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MIGRATION AND A DECONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF MODERN SLAVERY IN UNIGWE CHIKA'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

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Abstract

Contemporary African migration narratives increasingly reveal the intricate relationship between migration and modern slavery, particularly as transnational mobility is mediated by economic precarity, gendered exploitation, and unequal global power relations. This paper examines Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street through the lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, with the aim of interrogating how the novel destabilises dominant assumptions about migration and modern slavery. Drawing on five deconstructionist principles – subverting hierarchies, the marginalised "Other," the critique of subjectivity, the aporia of agency, and linguistic imperialism – the study undertakes a close textual analysis of the novel. The analysis demonstrates that Unigwe resists linear victimhood narratives by exposing the contradictions that underlie conventional binaries such as freedom/slavery, victim/agent, home/exile, legality/illegality, and empowerment/exploitation. The findings are that migration is represented not as a singular route to liberation or oppression but as an unstable and ideologically mediated process in which hope and coercion, choice and necessity, identity and displacement continuously intersect. Similarly, modern slavery

emerges as a fluid, relational condition sustained by socio-economic inequalities, patriarchal structures, and transnational systems of power rather than as a fixed criminal phenomenon. The study concludes that On Black Sisters' Street deconstructs dominant discourses surrounding migration and human trafficking by foregrounding ambiguity, multiplicity, and the instability of meaning. It therefore argues that a deconstructionist reading extends existing scholarship beyond predominantly sociological, feminist, and postcolonial interpretations by illuminating the textual mechanisms through which migration and modern slavery are problematised. The study contributes to African literary criticism by demonstrating the value of deconstruction for rethinking contemporary migration narratives and the complex politics of power, identity, and exploitation.

Keywords: Deconstruction; Migration; Modern Slavery; *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Introduction

International migration has become one of the defining features of contemporary globalisation, driven by complex interactions among economic inequality, political instability, armed conflict, and the search for improved life opportunities. Although migration is often classified as either voluntary or forced (Hagen-Zanker, 2010), this distinction is increasingly contested because structural conditions such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and social exclusion frequently constrain individual choice. Consequently, migration cannot be understood merely as a movement across geographical boundaries; it is also a site where power, identity, and exploitation are continually negotiated.

One of the most disturbing consequences of contemporary migration is the rise of modern slavery. The International Labour Organisation (ILO - 2009), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the Walk Free Foundation (2022) estimate that nearly 50 million people worldwide live in situations of modern slavery, including forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage, sexual

exploitation, and human trafficking. Human trafficking, in particular, has become closely intertwined with irregular migration, as traffickers exploit migrants' economic vulnerabilities and aspirations for a better life (Ladele & Omotaye, 2017). Rather than existing as separate phenomena, migration and modern slavery often operate within the same transnational networks, where the promise of mobility frequently conceals systems of coercion and exploitation.

Nigeria remains one of the principal countries of origin for victims of transnational human trafficking. Widespread poverty, youth unemployment, gender inequality, weak governance, and persistent insecurity have intensified outward migration, especially among young people seeking economic survival and social mobility. While migration itself is not inherently exploitative, the desperation produced by these conditions renders many migrants susceptible to deceptive recruitment practices that culminate in forced prostitution, domestic servitude, and other forms of modern slavery (Babayemi, 2018). As a result, the boundaries between voluntary migration and coerced exploitation become increasingly difficult to sustain, revealing migration as a deeply contradictory process rather than a straightforward exercise of individual agency.

These realities have attracted considerable attention in contemporary African literature, where writers interrogate the human consequences of globalisation, displacement, and transnational exploitation. Among such works, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* offers a compelling representation of Nigerian women whose migration to Europe, motivated by hope for economic advancement, culminates in sexual exploitation and dehumanisation. Yet the novel resists simplistic victim-centred narratives by exposing the unstable relationships between freedom and bondage, agency and coercion, aspiration and exploitation. Migration emerges simultaneously as liberation and entrapment, while modern slavery appears not as an isolated criminal enterprise but as a product of intersecting economic, cultural, and ideological forces.

