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Original Article

Impact of Migration Spaces on the Prostitute Character in On Black Sister Streets

Agatha Muturi[1], *Murimi Gaita*[1*] *& Macharia Mwang*[1]

[1] Kenyatta University, P. O. Box 43844-00100, Nairobi.
*Author for Correspondence ORCID ID; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0414-0492; Email: gaita.murimi@ku.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

Migration has a traumatic effect on individuals as they are in a foreign space, more so on female persons. The paper interrogates the complex ways in which migration intersects with social factors such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality to shape experiences for migrant characters in African literature. In On Black Sisters' Street, Chika Unigwe explores the complex realities of migration through the lives of four African women trafficked to Belgium to work as prostitutes, foregrounding the often-unspoken challenges and trauma associated with migration. This paper explores how the prostitute character navigates foreign and urban spaces, particularly as an immigrant, and how space both enables and restricts her movements and agency. Drawing from Hubbard's view that the construction of space shapes both human sexuality and the identity of places, Persak and Vermeulen describe space as a nexus that focuses on the dynamics of prostitution, drawing on Hubbard's (1997) view that the construction of space shapes both human sexuality and the identity of places. The study adopts Luce Irigaray's poststructuralist feminist concept of "women on the market," which frames women as commodities in a system of exchange, while also drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw, Intersectionality theory to explore how overlapping systems of gender, class, race, immigrant status, education and other social categories further compound the commodification and marginalisation of women within the selected African novel. This research uses purposive sampling to identify relevant texts and a qualitative approach to analyse and present its findings. The paper aims to highlight the critical perspectives on immigrant characters as portrayed in the literary works of African female writers.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF KEY WORDS

Prostitution - the exchange of sexual services for payment or other benefits, representing both an economic transaction and a socially contested practice despite varying degrees of legal and moral censure.

Intersectionality - the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, which create overlapping systems of discrimination or

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disadvantage.

Marginality – the notion of how the underprivileged people struggle to access resources and equal social participation.

Agency – the freedom and capacity to act within defined contexts. It examines characters' abilities to make choices, act freely, and control their lives within narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

Prostitution ranks among humanity's oldest professions, historically intertwined with ancient religious practices involving shrine prostitutes in cultic rituals. Societal perceptions of prostitution have evolved considerably across centuries. While feminist scholars agree that inequality within male-dominated societies fundamentally drives prostitution, debates persist regarding whether sexist or classist factors predominate, and whether sex workers should be viewed primarily as coerced victims or independent entrepreneurs (Kissil & Davey, 2010). Literary portrayals have often negatively depicted sex workers, leading to misconceptions and misunderstandings in texts worldwide, including post-colonial African literature. A comprehensive understanding of prostitutes requires examining the spaces they occupy, their marginalisation, and their agency.

Historical records reveal diverse attitudes toward prostitution. In the 16th century BC, Greek literature, three categories existed: The Pornai (slave prostitute), the freeform alley prostitute, and the Hetaera (educated courtesan enjoying unusual social influence). By 1358, Venice's Great Council declared prostitution "*absolutely indispensable to the world*," with government-sponsored brothels established across major Italian cities during the 14th-15th centuries (Head, thought.com). Victorian Britain contrasted sharply with Renaissance perspectives, viewing prostitution as contradicting endorsed moral principles of modesty, prudence, and elegance. *"Fallen women"* abandoned these values, working through various routes, including army camps, brothels, and street walking. While some literature condemned prostitution, others found fascination; Marquis de Sade, the "*father of written eroticism*," used sexual themes to critique society's repression of women while acknowledging prostitution as enabling male sexual gratification.

Migration has a traumatic effect on individuals as they navigate a foreign space, especially female persons. The paper interrogates the complex ways in which migration intersects with social factors

