



**MIGRATION, IDENTITY AND RECONSTRUCTION
OF FEMALE MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S
*BETTER NEVER THAN LATE***

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Abstract:

This paper interrogates migration, identity and the nuances of female migrants' experiences in Chika Unigwe's *Better Never than Late*. The paper notes that, although women seem to have dominated the global migration flow, migration has mostly been considered from an overwhelmingly male perspective, perhaps, due to the male predominance in the process. This development, most often, creates complexes that diminish the identity and self-worth of women in their destination countries. It also leads to some misrepresentations and erroneous portrayal of migrant women in some literary and critical discourses on migration. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts a deconstruction and reconstruction of this perception and establishes that women, like men, are also active participants in the migration process and not merely appendages of male migrants. The paper adopts Post-colonial Feminist theory as its theoretical position and, through analysis of some extrapolations in some selected stories in Unigwe's text mentioned above, the paper reveals that, given their multifaceted roles, women contribute immensely to the economic development of their countries of destination, through their competencies and skills. The paper concludes on an appeal note, that countries should evolve legal instruments that promote the rights of migrant women.

Keywords: migration, identity, women, experiences, reconstruction

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of human migration, in the summation of Marie McAuliffe and Marfin Ruhs, "*stretches back to the earliest periods of human history*" (1). This implies that migration, dispersal and other cultures of mobility have always been an integral part of humanity. It is in recognition of this fact that Susan Friedman notes that "*movement whether forced or*

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sought out, is the foundation of human evolution and the history of change on a global landscape" (Quoted in Solomon, 48). As one of the many ways through which the human population shifts around the globe, migration has been seen as a potent agent of globalisation.

As insinuated by Friedman above, many factors necessitate and determine migration. However, human migration, according to the United Nations Human Rights Commission: *"is a systemic condition driven by economic under-development, severe social fragmentation, weak state, migration policies that shape interaction between sending and receiving states, and colonial ties"* (4-8). Also, Everett Lee, using his Push-Pull theory explains that: *"place of origin, place of destination, intervening obstacles and personal factors lead to spatial mobility of population* (Quoted in Dick, 21). Following Lee and Friedman above, it may be apt to submit that there is no human society that has not been tainted by migration. Migration could occur within the national landscape, conveying the notion of internal migration and could also occur outside the shores of national borders, which is external migration.

In the recent decades, migration has not only been made convenient and possible through advances in transportation technology, but has also received prominence in socio-political, economic and literary discourses around the globe. In recent times, for example, the mass movement of people from African countries and other third-world countries *"led to politically-charged debates about the building of walls to keep irregular migrants out of the United States and Europe"* (Brobbeey, 1). This also corroborates Soren Frank's position that *"the large-scale migration has then led to the globalisation of the local and the localisation of the global, so much so that 'the global permeates the local, while the local dissipates into the global; and the production of human identity is informed by new coordinates'"* (2).

Of all those who involve in external migration, only a few purposefully and legally migrate through the instrumentation of visas and transmutation of citizenship and lotteries. Others defy all migration protocols and cross the Mediterranean Sea and the Sinai Peninsula, not minding the oddities and fatalities associated with the movement. According to Gideon Brobbey *"In October, 2013, the world was shocked by the death of three hundred and sixty-six (366) African migrants close to the Italian Island of Lampedusa. Only a few African migrants survived this tragedy"* (2) This informs Ajibola Okpeyemi's succinct submission that, *"the recent migrant crisis has especially forced scholars and laymen, artists and critics to engage in the migration discourse to ascertain the dialectics of migration, migratory patterns and its consequences on people, spaces, and contexts"* (65).

