MIGRATION, MOMENTARY HAPPINESS AND DESPAIR IN ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

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Abstract

This study interrogates the experiences of some African migrant characters that left their home countries to pursue their dreams and visions in seemingly utopian host countries in Europe and America, amidst unanticipated realities which they have to grapple with. It explores the themes of migration and the momentary happiness migrants get by their anticipation that abroad will help them actualize their dreams and the sudden despair that follows, in the face of their non-achievement of their dreams and visions by their non-inclusion in the scheme of things in their host countries. Applying postcolonial theory which sees migration as fallout of colonialism, the paper examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2010) as fictional texts that revolve around the journey motif, especially as it borders on the vicissitudes of surviving in a foreign country. The study reiterates that the aspirations of most Africans before and during migration end in illusion, even as the migrants' inability to achieve the rosy life envisioned of Europe and America causes them disillusionment. It concludes that the authors seem to be 'speaking in one voice' through their well-crafted novels, to their readers, that notwithstanding the socio-economic challenges at their home countries, there is no place like home.

Key Words: Migration; Momentary Happiness, Disillusionment, Postcolonial theory, Nigerian migration literature,

Introduction

Migration is one of the topical issues confronting the current global dispensation. It is a global phenomenon which has gained traction following the compression of the world into a global village. Emma Bond posits that "migration is without doubt emerging as one of the defining global issues of the twenty-first century, and related practices of interpretation, response and representation are fast becoming increasingly pressing concerns for a range of diverse disciplines" (1). This implies that migration has taken the centre stage in global intellectual discourses. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the scale of migration especially out of the African continent to Europe and North America. Migration is assumed to have colonial provenience but its origin predates colonialism. Ian Chambers infers that a thorough analysis of contemporary migration makes it "...impossible to ignore the ghost of history, and the link in chain that extends from West Africa five hundred years ago to the coast of Southern Europe today and then on into the heartlands of the occidental metropolis" (17). Chambers' assertion alludes to the trans-Atlantic slave trade which saw the forcible movement of millions of Africans under worse human condition across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Though migration did not originate from colonial rule, colonial conquests have altered the pattern and rate of migration significantly (Ikeagwuonu, 1). In sum, contemporary migration, especially out of African, has been linked to "the historical evolution of African countries, colonial experience, post-colonial development strategies and the current political and economic situations ..." (Adepogu, 87).

Migration involves leaving one's place of residence for another place. A migrant can be any "person who moves from one place to another whether locally or across border especially in search of work" (Egbuta and Lekwa 34) and for the purpose of general socio-economic wellbeing. Adopting a more technical perspective, the International Organization for Migration defines a migrant as:

Any person who is moving or has moved across international borders or within a state, away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status, (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, (3) what the causes of the movement are, or (4) what the length of stay is (https://www.ion.int/who-is-a-migrant).

This definition is quite broad. The focus of this study is specifically on international/trans-border migrants; people who move from their country of origin to another country voluntarily or involuntarily in search of greener pastures.

There are many definitions of migration. Jessica Hagen-Zauker defines it as "the temporary or permanent movement of individuals or groups of people from one geographical location to another for various reasons ranging from better employment possibilities to persecution" (4). Tade Akin Aina views migration as a form of population movement which involves "spatial residential relocation over a relatively long period of time ..." (42). Similarly, The National Geographical Society (of America) defines it as "the movement of people from one place to another for the purpose of taking up permanent or semi-permanent residence, usually across a political boundary" (6). This study adopts Hagen-Zauker's definition cited above because of its aptness and relevance.

Migration can be intra-national or international, temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary. Intra-national migration takes place within the confines of a nation-state, while international migration goes beyond the national territory of the migrant. Migration is temporary when the journey is intended to last for a brief period of time, and permanent when it is a complete sojourn in the host-land. Also migration is voluntary if the migrant embarks on the journey willingly, without any coercion. When it is involuntary, the migrant is coerced to embark on the journey. This study focuses on voluntary international migration.

There are three stages of international migration; namely, pre-migration stage, migration stage and post-migration stage (Bhugra and Becker 19). The pre-migration phase is when the would-be migrant puts

together the travel documents and procures the items which would be needed for the journey. At this stage, plans are hatched, goals are set and prospects are envisioned. The next stage is the migration proper which involves the actual movement through land, air or sea. At the post-migration stage, the immigrant has arrived at the host-land and fused into the social and cultural environment of the new place of residence. It is at this stage that the immigrant activates their sense of adaptation and acclimatization in order to imbibe new ways of life, adjust their personality and perform new roles. For the post-colonial migrant, this stage entails giving up some cultural traits and hangovers that are not necessarily needed and sometimes, grappling with or trying to mimic the attitudes of the citizens of their new society. It is at this stage that the post-colonial migrant begins to discover the real situation of life; the realizable or unrealizable nature of some of the pre-conceived dreams and aspirations of the pre-migration stage.