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such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality to shape experiences for migrant characters in African literature. In the novel, Unigwe explores the complex realities of migration through the lives of four African women trafficked to Belgium to work as prostitutes, foregrounding the often-unspoken challenges and trauma associated with migration. Unigwe is a Nigerian-born Igbo novelist who was the winner of the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2012 for her novel *On Black Sisters' Street*. The novel focuses on four women who migrate to Belgium to work as prostitutes. The narrative is centred on their migration from Nigeria to Belgium, Antwerp. The women endure suffering, marginalisation, as well as a lack of agency. After the death of Sisi, the other women unite in a tearful narration of the circumstances that threw them into the path of prostitution.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This paper explores how the prostitute character navigates foreign and urban spaces, particularly as immigrants, and how space both enables and restricts her movements and agency. Drawing from Hubbard's (1997) view that the construction of space shapes both human sexuality and the identity of places, Persak and Vermeulen (2014) describe space as a nexus that focuses the dynamics of prostitution. In concurrence, Hubbard (1997, p. 15) states that prostitution is often confined to insignificant, concealed areas—off the beaten path, isolated from the city's core, and concealed from the stare of passers-by. The study adopts Luce Irigaray's poststructuralist feminist concept of "women on the market," which frames women as commodities in a system of exchange, while also drawing on intersectionality theory to explore how overlapping systems of gender, class, race, immigrant status, education and other social categories further compound the commodification and marginalisation of women in the novel. In '*Woman on the Market',* Irigaray (1985) identifies two primary criteria used to assess a woman's value within a patriarchal system: Her use value, which is a woman's perceived natural qualities and capabilities, and exchange value, which is determined by her role in social and economic exchanges, particularly those between men.

Zimmerman (2016), in her analysis of Luce Irigaray's *'Woman on the Market',* communicates two particular criteria against which the value of a woman is measured in a male-dominated structure of trade. She argues that women are not born commodities but become one. Irigaray states that "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (Irigaray, 2016, p. 170). In the novel under study, women are commodified and exchanged within patriarchal societies. The market women find themselves in is equivalent to the space the prostitute character finds herself in. In my opinion, this space determines how she is perceived by society; she becomes a commodity to be exchanged from one man to another, as Irigaray notes that the production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men, and they pass from one group of men to another (Irigaray, 2016, p. 171). Irigaray's work examines how women are commodified and exchanged in a male-dominated society, like goods in a market. In the novel, the prostitute characters are objects, being priced for what they represent or can be exchanged for, rather than their personality.

Persak Nina and Vermeulen Gert (2014, p. 15) describe space as a *nexus* that brings together the nerves of prostitution. They cite Hubbard (1997, p. 6), who believed that the structuring of space shapes the forms of human sexuality and places, and therefore, the prostitute is shaped by the space they work in. They contend that spaces where harlotry finds its 'place' or is assigned to are usually concealed, off the trodden route, alienated from the hub towards more shadowy areas of the city where she is not in the path of consumers and moral public (Hubbard, 1997, p. 15). It is perhaps because of the spaces they occupy that result in their marginalisation. Lyn Murphy states that women

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involved in harlotry are an exceedingly stigmatised population(Murphy, 2010).

Hubbard (1997) argues that the changing location of prostitution in the city is the result of a constant interplay between the ordering strategies enacted by the police, council and community protestors and the resistive tactics adopted by sex workers. The net outcome of this process, he adds, is that a space is created. Lefebvre (1991) adds that social space is what permits fresh actions to occur while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. From this statement, therefore, in my opinion, prostitutes have created new spaces. Due to the hostility meted out against them, they create different spaces that are socially tolerated. Vermeulen (1991) agrees with the creation of new spaces by the prostitute that the sex trade has always been more diverse than the brothel; new spaces and working conditions have continuously developed with politico-military, socio-economic and cultural transformation since the beginning of the early modern period. The prostitutes, therefore, create spaces where they are less likely to be marginalised. The prostitutes are more than willing to be exported to Belgium as prostitutes since they believe that, unlike in Nigeria, they will be less victimised. The space occupied by the prostitute character mirrors Irigaray's 'market' where women are commodified and their bodies traded for money; here are some examples of spaces as discussed by Vermeulen (1991).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a narrative analysis qualitative design to examine non-numeric information. Following Mohajan Haradhan's framework, narrative research focuses on people's stories about themselves or events, providing individualised insight into participants' structured and intangible experiences. The researcher conducted content analysis of selected texts, examining narratives of prostitution experiences, occupied spaces, and their implications. Purposive sampling was employed, selecting novels based on their portrayal of female prostitutes. Primary data came from close readings of the novel '*On Black Sister's Street*' by Chika Unigwe.

