Survival strategies of black female characters in Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street*

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***Oorlewingstrategieë van swart vrouekarakters in Chika Unigwe se roman* On Black Sisters' Street**

Chika Unigwe is in Nigerië gebore en haar roman On Black Sisters' Street bevat 'n priemende ontleding van die situasie van swart vroulikheid in die hedendaagse België. Sy beskryf die lewe van slagoffers van mensehandel wat 'n lewe probeer maak in Antwerpen se rooiligdistrik. Deur middel van haar karakters problematiseer sy hul gemarginaliseerde bestaan daar waar gender, ras, mag en politiek oorvleuel. Hierdeur gee sy 'n stem aan mense wat stilgemaak en op vele maniere 'n onsigbare groep in die samelewing is. In hierdie artikel word 'n interseksionele ontleding gedoen en word die roman gesitueer binne die groter konteks van Unigwe se skryfwerke en aktivisme, asook ten opsigte van haar ervaring as immigrant en swart vrou in België. Aandag word gevestig op hoe die vier vrouekarakters in die roman hul subjektiwiteit navigeer as Afrika-vroue in 'n wit, Europese konteks en hoe hulle 'n sin vir hul eie identiteit handhaaf terwyl hulle as gemarginaliseerde, 'weggooibare' subjekte van mensehandel beskou word. In hierdie artikel sal geargumenteer word dat hierdie karakters hul sin vir identiteit en agentskap haal uit verskillende strategieë en hul herkonseptualisering van wat vir hulle hul tuiste is.

1. Background and contextualisation

Chika Unigwe was born in 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. In Nsukka, she commenced her studies at the University of Nigeria. There, she obtained a BA degree in English in 1995. In the same year, Unigwe moved to Belgium after marrying a Belgian engineer, making her husband's home her own. In Europe she continued her studies. In 1996, she obtained an MA degree in English from the Catholic University of Leuven, and thereafter, in 2004, earned a PhD from the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, for her dissertation entitled "In the Shadow of Ala: Igbo Women Writing as an Act of Righting" (Anon. 2020).

For a number of years, Unigwe was active in Flemish regional politics as a city council member for the Christian-Democratic party CD&V (Christian Democratic and Flemish). In 2009 she left the Flemish political scene to concentrate solely on her writing career. With the exception of two years that she spent in Seattle, Unigwe lived in Belgium until 2013 when the family moved to the United States where they currently reside.

As a writer and intellectual, Unigwe continues to play an important role in the Flemish cultural scene. Her novels, although they are written in English, are first published in Dutch translation. Her most recent novel, *De zwarte messias* (2013), is about Olaudah Equiano, a famous 18th-century slave and the voice of the abolitionist movement. It has yet to be published in English.

Unigwe has a lot of firsts to her name. She is the first black Flemish author, first published female migrant author in Flanders and the first Flemish migrant author to have their books translated from Dutch to English.

Although she started out writing poetry and collections of poems, such as *Tear Drops* (1993) and *Born in Nigeria* (1995), she has built a reputation mainly as a fiction and non-fiction writer. She was awarded the 2003 BBC World Service Short Story Competition's first prize for *Borrowed Smile* (2003), was nominated for the Caine Prize for African writing in 2004 and was awarded the prestigious NLNG Prize for Literature in 2012. In 2003 she entered the literary scene in Flanders when she won the Flemish Literary Prize for her first short story in Dutch. The short story "De smaak van sneeuw" ('The Taste of Snow') was published in the short story collection *De Eerste Keer: Tien jonge talenten aan de start van hun schrijversloopbaan* ('The first time: Ten young talents at the start of their writer's career'). Of the ten young writers to be published that year, she was the only non-native Dutch speaker (Bekers, 2015: 27).

Her Nigerian background and the migration experience play an important role in her writing. She wrote a number of (semi-)autobiographic essays and stories drawing on her personal experience of life in Belgium. A title of an essay from 2013, "Losing My Voice", seems to be symbolic of an experience of a cultural clash. Unigwe (2013a) writes:

> When I began to write again, I discovered that I was not writing the kind of fiction I would have written back home. Certainly not at first. I wrote about displacement and sorrow. The voices of immigrants filled my head and spilled out on several pages of short stories and then a novel, *The Phoenix*. My characters were mostly melancholic women unable to return home but lacking the tools (or perhaps the temperament) to fit into their new home. They were victims browbeaten into silence by an alien culture and an alien climate. Perhaps it was me wanting to pass on what I had suffered to someone else.

