

The Domination and Sexual Objectification of Women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

Amara E. Chukwudi-Ofoedu
Department of Languages and Communication
Abia State Polytechnic, Aba
Abia State, Nigeria
Email: amarafoedu@yahoo.com

Abstract

*Since the appearance of women in African literature, they are stereotypes in their roles, ranging from breeders of children, home managers, farm lands to sexual objects. This lays credence to the social norms which have dictated certain gender roles for men and women. Men have generally been regarded as dominant, masculine and independent, whereas women are often portrayed as weak, sensitive and dependent. This dependence is on the men who determine the level of a woman's self-fulfillment. With this perception women became objects in the hands of men. Objects to be used in one way or the other for the satisfaction of others. The objectification of women has in turn, aided patriarchal practices and the suppression of women in the society. One of the most durable and damaging stereotypes propagated in African literature is that of the woman as a sexual object. Many African writers are irresistibly driven to write about the sexual attributes and behaviour of the African woman. Sexuality is the main context in which her identity has been defined. They are not seen as worthy of thoughts and actions, rational in thinking, responsible and respectable. The aim of this study is to critically examine the domination and projection of women as sex object using Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* as a case study. The paper points out the vices and measures used by men and the society to dominate, subject, and confine the woman. The theoretical approach to this work is Socialist feminism because the issue of sexual objectification in this novel is mostly spawned by the failure of the Nigerian government in providing job opportunities thereby creating an economic hardship. In addition, it discloses the social realities that force and subject women as sexual object.*

Keywords: *Domination; patriarchy; objectification; sexual objectification; and prostitution*

Introduction

African culture has played a major role in the domination of women by reinforcing and justifying men as superiors in their roles and actions. This ideology is termed patriarchy or patriarchalism, which emphasizes that the man is lord and master and therefore dominates and as the superior being, must be obeyed at all times. Ogundipe (1994, p.34) affirms this statement by declaring that "the ideology that men are naturally superior to women in essence and in all areas, affects the modern day organization of societal structures. This ideology prolongs the attitude of negative discrimination against women" and their dominance. Butengwa (1993, p.27) also attests to this by stating that "a closer scrutiny of this culture would expose that only those aspects of culture which upheld the subordination of women are considered culture." The African culture upholds the rights of men as heads, whose authority is not to be questioned and challenged, and their words are law and final. Women too have been brainwashed through years of objectivity and domination to believe and accept that this is true about the men and about them too.

Writing in the past too were typically a male dominated sector, as women were given

minor or no roles at all in literature. The women in works written by men were non-significant, or the roles assigned to them were not honourable ones. They were just mothers, wives, mistresses, concubines or prostitutes. Female characters were given stereotypical roles, portraying women as obedient, passive and unintelligent, and most importantly as a physical object of men's sexual desire.

The stereotypical notions about sexual nature of the African woman have been propagated mainly, though not exclusively by male writers. In some African novels, most of the women are forced to submit to sexual whims of the men. The women are victims of a double exploitation – economic and sexual, reflecting a patriarchal system which is sustained by the domination of women by men. Sometimes, the women are sexually exploited for reasons beyond their control. In confirmation to the above Omotoso (1998, p.200) posits that “force, fear and the desire for survival explain the apparent ease with which the female characters succumb to sexual abuse”. The relationship between poverty and promiscuity contributes considerably to the moral atmosphere of the novel under study.

Women as sexual object means that they are first and foremost object. Objectification is a term used to refer to the treatment of a person as an object and not as a subject – by object, it portends that one is voiceless, thoughtless and has no control or responsibility over their actions. As an object, a person is seen and treated as a mere tool, a toy, to be used and discarded, not worthy of dignity and respect, stupid and insignificant. Papadaki (2014) in an article ‘Feminist Perspectives on Objectification’ defines objectification as “seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman as an object.” When a woman is treated as an object, she has no feelings, opinions or rights of her own. In objectification, a person is owned by another which means the person owned lacks autonomy, self-determination, integrity and treated primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses.

Apparently, sexual objectification is the treatment of women as sexual object, to be valued only for sexual satisfaction of men. It also occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). As women are objectified, especially as their sexuality is the main focus about them, young girls grow up thinking that their sole purpose in life is to appeal to a man and please his every desire even to their own detriment. This affects their orientation and development and brings about the persistence of self-objectification. According to Calogero (2013, p.312), “self-objectification occurs when the objectifying gaze is turned inward, such that women view themselves through the perspective of an observer and engage in chronic self-surveillance”. In justifying the above statement, Carole Heldman, a feminist blogger writes thus:

Women who grew up in a culture with widespread sexual objectification tend to view themselves as objects of desire for others. This internalized sexual objectification has been linked to problems with mental health (e.g. clinical depression, habitual body monitoring), eating disorders, body shame, self-worth and life satisfaction, cognitive functioning, motor functioning, sexual dysfunction, access to leadership and political efficacy. Women of all ethnicities internalize objectification, as do men to far lesser extent (p.2).

