



SCARRING AND (RE)COVERING THE FEMALE BODY IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND OKEY NDIBE'S *ARROWS OF RAIN*

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Abstract

*In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*, prostitution and violence against women are some of the dominant issues. Unigwe and Ndibe use character and imagery to portray these issues and to contest the societal construction of prostitution and the treatment of prostitutes. This essay, therefore, examines the effects of prostitution on the female body and argues that the idea of choice or agency in prostitution is illusory, because the prostitutes do not have control over their bodies. Often, they are at the mercy of their masters and users, because being confined within the borders of absence and silence strip them of dignity and render them voiceless and invisible. The essay contends that their experience often causes scarring – mental or bodily wounds, and finds that the conflicts between the prostitutes and their masters are based on their desire to own and cover their bodies again. This essay adopts feminist and cultural approach in the analysis of the novels.*

Keywords: prostitution, scarring, nakedness, feminism, Unigwe, Ndibe.

1 Introduction

Prostitution may be a lot of things for many women: a ticket out of poverty, an escape from an abusive relationship, a lifestyle or a kind of self-assertion. However, whatever the case may be, for most of these women, prostitution can be said to be inherently violent and something that wounds. Their identity as prostitutes and the act of prostitution itself classify them as other. In a society where their activity is considered as illegal, they cannot be protected by the state, since they have no rights. Therefore, the prostitutes can be said to be naked literally and metaphorically in a society that sees that sort of nakedness as repulsive and forbidden. The society cannot cover this nakedness, therefore, the task of covering or re-covering their nakedness falls on the naked themselves since they, more than anyone else, feel the impact of their nakedness. The only way to reclaim their identity is to renounce prostitution. However, since prostitution is run and patronized by a powerful other, the prostitutes soon find out that whether they entered prostitution voluntarily or were coerced into it, they are ultimately owned. Those who claim ownership of their bodies decide whether or not their bodies can be covered. Moreover, belonging to everyone and to no one also leaves them at the mercy of their *users*, because those who have access to their bodies feel entitled to use them in any manner they see fit.

In certain cultures, prostitution is considered a vice whereas it is tolerated if not endorsed



in some cultures. However, for some women rights activists, prostitution is regarded as the exercise of agency, as a form of self-determination. Although some feminists adopt this position, others, according to Sheila Jeffreys, consider prostitution as ‘sexual violence’¹ against women or as the objectification of women’s bodies. Treating women as objects, especially as sex objects, have dehumanizing effects on the women, as often, the experience reduces them to nothing and strips them of their identity. In ‘Scenes from The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies,’ Arthur and Marilouise Kroker explores this objectification of the female body using Elsbeth Rodger’s paintings to show that a woman’s body is not only objectified but also confined. According to Kroker and Kroker, women’s bodies in Rodger’s paintings “are always framed by hard-line enclosures’ and the bodies appear as ‘the site of cancellation and loss, of what’s left over from the great subtraction forced by the enclosures within which they are confined’.”² This idea of confinement or framing is culturally constructed and appears to be the very nature of the lives of sex workers and victims of human trafficking.

In *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex-trafficking*, Jennifer Suchland reads an anti-trafficking poster as another site of confinement, of loss, of bondage. The poster is a picture of a standing young woman clutching a chain-link fence, a fence Suchland claims serves “as a metaphor for ... bondage”.³ Thus framing or confinement can be said to be something that restricts, constricts, limits and weakens its object. Or to put something within a frame is ultimately to objectify it, to treat it perhaps as merchandize. The girls’ in Shipperskwartier, the red light district in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, have display windows, huge “windows like showcases”⁴ where the prostitutes’ bodies are framed like merchandize, like sex toys or objects of pleasure.

Contemporary writings in Africa are also concerned with the issue of human trafficking especially sex trafficking and prostitution. Some of these African writers depict sex trafficking or prostitution as a gender-based violence, a violence against young women by a system that funds this profit driven enterprise or what Suchland considers as “economies of violence”⁵, that is, informal or unregulated economies “that are sustained by violence against the individual”⁶. In Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*, we see this issue of

¹ Sheila Jeffreys. *The Idea of Prostitution* (Victoria: Spinifex Press, 1997): 1.

² Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies* (Canada: CTHEORY Books, 2001): 1.