In the interview that Elisabeth Bekers (2015: 28) conducted with her, Unigwe describes these themes in her writing as "writing about migrant women, very melancholic women who do not have the tools to settle in this new space, or who are unable to go back" and compares this to the position in which she found herself at the beginning of her stay in Belgium. The similarity of the two

statements might point to how deeply the migrant experience has influenced Unigwe as a writer and in so doing contribute to the urge to pass on what she has experienced.

Unigwe's 'European' (or 'post-migration') novels do concentrate on the experience of African migrants in the West, and specifically in Belgium. Even her most recent novel, *De zwarte messias* (2013), in which she writes about a historical figure, has the same central themes as her other works, which are racism, human trafficking, and the desire to belong. The importance of Unigwe in the Dutch literary field is acknowledged by her inclusion in a collection of short stories in 2018 with a significant title *Zwart. Afro-Europese literatuur uit de Lage Landen* ('Black. Afro-European Literature from the Low Countries'). The collection, edited by Vamba Sherif and Ebissé Rouw, is an attempt to claim a place for African writers within Dutch literature. Sherif and Ebussé (2018: 11) have gathered 20 of what they have termed 'fresh, innovative, raw and challenging' African voices, from both the Netherlands and Flanders – the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. They close the foreword with the statement that it is their 'expectation ánd hope that by the means of this collection the Dutch literary landscape will change forever' (Sherif and Ebussé, 2018: 13).

Unigwe's (2018: 195-201) contribution, called "Anekdotes om rond de tafel te vertellen" ('Anecdotes to tell at the table'), contains anecdotes about her migration and especially integration in Belgium. These experiences speak of being at the receiving end of racial and gender prejudice in the Belgian society. One of the recurring themes in her contribution is what she portrays as the impossibility of un-becoming a migrant which she attributed to her skin colour: While her Polish neighbours' son can change his name and cut himself loose from a disabling xenophobia her own children will always be considered migrants. Even though they have a Belgian father, were born in Belgium and do not know or have any other 'home', "it seems to be their destiny to feel rootless, lost in a labyrinth" (Unigwe, 2018: 198-99).

In the interview with Bekers (2015: 28), Unigwe speaks about the label 'allochtoon', a discriminatory and exclusionary term, which in practice means that you can never become a local:

> When you're writing about Africa and revisiting the place, you are doing so from Belgium. Even though you are married to a Belgian and your children were born here, you are still often considered an "immigrant" – what Dutch-speaking people call an "allochtoon". "Allochtoon" literally means "from elsewhere"; it's a geological term that has the presumption of being a neutral term, but it isn't because it tends to be only applied to non-Western immigrants.

As Unigwe states, such a way of thinking makes it very difficult for migrants to belong. In an interview published in a Flemish magazine, *MO*, Unigwe shares her own experience of being a migrant in Flanders, mentioning loneliness as a fundamental part of the migrant experience. She claims that such loneliness would not have been the case in Africa, since people there tend to visit and approach each other much more easily (Goris, 2005). It seems logical to assume that Unigwe's personal trajectory as a migrant, the hardships she has faced and the feelings of "visceral loneliness" (Tunca, Mortimer and Del Calzo, 2013: 54) have influenced her writing. In Unigwe's first European novel, *The Phoenix* (2007), the author tells a story of a Nigerian woman called Oge who, after being diagnosed with cancer and estranged from her Belgian husband, fights to find a sense of herself in the unwelcoming Belgian social environment.

2. *On Black Sisters' Street*

Unigwe's second novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* (2010), concentrates on four female characters – Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce – who have been trafficked from Nigeria to Antwerp by a pimp from Lagos, called Dele. For different reasons, all four of them have, forced by various circumstances, agreed to work for him and pay him a percentage of their earnings in return for organizing their illegal entry into Europe. They end up sharing a house in Zwartezusterstraat – meaning literally 'black sisters' street', referring, however, to white nuns' black habits – and working in the red light district of Antwerp, the Schipperskwartier, at night.

