

## LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IN *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND *SARAH'S HOUSE*

AGBOOLA Olubunmi Tayo  
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

### Abstract

This paper explores the literary representations of female trafficking and exploitation in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*. Anchored in radical feminist theory, the study examines how both novels portray the commodification of the female body, the psychological trauma of trafficked women, and the socio-economic systems that enable gendered oppression. Unigwe and Ajaegbo present vivid narratives of women lured or coerced into sex work under pretences, exposing the intersection of poverty, patriarchy, and neocolonial capitalism as driving forces behind human trafficking. The characters of Sisi and Nita, among others, illustrate the moral and physical degradation trafficked women endure while also reflecting the resilience and resistance that persist amid systemic abuse. By analysing character development, narrative structure, and symbolic motifs, the paper argues that both authors critique not only the act of trafficking but also the societal conditions that normalise female exploitation. Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender, agency, and the literary role in illuminating hidden crises affecting African women.

**Keywords:** female trafficking, exploitation, economic, oppression

### Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of human trafficking—particularly the trafficking of women—has garnered increasing attention from governments, international organisations, non-governmental agencies, the media, and the academic community. Literature's enduring ability to mirror and critique society has played a vital role in engaging with this complex phenomenon. Writers often act as the moral compass of their societies, using narrative as a tool to illuminate both the triumphs and the traumas of human experience. Contemporary African literature, in particular, has responded to the continent's shifting socio-political and economic landscapes by foregrounding urgent issues such as migration, gender inequality, and human trafficking. In this context, the literary spotlight on female trafficking has not only amplified the visibility of the issue but has also provoked critical reflection on the limitations of prevailing transnational and international anti-trafficking policies. These policies often fall short due to a lack of nuanced understanding of the gendered dimensions of trafficking and the complex, subjective realities of trafficked women (Cameron

and Newman 2007).

Human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of women, is a pervasive global phenomenon that constitutes a serious violation of fundamental human rights. According to the *International Labour Organization* (2012), approximately 21 million individuals were subjected to forced labour worldwide, with 11.7 million in Asia-Pacific, 3.7 million in Africa, and 1.8 million in Latin America ("ILO Global Estimate"). A significant proportion of these victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation, driven by persistent global demand for commercial sex (Lutya and Lanier 2012). Traffickers, motivated by substantial profits, often employ coercion, deception, and violence to maintain control over their victims (Jakobi 2012).

In recent years, human trafficking has received growing attention in both policy discourse and literature. While the clandestine nature of trafficking means that many cases remain undocumented, literature plays a critical role in exposing these hidden injustices. Touzenis notes that the number of identified victims represents only a fraction of the total individuals affected by trafficking (2010). Traffickers often target

vulnerable populations—especially women and children—using manipulation and false promises to lure them into exploitation (“Trafficking in Persons Report”). The long-standing issue of violence against women further increases their susceptibility to human trafficking (Walklate 2014).

Victims of trafficking are frequently exploited repeatedly until they are considered no longer valid due to age or overuse (Macy and Graham 2012). Over time, some victims may internalise cycles of abuse and, in rare cases, may themselves become exploiters as a coping mechanism to reclaim lost power (Lanier and Henry 2010). While public discourse often equates trafficking with women trapped in the sex industry, the issue is far broader, involving both men and women and extending into sectors like forced labour, child soldiering, and organ trafficking (Rao and Presenti 2012). Socio-economic disparities and conflict shape Africa’s long-standing history of human trafficking. Trafficked victims often find themselves in foreign countries without legal protections, isolated and powerless against exploitation. Organised criminal networks facilitate recruitment and transport, sustaining the global trafficking infrastructure. Scholars have examined the intersections of migration, trafficking, and cross-border prostitution, highlighting how globalisation intensifies vulnerability (Poulin 2003; Outshoorn 2005; McFadyen and Collins 2009; Eze 2014; Efrat 2016).

Connell and Marsh argue that globalisation transforms the dynamics of space and place, creating new forms of social interaction and exploitation shaped by a “dialectical intermingling of the local and the global” (2011). Hodge and Lietz, in their review of sex trafficking literature, identify recurring themes such as recruitment strategies, the global scope of trafficking, and the role of economic incentives. However, they also point out a notable lack of representation in social work-specific journals despite the relevance of this issue to the field (Schatz and Furman 2002; Lundy and Grossman 2005).