Although existing scholarship has examined the novel through feminist, postcolonial, discourse-analytic, psychoanalytic, and social realist perspectives, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which the text deconstructs the conceptual binaries that underpin dominant understandings of migration and modern slavery. A deconstructionist reading, therefore, foregrounds the internal contradictions and ambiguities that unsettle oppositions such as freedom/slavery, victim/perpetrator, home/exile, legality/illegality, and agency/coercion. By interrogating these unstable categories, this study demonstrates that *On Black Sisters' Street* challenges fixed meanings of migration and modern slavery, revealing both as contingent, paradoxical, and ideologically constructed experiences.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street has consistently explored the novel's engagement with migration, gender, identity, prostitution, and human trafficking. These studies have significantly advanced understanding of the socio-cultural and political realities represented in the text. However, they predominantly employ sociological, feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, discourse-analytic, or realist frameworks that treat migration and modern slavery as relatively stable social categories. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to how the novel destabilises these categories through its internal contradictions, ambiguities, and shifting meanings.

De Mul (2014) examines the construction of Black identity by analysing Unigwe's self-positioning as an ethnic minority writer in Flanders alongside the identity negotiations of African migrant women in Antwerp. Kamalu and Ejezie (2016), using Critical Discourse Analysis, demonstrate how linguistic choices construct social meanings and power relations, revealing the ideological function of discourse in representing migration and exploitation. Adopting a Socialist Feminist perspective, Chukwudi-Ofoedu (2017) investigates the patriarchal structures that commodify women's bodies and sustain their exploitation, while Ladele and Omotayo (2017) similarly foreground gender as the principal lens through which the experiences of African

migrant women are understood.

Other scholars extend the discussion to questions of identity transformation and socio-economic exploitation. Alao (2021), drawing on Postcolonial theory and Psychoanalysis, analyses the motivations for African migration to Europe and the subsequent reconfiguration of migrants' identities under Western ideological influence. Haruna-Banke and Gogo (2022), from a social realist perspective, examine the experiences of the trafficked Nigerian women in Antwerp, exposing the structural conditions that sustain prostitution and human trafficking.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they largely interpret migration and modern slavery as coherent socio-economic realities whose meanings are assumed rather than interrogated. Their emphasis on social causation, gender oppression, identity formation, or ideological domination leaves relatively unexplored the textual instabilities through which the novel questions these very assumptions. As a result, binary oppositions such as freedom/slavery, victim/agent, home/exile, legality/illegality, and hope/despair often remain analytically intact, despite the novel's persistent disruption of such distinctions.

This study addresses that critical gap by employing deconstruction as its theoretical framework. Rather than viewing migration and modern slavery as fixed or mutually exclusive categories, it examines how On Black Sisters' Street subverts hierarchical binaries, problematises the marginalised "Other," critiques unified subjectivity, exposes the aporia of agency, and interrogates linguistic imperialism. Through this approach, the study demonstrates that the novel presents migration and modern slavery as unstable, relational, and ideologically mediated constructs whose meanings are continually deferred and contested, thereby extending existing scholarship beyond predominantly sociological and representational readings.

Deconstruction As a Theoretical Framework

Deconstruction is a poststructuralist and postmodern approach to textual analysis that systematically interrogates the assumptions

underlying Western metaphysics and traditional systems of meaning (Derrida, 1981; Zima, 2002). Developed by Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s, deconstruction is not a process of dismantling texts but a critical practice that exposes the internal tensions, contradictions, and instabilities within language and meaning. It challenges the philosophical assumptions of certainty, presence, and fixed truth by demonstrating that meaning is always relational, contingent, and open to multiple interpretations (Derrida, 1981; Zima, 2002). As a mode of reading, deconstruction shifts attention from the apparent coherence of a text to its ambiguities, silences, and internal contradictions, revealing meanings that transcend its surface structure (Atkins, 1983).

Jacques Derrida is the principal architect of deconstruction, while its development in literary studies was significantly advanced by the Yale School of criticism, particularly Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman (Atkins, 1983; Zima, 2002). Other influential scholars, including Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Jonathan Culler, further expanded and applied deconstructive principles to literary and cultural criticism (Atkins, 1983; Zima, 2002).

Deconstruction is grounded in several interrelated concepts that illuminate the instability of language and meaning. These include:

a. The critique of logocentrism, which questions the privileging of speech and the assumption of an original, stable presence;
b. *Différance,* Derrida's concept that meaning is simultaneously produced through difference and endlessly deferred;
c. Binary oppositions and violent hierarchies, which expose the unequal power relations embedded in conventional conceptual oppositions;
d. The trace, which suggests that every sign bears the residue of absent meanings;
e. Undecidability or aporia, which reveals the irreducible contradictions that prevent texts from yielding a single, authoritative interpretation; and

f. Iterability, which demonstrates that signs acquire new meanings whenever they are repeated in different contexts (Atkins, 1983; Culler, 1983; Derrida, 1981; Zima, 2002).