Secondary data comprised theoretical discussions on space and prostitute characters' agency. These sources, books and journals, were accessed through university libraries and the Kenya National Library Services. Data from both primary and secondary sources underwent analysis to interrogate the complex ways in which migration intersects with social factors such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality to shape experiences for migrant characters in African literature. Findings were presented through a discussion format, exploring how spatial positioning influences marginalisation and decision-making capacity among prostitute characters in the selected literary works.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prostitution Spaces

Physical Space

In a street sex prostitute, the character is portrayed as one who tries to attract clients on the street or in other public places. The services are also offered in public, e.g. in a car, a hotel or the client's home. Window prostitution is yet another space represented in the African prose fiction. In this framework, a prostitute character attracts clients from behind a window while the services are rendered in a separate room. Bar prostitution is an agreement between the bar owner and the prostitutes. The idea is to make the client buy more drinks, and afterwards, the sexual services are offered in separate rooms of the bar or the toilets. Private prostitution, on the other hand, is a non-visible type of prostitution where women work alone or in cooperation with other women.

Until the mid-1950s, according to Vermeulen (1991), London prostitution was primarily street-based. Women provided their services in 'bawdy houses', but with further growth in the entertainment and hospitality industries, many

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prostitutes worked from cafes, restaurants, massage parlours or took clients to their own lodging.

According to Vermeulen (1991), a red-light district is defined as an area containing a cluster of visible sex-oriented/erotic businesses like strip clubs, porn shops, erotic bars, peep shows, massage parlours and brothels. In the text under study, physical space can be divided into the following.

Brothel

A brothel is a place where people engage in sexual activity with sex workers in exchange for money. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a brothel is a house where men visit prostitutes and pay for sexual intercourse.

In the text, the brothel functions as a highly stratified space. On her way to her work station, Sisi sees the Villa Tinto, which is the queen of all brothels. Madam says it's the largest and most expensive. It ensures that the prostitutes working there are well protected, and according to her, they even have panic buttons in their rooms, as well as their own police station. This is definitely a high-class brothel and too expensive for them. The Villa offers privacy to its customers and ensures that the prostitutes are not exposed to any form of danger.

This brothel clearly shows how a space can enable or restrict a prostitute's movement. This space acts as an area that restricts the movement of its prostitutes since it has everything in it. This excludes Sisi from working in that environment due to the intersection of her skin colour and her financial standing. Madam says that it is too expensive for them. This spatial exclusion aligns with Luce Irigaray's poststructuralist concept of the '*woman on the market*', where women are commodified and circulated within patriarchal economies not as autonomous subjects but as objects of exchange. The Villa is not a place of liberation but a marketplace, where the bodies of women are assigned different economic value. For women like Sisi, the inability to access this space underscores her position as a low-valued commodity that is circulated but never in control of its worth or safety.

Redlight District/Window Prostitution

These are designated pleasure districts where a concentration of prostitutes is found.

In Belgium, neither prostitution nor the purchase of sexual services is a punishable offence (Reinschmidt, 2016, p. 1). Reinschmidt observes that Antwerp has a long tradition of prostitution linked to the city's history as a port. Additionally, in the 1990s, there were a total of around 240 windows in 17 streets of the harbour district and in three streets near the station. In her paper, she argues that the city began to shift window prostitution into a tolerance zone. Whereas previously there were around 280 windows scattered over twenty streets, currently the same number of windows are located within three blocks.

A window, she noted, can be rented for approximately € 800 per week. Usually, two women split the rent and work in shifts. She notes that the third largest group of prostitutes is formed by Nigerians (Reinschmidt, 2016, p. 6).

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the prostitutes, as they stood in their glass windows, watched men outside. Some men, unfamiliar with Antwerp, are surprised to suddenly face half-dressed women of different colours and quickly walk away in embarrassment. Others, aware of the place, approach with confidence, moving from one window to another before making a choice. On her first day, Sisi notices the large showcase-like windows bordered with neon lights, behind which young women pose suggestively in lingerie and thigh-length boots, using gestures to attract clients. The scene depicts a market as described by Irigaray.

Sisi's move to a display window in Schipperskwartier marked an upgrade from her previous workspace, giving her a sense of increased value and higher class. Though her attitude was more performative than reflective of true agency,

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she adapted by posing, smiling, pouting, and tapping her ring on the glass to attract customers. The decorated window is more prestigious than the dim café, which offered her a feeling of freedom within confinement—one shaped by her immigrant status, the economic system, and patriarchy.