In Africa, myriads of ugly indexes account for migration, especially, by the young ones, who leave the shores of the continent daily, in droves. Nigeria, in particular, has been plagued with insurgent wars that have decimated a significant percentage of its citizens. James Okpiliya and Kufre Akpan aver that: *"For close to two decades now, Nigeria has been faced with a worrisome security challenge as orchestrated by the faceless Islamic fundamentalists known as Boko Haram, a sect driven by the desire to Islamise Nigeria such that Nigeria will be governed by Sharia laws"* (50). Inequality, wars, insurgency, lack of job opportunities and other ugly socio-political decimals ravaging nations of African state, have been the major push factors that have seen many Africans denouncing their origin

and identifying with countries in Europe, America and other Asian countries. Ezechi Onyerionwu explains that:

"It is within the context of the socio-political and economic crises engendered for Africa and the African that the continent's history of dependency has no end in sight, and can only take new forms to perpetuate the inevitable. The story of Africa is now the story of hunger, starvation, disease, leadership directionlessness, wars, terrorism, corruption, and general under-development and disillusionment. And the mass exodus of Africans from their motherland in search of these securities that have infernally eluded them at home, courtesy of the devastation of enabling structures, becomes not just imminent, but a cause for contemporary global concern." (The Guardian, October 2, 2016).

The above situation has become an international emergency, and if drastic measures are taken to make the continent appealing and liveable, it may one day wake up and find itself on a precipice.

Although migration has become a global reality, given some socio-political upheavals that characterise almost all nation states in the world, Africa is still very much in the centre of a new world emergency. The situation has degenerated into a situation where a typical African, at the moment, sees the Europe, America and other Asian countries as destinations of survival, carrying the promises of a blissful life, and not minding those oddities in the package. Charles Adeyanju and Temitope Oriola support the above position when they aver that:

"...some extra-economic factors like the presentation of lives overseas by African migrants as alluring and fascinating and the tendency to portray themselves as sophisticated, upwardly mobile and people exposed to savoir-faire of modern life, have also been responsible for the mass movements of Africans." (945).

Unfortunately, as pointed earlier, those who have migrated conceal the ugly aspects of immigrants' lives such as unemployment, racism, loneliness and other unsavoury experiences.

It is against this backdrop that Onyerionwu further reveals that:

"It is mainly the overestimation of the characters' chances of survival and the opportunities for the realization of their dream life (or life dreams), and the tragic disillusionment that comes with it, that engages the new African transatlantic novel." (The Guardian, October 2, 2016).

Although the process of admitting migrants by destination countries is gender neutral, it is, however, realised that migration is deeply gendered. Gender relations and hierarchies, as well as, policies or practices leading to gender inequities, to a greater extent, contribute immensely in shaping the experiences of female migrants and this

carries a baggage of ugly realities for them. Arising from the above, most often, the initial euphoria of travelling out is quickly replaced with acute disillusionment. The United Nations' Division for Advancement of Women observes that:

"It has been noted that recent scholarship on migration reflects growing attention to gender, and to the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality. It is important to understand the causes and consequences of international migration from a gender perspective because hierarchical social relations related to gender shape the migration experiences of migrants, whether male or female." (27)

This informs Omolola Ladele and Adesunmbo Omotayo's position that *"Much like the process of globalisation, migration is highly sexualised and gendered"* (52). Thus, given the highly patriarchal colouration of African society, migration on the continent traditionally has often been considered in masculine terms. The above does not only stifle the self-worth of women but, in Africa, the search for this gender freedom may have been one of the major factors contributing to the stream of internal migration or migration out of the continent (Solomon, 63).

In recent times, however, there have been drastic shifts in the traditional configuration of migration, as more women have become more assertive and desire not only gender freedom but also more financial and economic freedom. Given their multifaceted roles, female migrants have renegotiated their identities, relationships and mode of socialisation in their host countries. This development has attracted the attention of many contemporary African writers, especially novelists, among whom are females, residing outside their home countries. The major themes of this emergent direction of African fiction are disenfranchisement, disillusionment, physical and psychological subjugation, the politics of residency and survival.

Writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie, Noviolet Bulawayo, Chika Unigwe, Sefi Ata, Unoma Azuah, Tanure Ojaide and others have boldly dramatised and narrativised the ordeals of migrant women and also accoutred them with an assertiveness that enables them to renegotiate their individuality and survival. It is also for this reason that Tanure Ojaide avers that:

"African writers have become part of the worldwide phenomena of migration and globalization with the attendant physical, sociocultural, psychic, and other forms of dislocation, which permeate their individual writings. Migration, globalization and the related phenomena of exile, transnationality, and multilocality have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of the literary production of Africans abroad." (43)

It is through the expert handling of these themes, and with the kind of narrative resilience and courage hardly seen in African literature of previous epochs that the new African transatlantic novel has been established as perhaps the fictional fulcrum of new

African. (Onyerionwu, *The Guardian*, October 3, 2016). Onyerionwu's position aligns with Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton's earlier position that "*these writers have their sensibilities sharply moulded by the contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism, globalisation, nomadism, and liminality, and that they have to grapple with these matters more than their literary forebears did*" (8). These writers not only expose the gender-related maltreatment of female migrants, but also imbue them with a new consciousness and strategies for survival.

This paper adopts Postcolonial feminism as its theoretical position. This theory is a sub-set of feminism that explores the effects of the vestigial of colonialism and neo-colonialism and the impacts they have on the female gender. According to Ritu Tyagi:

"Postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in Western locations. It concentrates on the construction of gender difference in colonial and anti-colonial discourses, representation of women in anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses with particular reference to the work of women writers." (45)

Tyagi's position is muted as a reaction against the exclusivist position of Western feminism. Thus, Postcolonial Feminist theory questions the homogeneity of the female experience and makes room for gender activists from "Other" places and "Other" cultures to advocate for gender equality in their own way and on their own terms (Ajibola, 130). In other words, the theory points out the fact that there is no universalised female experience, and therefore, all experiences, and even variant experiences are worth narrating. Invariably, Postcolonial Feminism helps to shape feminism and the feminist struggle from a universal one where just a few are visible to a movement that caters for difference and individuality. The major exponents of this theory include: Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Yvonne Vera, Cherrie Moraga, Radhika Mohanram and others.

Against this backdrop, this paper applies some tenets of Postcolonial Feminism in the analysis of some extrapolations from selected stories in Uniqwe's *Better Never than Late*. The paper does not only centralise women and their peculiar experiences in migration and diaspora spaces, but also deconstructs and reconstructs as well, some gender-related stereotypes that are responsible for the difficulties migrant women face in their host countries.

2. Some Critical Voices on Female Migrant Experiences in African Literature

The incorporation of gender perspective in the analysis of migration has led to proper representation of female migrant experiences and also aids in the formulation of policy and measures aimed at addressing the specific needs of women who migrate. As noted by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs:

“Previous approaches to documenting and understanding international migration have often disregarded the migration of women. Analytical frameworks either ignored the participation of women in international migration and their contributions or assumed that the causes and consequences of international migration were similar for migrant women and migrant men, thus avoiding an investigation of how migration and its outcomes differ by sex.”

It is partly against this backdrop that critical attention on African migratory literature surges, especially in the explosive dispensation of the 21st century.

Koskei Chepkorir in her interrogation of the harrowing experience of African immigrant women in Adichie’s *Americanah*, presents the female migrant as being unfairly treated by male domination and also reveals that the women only manage to survive their ordeal by their ability to quickly form closely-knit relationships, which helps them assist each other whenever the need arises. Also, in her discursion African hairstyle as a means of identity formation in the text, Chepkorir indicates that when African women stick to their natural self, they demonstrate a strong sense of self-worth rather than when they imitate anything they see coming from the West in the name of fashion.

Ladele and Omotayo in their critique of Unigwe’s debut novel, *The Phoenix* catalogue the instances of maltreatment of the protagonist-narrator, Oge, who tries not only to come to terms with the reality of the tragic loss of her five-year-old son, but with a devastating cancer diagnosis. The authors describe it as *“a novel of grief, pains, loss, and of loneliness of a black woman married to a Belgian, living in far-away Belgium”* (54). The authors also reveal how Oge is often thrown into disillusionment when she juxtaposes her life in Belgium with the one in her homestead in Enugu, Nigeria. Their study concludes on the assumption that Unigwe must have woven her personal experiences into that of her protagonist in the novel.

