

Commodity Function in Diaspora Space: Reading Chika Unigwe's *On black sister's street*

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Abstract

This paper examines the preoccupation of modern migration with late capitalism and how migrant characters' identities are formed in tandem with commodities both in pre-migratory contexts and in the diaspora space. Specifically, the discourse focuses on diaspora space as site where multiple processes are at work as fluidity of identities; formation and reformation of peoples are at the centre. It hinges solidly on the templates propounded by Avtar Brah (1996) in her book titled Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities and Chika Unigwe's On Black Sister's Street. The impulse is to delineate the characters in On Black Sister's Street with a view to divulging the identity constructions of the self and the other both in the homeland and in the new world. Brah's propositions on diaspora space forms the theoretical scaffolding on which the study is hinged. It is deduced that the multiple representations of people within the diaspora space is congruent with capitalism thereby commodification of identities becomes inherent. It is established that the objectification and commodification of characters result in alienation, exclusion and aloofness, hence, entrenching these fervours of migration.

Introduction

Globalisation and its attendant challenges have resulted in an increase in the movements of peoples across social, economic and political borders. This movement is termed migration results in different diasporas. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars from diverse fields like anthropology, literary criticism, religion, economics and even the visual arts. According to Omolola Ladele and Adesunmbo Omotayo (2017), the historical antecedents of African migrations predates the present time. The continent has particularly experienced several distinctive and definitive historical waves of complex migrations dating from the period of slave exploitation to colonialism. In their view, from the period of pro-nationalist calls for independence and the end of apartheid, the subsequent self-rule and the disillusionment following that, Africans have participated in mass movements beyond the continent for diverse

reasons; including brain drain, and the search for the pursuit of greener pastures. These dispersals have resulted in what is known as diaspora.

Oliver Bakewell (2008:5) defines diaspora as involving “movement of people from original homeland to more than one country, either through dispersal (forced) or expansion (voluntary) in search of improved livelihoods” having “a collective myth of an ideal ancestral home and a strong ethnic group of consciousness sustained over time based on a shared history, culture and religion with a sustained network of social relationships with members of the group living in different countries of settlement”. This definition has become extant in postcolonial and postmodernist discourse. According to Brah, the late twentieth-century forms of transnational movement of capital and people usher new kinds of diasporic formations. The rapid rate of technological, commercial and organisational innovation is accompanied by a proliferation of new methods of production, new markets, new products and services, and new systems of financing. This accelerated mobility of capital has resulted in a new diaspora which is not just a description of a group of people but a theoretical concept known as diaspora space.

Brah (1996: 208) examines diaspora space as a contemporary grid for the analysis of contemporary trans/national movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital. Brah defines diaspora space as “the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed”. This juxtaposition of multiple subjects and concepts provides a vantage position for the inclusion of capitalism in the migration process.

Brah’s diaspora space provides a spatial environment for the elaboration of issues concerning the transnational movement of people from a position of resistance to that of vivid subjugation and oppression. Brah’s notion of diaspora space informs a mosaic rather than formulaic interpretation as she posits that in order to understand issues on border crossing and diaspora discourse, there should be a concert of ideas from late capitalism. To her, diaspora space enunciates the underlying social, historical and economic conditions that predicate contemporary migration and diasporic identity formation and reformation. It goes beyond the common tropes of Burkhass and arranged marriages to issues of undocumented workers, violence origination from racial binaries and the globalization of capital.

In the light of the foregoing, issues of undocumented workers and the globalisation of capital are at the heart of late capitalism and economic conditions predicate identity formation within diaspora space. Concretely, the thrust of this study hinges on Karl Marx’s (1955) position that in this era of globalisation of capital, money and commodities begin to stand in for human relations and human being, objectifying them and robbing them of their human essence. This objectification of human beings within the third space plunges the migrant into a greater aloofness, illuminating diaspora space features of exclusion and alienation. The methodology relies on dialectical analysis. Commodity function in diaspora space is explored through segmental thematic discourses of the migrants objectification in the homeland, commodification in the diaspora and what Graham Huggan (2001) refers to as the self-commodity-function.

Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sister’s Street* tells the story of four young African women in Brussels who are undocumented sex workers. These four women are figured as commodities, mere cargos and tools in the eyes of their families, Madam, Dele, Segun and their customers in

Europe. Though, they have all been objectified as commodities prior to their migration journey, they experience a greater alienation in the diaspora as a result of their status quo. The internal disconnect each of these women feel and the tragic end of Sisi is as a result of the frustrations arising from their commoditization.