³ Jennifer Suchland. *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex-trafficking* (Dorham: Duke UP, 2015): 2.

⁴ Chika Unigwe. *On Black Sisters’ Street* (London: Vintage Books, 2009): 203.

⁵ Jennifer Suchland. *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex- trafficking* (Dorham: Duke UP, 2015): 1.

⁶ Suchland. *Economies of Violence*: 3.



human trafficking from the victim's or survivor's perspective and how some of these individuals are reintegrated back into the society on their return from Europe. Since their bodies have been exposed and scarred, the reformatory agency that takes them in begins the job of re-covering their naked bodies. Chris Abani's novella, *Becoming Abigail*, is equally concerned with this issue.

In *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Arrows of Rain*, we also find issues of violence against women and the objectification of their bodies. Since both texts are relatively new, criticisms on the texts appear to be sparse. However, available scholarship on the texts grapples with both thematic and linguistic elements in the texts. Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike explores sexuality and subjectivity as ideologically constructed, since most of the characters participate willingly in their objectification and subjugation. Using Althusserian theory, he posits that the characters willingly participate in their own subjugation as sex slaves, because the working of ideology enables the characters to view themselves as free subjects since they have to believe in their own agency as free subjects. Or what drives ideological apparatuses is the individual's consciousness as a free subject so that whatever the characters appear to feel as their choice is already conditioned by and "in conformity to the practices of ideology".⁷

Ikenna Kamalu and Blessing O. Ejezie explore the functioning of language as ideation in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. They affirm that the writer's linguistic choices enable our "understanding of the social experiences and ideology"⁸ within the text for it is ideology that aids our discovery and understanding of issues of "identity, sexual violence and gender roles."⁹ Thus Kamalu and Ejezie assert that we "can infer the ideational meaning of a text by considering the identities of the participants in a discourse event, their relationships with one another, the background knowledge we have about our social world and the world of the narrative, and the context within which the discourse event takes place."¹⁰

Sarah De Mul looks at the question of blackness from Unigwe's point of view. She argues that Unigwe's idea of blackness is projected in her narratives in what is described as 'authorial self-representation'.¹¹ De Mul asserts that blackness for Unigwe is a social

⁷ Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike "Sexuality and Subjectivity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" (Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities): 8

⁸ Ikenna Kamalu and Blessing O. Ejezie. "Ideational Representation of Prostitution and Social Meaning in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" Inkanyiso Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. 8.2 (2016): 116.

⁹ Kamalu and Ejezie. "Ideational Representation of Prostitution" 8.2 (2016): 116.

¹⁰ Kamalu and Ejezie. "Ideational Representation of Prostitution" 8.2 (2016): 110.

¹¹ Sarah De Mul. "Becoming Black in Belgium: The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe's



construction gained through her migration and experience in Belgium, a culture where blackness or being African is perceived as being “other”, as the opposite of whiteness. De Mul argues that Black identity as conceived by Unigwe in her writings is “a form of discipline, ... a set of norms, narratives, and everyday performative roles and acts. It is what you *do* at particular times, rather than who you are.”¹²

This idea of blackness as ‘a form of discipline’ seems to answer the question James O’Higgins put before Foucault in an interview, whether homosexuals “ought to be encouraged to think of themselves as a class in the same way that unskilled laborers or black people are encouraged to in some [European] countries?”¹³ This is to say that to be black is to belong to a minority group (class) whose identity is “other”. Thus De Mul argues that Unigwe is writing for herself as much as for her characters in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and that the aim of their self-representation is to “wrest control of the construction of their bodies away from the distorted visions of dominant culture.”¹⁴ On the other hand, Omolola A. Ladele and Adesunbo E. Omotayo pursue the issue of migration and identities in Unigwe’s novels. They argue that migration affects identities, because it has the capacity to alter not only the identities of the migrants but their realities as well. They regard the woman’s body in Unigwe’s text as “simultaneously the site of physical and symbolic migration.”¹⁵

Scholarly reviews on *Arrows of Rain* have explored the theme of military brutality or dictatorship. Niyi Akingbe sees Ndibe as one of the contemporary Nigerian writers who speak against contemporary issues like abuse of power, corruption and social inequality. He uses his analysis of theme, style and techniques in the text to underscore Ndibe’s treatment of the evils of military rule. Similarly, Edwin Onwuka focuses on what he describes as “Military Virus” in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* with a view to establish “personality traits associated with soldiers in politics.”¹⁶

From the literature on the texts available to the researcher, it appears that no critic has done

Authorial Self-representation and *On Black Sisters’ Street*” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 29.1 (2014): 12.