The prostitutes lack agency; Joyce is a gendered, undocumented immigrant, and these identities compound her vulnerability within the red-light district's hierarchy. Joyce, having been tricked into the job, has no choice or voice to fight the system. After two days, Joyce is taken to the Schipperskwartier, skimpily dressed. She is a commodity on sale in the market, more like a piece of meat. She stood behind the glass and prayed that no one would notice her. However, she was noticed, and the customer pleased became a regular. Joyce entertains him since she gets a good tip, a sign that she does not entertain him out of free will but out of the need for money. In the text, the red-light district is portrayed as a marginalised space as it is described to lose its vivacity, deserted and almost ashamed of the day exposing what should be hidden, it had a mournful look which is in line with Persak Nina and Vermeulen Gert (2014, p. 15) argument that spaces where harlotry finds its 'place' or is assigned to is usually concealed, off the trodden route, alienated from the hub towards more shadowy areas of the city where she is not in the path of consumers and moral public.

The immigrant prostitutes in Belgium are living a socially isolated life, away from mainstream life. They have been kept under a red-light district, which was avoided by the greater number of the masses. Their only interaction would be with clients, other prostitutes, and the staff of the brothel, a factor that extended their marginalisation. The author vividly describes how tourists felt whenever they were faced with naked women inside the booths, taking hurried steps not wishing to be tainted by the lives behind the window (Unigwe, 2009, p. 115). This statement brings out the social marginalisation of the prostitutes in the novel.

The window in this case acts as a marketplace for the prostitute, turning her into a display commodity, lit, framed and arranged for sale. The women confined in this space lack the agency to choose the men they would want to please. Joyce, on one occasion, prays that no one notices her. The girls' immigrant status, gender, as well as their economic status intersect to marginalise them.

Boarding House

The Zwartezusterstraat is described as having 'the appearance of a maligned, childless wife in a polygamous household' (Unigwe, 2009, p. 65), a metaphor that depicts the street's neglect and its symbolic association with a degraded woman. The street itself is feminised and marginalised, separated from the decent parts of the city, just as the women who work in it are separated from social acceptance. The brothel is a spatial disappointment: its grimy front door leads into a red interior characterised by a long, thin mirror that runs from the ceiling to the carpet. This mirror trains the prostitute to a constant self-surveillance, coercing the women to inspect their bodies for display. In line with Irigaray's theory of a woman as a commodity, the mirror literalises the idea that women are commodities to be gazed at, examined, and purchased.

Sisi is taken back by the pictures in her room, which are explicitly sexualised images that signal the nature of the work she will be performing. The pictures strip her of her former identity and rebuild her as something to be sexually used. The setting causes her to become self-conscious, not as a person, but as a product. The mirror, the sexual images, and the red lights all work together to signify her body as being within the economy of desire and consumption, a circumstance Irigaray describes as the inevitable fate of women being exchanged as commodities among men.

Joyce's entry into this space is equally marginalising. Having been tricked into believing she was going to Belgium to work as a nanny, she discovers her actual purpose the moment she arrives

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at the brothel and sees the big mirror. As a black woman, her migration status, race, and gender intersect and render her particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Her body is doubly commodified: first by the traffickers who brought her, and secondly by the red-light economy that profits from her racialised sexuality.

Bar

On the first day, Madam walks Sisi to a café that is dimly lit with star lights (Unigwe, 2009, p. 132). The description of the café symbolises how the women's labour was concealed, marginalised and made invisible within patriarchal economies. In the café, Sisi is viewed as an object whose main purpose is to intoxicate men and become available for their use. Though the café offers her a space for her economic gain, it does so by confining her to a degrading and unsanitary space. She engages in sex in the men's toilets, and Sisi is disgusted by it all. In this space, her labour is hidden, and her agency does not count as far as she serves male pleasure.

Over the next few nights, the café's dimness begins to consume her. The oppressive atmosphere "sucks out her ability to pretend." She sits alone, watching as other girls disappear into the men's toilets. This illustrates the intersectional forces working against the migrant women; their movement is limited, labour is dehumanised, and emotional resistance is worn down. The café becomes a space of initiation, one where the illusion of agency is shattered.