Commodity-function in pre-migratory contexts

Pre-migratory objectification is what prompts Ama to leave Enugu for Lagos and finally for Brussels. Her step-father, Brother Cyril, is the first to rip her of her humanity. At the age of eight he rapes her and leaves her with no voice to express herself, because he feels he has done her mother a huge favour by marrying her when she was pregnant with someone else's baby. At night he sneaks into her room, covers her mouth and forces her to have sex with him he then pretends to be a man of God during the day. When Ama turns eighteen, Brother Cyril still attempts to continue treating her with disregard, just like before but she rebels. But her confrontation yields no positive result; rather she is shipped off to Lagos.

Ama tried to tell her mother about the year she was eight. On the tip her tongue, she tasted the fear of the nights he came into her room and yearned to spit it out. She started but her mother cut her short. 'Just shut up. Shut up Ama, before I am thrown out of my husband's house because of you'... 'Just pack your things. Pack your things. First thing tomorrow morning, *ututu echi*, you will be on the bus to Lagos (150-151)

Ama's mother is insensitivity to her daughter's emotional state as a result of the rape. Her treatment of Ama shows that, to her mother, she is not a human being with thoughts, feelings and emotions. To her mother, she is just "an ungrateful child", "a wicked child whose sole aim in life was to ruin her mother's life" (150). Her mother feels that Ama has no right to express herself or her feelings for fear of her marriage. So the only means to keep her shut is to Cargo her to Lagos.

The aftermath of this ill treatment she receives from her mother and Brother Cyril, is the resolution to commodify her feelings and emotions. After her encounter with Dele, Ama makes up her mind to go to Belgium to sell her body because that is what she has been to her mother and Brother Cyril-a mere tool for the satisfaction of their selfish interests. Though, not comfortable with the idea of prostituting herself, Ama concludes that it is even more dignifying for her since she will be rewarded with money compared to what Brother Cyril the so called man of God has done to her.

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 Lagos. But overseas. Which earned you respect just for being there... so why not? (166)

These were her thoughts during the period of her dilemma before she eventually decides to give in to Dele's proposal. Her giving in to Dele's proposal is consequent on Brother Cyril's treatment, judging from the above statement. She consents to giving her body to strangers who would give her souvenir for it rather than her step-father who had the effrontery to use and dump her when she becomes a liability.

Apart from her mother and Brother Cyril, Dele sees Ama as a commodity to be sampled before sending her to Belgium. He takes advantage of her willingness and desperation to escape from the humiliation her mother and Brother Cyril has plunged her into by having sex with her. Rather than asking for sex, he uses the word 'sample' instead. "I shall sample you before you go", "I must sample you. I must. I swear." (168) Commodities and items that are up for sale are what should be sampled not a human body but Dele sees her as a mere tool to be used for the satisfaction of his erotic pleasure and financial cravings. Ama accepts this objectification because "her thoughts already on the new life far from here, earning her own money so that she could build her business empire."(169)

Chisom, renamed Sisi, is a vivid portraiture of an objectified young woman. She is her parents' escape route from the life of poverty and complacency. Her education and upbringing are centered solely on the material gains her parents will receive from her after her graduation. She is their only hope and means of evasion from the horrors of the flat in Ogba. Their dreams ("intertwined with hers" (92)) of driving a car, of owning a house and of living the good life becomes short-lived when two years after leaving the University, Chisom is yet to secure a job. Her parents' hope begins to die when "there was no longer talk of a company car. Or a company driver. No arguments about a garden with food or flowers" (23) and this puts her under pressure, pressures of ending up like her father who "could never buy a car. He could never buy a decent house. He could never earn enough to fulfil his dreams" (90), or her boyfriend, Peter. She wants more than the kind of life they lead. Her dreams are to break free from the shackles of poverty and the walls that confine her boyfriend. So when she meets Oga Dele with his offer to travel to Belgium, "she was determined to get her own back on life, to grab it by the ankles and scoff in its face. There was no way she was going to turn it down. Not even for Peter." (23).