¹² Sarah De Mul. “Becoming Black in Belgium” 29.1 (2014): 13. Italics in the original

¹³ O’Higgins, James. Interview. Michel Foucault. *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. (New York: The New Press, 1994): 142.

¹⁴ Sarah De Mul. “Becoming Black in Belgium” 29.1 (2014): 12.

¹⁵ Omolola A. Ladele and Adesunbo E. Omotayo. “Migration and Identities in Chika Unigwe’s Novels” *Studies in Literature and Language*. 14.3 (2017): 52.

¹⁶ Edwin Onwuka. “Reading the ‘Military Virus’ in Postcolonial African Novels: Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain*.” *GEGE: Ogun Studies in English* 39.1/2 (2012-2015): 40.



a comparative study of these two novels nor has anyone examined prostitution in the novels as something that causes mental or physical scarring on the prostitutes. Thus, this essay argues that prostitution is inherently violent, whether voluntary, that is, whether it is a form of self-determination on the part of the women, or whether they were coerced into it, because their idea of choice is imaginary. They do not have control over their bodies, and their identity as prostitutes, as ‘other’, unites them in a common destiny – a destiny that is exploitative, violent and ultimately tragic. For some of the characters, their desire to recover their bodies, to regain their freedom will produce disastrous consequences because, “violent, anonymous death”¹⁷ can be said to be the destiny of prostitutes.

1.1 Scarring the Black Female Body: Prostitution and its Effects

Prostitution is presented in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Arrows of Rain* as having many causes. Often, it is prompted by socio-economic and cultural factors and at the same time, it can also be said to be an exercise of agency. However, no matter the conditions that lead to prostitution, the effect appears to be the same. It is marked by violence, either physical or psychological, that causes scarring – mental or bodily wounds. According to Erika Schulze, Sandra Isabel Novo Canto, Peter Mason and Maria Skalin, “several studies prove that prostitutes are at a heightened risk of violence, escalating to lethal violence”¹⁸, violence perpetrated not only by the client but also by “police and law enforcement agents.”¹⁹ It is not physical violence alone that causes scarring. Exploitation, objectification of the female body and rape are forms of scarring and these, in some ways, equally constitute violence. Most of the characters in the texts are already scarred before becoming prostitutes. Thus they carry within them psychological marks which show that they are already damaged by those experiences. Or it can be said that their experiences leave marks or wounds that prostitution deepens, wounds that do not heal but become protracted from persistent irritation, because, for some of the characters, prostitution will reopen the scars and keep them perpetually sore.

Prostitution is considered an aberration of social and moral codes of conduct in most cultures, because it deviates from acceptable sexual behaviour. Owing to the fact that the lifestyle of prostitutes is repugnant to decent society, these women are alienated and stigmatized in most cultures. However, the influence of modernization has improved the economic conditions of some of these women so that in some cultures, prostitution is not altogether considered an evil. Most prostitutes operate outside their families or in the

¹⁷ Okey Ndibe. *Arrows of Rain* (Essex: Heinemann, 2000): 219

¹⁸ Erika Schulze, Sandra Isabel Novo Canto, Peter Mason and Maria Skalin. “Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution and its impact on gender equality” Directorate General for Internal Policies. (European Parliament. 2014): 8.

¹⁹ Erika Schulze et al. “Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution ...” (European Parliament. 2014): 8.



communities where they are known but, whatever their location, it is difficult for them to escape abuse, exploitation or violence since, as Sarah Kingston argues, how prostitution is “perceived and responded to within society” is defined by the “cultural context in which prostitution is situated.”²⁰