This study distinguishes itself by

emphasising how globalisation fosters systemic vulnerabilities that underpin sexual trafficking. In *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Unigwe portrays trafficked women not simply as victims of deceit but as casualties of structural inequality in a globalised economy. Whether coerced or complicit, the women are marked for exploitation by their social and economic marginalisation. Unigwe’s depiction underscores how traffickers exploit initial vulnerabilities—economic need, familial instability, or displacement—to initiate recruitment. Likewise, Ajaegbo’s *Sarah’s House* has received scholarly attention for its symbolic and psychoanalytic portrayal of exploitation, state failure, and trauma. Together, both texts offer critical insights into the lived experiences of trafficked women and the larger systems that perpetuate their suffering.

### **Radical Feminism and Female Trafficking**

The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation remains one of the most disturbing manifestations of gender-based violence in contemporary global society. Literature, as a mirror and critique of lived realities, has increasingly engaged with the subject of human trafficking, revealing the structural and systemic forces that facilitate such exploitation. In Ifeanyi Ajaegbo’s *Sarah’s House* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the authors foreground the brutal realities of female trafficking through narratives that expose the commodification, dehumanisation, and sexual subjugation of women. This paper engages with these literary representations using radical feminist theory. This framework locates the oppression of women in patriarchal structures, particularly through sexual exploitation, violence, and the control of female bodies.

Radical feminism asserts that patriarchy—the systemic dominance of men over women—is the root cause of female oppression. One of its core arguments is that women’s bodies are objectified and exploited primarily for male benefit and that sexual violence and commodification are tools of patriarchal control (MacKinnon 1989; Dworkin 1981). These assertions find clear resonance in both *Sarah’s House* and *On Black Sisters’ Street*, where the protagonists are trafficked and reduced

to commodities in a global sex industry that profits from their suffering. The characters' lived experiences reflect not isolated incidents of abuse but a larger system of gendered oppression that radical feminism seeks to dismantle.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe tells the stories of four African women trafficked to Belgium for prostitution. Though each woman's journey is unique, all are united by their shared vulnerability and marginalisation in a patriarchal and postcolonial world. Radical feminism helps illuminate how women's choices are not made in freedom but are constrained by systemic conditions—poverty, abandonment, and societal expectations. For instance, Sisi, the central character, is lured into sex work by the illusion of economic empowerment, only to discover the brutal reality of sexual slavery. Unigwe critiques a world where women's value is tied to their sexual availability, echoing the radical feminist critique of male-centred societies that commodify female bodies (Jeffreys 2009).

Similarly, Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* focuses on the abduction of young girls in Nigeria and their forced involvement in child pornography and prostitution. The novel is particularly harrowing in its depiction of how traffickers, often working within organised crime rings, rely on manipulation, violence, and psychological control to exploit vulnerable girls. Sarah, the protagonist, experiences systemic abuse that begins with familial neglect and culminates in her capture and use in the pornographic industry. Ajaegbo exposes the intersecting forces of patriarchal violence, capitalism, and state failure, all of which radical feminism identifies as key mechanisms of female subjugation (Dworkin 1981).

What distinguishes both novels is their refusal to sanitise the experiences of trafficked women. Instead, they depict trauma in stark detail, offering a visceral representation of the violence that underpins trafficking. Radical feminism insists on the importance of making such violence visible, arguing that patriarchal societies often normalise or ignore the exploitation of women, especially in the sex industry (MacKinnon 1989). By foregrounding the interior lives of their female protagonists, Unigwe and Ajaegbo reject

narratives that silence victims, offering a space for testimony, rage, and resistance instead.

Another key insight from radical feminism is its critique of the myth of consent in prostitution and trafficking. Radical feminist theorists like Sheila Jeffreys argue that the global sex industry thrives on the illusion that women choose prostitution freely, when in fact, such "choices" are made under structural coercion—poverty, war, gender inequality, and lack of opportunity (Jeffreys 2009). Sarah's House and *On Black Sisters' Street* affirm this perspective by showing how their protagonists are exploited through deception or desperation. Even when the women appear to have agency, such as in the case of Sisi's migration, their consent is shaped by unequal power dynamics that obscure absolute freedom.