Social Space

Social exclusion refers to the process by which individuals or groups of people are systematically blocked from various rights, opportunities, and resources that are essential to social integration, such as employment, housing, healthcare, and education. According to Levitas (2007), social exclusion "involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods, and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society"

The women in the text are socially marginalised by the social spaces they find themselves in, and in this case, Belgium. The prostitutes lack support systems mainly because they are incapable of having meaningful relationships due to the work they do. In the text, the four women, despite living in the same house and working in the same red-light district, have a strained relationship. This is because none of them is ready to share their past. Their lack of identity, social marginality and poverty alleviate their marginalisation in a foreign land. When Sisi dies, the other women realise how little they knew of each other. None of them knew Sisi's real name, not even the men she had slept with. Sisi had realised earlier that everyone had a secret in regard to their past, but the longing to belong often made them talk to each other despite knowing that it was made up of air. At times, loneliness overcame Sisi, and she would call her parents from her cell phone, which was expensive, but her loneliness overcame her ability to make good economic decisions.

In the text, the act of naming is rooted in commodification and survival within a patriarchal system. When Sisi accepts the offer, she lies to her family about the type of job offered in Belgium; she does not tell them that she had to change her name to Sisi. She would rename herself, go through a baptism of fire and be reborn as Sisi. Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence for a while, earn money using her punani, and once she hits it big, she would reincarnate as Chisom (Unigwe, 2009, p. 32). The need to lose herself can be attributed to her sense of being commodified and her lack of choice. This renaming is a symbolic act that reflects the commodification of her body. In contrast, Alek's forced renaming by Dele shows how the female immigrant's agency is overwritten by patriarchal agents whose aim is to strip them of any cultural belonging. According to Irigaray, women are circulated and named according to their value in a male exchange system.

Restriction of movement is made possible when their passports are confiscated. Once in Belgium,

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Sisi is forced to surrender her passport to Madam until her debt is fully paid. She compares it to giving someone her life. She wonders what would happen if she changed her mind or wanted to go home (Unigwe, 2009, p. 78). The restriction of female immigrants shows that they cannot circulate freely without the permission of those who 'own' them. This is central to Irigaray's reading of women as goods who cannot move when they so wish.

A patronising tone is used on the prostitute to instil fear. Madam uses a condescending tone with Sisi. She detests the way she speaks to her as if she were a child (Unigwe, 2009, p. 79), but being a migrant who depends wholly on Madam, she does nothing. Sisi is forced to denounce her past at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a different story about her past. She is cautioned never to ask any questions and to follow all instructions without fail. Dele uses the same tone to ensure that Sisi makes her monthly contributions without fail. The "without fail" came out hard. A piece of heavy wood rolled across the table and fell with a thud (Unigwe, 2009, p. 31).

As immigrants, the prostitutes do not enjoy true friendship; they are devoid of social support. Thrown together by a conspiracy of fate, they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship, comfortable with whatever little they knew of one another, asking no questions unless they are prompted to, sharing deep laughter and music in their sitting room, making light of the life that has taught them to make the most of the trump card that God had wedged in between their legs (Unigwe, 2009, p. 20). Their inability to have meaningful friendships makes them more vulnerable to marginalisation.

The prostitutes in the novel experience marginality when their social and economic status intersect. The women are from a low social class, therefore economically dependent. They are less able to access basic services and opportunities. Their isolation stems from the fact that they are unable to achieve their dreams of living a 'good' life. The women are economically degraded since they lack job opportunities in their country, and this makes them easy prey for pimps like Dele. When offered an opportunity to work as a prostitute in an overseas country, Ama is hesitant and annoyed that Dele thought of her as that type of 'woman'. After putting to thought Dele's proposal Ama accepts, she reasons that it was overseas which earned one respect and did not run the risk of being recognised (Unigwe, 2009, p. 106), this clearly shows that in Lagos the prostitutes are socially marginalised and that is why they would prefer to work in an oversea country, similarly, Ama had to lie to Mama Eko that she was going to Europe to work as a nanny to a Jewish family (Unigwe, 2009, p. 108).

In like manner, Efe is compelled to lie that she will be cleaning pots and looking after babies. This is a form of social marginality, and Efe hides the truth for fear of being marginalised and judged (Unigwe, 2009, pp. 55-56). In the same way, Chisom/Sisi cannot bear to tell her parents the truth as to what her job entails. She is ashamed that, as a graduate, she cannot find a decent job and has to resort to prostitution. In her desperation, she chooses to become a prostitute in Belgium in an effort to elevate herself and the family from poverty. Her parents, on the other hand, are too afraid to ask for fear of knowing the truth (Unigwe, 2009, p. 32). In contrast to Sisi, Ama and Efe, who decided to become prostitutes in Belgium, Dele and Polycarp had to lie to Alek about the type of job she was to do in Europe. This could mainly be because prostitution was not something desirable in society (Unigwe, 2009, p. 148). The women are pushed to make decisions that marginalise them due to their socio-economic dependency.