Although these concepts collectively constitute the foundation of deconstruction, this study draws specifically on five closely related principles: subverting hierarchies, the marginalised "Other," the critique of subjectivity, the aporia of agency, and linguistic imperialism. These concepts provide the analytical framework for examining how Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* destabilises dominant narratives of migration and exposes the complex structures of power, identity, and exploitation that sustain modern slavery.

Deconstructing Migration and Modern Slavery In Chika Unigwe's on Black Sisters Street: A Critical Analysis

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* (2009) presents a haunting exploration of African women's migration to Europe and their subsequent entrapment in modern slavery through the sex trade. The novel, set in Antwerp, Belgium, traces the interconnected lives of four Nigerian women – Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce – who have been trafficked to Europe under false pretences. Through their experiences, Unigwe constructs a narrative that systematically deconstructs Western narratives of migration as liberation while exposing the complex power dynamics that sustain contemporary forms of slavery. This paper applies five deconstructionist tenets to examine how Unigwe subverts hierarchies, interrogates the position of the marginalised "Other," critiques traditional notions of subjectivity, reveals the aporia of agency, and exposes linguistic imperialism within the context of migration and modern slavery. By employing Jacques Derrida's deconstructive framework, this paper argues that Unigwe's novel dismantles binary oppositions between victim and agent, freedom and enslavement, and centre and periphery, ultimately revealing the profound contradictions inherent in contemporary migration narratives.

Subverting Hierarchies: Deconstructing Power Structures

Unigwe systematically subverts traditional hierarchies through her narrative structure and character development, challenging readers to reconsider established power dynamics. The novel employs a fragmented, non-linear narrative that accords equal narrative weight to each woman's backstory, effectively dismantling hierarchical distinctions among characters based on perceived importance or moral standing. This structural choice positions the four women as co-protagonists, each with equally valid claims to narrative authority. As Unigwe writes:

Nobody knows Sisi's real name, never having used it. Not these women gathered in this room without her. And not the men who had shared her bed (Unigwe, 2009, p. 37).

This deliberate withholding of Sisi's true identity from both the other characters and the reader subverts the traditional hierarchy of naming and knowledge, positioning these women as unknowable subjects whose full humanity resists easy categorisation.

Deconstruction identifies traditional dichotomies as "violent hierarchies" where one term governs the other (Atkins: 1983, 20). In the novel, the master/slave and trafficker/migrant binaries are central. The power dynamics between Madam and her girls represent another site of hierarchical subversion. While Madam positions herself as the absolute authority, the novel gradually reveals her dependence on the women she exploits. Madam's seemingly supreme power is revealed to be contingent and precarious, dependent on maintaining the fiction of her control while simultaneously recognising that her power would collapse without the women's labour. The narrator observes:

> Madam walked around with her incense stick, purging the house of the spirit of jealousy. Madam said the evil spirit of jealousy lived in their house, and the incense was supposed to exorcise it (Unigwe, 2009, p. 94).

This ritualistic performance of control ironically underscores Madam's inability to maintain actual authority, revealing how power structures

require constant theatrical reinforcement to appear legitimate. The hierarchical relationship between Madam and her girls is thus revealed as inherently unstable, dependent on mutual complicity that ultimately subverts the very hierarchy it appears to sustain.

Furthermore, Unigwe subverts the hierarchy between African and European characters by refusing to position Europeans as uniformly powerful or Africans as uniformly victimised. Characters like Luc, despite his relative privilege, are portrayed with the same complexity and ambiguity as the Nigerian characters. His relationship with Sisi exists in a space that refuses simple categorisation as either exploitative or redemptive. The narrator notes:

> Luc was a thirty-year-old banker. He stood out because he belonged to that rare breed of white Belgians who attended services at African Pentecostal churches (Unigwe, 2009, p. 216).

This positioning of a white European as voluntarily participating in African cultural spaces subverts the expected hierarchy, suggesting that cultural influence flows in multiple directions. Similarly, characters like Segun, the Nigerian man who ultimately murders Sisi, complicate any simple binary between African victims and European oppressors, revealing how power operates through multiple, intersecting hierarchies that cannot be reduced to racial or national categories.