Emmanuel Ngwira in his Dissertation, *“Writing Marginality: History, Authorship and Gender in the Fiction of Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie”* simply acknowledges that societal pressure is often responsible for the transformation that African women immigrants undergo. In his opinion, the consciousness of African stereotyped identity such as ‘blackness’ *“becomes an undesirable and unhomely trait in the pursuit of the American dream”* (164). He concludes that such underpinnings become necessary when examining specific measures that African women immigrants take in dealing with what they consider desirable or otherwise, in their pursuit of their dreams in the United States.

Judith Rosen in her article entitled *“Close to Home: NoViolet Bulawayo”* is of the opinion that the author, in this novel, intends to tell a story about Zimbabwe and the United States and to give a voice, especially to the illegal immigrants whose movements are restricted. In highlighting the disillusionment and frustration women migrants undergo in their new society, Rosen posits that Bulawayo seems to believe that those who run away from their homes must pay the cost of fleeing by learning to adopt a new self-identity in the United States.

Lynda Spencer in her dissertation "Writing Women in Uganda and South Africa: Emerging Writers from Post-Repressive Regimes" interrogates the phenomenon of rewriting home and exile by immigrants in Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*. She argues that "the novel conceptualizes the gendering of migration from home to exile (the United States) through the relationship between Christine and her mother". In her opinion, immigration allows a re-negotiation of one's sense of self and "enables us to ask, what difference it makes when daughters travel; what happens when the daughter returns to the mother; when the mother speaks to the returning daughter?" (174).

In the above critical oeuvres, the authors have, beyond doubt, attempted to engage adequately with the harrowing experiences of female migrants in those literary works. However, the studies simply revolve around the usual focus on the economics, politics and sociology of migration, and do not adequately address gender-specific migratory experiences. They seem to have taken for granted the constant renegotiation for a positive identity by these women. The works have also fallen short of highlighting how women evolve different coping mechanisms in the face of their subalternity. The above situation simply buttresses Uwem Affiah, Offiong Amaku and Kufre Akpan's assertion that "literature has always been a signpost for providing insights into its socio-political concerns" (64). It is against the backdrop of the above that this paper is structured. Apart from interrogating the otherness of African female migrants in their destination countries, this paper also examines how women migrants strategise to survive in a highly patriarchal migratory space.

3. Reconstructing Female Migrant Experiences in Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*

Chika Unigwe is one of the prominent African migrant writers with a deep concern on the plight of African female migrants in their host countries. She is also the author of *The Phoenix* (2007) and *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). In all these literary outputs, Unigwe, like her other contemporaries, constructively engages the social conditions of African women in the diaspora. Ladele and Omotayo reveal that: "As a Nigerian-Belgian writer, Unigwe has found herself writing about the varying gender-specific migration experiences of female African migrants in Belgium, a country she herself relocated to, upon her marriage to a Belgian" (54). And it is likely that as an emigrant herself, some of her personal experiences may have been woven into that of the protagonists in the novels. Thus, in the above stories, the author juxtaposes the lives of her female protagonists both in the homeland and host land and stylistically draws a conclusion that the diaspora may not altogether harbour the much-touted bliss Africans are anticipating.

Unigwe sustains this tradition in *Better Never Than Late*, as she vividly explores the hostile and humiliating conditions African women migrants face in foreign countries. The text is a collection of ten short, beautifully-honed and interconnected stories, chronicling the contradictions and other gender underpinnings that shape the experiences of female migrants in Belgium. The author also weaves a thread of hope for her women, by making them subvert the traditional ideas of womanhood, wifehood and motherhood in a

migratory context, thereby reconstructing the stereotypical and monotonous female migrant narrative.