As writers of Igbo descent, Unigwe’s and Ndibe’s representation of the characters’ consciousness is influenced by the cultural context and how prostitution is perceived by the prostitutes and the society. Sisi in *On Black Sisters’ Street* is ambivalent about her identity as a prostitute. This ambivalence is demonstrated through the split in her character. Her dual identity appears to be on a collision course as it is always fusing and interfering with her choices. In Ogba, prostitution is something Chisom would never have considered, because, in Ogba, she has acquired what it takes to succeed in the society. She has a university education and that is considered as key to a good life, a life full of great expectations. It is what entitles her to dream big. University education is the dream her father could not actualize, a dream he will pass on to Chisom, because for him, education is the ““only way to a better life””²¹. The father claims that he could have been a doctor, an engineer or ““a big man””²² but for his lack of education. Thus investment in Chisom’s education is a ticket out of poverty, a passport to the good life. Ironically, in the end, her education could not buy her any of the things they had hoped for. But this lack does not eliminate all the options, because this is a culture that puts marriage and family above academic qualifications, particularly for females. So with Peter, there is hope for Chisom but her dream is bigger than Peter. He “did not have the means to turn her life around”²³, neither does she have the right degree to attract the kind of suitors, “men returning home from Europe and America with wallets full of foreign currency”²⁴, who could have given her a bright future. Therefore, prostitution in Ogba for Chisom is insupportable. She sees her escape from Ogba as the beginning of good things to come. “She was heading into the lights of her future”²⁵.

If Chisom had become a prostitute in Ogba, she would have suffered familial rejection and cultural alienation, because prostitution in her culture is regarded as the worst sort of self-profanation. It is an abominable act, something that is unspeakable within the culture. Thus, Belgium is more desirable for Chisom as it is a world apart from Ogba. Also, the city of Antwerp, in her perception, is “the place to be when your dreams died, the place of

²⁰ Sarah Kingston. *Prostitution in the Community: Attitudes, Action and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2014): 13

²¹ Chika Unigwe. *On Black Sisters’ Street* (London: Vintage Books, 2009): 18.

²² Ibid: 19

²³ Ibid: 29

²⁴ Ibid: 29

²⁵ Ibid: 48



miracles; a place where dead dreams resurrected and soared and allowed you to catch them and live them”²⁶. In this place, she would not be censured, because prostitution, even if not accepted, seems to be tolerated. This is a place where her race more than her profession is considered as “other”, as she is considered as exotic amongst her clients. Thus, it is within the red light district that she becomes desirable and visible in a country where she does not exist. Although Sisi believes that prostitution in Antwerp will give her everything that her education could not, yet she remains ambivalent about it. Prostitution is supposed to liberate her from financial burdens, ironically, it is equally something that alienates her from herself, from her individual and cultural consciousness. Or, it can be said that prostitution is a paradox for Sisi, because it has the capacity to set free and to enslave. Her identity as a prostitute is a form of mental scarring, a form of mental and psychological wound.

Her first day at “work”²⁷ clearly expresses this feeling of alienation. Sexual intimacies with strangers will unearth self-loathing in her, a feeling produced by the knowledge of her cultural moral codes of behaviour. She is with a stranger who is “not the type of man she would have slept with”²⁸ ordinarily. But this man will have access to her body whatever her feelings, because he will pay for her services at the end. As the man touches her breast, her whole being revolts against this violation or desecration of her being. Her body has been reduced to a mere commodity. This estranges her from herself and destroys her self-esteem. But worse than these is the loss of self, the loss of identity. There is also this inability to separate the real from the imaginary, to recognise her real self as the following excerpt demonstrates:

*This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else. Another body. Not mine. This is not me. This is somebody else. ... This is not me. This is not me. This is a dream. ... This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. A Lexus sparkled in her head. Think of the money. Then a candlewick with a human body. God help me!*²⁹

It can be said that, through stream of consciousness, she reveals the rupture in her personality or her inability to reconcile her dual identity – Chisom and Sisi. As Sisi, she is supposed to be professional, to be clinical about her job but it is Chisom, the graduate with ambition, whom she casts off in Nigeria that she seems to think and act like in Antwerp.

²⁶ Ibid: 105

²⁷ Ibid: 183

²⁸ Ibid: 209

²⁹ Ibid: 212 italics in the original



The image of death is something that Sisi cannot seem to shake off. She appears to be shadowed by this image, first in Lagos and later, she will encounter it real in Antwerp.

