characters, each with tragic pasts in Africa that have led them to accept Dele's offer to trade 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" (p. 55).

Umezurike (2015), writing of Darko's heroine, observes "the erasure of her individuality, because she seems to have been successfully positioned (by ideology) not to actuate her own desires but rather those of her husband, even though she knows full well Akobi is undeserving of any affection" (p. 292). In Beyond the Horizon, Mara stares at an image and asks whether it is still hers: "what is left of what once used to be my image" (Darko, 1995, p. 1). The objectification she experiences from her husband is rooted in a patriarchal

system that positions men as dominant figures. She later states: “He is my lord, my master, and my pimp. And like the other women on my left and right, I am his pawn, his slave and his property. What he orders, I do. It’s my karma” (p. 3).

The main female characters in both novels share similar trajectories: they migrate because societal stereotypes and patriarchal structures hinder women from achieving independence and financial freedom. The secondary and service roles that traditional African society assigned to women enabled men such as Akobi in *Beyond the Horizon* and Dele in *On Black Sisters’ Street* to treat women as mere objects. Darko shows how Akobi consistently demonstrates a lack of consideration for Mara, making decisions for her without regard for her interests. Through Mara’s experiences, Darko highlights how a male-dominated society deprives women of autonomy and shapes the way they perceive themselves and the world.

This agrees with Adichie’s (2017) insistence that “Gender matters everywhere in the world” and that a fairer world requires raising daughters and sons differently (p. 23). The lack of economic empowerment for Mara in Ghana constitutes a push factor that made her consent to join her husband in Germany even when he does not regard her as a human being. Darko recounts their first sexual encounter in Germany as domestic rape: Akobi “was brutal and over-fast,” performing “something he wouldn’t have done if he had his way” (p. 84). The author uses this not only to show Mara’s objectification but also to portray how several married women are abused within the confines of marriage and may not voice it.

Gbaguidi (2018) argues that Darko highlights the oppressive roles women are forced into, noting that characters such as Mara and Vivian are exploited by men such as Akobi and Osey, who capitalise on their submissiveness for financial gain. Despite worsening mistreatment, Mara stays with Akobi because she lacks the means to free herself. When Akobi grew tired of supporting her, he arranged with Osey to force her into prostitution. Akobi took Mara to a nightclub, drugged her, and set her up so that she “was made the property of a good-looking dark-haired man who owned a sex nightclub called Peepy” (p. 115). A clandestine recording of the assault is then used to blackmail her into the work (pp. 115–116).

Umezurike (2015) notes that Mara is objectified “without any sense of guilt by society and objectifiers” in “a hyper-sexualised world... making it so normal for women to be constituted as sex objects in popular cultural forms” (p. 291). Mara later resolves to leave Akobi but vows never to return to Ghana, haunted by the fear that the videos will follow her home: “Home will have to remain a distant place” (p. 139). This synchronises with Cho’s (2011) observation that “to be ‘unhomed’ is to feel out of place... to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint” (p. 19). Mara concludes that “there’s nothing dignified and decent left of me to give them” (p. 146).

In *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the trafficker Dele takes advantage of joblessness in Nigeria to push young women into prostitution abroad. Encountering Chisom at a salon, he tells her, “If you wan comot from this our nonsense country, come see me make we talk” (Unigwe, 2010, p. 32). He organises young women, deceives them with hope of a better life, and then “exports” them as commodities. He tells Chisom that Belgium will cost “taty t’ousand euro” to be repaid “mont’ by mont’” (pp. 34–35). Dele looks at women as

assets: “as for those melons wey you carry for chest, omo, how you no go fin work?” (p. 43). What Dele represents in *Unigwe* is what Akobi and Osey represent in *Darko*. The authors’ portrayal of Africans as principal agents in the trafficking of other Africans indicts internal patriarchal and economic structures as well as global sex markets.

Unigwe also explores intra-familial abuse. Ama reports that her surrogate father raped her “night after night” when she was little; her mother does not believe her and silences her (p. 147). The scene stages the voicelessness of the African girl-child in a patriarchal household, and the complicity of women who protect male authority. Dele further exploits Ama by making sexual “sampling” a condition of her travel (p. 168). In Belgium, Madam confiscates the women’s passports and sets a monthly remittance of five hundred euros to Dele via Western Union until the debt is cleared (p. 183). Isabella (2022) reads the novel as testimony that “in the specific context of sex trafficking, women are perceived as replaceable and disposable commodities” (p. 230).

Unigwe captures the psychic cost in Sisi’s dissociation: “This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me... This is somebody else” (p. 212). After years of prostitution, Sisi experiences worthlessness and lack of fulfilment. The four women’s stories show that sexual objectification and abuse are traceable both to displacement in the host country and to patriarchal orientation in African society. Trapped between these forces, the women are compelled to use their bodies as instruments of survival—an indictment of the state’s failure to secure the conditions of a liveable life.

5. Conclusion

Chika Unigwe and Amma Darko use these contemporary African migratory fictions to draw attention to the growing menace of sexual objectification and the nuances of abuse occasioned by patriarchal power structures and archetypal stereotypes. Through the experiences of characters such as Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* and Sisi in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, both novels highlight how patriarchal structures, societal stereotypes, and economic vulnerability drive women into forced prostitution and dehumanising circumstances. These women, marginalised by gender, class, and migration status, face severe emotional and psychological consequences from the abuse they endure.

The novels critique global systems that dehumanise and commodify migrant women, shedding light on the intersectional forces of gender, race, and class that fuel their exploitation. In doing so, the authors challenge the structures that perpetuate these women’s vulnerability and call attention to the ongoing struggles of migrant women in a globalised world. Ultimately, both works underscore the need for societal change to protect women’s rights and autonomy, while condemning the systems that reduce them to mere commodities.

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