Sisi, a university graduate, is portrayed as being frustrated by the lack of job and life opportunities back home and decides to travel to Belgium with its promise of money and a better life. Efe is a single mother who does what she can to support her son back home. Ama is running away from the sexual abuse of her stepfather and dreams of financial independence. Joyce is a refugee from South Sudan who was "sold" to Dele by her Nigerian boyfriend after his mother had disapproved of their relationship.

When, at the beginning of the novel, Sisi is brutally murdered, the remaining three characters are brought together and after months of living next to each other without opening themselves up to one another, they share their stories and tell each other of their lives that brought them to that precarious space. Later on, the reader is informed that Sisi was murdered because she tried to escape the house and sex work to live with her Belgian boyfriend. Sisi is proven wrong in her reasoning that Dele cannot hurt her from afar when the seemingly innocent and harmless Segun kills her, as assigned by Dele, with an axe. The

sentence "Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele!" (Unigwe, 2009: 271) serves as a reminder of their position and a sense of inescapability.

In an interview conducted by Daria Tunca, Unigwe explains her motivations for writing a novel about illegal Nigerian sex workers (Tunca, Mortimer and Del Calzo, 2013: 54):

> After I moved to Belgium, I made a journey by train from the north of the country to Brussels, and I remember passing through Brussels North and seeing all the prostitutes in the display windows. It struck me that here was a place where sex was not only very openly talked about, but was also openly up for sale. That was one of the first cultural shocks. And when I realised that many of the African prostitutes in Antwerp were from Nigeria, I became really curious. *On Black Sisters' Street* was my way of answering all the questions I had. It was a book I wrote to satisfy my own curiosity.

The acknowledgements at the end of Unigwe's second novel (2009: 297) begins as follows:

> Writing *On Black Sisters' Street* has been a learning experience for me. I am, in the first place, grateful to those whose story it is: the nameless Nigerian sex workers who allowed me into their lives, answering my questions and laughing at my ignorance.

Unigwe also uses the phrase "learning experience" in a paper she published in the *Journal of the African Literature Association* in 2008, which is based on the research done for *On Black Sisters' Street* (Unigwe, 2008: 116): "It was a learning experience for me and ultimately an enriching one. (…) I am hoping that the paper will elicit dialogue as well as contribute to this very pertinent discourse of (female) sexual migration." This intersection of academic, intellectual and literary work is an aspect of all Unigwe's work, since her ambitions are clearly not merely literary but also, socio-cultural.

On Black Sisters' Street is a "pioneering text" (Bastida-Rodriguez, 2014: 204) because it charts the growing group of African migrants in Belgium, but more importantly, because of its account of the stories of sex trafficking, which are often not in the narratives of Afro-European subjectivities, or in the narratives of migration in general. Ladele and Omotayo (2017: 57) describe the text as a very realistic portrayal of "the extremely degraded life of female black immigrants' existence in the West". Unigwe did not create a homogenous tragic narrative of human trafficking. One could say that, apart from Alek/Joyce who was sold in a way by her boyfriend, all the other female characters have chosen this path themselves. The issue of agency in the novel is thus much more complex. In

the interview conducted by Tunca, Unigwe discusses this aspect of her novel as follows (Tunca, Mortimer, and Del Calzo, 2013: 55):

> It was very difficult for me to get my head around the fact that a woman would choose to bribe someone to bring her over to Europe and be paraded naked. And not being bought is seen as a failure. So yes, it is a choice they've made, but they've only made it because they didn't have alternatives available to them. When I was writing the book, I had to redefine for myself what the parameters of choice were. Perhaps Alek was indeed forced into prostitution, but the other girls were also forced into it by circumstances. In a way they're all as much victims as Alek.

Even though their reasons and circumstances differ from each other, all four of the characters have become "available to be enslaved because of their vulnerability" (Bales, 2012: xxv). The heterogeneity of their stories, and the various means of coping with their precarious existence, is what makes *On Black Sisters' Street* an interesting and challenging novel. The following analysis concentrates on a number of themes in the novel, striving to reveal "the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination" (Davis, 2008: 67) in the (forced) migrant subjectivities of black women in Belgium.