In addition, Sisi feels the societal expectations on the first day of her work. She feels ashamed of the outfit she was wearing. She tries pulling it down to cover her shame. Correspondingly, Joyce is uncomfortable with the lingerie and thigh boots that Madam chooses for her first night. The two women have to endure the shame since they are in a foreign country with no passport, no money and a huge debt

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to pay. The intersection of poverty and immigrant status compounds to oppress the women.

Sisi's social upbringing further marginalises her. She tried to block the voices that came to her head- her mother's disappointed remarks on her choice of selling her body for some money (Unigwe, 2009, p. 110). Similarly, Joyce feels guilty for having sex with a stranger. She confesses that she tried not to think about her mother because she did not want to see her mother cry (Unigwe, 2009, p. 150). The two are unable to merge their upbringing with the path of prostitution that had been forced on them by circumstances, and they feel weakened.

In literature, characters experiencing socio-economic marginalisation are frequently portrayed as lacking the means or social mobility to escape their impoverished conditions, despite their efforts. According to hooks, economic marginalisation reflects the structural barriers that reinforce a cycle of poverty and dependency, often exacerbating social and psychological alienation (hooks, 2015, pp. 75-79). Such representation reveals the social intensity that inhibits marginalisation of individuals from achieving economic empowerment and self-determination.

The marginalisation of the prostitute is intensified by the intersecting forces of race, gender, class and undocumented migration status. The women are marginalised in social spaces, especially when they are not acknowledged by the citizens of the host country. The spaces they occupy are hidden from the public, and the only social place where the women felt close to being accepted is in the 'all black' church. However, this is short-lived as the pastor rains curses on them as evil daughters of Eve who would surely burn in hell. Due to this, Sisi had to quit the church. At a party thrown by Efe to commemorate her grandmother. There is a feeling of belonging where the immigrants are invited. However, there is no social belonging as one group is critical of the culture of the other. The women are also time-conscious; they don't want to spend a lot of time and be late for work, as they would surely be punished by Madam. Therefore, the women's movement is controlled by the people who 'own' them.

Cultural Space

Culture shock is defined as a feeling of confusion felt by someone visiting a country or place that they do not know (Cambridge, 2025). The prostitutes experience culture shock that is gendered and racialised, shaped by their immigrant status and their commodification as sex workers.

Ama's arrival in Antwerp during one of Belgium's hottest summers highlights her unpreparedness, dressed in a corduroy suit with long extensions, which made her uncomfortable, for she had assumed Europe would be cold. Being in a new place, she doesn't know what to do and has to rely on a roommate who takes pity on her and gives her a dress to change into. This illustrates the unequal flow of information and preparation across racial and economic lines.

Sisi experiences dislocation and regret. She feels confused about the decision she had made; her transition from Nigeria to Belgium is marked by uncertainty as well as regret. She wishes a hand would stay her from leaving Lagos. Her arrival at night foreshadows the dark path ahead; the space she enters is one of surveillance and commodification. Poststructuralist feminist thinker Luce Irigaray's notion of 'woman on the market' becomes evident as Sisi enters Belgium, where her body is seen as a commodity.

This commodification continues in how Sisi and the others must suppress their identities. After retelling their stories, Joyce starts crying, something they have never seen. They do nothing. They are in unknown territory, having always had a relationship that skimmed the surface like milk (Unigwe, 2009, pp. 154). As immigrants, the women did not have any supportive relationships with each other for fear of victimisation. The women's social alienation stems from how immigrant status and gender intersect to suppress intimacy and community.

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Efe's disillusionment upon arrival is evident. She had imagined Belgium would have castles and clean streets and snow as white as salt; this is in contrast to what she actually found. In her part of Antwerp, huge offices stand alongside grotty warehouses and desolate fruit stalls run by effusive Turks and Moroccans (Unigwe, 2007, p. 19). The reality of her new environment confronts her, revealing how migrant women are ushered into economic dangers far from the imagined safety of the West.