Some scholars have adduced a lot of reasons which make people to migrate. Some of these reasons include: "unemployment, civil unrest, inadequate food supply, bad governance, defeat in war, the desire for material gains, poverty, the search for better health care facilities, high population pressure and education" (Ugwuanyi 251). Political instability and globalization are also issues that induce migration. But as Dustman and Weiss reiterate, the major reasons for migration can be summarized into "migration for economic reasons and migration for individual survival in the face of natural disaster or persecution" (Dustman and Weiss 2). Migration, whether it is for economic reasons or for individual survival, portends some kind of enslavement. No matter how exhilarating the experiences are, there is usually the feeling of nostalgia for one's home country, often propelled by the realities that confront the migrant in the host country. Alessandro Dal Lago corroborates this in his assertion that "immigration, more than any other phenomenon is capable of revealing the so-called host society" (13), and exposing the dynamic or non-dynamic nature of a nation's social fabric.

Arguably, Africans constitute an appreciable sum in the number of post-colonial migrants globally. Pre-colonial Africa was characterized by great movements, of people and of labour. However, "in the history of modern Africa (the colonial century from 1880 up to today), the extent of the migratory phenomenon has been and remains gigantic, probably more important in relative terms than anywhere else" (Amin 30). By implication, Africans have been migrating to Euro-America over the past centuries, but the number has been on the increase since the last two decades of the twentieth century (Capps, MaCabe and Fix 2). The reason is because the rate of political and economic instability in Africa increased within this period. Sadly, the situation has not abated in the twenty-first century for, even at the moment, many Africans still risk their lives trying to emigrate to Europe, Asia and America by all means and at all costs. In 2017, the International Organization for Migration reports that:

In the last years, migration movements from Africa to Europe have gained increased and extensive attention. Through popular discourse and media coverage, a certain image of African migrants has been created based on three main assumptions: migration from the African continent is steadily increasing, it is mainly directed towards Europe, and that its main drivers are poverty, lack of opportunities, and general violence (IOM Report 4).

Unarguably, the history of post-colonial Africa attests to the increased emigration of Africans especially owing to bad governance and its attendant consequences. In Nigeria, for instance, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the Babangida regime brought austerity measures that contributed to the devaluation of the Naira, and worsened that general living standard of Nigerians and drove a lot of skilled and semi-skilled citizens into migration. Migration has therefore become a constant issue in the country. It has captured the popular imagination of many Nigerians to the point of becoming a threading subject of many discourses.

As important factors in the modern world, the migrant and migration play significant roles in the production of creative outputs such as Literature. The remarkable effect of migration has led to the emergence of "a new kind of writing called literature of migration..." (Poujafari and Vahidpour 680). Migration is, indeed, a significant aspect of the contemporary times. Its existence and prevalence are aptly captured in contemporary literature. Creative writers, some of whom are migrants, have gone ahead to distil the affective experiences of migration into literary narration. Migration, thus, features as a recurring thematic preoccupation in African Literature.

This paper examines the issue of migration and the momentary happiness as well as the consequent feeling of despair experienced by migrant characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. The major focus is to discuss the issue of migration and the kind of illusory visions conceived by migrants of African origin, especially Nigerians, as depicted in the works of Nigerian writers. It hopes to interrogate the kind of visions and goals Nigerian migrants set for themselves before their migration to Europe and America, the factors that influence these visions and their realisability or otherwise in the face of the new social environment of the migrant, as illustrated in the works of these two Nigerian novelists.

Studies on Chamamanda Ngozi Adicie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

In their seminal book, *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Aesthetic of Commitment and Narrative* (2010), Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu capture the emergence and glowing significance of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in global literature, thus:

> If there are new world writers who do not need any introduction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 32 year-old Nigerian writer of fiction, is surely one of them. She has not only taken the literary world by storm ..., she has also set out to redefine the universal fictional aesthetics,

> transforming in the process the reception and appreciation of modern African Literature. (8)

This notable introduction implicates a wide critical reception and appreciation of Adichie's narrative oeuvres. *Americanah*, her third novel, is not left out in this regard. This is similar to what Andre Kabore does in her essay titled "Migration in African Literature: A Case Study of Adichie's Works." In the essay, she engages in a critical and stylistic analysis of Adichie's works generally. Kabore identifies Adichie as a migrant writer whose narratives on migration are partly inspired by her own personal experiences. While applying some theories of international migration and socio-criticism in her analysis of *Americanah*, the critic observes that Adichie uses Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel, to reveal the major reasons for postcolonial transnational migration. Some of the reasons Kabore identifies include: the quest for better higher education, bad governance, the quest for economic prosperity, frivolous visits and "choicelessness or the unavailability of choice" (6). The study highlights the development of a hybrid identity as one of the negative outcomes of migration. This happens when the migrant takes up a fake identity in order to survive in the host land, as exemplified by Bartholomew in *Americanah*.