3. Themes

3.1 *Disposability*

Isoke (2013: 1) describes black women who have a low income as "(…) lacking in respectable claims to citizenship and belonging". This is even more true in the case of the illegal black migrant sex workers in *On Black Sisters' Street*. The female characters living in the house in Zwartezusterstraat are dehumanized and robbed of their personality and identity in multiple ways. The red-light district of Antwerp, where the four characters live and work, is a "death zone of humanity" (Balibar 2001: 24) where they constantly have to face the cumulative effect of different forms of extreme violence or cruelty. "Transatlantic slavery, from the slave ship and beyond, was predicated on various practices of spatialized violence that targeted black bodies and profited from erasing a black sense of place," writes McKittrick (2011: 948). Human trafficking, as depicted in *On Black Sisters' Street*, is operating with similar mechanisms. The four women in the novel are represented as those 'without', struggling with "black placelessness" (Balibar 2001: 24).

"We're not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals. (…)", claims Efe after Madam coldly

informs them that they are expected at work the next day and that she has found a replacement for Sisi (Unigwe, 2009: 289-90). Ama, Efe, Joyce and Sisi are portrayed as the embodiment of a disposable type of woman: "a young woman from a third world locale – who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of human disposability" (Wright 2013: 2). Even though they are treated like "living form(s) of human waste" they "simultaneously produce many valuable things with their labor" (Wright 2013: 2).

Ladele and Omotayo (2017: 56) argue fatalistically that "(…) irrespective of the society in which a black woman finds herself, the tentacles of patriarchal structures including the religious institutions also impinge on her freedom". The Dele character who in a literal sense owns the four women in Zwartezusterstraat embodies this patriarchal power. Sisi is proven wrong about Dele's far reaching power over her when she is killed. This reminds one of what Achille Mbembe (2003) argues in his article "Necropolitics". In that sense, Sisi is "put to death", while Senghor Dele is "exercising the right to kill" (Mbembe 2003: 12). By this action, Dele reduces Sisi to an object and affirms his position as a subject in power to instruct such actions, – a modern-day slave-owner.

The women sharing the apartment in Zwartezusterstraat are represented as replaceable, and disposable (Bauman, 2014), even compared to cockroaches (Unigwe, 2009: 39) and "a commodity for sale, a slab of meat at the local abattoir" (Unigwe, 2009: 182). They are treated like objects by their customers who are looking for an(y) African to feed their European porno-tropical fantasies (McClintock, 2013: 22) and reinforce their superior sense of self, since "ethnosexual frontiers are exotic, but volatile social spaces, fertile sites for the eruption of violence" (Nagel, 2003: 55). On a number of occasions in the novel, the women are called by their customers "you Africans" (see pages 36 and 178), reflecting the replaceability of these women in the eyes of their customers. The women experience the most painful realization of their mortality and replaceability when Madam informs them casually of Sisi's death: "The same questions go through their heads. Who is going to die next? To lie like a discarded rag unnoticed on the floor? Unmourned. Unloved. Unknown. Who will be the next ghost Madam will try to keep away with the power of her incense?" (Unigwe, 2009: 39). When Madam adds "another one bites the dust" (Unigwe, 2009: 39), Ama, Efe and Joyce are portrayed as feeling furious and helpless at the same time. The moment that they are informed about Sisi's death, therefore makes them feel vulnerable and literally enslaved. The characters experience (Bales 2012: viii) "the damage to their bodies through trauma and untreated disease, the theft of their lives and work, the destruction of their dignity, and the fat profits others make from their sweat".

3.2 *Identity*

The four female characters are not only treated as interchangeable, but they have literally been robbed of their official identity when even their (fake) passports have been confiscated by their madam: "'All you need to know is that you're persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here.' Madam took a drag from her cigarette, lifted her face upwards and exhaled."

The women were made to use fake names. Sisi had chosen a new name herself as a means of distancing herself from her previous life. Alek has had a new name appointed to her by Dele, since her own name sounded too masculine and not fun enough, as indicated in the following scene: "'Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like anem wey dey always jolly. Joooooyyce!'" (Unigwe, 2009: 230). Later, Efe witnesses an auction of young women in Brussels (Unigwe, 2009: 278):

> (T)he women would be called into the room one at a time for the buyers to see and admire. They would all have numbers, for names are not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off their tongues. Nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with the odd combinations of consonants that make African names difficult for fragile tongues.