Sisi's death and the women's inability to mourn her culturally highlight another layer of exclusion. The culture in Belgium does not allow it, and the women are unsure of what to do. It is well captured that the silence was unnatural. Shrieks and tearing of clothes should accompany Sisi's death; noise, loud yells, something, anything but the silence that closes up on you (Unigwe, 2009, p. 27). The religious expectations compound their exclusion. At one time, Sisi had to quit a church she used to attend when the pastor rained curses on them, "evil daughters of Eve, who shall certainly burn at the end" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 169). Sisi complains that the man knew that half of his female congregants were in the trade, and he benefited from the money through tithes and various offerings. Poststructuralist feminism helps frame this as another instance of "woman on the market," where patriarchal economies of morality and shame dictate her social value.

In these instances, space both enables and restricts the women's movement and agency. Black immigrant women are shaped by the intersection of gender, race, class, and migration. Belgium is not a neutral space but a regulatory environment where their bodies, names, desires, and histories are managed and commodified.

Emotional and Psychological Space

When sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sisi has to narrate a fabricated story about her life. In denouncing her roots, Sisi is denied asylum and is given three days to leave the country. However, when she tells Madam what she had been told, Madam informs Sisi that she was a persona non-grata and that she did not exist in the country. This process of sending the girls to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was repeated with the other girls, more or less with the same stories. The girls, therefore, did not exist in Belgium, which greatly curtailed their ability to move as well as their agency.

The way Madam looked at Sisi made her feel like a commodity for sale, a piece of choice meat, a slab of meat at the local abattoir. Madam owned her body and soul. Sisi is in a market that she was not born in but found herself in. The immigrants have no real freedom, which intersects with their financial abilities, gender, as well as their immigrant status.

Ama never revealed her past. Whenever asked about her parents, she would always lie that they died when she was still a baby. The traumatic experience that she had gone through at the hands of her step-father had a great influence on her choices. When Dele proposes the job, she wonders what was wrong with men taking her body for money since her step-father took her for free and discarded her when she no longer sufficed (Unigwe, 2009, p. 106). She is pushed into a market where men determine her worth. This is in line with "woman on the market", where women are commodities to be exchanged among men.

Financial 'Space'

In this paper, financial space refers to the space created by access to or lack of financial resources within which the prostitute seeks to overcome. The women undergo financial struggles that make them become prostitutes. Lack of finances intersects with their gender and immigration status to enable or restrict their movement.

The prostitutes migrate to Belgium as a country that will offer them financial empowerment that is lacking in their country. Sisi, a graduate, is unable to find a job despite having a degree. Her boyfriend

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Peter cannot rescue her from her poverty or offer a better life for himself or Sisi. She does not want to end up like her mother, whose dreams never materialised due to a lack of resources and the fact that her husband never got any promotion as the cost of living continued to skyrocket. She meets Dele, who entices her with the idea of going abroad to work and attain financial independence. She thinks of her home, the shared kitchen and a toilet with a cistern that never worked and she makes the decision to go abroad.

In the text, Joyce/Alek represents another dimension of economic marginalisation shaped by conflict, trauma, and displacement. She moves out of her country due to a civil war. Alek loses any form of economic stability she might have had. In the camp, she had to depend on Polycarp for any basic needs. When Polycarp took her to Lagos, Nigeria, she lacked formal education as well as any skills to enable her to attain economic independence. When Polycarp's mother refuses to have her as a daughter-in-law, she has nowhere to go, and her life is solely determined by Polycarp. Unlike the other girls who chose to be sex workers, Joyce is tricked into the job, which equates to slavery. Upon reaching Belgium without money and lacking legal documents, she is compelled to work to repay her debt to Dele, a harsh reality stemming from economic marginalisation.

Across the novel, economic marginalisation of the prostitute characters is shown to be a consequence of the intersection between gender, lack of education, lack of job opportunity, violence, and societal expectations, among others. Their poverty and lack of economic opportunities in Nigeria drive them into the arms of traffickers like Dele. Intersectionality theory emphasises that their class status intersects with their gender and race, making them more susceptible to exploitation and limiting their ability to escape their poverty (McCall, 2005). Through their narratives, the authors call for a re-examination of the structure that socially and economically intersects to disenfranchise prostitutes.