Importantly, both novels also gesture toward resistance and the possibility of liberation, though within limits. In *Sarah's House*, Sarah escapes her traffickers and begins a journey toward healing and reclaiming her agency. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the solidarity formed among the women suggests that collective resistance and emotional support are crucial in challenging patriarchal exploitation. Radical feminism recognises the power of female solidarity and consciousness-raising in dismantling systems of oppression. These moments of connection among the women, while small, reflect feminist strategies of resistance and point to the necessity of systemic change (hooks 2000). Nevertheless, radical feminism has been critiqued for being essentialist and not always attentive to the intersection of race, class, and colonial history in shaping women's experiences. For African women trafficked into Europe, their victimisation cannot be understood solely through gender. Postcolonial conditions, economic disparity, and migration politics also play key roles. While radical feminism provides a robust framework for understanding the sexual exploitation depicted in these texts, its insights are enriched when combined with intersectional approaches that account for the multilayered nature of oppression (Crenshaw 1991).

In conclusion, radical feminism offers a compelling theoretical lens through which to analyse *Sarah's House* and *On Black Sisters'*

*Street*. Both novels expose the patriarchal underpinnings of female trafficking and reveal how women are devalued, exploited, and commodified in systems that prioritise male power and profit. Through their harrowing yet humanising portrayals of trafficked women, Ajaegbo and Unigwe contribute to a feminist literary tradition that challenges exploitation and demands accountability. Radical feminism, with its unflinching critique of sexual violence and gendered power, is thus a fitting framework for interpreting these powerful narratives of suffering, survival, and resistance.

### **Synopsis of Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street***

Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* is a harrowing narrative that explores the grim realities of child trafficking and sexual exploitation in Nigeria. The novel follows Sarah, a young girl abducted into a criminal network that produces child pornography and services sex clients. Through Sarah's journey from victimisation to eventual escape, Ajaegbo critiques systemic failures—poverty, patriarchal abuse, and state corruption—that enable trafficking. The novel foregrounds the psychological trauma of its protagonist while offering a bleak commentary on societal complicity in the commodification of vulnerable girls.

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* centres on the lives of four African women trafficked to Belgium to work in the sex industry. Told through interwoven narratives, the novel reveals how each woman—Sisi, Ama, Joyce, and Efe—was driven by socio-economic desperation into a system that exploits their bodies for profit. The novel examines themes of migration, identity, female solidarity, and the illusion of agency under coercion. Through these characters, Unigwe critiques globalisation, gender inequality, and the racialised nature of modern-day slavery.

### **Trafficking of Women and Prostitution in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Sarah's House***

Both Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* present deeply unsettling portrayals of the trafficking of women and the exploitation of their bodies through prostitution. These texts critically

examine how patriarchal capitalism, poverty, and systemic failure converge to render women vulnerable to sexual slavery, often under the guise of offering them economic salvation.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe introduces four protagonists—Sisi, Efe, Joyce, and Ama—who are trafficked from Nigeria to Belgium under false promises of a better life. Characters such as Dele and Madam function as central agents of this illicit trade, exploiting the women's economic desperation. Dele's deceptive proposition to young women—"If you wan' comot from dis our nonsense country, come see me make we talk" (32)—exemplifies the manipulative language traffickers use to lure victims into sexual slavery. Sisi's backstory exemplifies how a capitalist and patriarchal society conspires to marginalise educated women. Despite being a university graduate, she is unable to secure a job and is forced to apply for roles she is not qualified for:

An air hostess with Triax Airlines (must be an excellent swimmer; Chisom had never learned to swim), an administrative assistant with Air France (excellent French required; Chisom knew as much French as she did Yoruba, which was not much, if anything, at all (23).

When these efforts fail, Sisi views Dele's offer as her only lifeline to sustaining her family financially:

So when she got the offer that she did, she was determined to get 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).

Unigwe further highlights how traffickers enrich themselves from this dehumanising trade. Dele, a pimp, lives extravagantly off the women's earnings:

He always wore rich lace suits and left her huge tips. The other regulars knew him as he would sometimes offer to pay for their food and drinks,



shouting across the table...  
'Mama, I dey declare today!  
For everybody. Even you! Eat!  
Drink! Senghor Dele is paying  
(161–162).

Most of these young women are being transported to Europe to work as prostitutes, where their female bodies are being subjected to subjugation and exploitation. This is a modern-day form of slavery where a woman is transported to a new environment where she does not know anybody, and so becomes an object of sex. Prostitution serves as a strong thread that ties these women (Ama, Efe, Joyce and Sisi) together in the world of trafficking. Sisi, out of desperation to have a better life and support her family, went into prostitution; this also applies to Efe, who was abandoned by her sugar daddy with a child to care for and has the responsibilities of her siblings to shoulder had to accept the offer of Dele to travel abroad to work as a prostitute.