The novel also subverts temporal hierarchies, refusing to present the past as merely a prelude to a more significant present. Through extensive flashbacks to Nigeria and Sudan, Unigwe insists that the women's pasts are not simply explanatory devices but constitute their identities in ways that resist linear progression. Joyce's traumatic past in Sudan, Efe's experiences in Lagos, and Ama's childhood in Enugu all operate as parallel narratives that exist alongside and within their present circumstances, subverting any simple chronology of victimisation and survival. This structural choice challenges readers to recognise that these women's experiences of modern slavery cannot be understood through linear narratives of cause and effect, but require more complex frameworks that respect the multiplicity of their histories.

The Marginalised "Other": Constructing and Resisting Otherness

Deconstruction focuses on the ex-centric or marginal voices to subvert hegemonic orders (Zima: 2002, 174). Unigwe's *On Black Sisters* interrogates the construction of the marginalised "Other" in both African and European contexts, revealing how otherness operates as a fluid category that shifts depending on perspective and power. The women in *On Black Sisters* are multiply othered – as women in patriarchal societies, as Africans in Europe, as sex workers in a context that stigmatises their profession, and as illegal immigrants in a system that denies them legal recognition. This multiplication of otherness creates a complex matrix of marginalisation that the novel refuses to simplify. As the narrator observes of the women,

> They are all the family she has in Europe. And families who know so little of one another are bound to be dysfunctional (Unigwe, 2009, p. 41).

This recognition of their shared marginality ironically becomes the basis for their construction of alternative forms of community, suggesting that otherness can simultaneously exclude and unite.

The novel explicitly addresses the construction of African women as the exotic Other within the sex trade. The women's bodies are commodified specifically because of their race, with clients seeking "een afrikaanse" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 148) as part of their sexual consumption. The narrator notes, “He made it sound as if you could walk from Belgium to London. From one door to the next" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 71), revealing how European perceptions of Africa reduce the continent to a homogenous, accessible space. However, Unigwe resists this reduction by insisting on the particularity of each woman's experience and origin. Efe's Nigerianness, Ama's Igbo identity, Joyce's Sudanese background, and Sisi's Chisom-self all refuse to be subsumed into a single African identity, even as they are subjected to the homogenising gaze of European clients.

The construction of the Other also operates within African communities, as the novel reveals how Nigerian characters otherize

other African nationalities. Ama and Sisi agree "that Ghanaians were just wannabe Nigerians and Antwerp was, for all its faults, the best city in the world" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 17). This internal othering within the African diaspora complicates any simple binary between African unity and European oppression, revealing how marginalised groups often reproduce exclusionary hierarchies. The South African character who assumes Efe is Ghanaian, then comments on "makwerekweres" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 18), further illustrates how otherness operates within African communities as well as between Africans and Europeans.

Unigwe also explores how the women are othered within Nigerian society before they leave Africa. Efe's pregnancy outside marriage marks her as a social outcast, with "neighbours…pointed at Efe and laughed out loud whenever they passed her" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 59). Ama's experience of incest and subsequent expulsion from her home further illustrates how marginalisation operates within African communities, suggesting that the women's later experiences of European otherness are not entirely new but rather intensify existing patterns of exclusion. This temporal continuity challenges any narrative that would position migration as a simple transition from inclusion to exclusion, or from African community to European isolation.

Critique of Subjectivity: The Instability of Identity

Deconstruction challenges the notion of a "unified, coherent subject," viewing it instead as a product of socio-linguistic customs (Zima: 2002, 180). *On Black Sisters* presents a profound critique of traditional notions of subjectivity, revealing identity as fragmented, performative, and contingent rather than unified and stable. The women's multiple names – Chisom/Sisi, Chinyere/Ama, Alek/Joyce, Efe/ – embody this fragmentation, suggesting that identity is not a fixed essence but a series of performed roles that shift depending on context and audience. Sisi's adoption of a new name for her new life – "She would rename herself. She would go through a baptism of fire and be reborn as Sisi: a stranger yet familiar" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 44) – explicitly thematises the constructed nature of identity. Yet this reconstruction is

never complete, as "Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 44), suggesting that identity remains haunted by its previous forms.

The novel's narrative structure reinforces this critique of subjective unity by presenting each woman's story through a fragmentary, non-linear mode that refuses any single, authoritative account of their lives. Each woman's backstory is presented through a combination of direct narration, reported speech, and the third-person narration that frames the text, creating a polyphony of voices that resists reduction to a single subjective perspective. As the narrator observes:

> They were people without any past, people with forgotten pasts, so whatever was said would have to be made up of air" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 195).

This recognition of the constructedness of their pasts – Sisi's invented Liberian identity for her asylum application, the fragmented memories each woman carries – further destabilises any notion of a stable, knowable self.