In her essay "Deconstructing the 'Single Story': Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" Isabella Villanova insists that the novel is a bildungsroman narrative which portrays the growing up motif using Ifemelu and Obinze. Villanova posits that Adichie uses the story of Ifemelu and Obinze to explore various themes such as "migration, diaspora, displacement, borderlines, racism, hair as a metaphor for race, the interconnectedness between race and gender, the search for identity and national belonging" (87). The critic adopts diverse perspectives – gender, decolonization, globalization and Afro-politanism – in discussing these themes and by doing so, establishes *Americanah* as a narrative that deconstructs the 'single story' about Africans. Anthony Oha and Bibian Anyanwu attempt a linguistic analytic study of Adichie's *Americanah* in their paper entitled "A Stylistic Explication of Linguistic Innovations in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." While

adopting "graphonological, syntactic and lexico-semantic parameters" (96) which are aspects of descriptive linguistic analytical methods, Oha and Anyanwu reveal some linguistic innovations in the novel. They conclude that "Adichie's third novel, *Americanah,* is laden with linguistic innovations which resulted in her [successful] attempts at realizing verisimilitude" (115) in her writing.

The study by Solomon Edebor and Mbasughun Ukpi, entitled, "Rethinking Post-independence Nigerian Quagmire in Adichie's *Americanah*", is one veritable literature that highlights post-colonial realities represented in the text. Through the use of sociological approach and descriptive analysis, the study projects *Americanah* as a work of social criticism which catalogues Nigeria's postcolonial problems. The critics argue that these post-independence challenges are exerting enormous pressure on the citizenry, forcing them to run away to Euro-America in search of better life. They identify "corruption, joblessness, poor educational system and bad governance" (23) as some of the problems plaguing Nigeria, causing a drastic reduction in meaningful development and necessitating the migration of thousands of Nigerians in search of better alternatives elsewhere. Yacobou Alou's "Narrating African Immigrant's Survival Strategies: Fake Relationships and Marriages in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Americanah*" centres on some survival strategies adopted by African immigrants. Citing the establishment of unserious, fraudulent relationships by Ifemelu and the sham marriage arrangement by Obinze, Alou reveals the extent to which trans-national African migrants can go in a bid to survive in their country of immigration. The critic opines that "In *Americanah*, Adichie casts a critical observation on the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer through a well-crafted immigration narrative. She captures the complexity and variation of African experiences through the eye of her immigrant characters..." (Alou 317). The study concludes that *Americanah* exposes some of the illegal stratagems which post-colonial African cross-border migrants adopt in order to overcome the socio-economic road blocks invented by the host land to restrict them from enjoying certain privileges there.

The same thing applies to the essay entitled "Migrancy and Diaspora Identities in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," where the critic, Ogochukwu Ikeagwuonu focuses on the portrayal of migration – and identity formation in the two texts which incidentally are under study in this paper. The critic contends that the multifaceted and intertwined experiences that the novels depict about African migrants help in understanding the dynamic trajectories of diasporic experiences. Ikeagwuonu further argues that "Africans are challenged by the instability arising from the quest for survival in the new world as a result of imperialism ...[thus] Nigerian immigrants are depicted as grappling with difficulties and identity crisis" (12). The same critical trend runs in U. D. Uwakwe's "Self-Enslavement in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Adichie's *Americanah* where through his analysis of both texts under study, he avers that Africans who migrate to Europe and America in quest of the Golden Fleece subject themselves to diverse forms of self-enslavement. Drawing instances from both texts, Uwakwe deplores the situation where some African migrants submit themselves to enslavement. For instance, Obinze's status as an illegal migrant deprives him of certain privileges in Britain only for him to settle for menial jobs in which the working condition equates slavery. The girls in *On Black Sisters' Street* on their own part are subjected to enslavement and sexual exploitation. Uwakwe concludes that the two texts evidently show that African migrants are responsible for their travails as they willingly submit themselves to enslavement through migration.

Chika Unigwe, just like her Igbo sister, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is a writer of international repute. Her novels have received critical acclaim locally and internationally. Studies based on her fiction abound but in this work, the focus will be on her second novel *On Black Sisters' Street* published in 2010. In her essay, "Redressing the 'Narrative Balance': Subjection and Subjectivity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", Daria Tunca posits that Unigwe "... decided to approach the sensitive topic of immigration through another angle, namely that

of prostitution" (2) in her second novel. While citing what inspired Unigwe to write the novel, Tunca avers that the story gives voice to the 'silent minority' of female prostitutes in the 'red-light' district of Antwerp. Unigwe, therefore, uses the narrative to expose the chicaneries of the African sex trade that goes on in some hidden corners of most streets in some major cities in Europe. However, the critic praises the sense of objectivity exhibited by Unigwe in the narrative, for she neither approves nor condemns the actions of the four protagonists. Also she neither generalizes that the scenario is obtainable in all streets of Europe nor laments that the contemporary world is being swallowed by the iniquities emanating from prostitution.