She would be Dele and Sons Limited's export. L.I. would get a better life. Go to good schools, become a big shot and look after her when she was old and tired. L.I. was a worthy investment to encourage her to accept Dele's offer. And even though leaving him would be the hardest thing she would ever do, she would endure it for his sake. (82)

Traffickers send so many young women to Europe and have deeply rooted connections; this makes it very easy for them to transport girls successfully without encountering any problems. This tends to boost their confidence in this illicit trade as Dele boastfully displays this to Sisi; 'I dey get girls everywhere. Italy. Spain. I fit get you inside Belgium. Antwerp. I get plenty connections there. Plenty, plenty!' (34). The high demand for women and young girls in the destination countries drives the trade in human trafficking. The police force also has rotten eggs among them who serve as accomplices to this heinous crime of trafficking women, as Ama attests to this. "Ama laughs. 'Madam has the police in her pocket. You heard

her. We tell the police, and then fucking what?' (290). When these women get to their place of destination, their passports are collected by the pimps or Madam, thereby withholding any sense of identity from these helpless women in a strange land; This is what Madam does to the four women in the text 'Ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it' (119). Madam's confiscation of the women's passports signifies both symbolic and literal ownership. To have these young women under absolute control, they instil fear in them by threatening them and dealing with anyone who tries escaping without paying all the money (debt bondage) the traffickers demand from them. The Madam and pimp use fear and deception to keep their girls passive; the fear of being arrested and deported as an illegal immigrant also serves as a form of keeping these young women under control, as their passports are being taken away from them. This coercion is reinforced through threats:

Now until you have paid up every single kobo', she pointed the cigarette at Sisi, 'every single cent of what you owe us, you will not have your passport back...Every month, you go to the Western Union and transfer the money to Dele. Any month you do not pay...' She let the threat hang, unspoken yet menacing, her left hand plucking at a tuft of hair under her chin. (183).

The women are reminded of their powerlessness through fear of deportation and physical harm. The tragic fate of Sisi—murdered for attempting to escape—exemplifies the violence traffickers use to maintain their power: "Segun killed [Sisi] under the instruction of Madam" (293).

Unigwe depicts human trafficking and prostitution as unethical and forced businesses that people have manipulated to make it worthwhile for their future lives. Thus, in this sense, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce can be labelled as victimised characters who are forced by circumstances to seek freedom through prostitution, in which the novel appears to condemn the circumstances (classed society) that necessitate prostitution rather than the

individuals concerned. The characters of Dele and Madam as key agents of human trafficking portray the oppression and absolute control of the bourgeoisie (traffickers) over the proletariat (women), who are victims of economic pressure in Nigeria.

Similarly, *Sarah's House* depicts a comparable structure of exploitation within Nigeria's internal trafficking network. Ajaegbo's protagonist, Nita and other girls like Matti, Tega, and Ibiwari are trafficked from rural areas to the city. Their introduction to prostitution is abrupt and violent:

I watched in stunned silence as they also undressed and slipped into different articles of clothing that revealed more than what they concealed... The girls looked lifeless and defeated. They moved like wooden puppets (17).

Ajaegbo, like Unigwe, portrays the traffickers—Slim, Fatty, and Madam—as exploitative agents. Slim feigns romantic interest to lure Nita, promising her dreams of a better life:

Slim had promised opportunities made possible by good education and the freedom to be and do whatever I wanted if I worked hard...I followed him because his words had created the life I believed in, the life I wanted and not this hell. ( 31).

The high monetary return from selling women and children makes this trade attractive, as there is an increased demand for commercial sex workers. These traffickers enrich their pockets with this heinous trade. The economic incentive behind trafficking is underscored:

You will need the strength from the food to handle the mugus. To make money for us, eh?(18); Their wealth comes from our degradation and subjection to the most humiliating acts known to man. Most times, you are lucky, and you meet a gentle *mugu* who does not have weird sexual tastes (42).

These women endure severe abuse, including physical violence, as seen when Tega and Matti

return from work visibly battered:

Tega walked into the room first, her steps unsteady on wobbly legs... Beneath her left eye, a huge bruise nestled in the folded flesh (18–19).

In this environment, victims are made to carry out their sexual duties without any form of objection; they have no say over their bodies. Any form of resistance invites brutal retribution from traffickers. Victims, therefore, have no voice and autonomy:

It is the life of prostitutes—the life of slaves. You do what they ask you to do (39). A lot of bad things happen to those they call trouble-makers. You can die (40).