From the moment she dresses for her job in Antwerp, she begins to experience internal conflict – the who she is and the who she is to become begin to war inside her. The knowledge that her life has sunk so low, even with her degree, awakens murderous “thoughts that made her wish she could smash things”³⁰ (201). It can be said that it is as Chisom that she feels when she is inaugurated into her new profession. Thus:

In a toilet cubicle, Dieter pulled his trousers down to his ankles.... He held her close. Pushed her against the wall, his hands cupping her buttocks, and buried his head in her breasts. ‘Stop,’ she shouted again.... Stop! His moans swallowed her voice. His penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed ... inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she baptised herself into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain wherever he touched, like he was searing her with a razor blade that had just come off a fire.³¹

She feels with this intensity because she has lost her dignity and pride as a woman. Whereas she is valued in Ogba, in Antwerp, she is reduced to a mere object, a sex object without value. The mental violence she experiences is due to the knowledge that she has lost her freedom. Similarly, the death or loss of Sisi’s identity constitutes another form of mental scarring. If she was nobody in Ogba, in Antwerp, she is a ghost. Thus prostitution awakens in her such intense self-hatred, because despite the riches she hopes to amass from prostitution, she could not do away with the feeling that she has become something “other”, a reject of society – something unsavoury, fit for the trash. Her death is a clear demonstration of what her life has become – trash – and trash is not valued. It is inconsequential. Unlike Sisi who is not sexually exploited before coming to Antwerp, Ama, Joyce and Efe come to Antwerp already scarred, already broken. If their bodies have already been defiled and marred, prostitution could not be any worse than their past experiences. Since they are all “*damaged goods*”³², prostitution, therefore, appears to be a way of survival rather than an act of shame. If their bodies had been violated without apology, why would they resist prostitution if it promises handsome payment? Giving their bodies to men who will pay for their services far outweigh the degradation and abuse they suffer without gain. It is on this premise that Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* will justify prostitution. Ama who suffers rape and abuse in the hands of her foster-father, a man she

³⁰ Ibid: 201

³¹ Ibid: 213.

³² Ibid: 75



knows as her father, shares similar sentiments as the following passage reveals:

Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted, no questions asked. No please or may I or could I. Discarding her when she no longer sufficed. And strange men taking and paying for her services. And it would not even be in Lagos. But Overseas. Which earned you respect for being there. It was not like she would be standing outside nightclubs in Lagos Island hoping that she would not run into someone who might recognise her.³³

Ama understands how prostitution is considered in her culture but what moves her to accept Dele's offer eventually is the fact that her status as someone living overseas is valued above what one does overseas. On the other hand, prostitution overseas will guarantee the kind of anonymity that the job requires. Thus Sisi's housemates and workmates will adapt to prostitution in a manner that Sisi never could, because Sisi does not have the "resilience"³⁴ the job requires.

In *Arrows of Rain*, objectification of a woman's body, rape, sexual exploitation and physical assault are forms of violence. The men who purchase sex as well as the law enforcement agents, especially the Vice Squad, inflict these forms of violence. For Iyese, it is one of her patrons, Major Isa Palat Bello, who will inflict the cruellest violence on her. However, like Sisi's housemates, Iyese enters into prostitution already scarred. Her marriage to Dr. Jaja is a form of mental scarring for her. Due to her inability to conceive, Dr. Jaja turns their love-making into a mechanical exercise, a routine bodily encounter engaged in for the sake of procreation or as Dr. Jaja describes it, "the procreation project"³⁵. Thus Iyese's body is treated as a mere object whose function is purely to bring children into the world, a baby-making machine that will be discarded and replaced with a more functional or productive one.

It is Dr. Jaja's betrayal more than her inability to conceive that causes emotional scarring for Iyese. Since she redeemed Dr. Jaja from a sexless life and introduced him to the delights of the flesh, she feels Jaja would have been patient with her until perhaps her body can be coaxed to learn to fulfil its function. Thus the effect of Dr. Jaja's betrayal on Iyese is like a physical wound:

the pain began to seep into her, to enter her through all the feeling spots in her body. As it drilled towards the centre of her being, she felt the room begin to spin in circles, slowly at first but quickly gathering motion.

³³ Ibid: 166

³⁴ Ibid: 184

³⁵ Okey Ndibe. *Arrows of Rain* (Essex: Heinemann, 2000): 149



The air became dense, blue; his face, before her, appeared to expand and dissolve. The room swam; her head rang with echoes. An anguished groan, involuntary, broke her silence as she slid into unconsciousness.³⁶

Her childlessness has wounded her spirit and pride as a woman, but Dr. Jaja's betrayal intensifies her misery, the misery is so deep that she collapses under the weight of such torturous pain.