Florence Orabueze's study entitled, "The Law and Slave Trade: An Evaluation of Sex-Slavery in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", has a rather unique focus. Taking up the issue of sex-slavery from the legal perspective, the research exposes a new slave trade prevalent in modern Nigeria through the activities of "trans-border criminal business conglomerates which ship women, both the young and the old, across frontiers for the purpose of procuring sex in various cities in Europe" (47). The study identifies the existence of domestic and international sex slavery in the text as illustrated through the lives of Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, female characters in the novel, all of who suffered both forms of sex slavery at various times in their lives. In similar vein, Amara Chukwudi-Ofoedu analyses Unigwe's novel as a narrative that explores the dominant issues of representing women as objects of sexual gratification. Applying the theory of social feminism in the paper, "Domination and Sexual Objectification of Women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", the critic berates the Nigerian government for failing to provide adequate social security for its teeming population, especially women, a situation which makes characters such as Sisi (Chisom) to wilfully resort to prostitution abroad after being jobless for many years even as a graduate. Chukwudi-Ofoedu indicts patriarchy in all its manifestations for the sexual objectification of women which is prevalent in the text.

Laura Reinares and Sabrina Benkhaled in their separate studies entitled "The Pedagogies of Sex Trafficking in Postcolonial Fiction: Consent, Agency and Neoliberalism in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*" and "Capitalist Patriarchy and Sexual Exploitation in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*," respectively strike a similar chord. Both works appraise Unigwe's novel as a narrative that projects the appealing issue of women trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Reinares deconstructs the idea of 'consent' and agency because "although many voluntarily trafficked people like to enjoy a degree of independence … this apparent autonomy rest on a very fragile power balance, as the dynamics of the job are necessarily complicated by the illegality, criminality and therefore heightened vulnerability of the trafficked person …" (57). Thus the act of acquiescence to sex is necessitated by the limitations imposed on them by their circumstances. She, however, commends Unigwe for using her novel to expose the sad realities that confront sex-trafficked persons. On his own part, Benkhald highlights patriarchal capitalism as the root-cause of women trafficking, their sexual exploitation and debasement. Drawing illustrations from the text, the critic decries the attitude of people like Dele, whose registered import and export company specialize in the trafficking of beautiful women to far-away lands specifically for the purpose of sex-trade. Bankhald concludes by reiterating the fact that "sexual markets are intimately related to shadow economy and globalization. Sex trafficking is a business that benefits the economy of countries and is beneficial for traffickers" (67) like Madam and Dele but harms the victims whose physical and psychological makeup are debased.

Evidently, the works reviewed above show that there is a niche carved for this study, which is to explore the temporary happiness and the concomitant despair that most post-colonial transnational migrant characters experience in the host-land. Admittedly, most of the literature on *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* explore them as migration narratives that detail varied aspects of the experiences of migration. However, none of them interrogates the paradox of

momentary happiness that gives way to painful sadness experienced by African migrants in their various lands of immigration as portrayed the two novels under review. It is this gap that this paper sets out to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted to guide the research in this paper is Postcolonial Theory. John Lye notes that Postcolonial theory started gaining prominence in the mid-1980s and "focuses particularly on: the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people and on literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of inevitable *Otherness*" (3). It is a theory through which the opinions of the marginalized are investigated especially in the face of Neo-colonialism, which is characterized by some lingering effects of colonialism. Critics of post-colonialism argue that colonialism is still strongly entrenched in most African, Asian and other American annexed territories who are still suffering the impact of such conquests. Robert Young addresses this when he asserts that:

> Postcolonialism offers a language for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledge and histories are not allowed to count. It is above all this preoccupation with the oppressed, with the subaltern classes, with minorities in any society, with the concerns of those who live or come from elsewhere, that constitutes the basis of postcolonial politics and remains the core that generates its continuing power. (14)

The theory, according to Barry, can be traced back to Frantz Fanon's "cultural resistance to Frances' African empire" (127), where Fanon argues that for colonized people to reclaim their voice and identity, they had to reclaim their past and work hard to wipe out all forms of colonial ideology through which their past has been misrepresented and their future truncated.

Post colonialism is evidently implicated in migration as colonialism is basically the root to contemporary transnational migration from Africa to Europe and America. As Ian Chambers notes, postcolonial wounds are still bleeding and are the root causes of most social upheavals that push people to migrate out of their countries. As he puts it, there is a "crucial interrelationship between colonialism, citizenship, democracy and migration…[and] the historic violence both in the colonial cut and the subsequent postcolonial wound that bleeds into all accountings of the past and present" (16). Commenting further, he observes that migration is inseparably entwined with history- as all the issues forcing or motivating people to migrate out of their home countries especially in Africa can be traced to Africa's history plagued by colonization characterised by the flagrant partitioning of Africa into governable units by Western powers in 1884.