The women's performance of identity in their work exemplifies the performative nature of subjectivity. Sisi learns "to smile, to pout, to think of nothing but the money she would be making" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 195), performing an identity for clients that has no necessary connection to her "true" self. This performance extends beyond work hours, as Sisi engages in elaborate fantasies while walking through Antwerp, "imagining she was a tourist, some rich woman who could afford to travel the world for leisure" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 211). These performances reveal identity as a series of roles that can be donned and discarded, challenging any essentialist understanding of selfhood. Yet the novel also insists that these performances have real consequences, that the self cannot simply be shed like a costume.

The instability of identity is further emphasised through the theme of naming and renaming that pervades the novel. Dele's renaming of Alek as Joyce – "He brings out his hand, and traces Sisi's figure" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 172) – represents a violent imposition of identity that the women must navigate. Yet even this imposed identity

becomes a site of potential agency, as Joyce eventually embraces her new name and identity while also maintaining a connection to her past. The narrator notes:

> When Alek got her passport from Dele via Polycarp and saw that she had indeed been renamed Joyce, she did not say a word" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 191).

This silence represents both submission and resistance, suggesting that identity is contested terrain where power operates but never achieves total control.

The women's construction of alternative communities – "Now we are sisters" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 238) – represents an attempt to forge new forms of subjectivity through collective identification. Yet even this collective identity is unstable, as the women

> ...are not sure what they are to one another. Thrown together by a conspiracy of fate and a loud man called Dele, they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship (Unigwe, 2009, p. 28).

This ambivalent formulation captures the novel's overall critique of subjectivity: identity is always provisional, always in process, never fully achieved or fully stable.

The Aporia of Agency: Freedom and Constraint in Modern Slavery

An aporia is an unresolvable contradiction where incompatible meanings are simultaneously true (Atkins: 1983, 25). The question of agency represents perhaps the most complex theme in *On Black Sisters*, as Unigwe explores the paradox of choice within systems of profound constraint. The women's decision to migrate to Europe is presented as simultaneously free and coerced, a choice made under conditions that severely circumscribe meaningful agency. The narrator notes that "she had agreed to Dele's terms before she asked what she was expected to do abroad" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 72), suggesting a complicity that cannot be reduced to simple victimisation. Yet this complicity is itself shaped by conditions of desperate economic necessity, as Ama's thoughts

reveal:

> Mama Eko was nice. Mama Eko herself felt almost like a mother. A proper working mother. But Mama Eko could not give her the kind of life she dreamed of (Unigwe, 2009, p. 137).

The aporia of agency is perhaps most starkly illustrated through the women's relationship to their bodies. In their work, the women perform what appears to be voluntary sexual engagement, but this performance occurs under conditions of economic and legal constraint that fundamentally undermine its volition. Madam's instructions to Sisi articulate this paradox explicitly:

> Make him forget that he is paying for the tenderness that you are showing him. That is the secret of the game" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 226).

The "game" requires the erasure of the economic transaction that makes the tenderness possible, revealing the structural contradiction at the heart of the women's agency. Sisi's internal struggle during her first encounter – "This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 175) – reveals the psychic dissociation necessary to perform agency within conditions of profound constraint.

The novel also explores how Dele represents the aporia of agency through his simultaneous roles as exploiter and provider. He describes himself as trying "to help poor gals" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 241), and the women often view him in these terms. Ama reflects, "Oga Dele just wanted to help. What choices did we have back home, eh? Oga Dele is trying to give us happiness" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 97). This recognition of Dele as a potential source of escape from desperate circumstances, while simultaneously the source of new forms of constraint, captures the impossibility of separating freedom from constraint in conditions of economic desperation. The women's agency is always already shaped by the structures that constrain them.

The relationship between Sisi and Luc presents another dimension of the agency paradox. When Luc encourages Sisi to leave her work and go to the police, he offers a vision of agency that Sisi recognises as impossible: "I could have chosen not to come. I was a grown woman, and he did explain the situation to me" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 222). This recognition that her initial choice was made under conditions that invalidate its status as free choice prevents Sisi from simply embracing Luc's narrative of victimisation. Her eventual decision to leave – to stop sending money to Dele, to move in with Luc – represents an assertion of agency that is immediately rendered vulnerable by the circumstances of her death.