She goes further to make an interesting observation between the two classes or terms, ‘object and subject’. She states “if one thinks of the subject/object dichotomy that dominates thinking in Western culture, subjects act and objects are acted upon. Subjects are sexual, while objects are sexy.” As subjects, one has right to their own choices, actions, activities and

responsibilities, while as an object, one is docile and inactive. As subject one is entitled to their sexual rights and freedom, the choice and right to be promiscuous as is the case with men, but becomes a stigma for a woman. Being sexual as a subject gives one the right to act upon, to desire and demand sex, but as an object, for a woman, she is acted upon, and she is suggestive of sex. She has no voice or mind of her own, and no choice or option but to comply. This is a clear manifestation of dominance of women by men.

Their role is merely to succumb to the pleasure of men at all time. The woman is made to believe that she is only useful in bed, and her body does not belong to her but to the man (men) and no matter her level in life, the society still regards her as a slave, an object to the man. Malti-Douglas (1995, p.137) affirms this point in his critical analysis of the novel, *Women at Point Zero*, “Firdaws [sic] travels the different paths of a woman’s life. She has a secondary school degree and is married at a young age to an old man. She is repeatedly abused by men”. He further states that one of the important issues raised in the novel is who owns and controls the woman’s body. Does Firdaus, the protagonist have a right to it? Firdaus’s narrative is a verbal attempt to reclaim her body but the society is more powerful, we learn.

Sexual Objectification in *On Black Sisters’ Street*

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian-born Belgian writer who lived in Turnhout, Belgium but later moved to the United States in 2013. She is a writer whose works deals with thematic concern similar to other African female writers. Their works are predominantly on women’s issues and experiences. Unigwe’s female characters are also described in stereotypical roles alongside their revolutionary features. She particularly views women in *On Black Sisters’ Street* as the perfect symbol for sexuality. The women are all victims of sexual exploitation in their host country, which testifies to the complex interplay between their sense of agency and the objectification to which they fall prey.

Unigwe’s urge to write about the lives of African sex workers in Antwerp arose from two different experiences. Her initial interest in the topic was sparked by the “cultural shock” she felt in Belgium when seeing young women on display in windows – a highly unfamiliar sight in Nigeria (Unigwe, “Interview”). Then, she was struck by the words of Caryl Phillips, who, at the end of his essay on the Nigerian women working in Antwerp’s red-light district, concluded: “this is not my story to tell. Others in Belgium will have to tell it.” This statement, Unigwe confides, “haunted [her] for a long time”, and, once she felt ready to “take that step” (“Interview”), she rose to the challenge of exploring these women’s lives through fiction. The result was a narrative first published in Dutch as *Fata Morgana* (2006), and later released in its original English version under the title *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

On Black Sisters’ Street tells a story of four black women (Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce), African prostitutes working in Antwerp, Belgium in order to survive and irk out a living for themselves, and fulfill their wish to satisfy their own aspirations which relates to the expression of their subjectivity. Unigwe boards on the issues of female objectification as illustrated in her novel, through these characters and their relationship amongst one another. In Tunca’s *Redressing the ‘Narrative Balance’*, she observes this objectification: On the long flight to Brussels, she is said to [feel] like cargo with a tag” (p.23). “While the word ‘cargo’ obviously refers to her new condition as an “item” for sale, the term is also an unmistakable reference to transatlantic slavery” (p.4). These women in the novel, are brainwashed to believe that there is a better chance of making it as a prostitute abroad, than living in poverty in Nigeria, where they were faced with a high rate of unemployment and hardship, a system of nepotism and godfatherism. Crackweel (2015, p.49) opines also that “the most damning judgment *On Black Sisters’ Street* makes it to critique the African governments and the despotic employment systems, which cause the European sex industry to be viewed as an

attractive alternative for African women.”

The woman is objectified through her body, she is made to believe she is an object, a sex tool to be used by the man, a property which can be sold into human/sex trafficking. Some scholars have emphasized on the issue of sex trafficking in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. For example, Orabueze (2004, p.44) in her article “ The law and slave trade: An evaluation of sex – slavery in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, narrows her own analysis to objectification in terms of sex-slavery whereby the woman is subjected to all forms of sexual abuse. She describes it as “an organized transnational criminal business empire in Africa, particularly Nigeria”. She also comments that “the narrator portrays that the worse type of slavery is trafficking in very young girls” (p.55). This is a modern day form of slavery where a woman is transported to a new environment where she does not know anybody and so falls prey to hoodlums.