Alek renamed Joyce is just a victim of intense multiple objectifications. She is not consumed by her love for material possessions or the goodies of life rather she is a victim of circumstance, war. Her country, Sudan, was at war but her parents were too late with their relocation plans. She becomes a victim. She witnessed the gruesome and gory killing of her parents and her only brother. She is objectified first by the rape by the soldiers who saw her as a "beanpole", an object for their satisfaction without feeling or emotions, a tool. They raped her and battered her at the same time:

The soldiers looked at her. A beanpole. Breasts like baby mangoes straining against her flowered dress. One of the soldiers smiled...grabbed her breasts. Pinched them as if he was testing out some fruit for firmness before buying... one of the soldiers had hit her with the butt of a rifle... the soldier on top of her slapped her...(191)

This description shows that she is nothing to them but an object for satisfaction. When she attempts to tell her ordeal to the United Nation's worker she realizes that she is just an object; a next-in-line in the course of duty. Alek noticed the cold treatment the United Nation's worker gives to her as she tells the story of how "the soldiers took turns raping her. Of watching her brother die, his brains splattered on the walls of her parents' room" (194) and realizes that her situation means nothing to her. This makes her feel like an "object that had lain dormant for years" (199)

The most jaw-breaking objectification of Alek is that done to her by Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier on peace keeping mission to Sudan, who falls in love with her in the camp. He takes her back to Nigeria after his deployment from Sudan with the promise of marrying her. They both had their lives planned out until Polycarp's parents come up with the idea that they cannot get married because she is a foreigner. Polycarp takes advantage of her helplessness and gives in to his parents' pressures without fighting for their love. He resolves to take her to Dele to make arrangements for her 'shipping' out of Nigeria since he cannot marry her. He says: "I know a man who'll help you. I will pay him and he can get you into London. America. Anywhere you choose". (225) Polycarp's action drains humanity out of Alex because in the passport she took "her face was blank" (232), there was no emotion or sentiment shown to her therefore, she has none to show in return.

Polycarp pays for his guilt by sending Alek away to Belgium but his hand washing exercise did no good to Alek. His action of commodifying her plunges her into a more hollowed space where she becomes nothing other than a sex tool in the hands of strange men. Her reminiscing of the flight to Brussels was shameful and dehumanizing. Thus:

The flight was long. And dark. And lonely. Alek felt like a cargo with a tag: Destination Unknown. For what did she know about where she was going? About the children she would be babysitting? (233)

Polycarp had just treated her like a piece of crap, expendable and discarded her after she had no more use all in the name of "obligations, first son, culture" and all other inconsequential details when love is involved. All these objectifying treatments dehumanize Alek but mark the beginning of the journey into diaspora space where identities are dynamic.

Commodity-function in diaspora space

The objectification of the migrant starts first from the home before a more intense form of objectification is meted on the migrants in diaspora space increasing their alienation and complicating their identities. The arrival of these commodity-migrants in Brussels and the events that follow during their stay before Sisi's epiphany is a proof of this fact. Madam, the customers, passersby and the relationships between the girls indicate the commodity-function of these migrants. They are up for sale. Their body parts are the goods and they are the shops for sampling. Sisi's death proves that the ambiguities and complexities arising from the identity acquired in diaspora space cannot be resolved

Madam is the highest commodifier of these migrants in Brussels. She does not see them as human beings with feelings but as business investments, tools and a pay cheque. Her words and actions towards them reveal this. Sisi's arrival at Brussels reveals Madam's truest nature. She seizes her passport "which is tantamount to putting her life into someone else's hand" (119) only to be returned to her when her debt is finally paid. She reminds Sisi of her place in this new world- a tool, who is not to ask any questions "you just do as you are told and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard". (120). After Sisi's trip to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their refusal to grant her residence permit or asylum in Belgium, Madam sees this as a medium to capitalize on her helplessness. She looks at Sisi like a buyer trying to ascertain the authenticity of the intended purchase:

Madam half closed her eyes...and slowly opened her eyes.
She let them run over Sisi, slowly thoughtfully. *As if she*

was trying to size her up, a commodity for sale, a slab of meat at the local abattoir. 'Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organize all this for you' ... Now, until you have paid up every single kobo...every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back (182-183 emphasis mine)

Sisi is a persona non grata in Belgium and this puts her in a disadvantageous position. She has to work her way out of the hand of the abattoir to become a full fledged human being but she never realizes that freedom. The process of getting that freedom is not an easy one as she has to take on another personality which is Sisi rather than Chisom. When she wanted to sleep with Dieter in the toilet she imagines *"this is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is somebody else. Another body"* (212)