Iyese would leave a life she considers as a life of indignity and betrayal to become a prostitute, in other words, she enters a life of ignominy. Or she considers the shame of being childless and losing her husband's love and her position to a fruitful womb worse than sharing her body with strangers in a strange city. Or it can be said that being childless has already stripped her of honour so that prostitution cannot dishonour her any more than childlessness has done. On the other hand, it may be that prostitution is a form of self-determination or assertion for her. If her body belonged to another who rejected it, because it was incapable of procreation, prostitution may be a way of enjoying her body without the demands of childbearing. It can equally be that Iyese seeks to be like Nnenna, the woman who steals her husband's affection as Nnenna is said to be "by no means an angel, that she wore thigh-revealing skirts and high-heeled shoes and painted her eyelashes with mascara. Some said she went to parties wearing no bra, so that her supple breasts heaved wickedly when she danced, tempting even the impotent"³⁷. Ironically, despite Nnenna's lack of innocence, her body will redeem her in the culture but, in spite of Iyese's innocence, her body will betray and dishonour her. Therefore, prostitution for Iyese can be said to be something that liberates.

If she is marred by her marriage to Dr. Jaja, prostitution will not only cut deep scars on her body, it will destroy her. The wound will also be lethal. Major Isa Palat Bello will be the ruin of Iyese. His position in the military and his background as the son of an Emir confer authority on him and it is equally his knowledge of the cultural and social context in which prostitution is perceived that fuels his violent and ruthless behaviour towards Iyese. He claims that he will kill Iyese "without consequence"³⁸ and he would carry out this threat. He would violently assault her on several occasions. However, the most dehumanizing is raping Iyese after stabbing her "vagina with a dagger"³⁹. After this attack, Iyese will denounce her life. She comes to the realization that her life is a useless and worthless life, a life without "meaning"⁴⁰, because there is no honour in prostitution just shame and

³⁶ Ibid: 154

³⁷ Ibid: 152-3

³⁸ Ibid 158

³⁹ Ibid: 166

⁴⁰ Ibid: 167



abuse. She would prefer to die rather than live, because she is treated like something less than human. Like Sisi, the image of death is strong around Iyese and Emilia. Evil, death and doom shadow her life as a wife and as a prostitute.

Tay Tay, the prostitute Bukuru revives, would feel the same way after being raped and brutalized by soldiers. More than the physical pain which she says is indescribable, what she also finds as demeaning or intolerable is the fact that she is treated like the lowest of the low in the social order of things. It is also the knowledge that nothing can save her from such violence and abuse since the government and her security agents orchestrate the violence. As a prostitute, she freely offers her body in exchange for money or gifts. Thus whether she sees herself as “a real prostitute”⁴¹ or not, the fact remains that she offers her body willingly to men, no matter the number in one night, for financial gain, but that does not make rape tolerable for her nor for Iyese. They feel dehumanized by rape since rape can be said to rob women of dignity. It mars or scars the victims, because it is something that erodes their sense of self. It denies their personhood.

Although all the women who are raped in *Arrows of Rain* are prostitutes, it does not make the traumatic experience less intense and what seems to wound the prostitutes more deeply is knowing that their assailants are protected by the law; in fact, they have the authority to treat them any how it pleases them. As far as the government and the society are concerned, they do not count; they do not exist. They are ghosts. The prostitute who deliberately walks into the lagoon does so, because rather than reliving such unspeakably inhuman treatment that she receives in the hands of the soldiers, she would literally forfeit her life, because, for her, life is no more worth living; she is already broken, “already utterly destroyed”⁴². To be treated worse than dirt or as a ghost appears to be the worst form of death. The death in question is metaphorical; not only does it imply a psychological death but also the death of identity as one’s identity describes who one is and how one is treated. To be without an identity is to be lost and dead, ultimately. So the life and death of one who does not exist in the society matter to no one but to the person. Since the lives of these women matter to no one, they will rely on one another for emotional support and care but more importantly, they will seek for ways to reclaim their lost identity.