To justify the adoption of postcolonial theory in this study, it is important to note that some scholars are of the view that the right to migrate is inalienable as it is enshrined in Article 13 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Even before then, the West especially Europe freely used this right to freedom of movement to better their lot over the centuries. However, 'today, no European state recognises this right; migration has largely become criminal activity' (Chambers 2012: 18). According to him, it is appalling that Europeans who were freely coming to Africa during the era of African annexation and colonization are the ones now building barriers, restricting and criminalizing free movement by Africans into their territories thus, drawing a dichotomy between a citizen and an alien- creating so much artificial bottlenecks for even the so-called legal aliens and those seeking citizenship of their various states. From this, it is obvious that as Uwakwe notes that " postcolonial criticism has embraced a number of aims: most fundamentally, to re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyse the process of decolonization" (389). Africa and most parts of the world that were colonized are still grappling with the

after effects of colonization among which is the uncontrollable migration of most of the colonized to the land of the colonizers.

Relating it to this study, it is evident that attempts will be made to examine the postcolonial dimensions of Africans' migrants' dreams and aspirations for happiness and the unanticipated illusive sad circumstances that become the end-point of these visions. Owing to this, some visions made by African migrants turn to momentary happiness as the realities that accost them in their lands of residence have some colonial colourations and underpinnings and as such, there is no better theory to apply in this study than post-colonial theory.

Momentary Happiness and Concomitant Despair of Migrants in Adichie's *Americanah* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

There are many reasons for which Africans migrate to major countries of Europe and North America. However, one of the major motivating factors remains the challenging and worsening socio-economic condition prevalent in most African countries. In addition, some African countries are embroiled in lingering wars and other forms of civil unrest and internal conflict, all of which undermine peace and stability. Many Africans, therefore, see migration as the only easy way of escaping from the quagmire, hence the zeal with which the procurement of travel documents is executed.

Arrival at the host-land and early period that follows are usually associated with feelings of great happiness among migrants, as they bask in the euphoria of achieving a life-long ambition. But as time progresses, this happiness metamorphoses into despair which results from unexpected experiences of reality. The migrants are excited for having succeeded in leaving their 'hell' of a home country and arriving at their 'haven' of a host country, with promises of a better life. However, these excitement and happiness become short-lived as migrants begin to encounter unforeseen and nearly insurmountable hurdles. This often leads to disaffection and disappointment especially when the migrants discover that some of the promises their new location appeared to hold are largely false.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, the paradox of happiness and sadness manifests through Ifemelu and Obinze. The prospect of travelling to America to continue her higher education because of the incessant strike actions in Nigeria that truncate her educational progress, gets her excited. "And so she began to dream. She saw herself in a house from The *Cosby Show*, in a school with [other] students holding notebooks miraculously free of wear and crease" (Adichie 99). This excitement is heightened "on the afternoon that she [Ifemelu] picked up her passport, the pale-toned visa on the second page, she organized that triumphant ritual that signaled that start of a new life overseas: the division of personal property among friends" (Adichie 100). This period and her eventual migration are characterized by excitement and happiness both of which change to shock and despair on her arrival in America. Contrary to Ifemelu's expectation of a cold but flamboyant life in America, she experiences an unusual heat wave and Aunty Uju comes to welcome her with an old car borrowed from her neighbour. The narrator reveals that "the sweltering heat alarmed her as did Aunty Uju's old Toyota hatchback, with a patch of rust on its side and peeling fabric on the seats" (Adichie 103-104).

Furthermore, when Ifemelu reaches Aunty Uju's house, the heat seems aggravated beyond the degree she is familiar with: "She had never felt a heat quite so hot. An enveloping uncompassionate heat. Aunty Uju's door handle, when they arrived at her one-room apartment was warm to the touch (Adichie 105). Apart from the heat, Ifemelu is disgusted to notice some old and unsightly buildings in America. She even sights a boy urinating near a brick wall and she could not hold her surprise: "See that boy …, I didn't know people do things like this in America." (Adichie 104). In addition, Ifemelu is shocked that at night she has to sleep on a blanket spread on the floor because the available bed in the house can only accommodate Aunty Uju and her son, Dike. Her shock, dissatisfaction and despair are expressed thus: "but this is America at last, glorious America, at last, and she had not expected to bed on the floor" (Adichie 106). While she is awake ruminating on the unexpected changes her life has undergone since her arrival in America,

she "slipped out of the room and turned the kitchen light. A fat cockroach was perched on the wall near the cabinets, moving slightly up and down as though breathing heavily" (Adichie 107). This surprises her more because she never expects to see cockroach in America. Similarly, as Ifemelu looks out from the window of the living room, "the street below was poorly lit, bordered not by leafy trees but by closely parked cars, nothing like the pretty street on *The Cosby Show*" (Adichie 106). The experiences of reality are contrary to the pomp and pageantry with which America is portrayed in popular culture and which Ifemelu expects. She, therefore, becomes disappointed, bewildered and despaired by a different reality.