Madam still has this same attitude with Joyce on her arrival. She gives her two days to rest from the journey before telling her to start "earning her keep. *Oya, time to open shop! Time to work"* (233) Joyce is animated. She is the shop. Her body parts are the goods up for sale in the shop. "Affection for sale." (179). Her only savior is that Polycarp is paying for her passport and the cost of her transportation unlike the other girls who have to work to pay Dele and still send to their families. Sisi highlights the price of their affection, thus:

Fifty euros for a P&S. a blow job. A bit more if a French kiss was required. Twice the price for half an hour of everything: P&S, French kiss and full penetration. With a condom. With a condom the client paid thirty Euros extra. (237)

However, death within the third space is trivialized and material things idolized instead. Sisi's death, according to Madam, is just spoiling business. Madam rather than mourn her, goes on with her normal business, eats a hearty meal for breakfast because Sisi is like a "discarded rag unnoticed on the floor" (39). Madam did not have the decency to put up a sad face when she tells them of Sisi's body that was found. She just says "the police might want to talk to you but I shall try and stop it. I don't want anything spoiling business for us" (39) this annoys the other girls because Madam uses the voice that is used to announce the death of a dog. This is the height of their commodity-function. Also, when Efe's sister calls her to tell her about the death of Iya Ijebu, someone dear to her, it is trivialized and overshadowed by the quest for commodities:

The 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.' A distant 'Iya Ijebu died two weeks ago' carried along a faint crackling line from a telephone cabin in Lagos ... 'Did you hear what I said about the Motorola? (9)

This conversation is a vivid portrayal of an emotional detachment from death with a focus on the gift to be received and not on the emotional consequences of the news on the giver.

The postures and the display of these women in the course of their sales also underscore their identities as commodities. This frustrates these women together with the aloofness in diaspora space. They pose in display windows, booths and bars like:

Mannequins in lingerie and high boots, they exuded a confidence that Sisi was sure she could master. She learned to stand in her window and pose in heels that made her two inches taller. She learned to smile... to rap at the window, hitting her ring hard against the glass...to twirl to help them make up their minds (236-237)

They pose with their eyes on the prize not on the discomforts of the cloths they are adorned with to attract customers. All Sisi can see is “money and more money. A return to Nigeria with a poise and a wallet that Chisom could have never had” (236). The objectification of these migrants increases their homelessness in diaspora space.

Self-Commodity Function

The commodity-function of these migrants is also highlighted by their consumer behaviours and conspicuous consumption, this is what Graham Huggan (2001:99) refers to as “oppositional identitary categories, in which style and image become inseparable from the social identity of their consumers, and fashionable possessions become a paradoxical marker of enlightenment”. These undocumented sex workers in diaspora space show the profits of their works not in greater friendships or national connections but in “boxes of chocolates and carrier bags of Japanese fans and baby booties embroidered in lace, fridge magnets and T-shirts...” (4) and a thirst for bigger and better commodities. Efe’s trademark are “high-heeled shoes and wigs” (11) such that she buys a new set for every occasion. Sisi’s motivations are “the gold jewellery, the house for her parents, the posh car” (184). Their personalities have been objectified such that there is no friendship between them. They hide from their past and cook up all forms of stories to hide their alienation. They feign small talks to ascertain that they are still human beings with feelings and emotions not just toys:

They were people without any past, people with forgotten pasts, so whatever was said would have to be made up of air. But that did not matter. The act of talking meant a lot more than what was talked about. It meant that someone still saw you as more than a toy to pass the time with. (237)

The commodification of their friendship increases their alienation because “they are in an unknown territory, having always had a relationship which skimmed the surface like milk” (239). But unhappiness permeated their skin and wound itself around their neck and forced their head down so that they walk with shame (247). This shame and regret pervades Sisi’s life in Antwerp and after nine months of her stay she decides to take her destiny into her own hands. This leads to her death.