Gelt (2011) reiterates that the protagonists in Unigwe’s novel are victims of sex trafficking, unemployment and quest for greener pastures abroad. Infact dreaming big is one of the reasons why women decide to work in the sex trade in exchange for passage to Europe, which they view as a paradise of opportunity and riches, far removed from the crashing squalor and bleak opportunities in Africa (*Los Angeles Times*). She goes further to affirm that the sex-trafficking of women is as a result of objectification of the woman by the man and society “the predatory ways of men’ is a factor in influencing the women ‘to make poor choices’.

Sexual promiscuity is the norm in the lives of the protagonists, namely Sisi (Chisom), Ama, Joyce (Alek) and Efe, a practice indulged in by both men and these women. The female characters are particularly depicted as depraved human beings, sleeping with any man without scruples nor with the intention of marriage. The stereotype of women as sexual object is strongly cultivated in the narratives. Examples abound in the experience of Ama. Even as a young girl, she regrettably, is seen as a sexual satisfying symbol. Ama was eight years old when her father (Brother Cyril) started abusing her sexually. A highly religious man, morally upright, wore white all the time, rejects anything ungodly and devilish (like music) frowns at indecent dressing, and was an assistant pastor in his church (p.112). He is a religious hypocrite, who hides behind Christianity and uses it to abuse his wife and daughter. A man so just and upright, molest and sexually abuses his daughter, and make her give in to him:

She would hold her body stiff, muscles tense, as if that would make her wish come true. When she did this, her father would demand, ‘what’s the Fifth Commandment?’ ‘Honour thy father and mother,’ she would reply, her voice muffled by the collar of her nightgown in her mouth. And she would relax her muscles, let him in, and imagine that she was flying high above the room. Sometimes she saw herself on the ceiling, looking down at a man who looked like her father and a girl who looked like her, when the pain made this difficult, she bit on her lower lip until it became numb. (p.114)

By this act, she was no longer a daughter to him, but an instrument for pleasure and sexual satisfaction. Her innocence is broken, and life never remained the same for her. Ama became a ghost of her self, floating around the house, and talked only to her pink walls which gave her comfort and always listened to her. Her mother could not help her; she cared less about her daughter’s cold and withdrawn behaviour because she is a quiet personality and preoccupied with other things.

When Ama got older and wise, she would think that her mother

walked around in a deliberate state of blindness. Otherwise she would have seen into her heart and asked her, ‘Nwa m, my daughter, what is the matter?’ She her mother would ask her so that she could tell her, but she never asked, choosing instead to complain about Ama’s hair being as rough as sisal. (p.115)

Her mother’s actions were as a result of her fear of her husband and the incessant male-worship of most women in marriages, especially African women, a system where a man cannot be wrong or challenged. A woman feels indebted to her husband and grateful to him for marrying her. She would go to any length to keep her marriage and please her husband, even if it meant going up against her own family and abandoning her own children, and in this case, abandoning her daughter to an abusive husband “What has she ever done for me? She let that man rule her, let him ruin her life. She did nothing. Nothing to help me. What sort of a mother is that?” (p.117). The negative effect of girl-child sexual abuse can be long-lasting.

Ama’s failure to pass her Jamb examination was a huge disappointment to her as it was supposed to be an avenue by which she would get away from her father and her home, go to school and get a good job later in the future. A good job which would guarantee her a better living. Despite not being her real father, but a man who had raised her, cared and provided for her, was as good and real as her biological father. Therefore, whether he is her biological father or not, he is not excused of his incestuous behaviour and suppression of his daughter (p.126).

Just like Sisi and Efe, she also has the desire to make it big in life. She has dreams of breaking away from the routine life she lived with her aunty (Mama Eko) when she came to Lagos. Unlike Efe, Ama’s desire is to be independent of men by making money by herself while Efe wants a man who would cater for her immediate needs. Dele recruited women for sex trafficking abroad. He makes them his tools, objects and still expects them to show appreciation to him. In addition, whenever these girls offend him, he expects them to apologise by offering their bodies to him. For instance, when Ama spat on Dele for telling her to consider engaging in prostitution abroad, she came back to Dele pleading for forgiveness for the insult and be given another chance at the offer she rejected, a chance to be a sex worker. He demanded that she be used by him sexually. First, he wanted to have sex with her before ‘helping’ which implies that his ‘help’ was not for free and it comes with a price.