Another actuality that makes Ifemelu unease is the shabby and seemingly suppressed looks of Aunty Uju unlike her vivacious and tidy appearance when she was in Nigeria. According to the narrator, "there was something different about her. Ifemelu noticed right away at the airport, her roughly braided hair, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug, as if it had been weeks rather than years since they had last seen each other" (Adichie 104). Ifemelu also notices a cringe in Aunty Uju's relationship with her because Aunty Uju's disposition towards her seems very impersonal. Having observed all these, Ifemelu concludes that "America had subdued her [Aunty Uju]" (Adichie 110). This is rather saddening to Ifemelu because she never thought of America as a subduer of those who seek refuge in it. She experiences happiness when her travel documents were ready. This happiness accompanies Ifemelu to America but soon becomes short-lived after a short while because her experiences of reality in America convert the happiness to sadness, despair and worry. Her life reveals that migrants experience a fleeting happiness that gradually distils into despair. At a point, she becomes very depressed as the narrative voice explains:

> Sometimes she [Ifemelu] woke up flailing and hopeless, and she saw in front of her and behind her and all around her, an utter hopelessness. She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how to kill herself. She lay in the bed and read

> books and thought of nothing. Sometimes she forgot to eat and other times, she waited until midnight, her roommates in their rooms, before heating up her food, and she left the dirty plates under the bed, until greenish mould fluffed up around the oily remnants of rice and beans. Often in the middle of eating or reading, she would feel a crushing urge to cry and the tears would come, the sobs hurting her throat. She had turned off the ringer of her phone. She no longer went to class. Her days were stilled by silence and snow. (Adichie 156)

Similarly, Obinze, Ifemelu's friend had travelled to London with optimism for a better livelihood. But he is constrained by lack of relevant immigration documents, including work permit. He therefore acquires and works with the National Identity Number of a character identified as Vincent Obi and pays him forty percent of his earnings as compensation for the stolen identity. He continues to perform menial jobs in London until his lies are uncovered. He is consequently relieved of his employment and subsequently arrested by the UK immigration officials during a failed attempt to marry Cleotilde, a British citizen of Angolan-Portuguese descent, after payment of £2,200. He is stripped of his wedding cloth, handcuffed and his shoes forcibly removed before "he was led to a cell. It was small, with brown walls and the metal bars so thick his hand could not go around one…" (Adichie 279).

This humiliating treatment leaves Obinze disheartened, compelling him to realise the illusiveness of his visions of making valuable use of the so-called opportunities that England offers. Sequel to this loss of faith in the British system, Obinze tells the lawyer hired by the British authorities to defend him, "I am willing to go back to Nigeria" (Adichie 279). This represents the African migrant in his weakest state of disillusionment. The intensity of Obinze's deceptive vision of England is highlighted by the narrator who comments that "the last shard of his [Obinze's] dignity was like a wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to retie" (Adichie 279). The peak of Obinze's degrading treatment comes fore when he reckons that the lawyer will

tick on a form that his client (Obinze) is willing to be "Removed" (Adichie 279). According to the narrator, the word 'removed' "made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing" (Adichie 279). From the novel, one gleans through the characters that Nigerian/African migrants are viewed in America and Europe as less human and dispensable objects, given the structural hurdles, which work against their dreams.

The experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze in Adichie's *Americanah,* echo those of the other migrants – Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce – in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Before her arrival in Belgium, Ama, for instance, believes that Europe is regularly a cold place. This makes her to travel with only the clothes that would keep her warm. Contrary to her expectations, "Antwerp welcomed her the day she arrived, engulfing her in a sunny summer embrace which shocked her as she had thought that Europe was always cold" (Unigwe 176). In the novel, the narrator reveals that the year Ama arrived Antwerp was 2000 and that year's summer was one of the hottest in Belgium in recent history. Ama "was not at all prepared for this heat that got between the skin and clothes like the heat of Lagos" (Unigwe 170). Unigwe's novel also portrays the female migrants' temporary happiness during their early days in Antwerp. They express great happiness having successfully left Africa and hopefully triumphed over the worsening socio-economic conditions prevalent in the continent. They are equally happy to have arrived Europe where their success is assured and future, bright. Sisi and her colleagues are in high spirit following their arrival in Belgium such that one of them, Efe, organizes a party in memory of a dead woman, Iya Ijebu, who she regards as her grandmother. During the memorial party, Efe spends lavishly serving "... guests... with two bottles of beer each and ... *jollof* rice [with] fried chicken gizzards" (Unigwe 7).

Beyond the foregoing, Sisi is equally happy and excited during her early days in Antwerp each time she eats bread with jam. The narrative voice reveals: "Sisi shattered jam on the bread. When was the last time I had jam? The magenta-coloured spread delighted her taste buds .... If she had any misgivings left about leaving home, those

misgivings were chomped into bits with each mouthful of food and pushed down into the pit of her stomach" (Unigwe 106). As Sisi eats bread with jam, she is excited remembering that such a recipe was above her purchasing power when she was in Nigeria. It is worth recalling that Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah* experiences a similar feeling of momentary joy in an American supermarket. She is amazed and somehow confused on the choice to make from the many brands of cornflakes displayed in the supermarket unlike in Nigeria where the choice is easy due to the scanty number/varieties on display. The narrator recounts how Ifemelu confided in Kimberly "about the vertigo she has left the first time she went to the supermarket; in the cereal aisle, she had wanted to get cornflakes, which she was used to eating back home, but suddenly, confronted by a hundred different cereal boxes, in a swirl of colours and images, she had fought dizziness" (Adichie 147).