Ama’s commodity function is also highlighted by her personal drives and ambitions. She longs for fashionable things. Her connection with her customers at Mama Eko’s *buka* (canteen) was not for friendship ties or familial relationship but for their luxurious life and physical adornments. This love for material possessions spurs her into commodifying herself. The narrator explains thus:

Ama looks forward to the customers, for sometimes they came with her dream. Reminding her of what she might have otherwise forgotten, keeping her on her toes so that she could never be complacent; young women slinging expensive handbags...sweet-

smelling perfume...perfectly groomed nails and expensive hair extensions (160)

These commodities are her major spur into diaspora space. They have become are her identity and they shape the woman she eventually turns into in Antwerp. Because long after the departure of the customers, their possessions left a longing in her and she “knew that she had to leave” (161)

Peter’s undying love for Chisom holds no bars in the face of her quest for a better life. She sees him as “stuck” as a teacher, with his five siblings under one roof and a salary unable to cover his rent for a month. In spite of his achievements as best teacher of the year, Chisom feels that if she marries him she might become stuck in abject poverty because “Peter did not have the means to turn her life around” (29). To Chisom;

Peter’s flat was a shrine to an accumulation of incremental achievements that did not camouflage, as far as Chisom was concerned, the fallacies of those successes. Peter’s life was a cul-de-sac. He did not have the passion to dream like Chisom did, did not aspire to break down the walls that kept him in. and this made her think that she was outgrowing him (27-28)

Chisom’s resolution to abandon peter for a life of prostitution abroad just to be able to send home some money lends credence to Karl Marx’s submission that money and commodities begin to stand in for human relations in the era of globalization of capital. According to Marx (1955):

Everything that men had considered as inalienable became an object of exchange, of traffic and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged, given but never sold, acquired, but never bought – virtue, love, conviction, knowledge conscience etc – when everything, in short, passed into commerce (30)

Peter’s love has no place in Chisom’s heart except for the material gains she expects to get. She commodifies his love for her by exchanging it with the promise of a better life abroad. Irrespective of Peter’s promises to her, remains undaunted.

In addition, Efe’s love for material possessions also makes her fall for Titus. Titus, on the other hand, spots her craving for material things like “denim trousers” (50), T-shirts, high heeled shoes, handbags, sweets, ribbons and the like. Titus capitalizes on her wantonness by giving her the things she wanted in exchange for her body. This accounts for the slavish description of their love making episodes;

When they went to a hotel Titus liked to take his time. He would drag her onto the bed...undress her and then have her parade the room naked before jumping on her and dragging her back into the bed again. He would make love to her, sleep, wake up and start again. Everything happened in silence save for Titus’s moaning of pleasure (59)

The silence of Efe and Titus' wake-sleep-wake-sleep sex rounds, indicates that her emotions have been bought hence, she has no right to feel a thing or to object to Titus' sexual demands. All these did not bother Efe whose name I interpreted as 'Wealth' or 'Riches'. Her only concern according to the narrator is that;

His need was buying her the things she wanted. For the first time in her life she felt that other girls might be envious of her, that they must want the things she had: the jeans with the glorious metallic V and the handbags that went with all colours and the high-heeled shoes that were so glamorous they could have belonged to the governor's wife (57)

But these did not make her anything more than an object to Titus who at the same time got her pregnant and abandons her without batting an eye-lid. To Titus, Efe is a means to an end, an object for his satisfaction. That is why even when she tells him of her pregnancy he just walks away without any sentiments or emotional attachment or care for the unborn child "he got up, turned his broad back to her, picked up his car keys from the bedside table and walked out of the hotel room" (59).

Efe, saddled with responsibility of bringing up LI leads to her agreeing to Dele's proposal. She would be personified as "Dele and Sons Limited export" (82). Her face, her breasts and her calves are the products; a commodity for sale. Her siblings also see her as their meal ticket and the money-making-machine who will pay for their education. So even when she announces her trip to Belgium, Rita who had come of age does not even bother to ask her the details all she says is "get me a Mercedes too." (85). Efe is determined to "sell men her body, rationing out fantasies twenty-five minutes at a time" (87) all in exchange for the riches she would amass and for the expensive school LI would attend in Lagos, hence, she sets forth for Brussels.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, one can deduce that within Brah's diaspora space there are multiple representations and imaging of peoples and since the attempt to understand diaspora should be congruent with capitalism, commodification of identities is inherent. This is evident in Unigwe's characters Sisi, Joyce, Ama and Efe. These characters are objectified and possess identities that are constructed in tandem with commodities and material possessions and as such experience alienation, exclusion and aloofness which are characteristic and symbolic of the fervor of migration.

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