Sisi’s (Chisom) failure to secure a job in her own home country pushed her to prostitution. Sisi thought her education was a passport to a better life, to actualizing her dreams and living up to her family’s expectations:

Chisom said, ‘I’m just glad I’ve graduated.’ She was looking forward to a realization of everything dreamed. To a going-to-bed and a waking-up in the dreams she had carried with her since she was old enough to want a life different from her parents? She did not need a clairvoyant to predict her own future; not when she had a degree from a good university. She would get a house for herself. Rent somewhere big for her parents. Living with three people in two rooms, she wanted a massive house where she had the space to romp and throw Saturday night parties (p.17).

Sisi had a lofted dream to live ostensibly and when she did not realise it as soon as she had wished, she jumped at the offer of prostitution abroad given by Dele. There was no way she was going to turn it down, not even for Peter, her boyfriend. She felt that her drive to succeed

is much bigger than her love for Peter, so he had to be cut off.

Inordinate ambition and big dreams were Sisi's major motivating factors for sexual objectification. The need to live big and have everything going without delay is what sometimes ties women to their objectification. This is another major reason for women's subjectification/objectification. The protagonists of this novel have choices, options, but the drive to make it big led them on, and so they see prostitution as the only way to their dreams coming to reality. Sisi's life flashed before her at Dele's proposal, determination to succeed was stronger than her anger at the offer of prostitution, even as Dele reduced her from the level of a human being to that of just a body, an asset, an object for 'work':

You be fine gal now. *Abi*, see your backside, kai! Who talk say na dat Jennifer Lopez get the finest *nyansh*? Make dem come here, come see your assets! As for those melons way you carry for chest, *omo*, how you no go fin work? He fixed his eyes, beady and moist and greedy, on her breasts. (p.39)

From the above, it is the woman's body attribute that qualifies her for 'work'. The bigger her sexual features (breasts and butt) the easier for her to get a job (prostitution). The female body is reduced to nothing but pleasure and attraction to men. Nevertheless, Sisi did not pay attention and could not care less as all that mattered to her at that time was leaving the country that failed to provide for her. At that point she forgot about her education and upbringing and only thought of what she was going abroad to do and how it would pay off (p.40). Her change of name to 'Sisi' was her way of leaving behind who she was, who she was brought up to be. Sisi became her new name and was her identify as a sexual object, as a slave worker, and Dele's property for work just for a while, till she returns to Chisom. She was being used as a tool for making money and yet she owed Dele her life for 'helping' her out of misery. This and that of Sisi (Chisom) marks the theme of renaming.

Chisom became Sisi's alter ego, the good self, the self that was shed like a snake's skin, put aside in order not to be tainted. While Sisi was to work in order for Chisom to live her dreams and live a fulfilled life. Chisom was not to be tainted by the sexual objectified and abused life of Sisi. Chisom was to be reborn like the phoenix that rises again from its own ashes after death. This alter ego kept Sisi going. She lived out her fantasies in her 'walks'. She becomes another woman, a woman who could afford what she wanted on her own. She lived her life of many women she admired in her fantasies. Her walks were her reprieve from all the burden, stain and guilt she felt from her job as a prostitute.

Page 236 reveals how women are sampled, auctioned as properties, sold and bought, with no respect for their body. They are priced in terms of numbers, with no names given to them. The use of name would mean giving them a face, an identity, a voice. With an identity, they could become subjects, and as subjects they are responsible for their action and decisions and had the right to say NO thereby putting an end to their objectification. As subjects, they are capable of thinking for themselves. It is better to deal with them as numbers, faceless, voiceless, as object.

In the end, Sisi falls in love with Luc and desires to live a clean life. With Luc's support, she is ready to do all that it takes to be free even going to the police to report 'Madam' as a major sponsor of sex trafficking. Sisi's freedom comes with a price, it costs her a life, her life, and her death was not taken seriously by her female pimp in Belgium (Madam) because she is considered an object for work. Sisi's death resonates the mere casualty that comes with the business. She was a mere slave, sex worker, a tool not to be mourned as subject, a human being.

Efe's objectification was by her own choosing because she saw her body as a small price to pay for luxuries. She was well aware of what she was plunging into and Titus used

her love for flashy things to get to her, to use her and the moment she was no longer useful (her pregnancy) he discarded and denied her. Titus a married man denied Efe's pregnancy which left her disappointed and a single parent, trying to survive. Efe and her sister believed that if the father of the baby owned up, shame will be taken away from her life and she would not be seen as one of those cheap Lagos girls. After the rejection of her baby, she picked herself up and got another cleaning job in Dele's company and would often hit at Dele to make passes at her because she saw him as a way out, if he should become her lover. When all her hints were unfruitful, and then the offer to Belgium "If I *wan* go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody de ask pikin if de pikin wan' sweet (p.70). To her, Dele's offer was her ticket out of the cleaning jobs with meager salaries, and L.I's (her son) journey to a better life. Dele seemed to look like a saviour, but his women were his properties and ticket to a good life for him.