Furthermore, the narrator of *On Black Sisters' Street* also portrays the momentary happiness and joy which Alek experiences on her arrival in Nigeria from Sudan. Being her first time, it takes her a while to adjust to the hustle and bustle of Lagos with its jam-packed vehicles. She savours her visit, with Polycarp, to the Bar Beach in Victoria Island. The narrative voice captures the feeling thus: "She stood on the wet, incredibly white sand, Polycarp holding her hand, and she told herself that life would not get any better than it already was" (Unigwe 217-18). With such great excitement, Alek anticipates that she would live a happy life in Lagos with Polycarp by her side. She is optimistic that all will be well.

It is instructive that this happiness and excitement which these characters – Sisi, Ama, Efe and Alek – experience do not last long. Their experiences of life and its vicissitudes foster a transformation such that instead of a continued happiness, despair takes over. Alek, for instance, becomes dejected when an Igbo culture that does not allow first-born sons to marry a foreigner puts an end to her hopeful relationship with Polycarp, and left with no other choice she has to migrate to Belgium. Moreover, all the ladies – Sisi, Efe, Ama and Alek – also encounter this

transformation. Their sexual enslavement, economic exploitation and the disheartening experiences they engender make them become helplessly despondent. At the gruesome murder of Sisi, the remaining three (Efe, Ama and Joyce) become aware of their vulnerability and collective mortality in the hands of their callous 'taskmasters' as they express their despair thus:

> We're not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals. Why are we doing this? And I don't believe that we cannot find an honest policeman. I don't believe that for a second! We report Madam and who knows, maybe we can even get asylum here... we can be free. Madam has no right over our bodies, and neither does Dele. I don't want to think that one day I will be dead here and all Madam will do is complain about how bad my death is for business ...Efe stands up too and puts one arm around each woman. Their tears mingle and the only sound in the room is that of them weeping. (*On Black.....* 290)

According to Maria Herenedez-Carretero, "most [African migrants] had felt optimistic that by emigrating, they could improve their lives, and assist their families, and seemingly accepting of, or with limited concern for the uncertainties that migration might entail in terms of the unknown or unforeseeable eventualities" (113). Among these 'unknown' and 'unforeseeable eventualities' that confront the African migrant is the hardly envisaged reality that he/she is to grapple with on arrival in his new location. Most times, the visions of African migrants when confronted by such stark reality, ultimately end in illusion. Despite the high hopes and aspirations before and immediately after migration, African migrants end up feeling dejected, depressed, exasperated, disappointed and finally disillusioned. It is as if there is an inscription on a hidden tablet that the visions of African migrants should culminate in nothingness or become utterly illusory.

The four migrant characters in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* are also faced with the reality of momentary happiness and concomitant

disillusionment in Europe. The narrator highlights that "the life [of the four girls] in Belgium, despite the money made from sex business, is far from a quality life they actually dream of realizing in the country. They live under threat and exploitation of Dele, and Madam who is in possession of their passport and shows no compassion when one of them died a mysterious death" (Unigwe 63). They are enslaved and used as commercial tools in the hands of those that are supposed to better their lives. The reality of disillusionment as an ideological thrust in Unigwe's novel under study is foregrounded by Ikeagwuonu who asserts that the author "exposes the disillusionment that comes with migration where she presents the prostitution of Nigerian women in Europe as a version of modern-day slavery of Africans to the new world" (10). The living condition of the four female prostitutes falls short of their pre-migration expectation. They live in a low-class region of Antwerp contrary to Sisi's expectations. "Before Sisi came to Belgium, she imagined castles and clean streets and snow as white as salt. But now when she thinks of it, when she talks of where she lives in Antwerp, she describes it as a botched dream" (Unigwe 24). This is because she lives "on dark streets carved with tramlines, houses with narrow doors and high windows nestle against each other" (Unigwe 24). The house is in deplorable condition and to ease anger and depression, the already victimized migrants engage in excessive drinking. Attempts by Sisi to emancipate herself from the stranglehold of the evil and exploitative human trafficking syndicate led by Dele Senghor and Madam, result in a catastrophic end, as she is gruesomely murdered for daring to breakaway and fall in love with a Belgian banker, Luc. Her untimely death therefore terminates her ambitions.