Ajaegbo also exposes the use of pornography as a tool for desensitisation and psychological control:

I had seen pornographic movies in what now seemed like my other life... I did not even know they made them in Nigeria... revolting (147).

### **Exploitation of the Female Body in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House***

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* explore the systematic oppression and exploitation of the female body within the context of transnational prostitution and human trafficking. Through their female protagonists, both authors reveal how patriarchal structures, economic instability, and systemic corruption push women into lives of servitude and sexual exploitation.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe depicts women trapped by the twin forces of poverty and patriarchy. Sisi, despite holding a university degree in Finance and Business Administration from the University of Lagos, cannot find a job due to systemic nepotism and sexism. She bitterly reflects that working in a bank requires not intelligence but “connections” (22). With no viable opportunities, she is lured into prostitution. Similarly, the other women—Efe, Ama, and Joyce—are each victims of abuse,

poverty, or war, forced into sex work to survive. This grim narrative finds a parallel in *Sarah's House*, where Ajaegbo's protagonists—Nita, Tega, and Miko—are similarly coerced into sexual slavery. Like Unigwe's characters, these women are stripped of agency and objectified. Nita, the central figure, is trafficked and turned into a commodity in a world she describes as "a place for the damned... where few survived" (106). Once inside this brutal system, resistance is met with violence or death. "There were so many ways one could die," Nita confesses, highlighting the omnipresent fear trafficked women endure (108). Both novels underscore how women's bodies become currency in capitalist sexual economies. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, women in Antwerp's red-light district are displayed like merchandise: "strutting in sexy lingerie... to attract customers" (178), framed by "blinking red and black neon lights" (237). Similarly, in *Sarah's House*, women are distributed to satisfy the desires of wealthy, powerful clients. Here, commodification intersects with criminality—organs are trafficked alongside bodies, and an orphanage is used as a front for unspeakable atrocities.

The complicity of the state and the elite is a prominent theme in both works. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Dele and Madam maintain a system of sexual slavery under the radar of European and Nigerian authorities. Likewise, Ajaegbo's *Sarah's House* presents traffickers like Slim, Fatty, and Madam as deeply connected to politicians, businessmen, and law enforcement. "Madam also had many militia friends who ensured that anyone who ran away from Sarah's House never lived long enough to tell the story" (116). Victims like Nita are fully aware that police cannot be trusted: "I don't talk to the police... I don't know Slim. I don't know Madam. I want to go now" (194). Both novels expose how these women are robbed not only of their freedom but of their identities. In Unigwe's work, the women are brought to Europe on fake identities and become "persona non grata" (182)—illegal, faceless, voiceless. "Silence and total obedience" (120) are demanded. Their deaths are treated as mere inconveniences. Sisi's death, for instance, elicits no compassion from Madam, who sees it as "nothing more than a temporary

discomfort" (39).

This dehumanisation is echoed in *Sarah's House*, where women are repeatedly sold and resold to different pimps and brothel owners. Tega and Nita, for instance, are transferred to Madam, a former sex worker herself who now perpetuates the cycle. Her house, ironically named Sarah's House in memory of a murdered girl, becomes a space of horror—"a house that houses young ladies and distribute[s] them to men... and where young children are brutally killed, their organs removed and trafficked" (181–182). Furthermore, both authors use the characterisation of pimps and madams to illustrate the internalisation of oppressive systems. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Madam and Dele are the exploiters, but they are products of and contributors to a larger patriarchal and capitalist system. In *Sarah's House*, Madam transitions from victim to perpetrator, reflecting how some women, once oppressed, become agents of oppression in a bid for survival and power.

### Conclusion

Overall, both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Sarah House* offer searing portrayals of how women are commodified within exploitative trafficking systems, exposing the intersecting structures of gendered oppression in both transnational and domestic contexts. Chika Unigwe and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo dismantle the myth that prostitution is a matter of autonomous choice, instead presenting it as a coerced survival strategy forged in the crucible of economic deprivation, systemic patriarchy, and social neglect. The narratives of Sisi, Nita, and their counterparts illuminate not only the brutal physical and psychological realities of trafficking but also the socio-political conditions that enable such practices to persist. Through these literary interventions, both authors condemn a world in which women's bodies are rendered expendable, fungible, and exploitable. Although each novel concludes with moments of resistance or revelation, the dominant message remains unflinching: human trafficking flourishes where poverty, patriarchal dominance, and institutional complicity intersect—underscoring the urgent need for systemic change.

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