1.2 (Re)covering the Traumatized Female Body

Since prostitution is inherently violent and traumatic, some of the prostitutes will want to redeem their identity, because prostitution seems to deny their identity as subjects. Or the death of their identity and the scars they sustain as prostitutes will motivate the characters, Sisi and Iyese, to denounce prostitution. Love, marriage and family give women honour in

⁴¹ Ibid: 215

⁴² Ibid:220



most African cultures, thus, Sisi and Iyese see these as means of re-covering their naked bodies, of recovering their lost identity. For Sisi, it is love and marriage and, for Iyese, it is love and motherhood. Their experiences as prostitutes awaken the desire to renounce prostitution in order to acquire a legitimate identity or to break free of an identity that puts them within the bracket of silence and absence, because their life as prostitutes emphasizes the absence of life, identity and freedom. Since absence and silence signify death, Sisi and Iyese will struggle to reclaim the life they have lost or to give themselves a new lease in life.

After eight months in prostitution and coupled with scars she has received, Sisi feels ready to “reclaim her life,” because she has “more than paid her dues”⁴³. Thus: “She would get rid of Sisi, let a fire consume Sisi, char her and scatter her ashes”⁴⁴. Sisi wants to redeem her identity as Chisom; Chisom, the graduate with prospects and dignity. As Chisom, she has maximum control over her life but as Sisi, she is owned; she is the property of Madam and Dele and this is why she despises her new identity, because it renders her voiceless and powerless. Sisi’s resistance of her status in Antwerp initiates the conflicts between her and the people who own her for as Michel Foucault postulates, power attracts resistance, because “if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations.”⁴⁵ Thus Sisi resists her identity since it is created by Dele and reinforced by Madam. It is in defiance of Dele and Madam’s control that she would want to “get rid of Sisi”⁴⁶. On the other hand, Sisi equally despises being spoken to as “a child”⁴⁷ as if she has no mind of her own, without choice or reason. Madam will impress it on her that her survival in Antwerp depends on her relinquishing her agency, her will. Reasons, decisions, questions are beyond her. They belong to the mistress, to Madam who is her superior in the business as well as in education. What is expected of her is “Silence and total obedience”⁴⁸; she is to be seen and not heard. It is the rule of the house.

Sisi’s visit to Keyserlei is her way of trying to recreate her identity. It is also a way of covering her body, her shame, because there she ‘was any story she chose. Far away from people she knew and who knew her’⁴⁹. Since the Vingerlingstraat has made her body despicable, to the extent that she “could no longer bear to look at herself, not even when she was alone”⁵⁰ she takes to going to places in Antwerp where she can create her own

⁴³ Chika Unigwe. *On Black Sisters’ Street* (London: Vintage Books, 2009): 276

⁴⁴ Ibid: 276

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault. *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. (New York: The New Press, 1994): 167.

⁴⁶ On Black Sisters’ Street: 276

⁴⁷ Ibid: 120

⁴⁸ Ibid: 120

⁴⁹ Ibid: 258-9

⁵⁰ Ibid: 248



story. In the daytime, she wants to expunge her identity as a prostitute as it is this identity that inflicts both mental and bodily wounds on her. Thus in order to own the imaginary identities she has created, she will take to collecting items or buying things which match or reflect these new identities.

It is also in her quest to find meaning in her life that she follows Efe to her church where she meets Luc. However, it is Sisi the property of Dele and Madam that Luc falls in love with. The tragedy is that Sisi is not free to love or live as she pleases. Thus if re-covering her nakedness will expose those of her owners then she must be destroyed, because she has signed up for this nakedness; it is the essence of being in Antwerp. Since this is a nakedness she consented to, she cannot cover that nakedness without fulfilling her own part of the bargain. She is a bondwoman so her freedom comes at a price and to prove that she has no power to seize her freedom, she will be destroyed.

Unlike the ex-Ghanaian prostitute who succeeds in finding love and freedom, Sisi will not succeed. It is not because of her inability to find *true love* but, because, unlike the Ghanaian prostitute, whose love or saviour clears her debt, Luc is unable to clear Sisi's debt. The police cannot save her either since she is "persona non grata"⁵¹ in the country. Also, involving the police will expose the rest of her housemates who, like her, will face deportation since they are all "illegal immigrant[s]"⁵². Thus her freedom or desire to re-clothe her body will incarcerate madam and ruin her business, outcomes that will consume them all. So, Segun is always there with his hammer to make sure that no investment goes awry. He is there to knock out any loose ends or to eliminate all forms of threats. The hammer, therefore, is symbolic and metaphoric. It can be said to symbolize justice as perceived by her *masters*. It is also a metaphor for death. It is this hammer that will cause the ultimate scarring, the deadly wound that kills Sisi.