Chisom (Sisi) in *On Black Sisters' Street* is a character economically marginalised by her low-class status. Her journey from Lagos, Nigeria, to Antwerp, Belgium, reveals the social and economic forces that push her into sex work and expose the harsh realities of financial insecurity. Her financial insecurity makes her an easy prey to a pimp named Dele. On arrival in Belgium, Sisi is denied asylum and stays in Belgium as an undocumented immigrant, which further marginalises her economically. She cannot look for another job besides the exploitative sex work. Her trip to Belgium places her in economic slavery as she had to pay back all the money she owed Dele. A few months later, she sees the impossibility of getting financial independence. This economic marginalisation can trap individuals in cycles of exploitation and vulnerability.

Efe's economic marginalisation serves as a critical factor propelling her into sex work in Belgium. Her background forces her to make decisions that place her in a vulnerable and exploitative position. Since Efe lacks formal education, she settles on cleaning offices. These jobs do not alleviate her economic status, and with a son about to join school, she is desperate to make money. Dele takes advantage of her situation and proposes to take her to Belgium. She has to pay a huge debt to pay back what she owed Dele, as well as take her son to school. As much as she finally becomes economically stable, she has to pay a high price for it.

Ama comes from a background marked by poverty and abuse, which limits her financial opportunities and compels her into sex work in Belgium. Her lack of formal education means that she cannot have any formal employment, which underscores her economic marginalisation. She works as a waitress in her aunt's café for nine months and wishes to have financial independence and, to an extent, to prove to her father that she has amounted to something. When Dele proposes to her about sex

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work, she is annoyed, but she agrees. Just like the other girls, she is an undocumented immigrant. Therefore, she is unable to look for any other type of work.

The prostitutes are stuck in a cycle of economic slavery, as a huge part of their earnings goes to Dele to repay their debt. Their limited ability to accumulate wealth keeps them economically dependent. Lack of finances limits their ability to make choices. The intersection of financial dependency, gender and immigration status greatly limits their movement.

CONCLUSION

In the novel, the prostitutes can navigate the urban spaces they find themselves in not as free agents but as commodities in a male-dominated market that echoes Luce Irigaray's analysis in "Women on the market". Although Belgium offers an opportunity to earn, their freedom is traded for financial survival. However, this financial freedom comes at a very high cost. Sisi realises that after months of saving and paying the huge debt that she had, it was almost impossible for her to get the financial freedom that she had been promised. The other three characters can clear their debts after a long time. As much as the spaces give the women a source of revenue, it also takes away their freedom of movement. The women are confined in the boarding house or behind the glass windows. Sisi cannot stand the suffocation and resorts to long walks alone, where she pretends to be a tourist.

The women are socially sidelined; they are unable to make true relationships. During Efe's party, the people are so self-conscious, judging each immigrant's culture. Even though the women know for a fact that their lives are made up, they cannot help but talk to one another. The women are stripped of their identity, which makes it hard for them to form meaningful relationships. It is only when they truly narrate their background that they can become sisters who achieve their individual dreams.

Their financial dependency is shaped by poverty, lack of jobs in their home countries and lack of education, which forces them into an exploitative cycle of sex work. Their entry into this profession is therefore less about choice and more about survival. They cannot change this profession since they have huge debts to pay and no passport. When the three ladies finally pay off their debts, they can put up a business, thus free to make choices.

Their psychological suffering is closely tied to intersecting oppressions: gender, race, migrant status, and class all contribute to their vulnerability. To cope, many suppress their trauma. Ama avoids questions about her past, reducing her life to the simple phrase that her family died when she was young. Joyce, when faced with her identity being rewritten by Polycarp and Dele, offers no resistance. This emotional silence reflects the structural violence embedded in the sex trade and migration systems. The women are not passive but are navigating systems that require silence and self-effacement as survival strategies in a market built and governed by men.

In sum, the prostitutes in *On Black Sisters' Street* navigate foreign and urban spaces. Their experiences in Belgium demonstrate how urban space, though seemingly offering economic opportunity, ultimately functions as a controlled marketplace where their bodies are commoditised, monitored and regulated. Through the lens of Luce Irigaray's *'Women on the Market',* their commodification becomes clear. They are reduced to objects of circulation in a system that denies them autonomy. Intersectionality theory further reveals how their gender, immigrant status and race compound their marginalisation, making escape from exploitation difficult.

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