

The Luxury of Shame

Chika Unigwe

THE LATEST AFRICAN WRITER TO COME TO PROMINENCE IN EUROPE, UNIGWE ENGAGES WITH PREJUDICE AND POLARISED CONCEPTIONS OF RIGHT AND WRONG. FOLLOWING THE LIVES OF FOUR ILLEGALLY TRAFFICKED PROSTITUTES, *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* ILLUMINATES THE MYTH OF THE WEST FROM AN UNDER-REPRESENTED PERSPECTIVE.

To introduce *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe has chosen a quote from Brian Chikwava's *7th Street Alchemy*, "Armed with a vagina and the will to survive, she knew that destitution would never lay claim to her." This notion of a vagina as a commodity, as an object or product to be bought and sold is approached with a business-like pragmatism by both Unigwe and the characters of her book. Yet hand in hand with this practicality, the women of *On Black Sisters' Street* remain fiercely hopeful; the value placed on their bodies is a saleable asset and the route to achieving their aspirations and escaping poverty.

Born in Nigeria, Unigwe is an award-winning short-story writer and author of two novels, both written in Dutch. Her first novel, *De Feniks*, takes the unprecedented accolade of being the first work of fiction to be written by a Flemish author of African origin. Unigwe's success places her alongside a raft of contemporary African authors, such as Chikwava and 2007 Orange Prize winner Adichie, who have achieved both populist and critical plaudits. Noting this trend, Unigwe comments: "In the past two or three months alone, Faber and Faber, Jonathan Cape and Orion have published debut (African) authors Petina Gappah, Brian Chikwava and Tricia Nwaubani, to name a few." This developing movement within mainstream UK publishers is congruent throughout Europe; why now are African writers becoming so eminent?

The reasons are many and varied; Unigwe comments: "I identify with other contemporary African writers because of our shared realities, often I can connect with the stories they tell. But I also identify with other writers who are neither African nor tell African stories. For instance, Caryl Phillips because he tells stories of displacement, and without ever having consciously decided to, I am aware that this is a theme my writing is interested in too."

UN figures show that 191 million people are now residing in a country other than the one they were born in. In the space of a generation, the number of international migrants has more than doubled, with Europe hosting 34% of all migrants. A further striking change is that half of all migrants are women, breaking with the traditional gender-assumption that men migrate to find work, with their families joining them abroad later. Following four female migrants and debating themes including morality, human nature, politics and culture,

On Black Sisters' Street is firmly contextualised within the larger frame of global migration. Whether Unigwe has a conscious intention to engage with this cultural dislocation or not, her prescient tale and the effects of displacement on the individual, family and society have never been more pertinent. Subsequently, authors such as Unigwe, Chikwava, Adichie and Phillips are superseding a new tenet for the 21st Century.

On Black Sisters' Street tracks Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, four young women who, for disparate reasons, left their homes in Africa and now work as prostitutes in Antwerp. Working for the same Madam, the story centres around the house the women co-habit on Zwartzusterstraat. "Thrown together by a conspiracy of fate and a loud man called Dele they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship, comfortable with what little they know of each other... making light of the life which has taught them to make the most of the trump card God has wedged in between their legs." Yet even with this shared lifestyle and domesticity, as illegal workers Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce conceal their real names and backgrounds from each other. It is only when the most enigmatic of the group, Sisi, is murdered, that Ama, Efe and Joyce are shocked into confronting their own mortality and consequently reveal their true selves. The resulting narratives disclose histories torn apart by war, sexual abuse, and family breakdown.

Researching *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe literally put herself in the shoes of the women she was studying. "I dressed up in my skimpiest skirt and highest boots and dragged my long-suffering husband with me into the red-light district on fieldwork." The women she spoke to commonly mistook her for a "new girl", "I tried to tell them I was a writer," explains Unigwe, "but they did not believe me, because in their reality, a black woman of a certain age is more likely to be a prostitute than a writer."

Judged in this way, the effect of her research and the individual stories she was told challenged Unigwe's polarised view of the world: "It made me realise how much of a luxury shame is and how easy it is to judge people from your own comfort zone. How much shame can you afford if your son or parents back home in Nigeria depend on your monthly Western Union remittance for



their upkeep? Or if your diabetic father depended on you for his medication?" Reflecting a global trend, many of the women Unigwe spoke to were working to provide not only for themselves but for dependents living in Africa. Money sent home by migrant workers worldwide has more than doubled in recent years; UN data estimates the figure at 232 billion US dollars in 2005, increased from 102 billion US dollars in 1995. *On Black Sisters' Street* explores the burden of familial responsibility through the character Efe, who has a son, L.I, an

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alcoholic father and many young siblings. In conversation with the local pimp, Dele, Efe enquires if he is offering a cleaning position, "To which Dele had laughed and said, 'No. Sales.' And it was the way he sized her up, his eyes going from her face to her breasts to her calves under her knee-length skirt, that told her what sort of sales she was going to be involved in. She would be Dele and Sons Limited's export. L.I would get a better life." The necessity of providing for her family makes any feelings of personal embarrassment or shame an indulgence she is grateful to sacrifice.

Dele is a sinister central figure in the book. Binding women into extortionate contracts, ostensibly to cover their flight and placement in Antwerp, the consequences for breaking this agreement are severe. On finding love, Sisi tries to break with prostitution, but even from Africa Dele is able to orchestrate her murder. His venom at being "crossed" knows no bounds. However, although a completely unsympathetic character, Unigwe makes clear that her intention was not to judge, but to tell the story with as much objectivity as possible. "I came to the novel in a state of tabula rasa," she says, "I spoke to some girls who were of the opinion that people like Dele offer them the only true chance they have of freeing themselves from the chains of poverty."

Perhaps the most damning judgement *On Black Sisters' Street* makes is to critique African governments and the despotic employment systems, which cause the European sex industry to be viewed as an attractive alternative for all four of the intelligent women. Sisi holds a University diploma, yet fails to find any skilled employment in Africa. Unigwe observes this situation as: "An indictment on the sort of society where it is near

impossible to get a job if your father does not know anyone who knows anyone high up enough to help you out, regardless of qualifications", she continues, "there are a lucky few in Nigeria, who have neither godfathers nor enough money to bribe anyone who end up with jobs and salaries commensurate with their diplomas." Increasingly

frustrated after two years of fruitlessly applying for jobs, Sis snaps at her father that she can't find work, "Unless you have found out that one of your friends is the director of any of the banks, because that is how things work, you know?"

In many African minds, Europe has acquired a mythic status as a land of golden opportunity. As Unigwe suspects, this is mainly attributable to "returnees" coming back with tales of unimaginable wealth and to prove it, they throw money around like it were sand." Illustrating this point, she recalls: "I remember a 'returnee' boasting once that he made more money doing dishes in Texas than his former classmate earned as a university lecturer. While his university lecturer classmate drove a battered 4x4, the 'returnee' had imported a jeep for his mother. As long as those who return perpetuate the myth of Europe (and America) as places where opportunities litter the floor and all one has to do is grab a pocketful of them, these perceptions will remain."

Published by Jonathan Cape, *On Black Sisters' Street* is available in all good bookshops. Now working on a new novel, for further information on Chika Unigwe, visit www.chikaunigwe.com.

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