Their European existence seems to consist of layers of half-truths, fake identities and lies. The women apply for asylum in Belgium with fake migration stories, even telling each other fake personal histories, such as the following (Unigwe, 2009: 237):

> And in between the customers she talked with the woman from Albania who rented the booth beside hers, a partition wall separating them. (…) They talked about their childhoods. Sisi made hers up. And she was sure the Albanian woman did too. They were people without any past, people with forgotten pasts, so whatever was said would have to be made up of air.

At the same time, Sisi adds that "the act of talking meant a lot more than what was talked about. It meant someone still saw you as more than a toy to pass time with." (Unigwe, 2009: 237). Even though both characters are too cautious to tell their real-life stories, the mere fact of talking creates an intimacy and humanity they do not receive from their customers. While being dehumanized and robbed of their identity in multiple ways every day, they still find means of maintaining their humanity. These strategies make it possible for the characters to cope with the precarious position they find themselves in. While it rings true that "(…) 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" (Ladele and Omotayo 2017: 56), Unigwe shows also that these black female migrant characters formulate new strategies of identity-forming and survival. Apart from portraying the precarious existence of black women who end up as illegal sex workers in the city of Antwerp, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* is also a novel which speaks of striving and surviving, and of exploring coping mechanisms.

3.3 *Africanness as strategic identity*

While labelled and homogenized as Africans by Belgians and especially their customers, the characters Sisi, Efe, Joyce and Ama also choose to think of themselves as African. The four female characters draw strength from, among other things, their shared identity and cultural background. This is compatible with Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism". It is a "critical strategy, which mimes the negative representation of minority groups" (Morton, 2003: 75), but at the same time clearly has positive implications for the marginalized subjectivities. Among other things, the women cook Nigerian food together and braid each other's hair. They also interact with other African immigrants. In Belgium the idea that 'Africa is a country' still has traction and at moments the shared, however partial, background provides a source of empowerment and social mobilization for the characters. For example, they attend a party in Brasschaat, organized by the Ghanaian community, for the occasion of installing a new chief (Unigwe, 2009: 273-274). Sisi regularly goes to a Pentecostal church Efe introduced her to where "Sisi enjoyed the ambience of a church of well-dressed, ebullient Africans (mostly) singing on the top of their voices" (Unigwe, 2009: 262).

These outings offer recognition and release from the defensiveness and wariness the characters feel they are constantly pushed into by their Belgian surroundings. An example of their interaction with the African community of Antwerp is the funeral party Efe holds to honour her grandmother who passed away. Efe did not even know how she died since "(t)he news of her passing had been a mere aside between 'Buy me a Motorola mobile phone' and 'Papa Eugene wants to know how easy it is to ship a car from there to here!'" (Unigwe, 2009: 8), but still felt obliged to honour the woman who had such a distinct influence on her life (Unigwe, 2009: 9):

> There would be lots of Ghanaians – those people were everywhere. Nigerians of course. A sprinkling of East Africans – Kenyans who ate samosas and had no traditional clothes and complained about the pepper in Nigerian food, not really African. The three Ugandan women

> from the 'Black is Beautiful' store close to the Berchem Station where Efe bought her wigs. (…) And the only Zimbabwean she knew, from the Schipperskwartier a woman who shuffled her feet when she danced.

While the Nigerian women frown upon other nationalities and ethnicities and think of them in unflattering stereotypes (as the quote above shows), when confronted with an unwelcoming Belgian environment, they search for reassurance and a sense of belonging (or rather a shared sense of placelessness) among other African migrants.

3.4 *Reconceptualisation of home*

The female characters draw the most sense of belonging from the house they inhabit on Zwartezusterstraat. One of the most empowering elements of the novel is the way in which the women create a new sense of space, a homely space which speaks of "the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of (their) bodies, the nurturing of (their) souls" (bell hooks, 1990: 41). Being robbed of their identity, humanity and voice, the house, and especially the living room, becomes a collective space they identify as theirs. The importance of the house is also evidenced by the chapter titles in the novel. This changes depending on who focalises: Sisi, Efe, Ama, Joyce, or Zwartezusterstraat. In this way, the house the four women share, takes on its own role, its functions as part of the narration as a silent witness to their stories (Unigwe, 2009: 273): "The house on the Zwartezusterstraat was like a family home. The communal kitchen and the shared living room bound the women."