Linguistic Imperialism: Language, Power, and Identity

Linguistic imperialism is deconstructed by exposing how the dominant order uses language to subject individuals (Zima: 2002, 71). Unigwe's novel engages extensively with questions of linguistic imperialism, exploring how language operates as a site of power, resistance, and identity formation. The women's relationship to Dutch, Flemish, and English reflects their marginalised position within European society, as they must navigate a linguistic landscape that is simultaneously alien and essential for survival. Sisi's efforts to learn Dutch – "she enjoyed foraying into the words, searching patiently for similarities between the foreign words that danced on the pages with the English that she knew" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 216) – represent both a strategy for integration and a reminder of her exclusion. The narrator notes, "Her Dutch was very limited, but she enjoyed foraying into the words" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 216), emphasising the pleasure and difficulty of linguistic navigation.

The novel's presentation of Nigerian English, Pidgin, and various Nigerian languages challenges the hierarchical positioning of European languages. The women's speech – "You tink say na one time you go pay? No be one time oo" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 36) – refuses to conform to standard English norms, insisting on the legitimacy of their linguistic practices. Dele's speech, Efe's narration, and the women's

dialogue all operate in a linguistic register that resists translation into "proper" English, asserting the validity of Nigerian linguistic forms. This refusal to domesticate the women's speech for European readers represents a resistance to linguistic imperialism, insisting that the story can only be told in the languages that the characters speak.

Madam's command of "perfect English" and "perfect Dutch" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 100) represents a more complex relationship to linguistic imperialism. Her sophisticated language use positions her as a figure of authority within both Nigerian and European contexts, yet this linguistic skill is also implicated in her exploitation of the other women. The narrator observes that "Madam's accent was sophisticated. Her words well enunciated, filed around the edges so that there was not a trace of roughness" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 100). This linguistic polish is presented as both admirable and suspicious, suggesting that mastery of the imperial language comes at a cost.

The novel also explores how naming functions as a form of linguistic imperialism, with Dele's renaming of Alek as Joyce representing a violent imposition of European linguistic norms. The narrator notes, "The name has to go, one time. Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 189). This renaming is explicitly acknowledged as an act of power, a denial of Alek's Sudanese identity in favour of a name that is "easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off the tongue" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 228). Yet the women resist this linguistic imperialism by retaining private names and identities that exist outside the purview of their clients and Madam. The narrator's retention of Alek/Joyce's original name throughout her backstory represents a refusal to accept the imperial imposition of a new name.

The novel's use of untranslated Nigerian words and phrases further challenges linguistic imperialism. Terms like "eziokwu," "tufia," "nwa," and "oga" appear without translation, insisting on their legitimacy and refusing to accommodate readers unfamiliar with Nigerian languages. This linguistic strategy mirrors the women's experiences of exclusion from European linguistic communities,

refusing to make their story entirely accessible to European readers. As the narrator observes, "when she spoke she rolled the hairs between her fingers as if trying to draw attention to them" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 99), suggesting that language itself can be a form of bodily presence that resists easy interpretation.

Conclusion

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters* offers a profound deconstruction of migration and modern slavery through its systematic subversion of established hierarchies, its interrogation of otherness, its critique of subjectivity, its exploration of the paradoxes of agency, and its engagement with linguistic imperialism. The novel refuses to offer simple narratives of victimisation or liberation, insisting instead on the complexity of the women's experiences and the impossibility of reducing their stories to any single interpretation. Through its fragmented narrative structure, its multiplication of perspectives, and its refusal of easy resolution, Unigwe creates a work that challenges readers to move beyond conventional frameworks for understanding migration, slavery, and agency.

The deconstructionist reading reveals how the novel dismantles the binary oppositions that structure dominant narratives of African migration to Europe. The women are neither simply victims nor agents, neither simply free nor enslaved, neither simply Nigerian nor European. Their experiences resist these categories, demanding instead a more complex understanding of how power operates through multiple, intersecting hierarchies. The novel's emphasis on the constructed nature of identity, the contingency of agency, and the operation of power through linguistic and narrative forms offers a model for understanding contemporary forms of migration and exploitation that refuses the certainties of both liberal humanism and postcolonial critique.

Ultimately, *On Black Sisters Street* suggests that the deconstruction of these hierarchies and binaries is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary response to the conditions of modern

slavery. By refusing to present the women's experiences as either simply tragic or simply heroic, by insisting on the complexity and ambiguity of their lives, Unigwe creates a space for understanding that does not reproduce the violence of the systems it examines. The novel's deconstruction of migration and modern slavery is also a reconstruction of the possibility of solidarity, community, and resistance within conditions of profound constraint.

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