With sexual objectification come deception and disillusionment, hope and promises. The objectifier sometimes comes as a helper or a loved one, just as Dele is seen as a saviour and a helper, one who will save her from her poverty and stagnant life. He is now, referred to as 'the kind one'.

My boss. Oga Dele. The kind one. You remember him, abi? The one who gave me extra five hundred naira at Christmas. He will get me a job in Belgium. (p.72)

Dele describes the prostitution profession as 'sales', and as such, the woman's body is referred to as shop where 'sales' take place. Her body is for the purpose of contracting transactions. In that instance, Efe was merely looked upon as an object for pleasure and sexual appeal. Dele sizes her up, just like he did to Sisi before she was sent abroad for work. This is the reduction of a woman based on her body parts alone and her appeal to the senses. Dele made sure they agreed to his terms and conditions, the installmental payments of their debts to him.

Efe had a choice, to refuse and continue with her cleaning job, though meager in salary, but at least it was better than nothing, better than being an object. She was aware of the 'sales' business, the main reason she was going to Belgium and compensated her conscience and her sister, Rita by quickly looking at the brighter side of what she was going to do, the things to be gained from her subjugation "he says before I know it, before one year even, I'll be rich. I'll buy a Mercedes-Benz" (p.72). Dele quickly encouraged her by telling her that business would be good for her there, because black women are in high demand by white men. Efe later becomes her own 'Madam' too and had her own girls. This is important as it is an effect of sexual objectification has on a woman, the greed, the profit was enticing and promises a lot of material things to be gained. Sexual objectification especially prostitution can be learned, just like other forms of objectification. It can be passed on from one generation to the other, from mothers to daughters, who end up believing that it is her place as ordained by God to be under the man and be used by him.

Unlike the other girls, Alek was not concerned about flashy things and making it big in life, but to survive, and keep surviving because she felt she owed it to her parents, to make them proud, else their death would have been in vain. Alek who was later named Joyce, and her family were victims of the Janjaweed militia involved in civil war in South Sudan. As to be expected in war times, her family was brutally massacred and she was raped by soldiers. She had a horrific experience that could leave anybody scared for life. She had the worst experience of the three women. Alek met and fell in love with a Nigerian soldier Polycarp, who was also in love with her, but he had to marry an Igbo girl because of family pressure. He then arranged for Alek to be sent to Belgium – allegedly to work as a nanny. She was the only one amongst the other girls that was tricked into coming to Belgium. The scene between

Alek and Dele, where she had to be renamed was symbolic as it states the major part of Alek's objectification. He thought her name sounded like a man's name and she had to change it:

The name has to go. Alek sounds too much like Alex. Man's name.
We no wan men. *Otioo*. That man's name has to go, one time.
Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her"
(p.196).

Dele's renaming of Alek symbolizes the erasure of the woman's identity. The procurer deems her real name sounds too much like a "man's", and proceeds to eliminate this unwelcome trace of masculinity. By this he reduced Alek's entire personality to her biological status. In addition, since the young protagonist was called after her grandmother (185), Dele's obliteration of the name also amounts to the blotting out of her family history.

Evidently, in the profession of prostitution, only women were to be used. Prostitution is generally perceived as a female dominated sector, a profession suitable for women, but controlled by the male society. This portrays the society's hypocrisy in singling out women and holding them responsible for the moral debasement that prostitution connotes. The woman is seen essentially as a sexual creature "par excellence", a seducer who is always seeking for carnal pleasures" (Omotoso, 1998, p.202). The men are never mentioned because prostitution is a demeaning profession and cannot be associated with them. The reality however points to the moral weakness of the men who lose their self-control when they see the sensual parts or a mere look at a girl or women. Yet women are blamed any time immoral sex takes place. The man cannot wash off his hand as innocent; rather he must accept both his culpability and acquiescence.

Conclusion

Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* reveals the sexual objectification of women and forces that sometimes drive women to fall victim. The exploitation of the women is characteristics of the domination of the society represented by the men. The men constitute an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system that oppresses the women which compels them make certain decisions that are inimical to the essence of their being. "The situation and problems of women in contemporary human society are born of development in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women. They are the product of class and sex" (Saadawi, 1980).

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