In one of the stories, "Cleared for Takeoff", the author challenges the traditional migrant monologue that a woman must give up everything, including her career to make her husband succeed. In this story, Ego, a first-class graduate in one of the Nigerian universities, refuses to asphyxiate in a factory in Belgium, where she lives as an emigrant with her husband Gbolohan and Daughter, Bola. Through social media, she reconnects with her university classmate, who now lives and works as an engineer in a private firm in London. She tries talking her husband into joining her friend in London but he vehemently refuses. "So, you don't mind if I go on my own then? Try it out? See what happens? (92). Against the wish of her husband, she joins her friend in London and secures a good job. A few months later, Ego, who only dresses for church on Sundays, while working in a factory in Belgium now dresses... like someone out of a magazine. Red lipstick and high-heeled shoes, skirts with slits and colourful sweaters. And always, she smelt perfumed" (92). Ego's sudden transformation underscores the therapeutic effect of the journey in a stifling marriage and environment. Helen Chukwuma avers that: "The journey is appreciated on the symbolic level where it involves a metamorphosis in orientation and goals on the part of the traveller" (84).

Through this new consciousness, Ego is seen personally negotiating her social, economic and psychological transformation, as her identity suddenly undergoes new processes of transmutation. Her position is also in tandem with one of the major assumptions of Postcolonial Feminist theorists which seeks the visibility of women, writers and feminist agitators in developing countries, emphasising that these women's stories, which are usually different from Western stories need to be heard (Ajibola, 130). Uwem Affiah, David Udoinwang and Offiong Amaku argue that: "postcolonialism seeks to understand the multifaceted issues of history, ethnicity, difference, migration, feminism, oppression, resistance, hybridity, etc. as it concerns the subalterns in relation to their former colonizers" (15).

Thus, Ego's disposition above corroborates Chukwuma's position that "A woman's fate is her own, as is her choice of life. In a world of diversities, and choice, a woman ultimately has to stand up and make a choice and her success and failure in that choice lies in her" (49). When her husband files for divorce and full custody of the child out of spite, "Ego did not contest.... She gave in so easily that my victory felt limp. I had to find ways to make it count" (95). Through this, the author explodes the myth of marriage and motherhood as the only source of relevance for women.

Despite her first-class degree, Ego is made to accept a menial responsibility in a factory, and that fires up her resolve to move away. When she tells her husband "I am wasting away here" (91), "This place is killing me" (92), she looks poised to break the system, to challenge the usual passive, impractical and burdensome form of existence of some female migrants and proceed to find fulfilment elsewhere. This also underscores how complicated the task of postcolonial feminist is. She suffers what Kirsten Peterson and Anna Rutherford describe as "double colonisation" (64). The above authors use this term to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of

colonialism and patriarchy. According to Ritu Tyagi, *"She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor"* (45).

Her satisfaction lies in taking a job responsibility that is commensurate with her certificate because *"She had worked too hard for her degree to ever feel satisfied not being able to work without it. It is like having wings and not being able to fly"* (93). Her success in London, therefore, projects an idea that some migratory spaces could stifle and asphyxiate the potential of female migrants. Irene d'Almeida, using Paul Sartre's existentialist views argues that human beings are *"the sum total of their choices and through the act of choosing, they create themselves"* (qtd in Okereke, 165).

In stark contrast to Ego in the above story, Prosperous in the next story *"Becoming Prosperous"*, out of patriarchal prompting, gives up her life and career and embraces the idea that a man is the one to succeed. Back in Nigeria, Prosperous was not only of privileged background but a successful banker. Her husband Agu was also successful in his supermarket business. A sudden twist ensued in their lives, as a religious riot broke out in Northern Nigeria, where they lived and claimed everything they worked for. Following this development, the need for migration became inevitable.

On getting to Belgium, the stark reality of their otherness quickly dawns on them. Prosperous' university degree can only fetch her a cleaning job in Belgium because she is not only a woman, an immigrant, but black. The situation amuses her anytime she recounts the contradiction of her expectations. *"I thought, they'll take one look at our degrees and offer us jobs on the spot. Company cars, a company house with a massive lawn, a butler and a chef"* (32). Unigwe dramatises the same scenario in her debut novel; *The Phoenix*, when the Protagonist, Oge, like Prosperous, is also encountered in the same web of frustration, as she finds it difficult coming to terms with her experiences in Belgium.