Iyese, on the other hand, feels that love can redeem her. But Ogugua will distance himself from what he considers as her shame, the scandal of being with a prostitute⁵³. The woman to be with is a cultured, wholesome woman – a woman of dignity. Like Sisi, Iyese discovers that the idea of agency in prostitution is an illusion. Although Iyese can be described as a freelance prostitute, because she is not a bond prostitute, incidentally, she is indebted to Major Isa Palat Bello, her major patron, who considers himself as her owner because he believes he has earned that right or bought that right because of the gifts he has lavished on her. This he believes gives him the right and the power to determine whether or not her

⁵¹ Ibid: 182

⁵² Ibid: 274

⁵³ Okey Ndibe. *Arrows of Rain* (Essex: Heinemann, 2000): 171



body can be covered and how that body will be clothed again. Bello understands the cultural and social implication of Iyese's status. Although Langa is described as "a vast, strange human bazaar where shame had no odour because people lived anonymously"⁵⁴ Iyese is invisible in this city and, at the same time, she is hunted. Since the state has launched a campaign against prostitutes and prostitution, anyone who gets rid of a prostitute is likely to have done the state a service thus the law will probably reward rather than punish such a person. Bello therefore knows that he has absolute power and authority over Iyese. He has the power of life and death over her. Not only will he thwart her desire to re-cover her nakedness but he will also take her life in the cruellest of circumstances, because to him and the society, she is worthless. She is trash.

Similarly, Sisi's death reinforces this idea of prostitutes as filth, as worthless. The whole of the narrative circles around her death which is represented by the use of flashback and foreshadowing, and unlike the other characters who tell their stories themselves, Sisi's story is told by a third person omniscient narrator who knows this character inside out and can tell her struggles within and without. Like Iyese, Sisi dies a violent anonymous death, her body like "a discarded *rag*" unnoticed on the floor. "Unmourned. Unloved. Unknown"⁵⁵. Ironically, in death, Iyese "was sprawled on the floor, naked ..."⁵⁶. This nakedness she so desperately wanted to cover will be the death of her and even in death, the body will be naked. Also, the nakedness does not speak of vulnerability but shame and indecency. Their bodies, Sisi's and Iyese's, in life as in death, are seen as hideous. Sisi's death, however, is ironical and symbolic. She escapes from Lagos, "a city of death"⁵⁷ only to encounter it in Antwerp, the city of light, the city of life, the city where she is supposed to be immortal.

Ama, Efe and Joyce in *On Black Sisters' Street* are characters who will eventually cover their nakedness. However, they will wait many years before they are able to re-cover their nakedness having paid all they owe. Thus it would seem that it is Sisi and Iyese's desire to assert themselves as subjects, to defy the dictates of those who claim ownership or control of their bodies that lead to their destruction or it can be said that their deaths prove that violent death is the ultimate destiny of prostitutes.

Conclusion

The essay has demonstrated that violence shadows the life of prostitutes, because prostitution is inherently violent. Although some of the characters see prostitution as a form

⁵⁴ Ibid: 157

⁵⁵ *On Black Sisters' Street*: 39

⁵⁶ *Arrows of Rain*: 179

⁵⁷ *On Black Sisters' Street*: 98



of self-assertion or a way to buy a future or a better life, they soon realize that their bodies do not belong to them alone; they are owned. Thus, it can be said that whether a woman joined prostitution voluntarily or did so by coercion, it is almost always traumatic – an emotional, physical or psychological trauma that causes scarring on a woman’s body. Being confined within the borders of absence and silence strip the women of dignity and also of identity so that they become desperate for freedom. They become desperate to recover their naked bodies, to recover their identities. Since these prostitutes lack control of their bodies or rather, they belong to agents and forces bigger than they are; to quit prostitution is, ultimately, to forfeit one’s life. To put it in another way, the act of prostitution is seen as excess, one which borders on the profane; this therefore defines how prostitutes are treated in the society. Since the prostitutes are classified as “other”, as the rejects of society because they have crossed over the boundary of what the society considers acceptable moral behaviour, it is almost always impossible for them to escape abuse and exploitation. Their identity attracts a destiny that is violent and, ultimately, tragic.

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