Other instances that show the level of despair the migrants' face can also be gleaned in Unigwe's novel in focus as it affects the four central characters. On her arrival to Belgium, Sisi is shocked that instead of being taken to a mansion in a boulevard, she is put in an accommodation in a slummy area of Antwerp called Zwartezusterstraat which "...wore the look of a much maligned childless wife in a polygamous home" (Unigwe 99). The house is in deplorable condition,

thus prompting expression of displeasure by Sisi. In the words of the narrator, "the house itself was not much to look at either. Truth be told, it was a disappointment. A ground floor flat with a grubby front door and, as she would find out later, five bedrooms not much bigger than telephone booths" (Unigwe 99). As she broods over the unconducive residence, Sisi is appalled by the uncourteous reception she gets from Segun, who picked her from the airport on arrival. "The man who has driven her from the airport, Segun as she now knew was his name has not said much since they got in. She had just uttered his name haltingly, like a sacrifice being dragged out of him and ushered her into her room" (Unigwe 199). This cold reception, which seems telepathic, becomes a precursor for Sisi's eventual murder by same Segun.

It is important to reaffirm as Emmanuel Ebekue and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh would have us believe, that "the European poised African migrant is a person of gargantuan dreams. The European dream for most African migrants is that of solace, of comfort, of wealth and other myriad of expectations" (50). However, such dreams are usually truncated as would be further illustrated with the three others in the novel namely, Efe, Ama and Joyce. For Efe, part of her dream for migrating to Europe is to become a 'Super Pimp' who would have a bevy of girls who will engage in commercial sex work for her and generate enormous money. She has hoped to buy the girls from an auction in Brussels, as the narrator reveals: "Efe believed that within the next two years she would be free. She was already talking of maybe acquiring some girls, of becoming a madam herself. She would buy girls in Brussels because it was more convenient, she said, to get girls who were already in the country" (Unigwe 278).

Similarly, Joyce hoped to make enough money from prostitution and then return to Lagos to open a school in the Yaba area to be named after her good friend Sisi. Relatedly, Ama desired to own a boutique where she will employ her Lagos-based benefactor, Mama Eko, as the manager. These dreams are shattered the day Sisi dies. Consequently, they reckon that it will be better to report the incident

to the police and save themselves from their harrowing experiences in Antwerp. Their discontent is evident as Ama laments:

> We're not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals.... And I don't believe that we cannot find an honest policeman.... We report Madam and who knows, maybe we can get asylum here. There are always people looking for causes to support. They can support us. We can be free. Madam has no right to our bodies and neither does Dele. I don't want to think that one day I will be dead and all Madam will do is to complain about how bad my death is for business. (Unigwe 290)

The foregoing is indicative of the level of frustration and disillusionment the girls face abroad. Their dreams of a fulfilling Europe, which Lanre Ikuteyijo would call "an 'imagined West'- an idealized view of life in western countries" (1), culminates in unsavoury realities.

Another dimension of illusion or despair in the novels under discourse is the identity confusion that confronts African migrants resulting from conflict between home and foreign cultures. So, when an African migrates to Europe or America, it is inevitable that there is a change of his or her identity because his or her environment and context have equally changed. The impact is that most African migrants suffer from identity crisis when they are confronted with this situation. The reality is that African migrants in desperation to find jobs and survive usually give up their original identities for those of members of their host countries. Upon migration, they soon realise that employment opportunities are not as easily available as perceived in home countries prior to movement. Faced with such reality, migrants come to terms with the fact that the possession of a social security card is a prerequisite for employment. This prompts them to impersonate a kin who already has the social security card, knowing full well that such act is against the law. The interplay between the social security card and the migrants' loss of identity is encountered when Ifemelu arrives

America. Aunty Uju obtains for Ifemelu social security card of one of her friends, Ngozi Okonkwo, who though an American citizen, has gone back to Nigeria briefly to start a business. She gives her the documents with strict instruction not to forget the name. Thus Ifemelu transforms into Ngozi Okonkwo, thus discarding her real identity. She continues to work with the stolen identity until she graduates and acquires her own social security papers. It is not only identities that are faked. Marriages are equally contrived as a strategy to get work/immigration papers. In *Americanah*, Aunty Uju marries Bartholomew not really for love but as a survival strategy to enable her relocate with him to another town where she hopes to give her son, Dike, a better upbringing and education. Also, to survive in London, Emenike has to marry Georgina, a British woman who is eight years older than him in order to get the highly priced and scarcely available British citizenship status. On his side, Obinze's attempt to marry Cleotilde in order to get British identity papers becomes illusive, following his arrest, subsequent movement to a detention camp and eventual deportation to Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that these transnational migrant characters in Adichie's *Americanah* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* experience temporary happiness and excitement due to their change of location from their country of origin to a country of residence. This happens because of their having left a home that offers them no prospects to another place the gives them the hope of a better life. The problems in their home-countries are traceable to the vestiges of colonial rule as most African countries suffer neo-colonial tendencies. However, this happiness and increased hope of success are soon overtaken by feelings of despair, shock, disaffection and disappointment as a result of their experiences of unexpected reality. The authors – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe – therefore, seem to be in agreement that migration is characterized by mixed feelings – a temporary excitement and a perplexing despair,

occasioned by inability of migrants to realize their pre-migration ambitions due to unfriendly structures of their host countries. This fosters the desire for homecoming among the migrants.

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