Before Sisi leaves the house on Zwartezusterstraat she takes her time to part with their living room, recognising it as the only "safe" space she has had in Europe. She cannot let the other women know that she is leaving, but stands still to say goodbye to this space which she shared with them (Unigwe, 2009: 276): "She stood still for a minute, as if paying obeisance to the memory of a good friend she had just learned was dead. She breathed in the smell of the room (…). It was a warm smell, something familiar, comforting. It almost smelt like home." Sisi leaves this shared space to create one of her own together with her boyfriend. What she strove for is however abruptly ended by her death and it is this shared space where the remaining women find a degree of solace as a space to mourn (Unigwe, 2009: 239):

> Joyce is sobbing and it is the first time any of the women have seen her cry.
> They do nothing. They are in unknown territory here, having always had a relationship

> which skimmed the surface like milk. They have never before stirred each other enough to find out anything deep about their lives. Joyce's tears take even her by surprise and she hurriedly wipes them away with the back of her hand. (...) Ama sighs and then puts a hand out and touches Joyce on her cheek. It is a warm touch and Alek smiles through Joyce's tears.

Sisi's death functions as a catalyst, a moment giving the other characters the courage to speak within that space, and to finally voice their histories. Alek/Joyce describes this crucial moment as "a release from something she had not known held her hostage" (Unigwe, 2009: 242). Prior to that moment, Alek/Joyce had refused to talk and share her story – also in the refugee camp (Unigwe, 2009: 196):

> She detested the sessions when the women gathered in a tent for coffee distributed by aid workers who encouraged them to talk to each other. To tell each other about their lives in the belief that the exercise would help heal them of the trauma they had survived. She did not want to hear their stories.

Joyce is shaken out of her denial and, in the safe environment of their communal space, she is finally able to tell the story of Alek. The three characters stand holding each other, while Ama says (Unigwe, 2009: 290): "Now we are sisters."

4. Conclusion

Unigwe's writing brings to mind the value of re-imagining the existing migratory discourse as well as the predominant image of Euro-Africans, and the gendered dimension of the traditional discourse on migration which is often perceived of in masculine terms (Ladele and Omotayo 2017: 53). Unigwe's stories and characters give voice to those who are silenced and robbed of their identity and subjectivity in various ways. She represents the objects of human trafficking as subjects, and gives them agency, something which they have been lacking. She depicts the 'disposable' women of Antwerp's red light district as unique human beings, each with individual stories.

The black female subjectivities represented in *On Black Sisters' Street* are complex and heterogenous where race, gender and class intersect with each other. The writer resists the urge to render her characters as mere victims and objects of human trafficking; she gives them each a unique story and provides them with coping strategies. In a way, the stories of all four women have a positive note, and they escape the trafficker Dele after all: Ama opens a shop in Lagos, Joyce starts a school for girls and Efe becomes a madam (Unigwe, 2009: 279).

Like Madam, Efe would have some police officers on her payroll to ensure

the security of her girls and of her business. She would do well in the business, buying more girls "to add to her fleet" (Unigwe, 2009: 279):

> Four years after Sisi died, Joyce would go back to Nigeria with enough capital to set up a school in Yaba. She would employ twenty-two teachers, mainly young women, and regularly make concessions for bright pupils who could not afford the school fees. She would call it Sisi's International Primary and Secondary School after the friend she would never forget. Ama, ironically, would be the one to open a boutique. She would make Mama Eko its manager. Mama Eko would tell her she always knew she would make it. They never talk about Ama's years in Europe.

Even Sisi dies with the vision of a happy life, that of one together with her boyfriend. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a disturbing story about modern-day slavery, but also a powerful novel of women's survival. Unigwe manages not only to add a gendered axis to the migratory narrative, but also offers a contra-narrative representing the victims of human trafficking as active subjects and survivors.

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