"Everything here is different. I had expected it but the magnitude of the difference still unsettles me. And now my life is changed. Completely, I feel like I am invisible. An unseen vapour floating odourlessly by. It is as if I do not exist. The feeling is so strong that I pinch my nose; I want to know if I still possess the sense of touch." (p.12)

Like Oge above, Prosperous' story details her loss, not only in terms of her old home but also of her loss of identity in this European landscape.

Following the pressure of European life on the husband, her much-cherished marriage becomes soured, as her husband changes and becomes withdrawn and abusive. She is not only suffering abandonment, but the chasm created by their disillusionment becomes widened. The narrator puts it thus:

"The words they do not say fill the distance they keep from each other, except when there is fault to be found.... When the food is not ready on time. When the flat is not tidy enough. Or her voice is not "wifely" enough. Then Agu unleashes his frustration on her." (44).

Agu attributes his weird attitude to sleepless nights and harsh working conditions in the bread factory. On the other dimension, Agu's new attitude may be explained simply as a reaction against the entrenched patriarchal idea that man's personal misfortune may arise out of the numerous spirits that follow their wives. This always throws up memories of the time everything seemed possible in their marriage. "...there had been no demarcation of chores, no women's jobs or men's. He would not have thought it insulting to be asked to do a woman's job" (35). These memories of the past comfort her in the wake of the uncertainties that characterise her life in Belgium.

The contradiction of the new environment takes a serious toll on Prosperous, as she loses her vibrancy and sense of self, and becomes acutely disillusioned and always overtaken by feelings of nostalgia. It has been noted that one of the major factors causing depression and disillusionment among migrants is the discrepancy between achievement and expectation. Dinesh Bhugra and Oyedemi Ayonride capture it vividly when they aver that:

"Mismatched aspirations and achievements can also produce stress, which can be related to the onset or genesis of depression. Expectations of the new country in terms of both personal and social gains (prestige in particular) must be matched by achievement if the individual is to function well. If achievements do not match aspirations, individuals are open to low mood, a sense of alienation and, more importantly, a sense of failure – all of which can trigger depression. It is possible that economic migrants will have heightened expectations of social mobility, which are more likely to contribute to a striving for success that might not be matched by achievement." (16)

As implied above, migration is supposed to bring about some kind of economic upliftment, but where the barest expectation becomes hard to be realised, it opens the room for depression. Thus, in this story, Prosperous becomes temperamental and always juxtaposes her near-perfect life in Nigeria with that of her new environment and concludes that "*we shouldn't have given in so easily. We should never have left. We would have been better off in Nigeria*" (34). It is against this backdrop that Omede Matthew avers that most female migrants suffer from "*a faux-perception of a host land as a landscape of greener pastures and there are the unending tales of woes that construct a psychological blockage against return to the homeland*". (99). It also validates Angela Dick's position that "*Migration tends to deposit disenchantment, synaesthesia disorder and depression on the migrants*" (22).

The social roles of female migrants, their autonomy and capacity to make decisions, their access to resources, and the existing gender stratification in countries of origin and destination, to a greater extent, contributes to shaping the experiences of female migrants. Despite the fact that gender roles have considerably shifted, resulting in some positive effects, some men still tenaciously hold on to the prescribed gender-type roles and behaviour and this has historically provided the unfortunate premises for denigration, suppression and exploitation of women. In the religious, socio-political and economic calculus of society, women are consistently stereotyped and denied positive

identity, through coercive norms that define and restrict what they are and can do. Monica Udoette and Kufre Akpan argue that: *"it is the manoeuvring of gender for some gains or advantage without regard to what is just or right and could be seen as an ideological construct to manoeuvre gender by a class for the purpose of personal aggrandisement"* (56).

Prosperous, in this story, lamentably reveals how her husband demarcates chores and constantly reminds her of her role as a woman, and how he feels insulted to be asked to do what he categorises as a woman's job. *"The men will do anything but clean. That's a woman's job.... It will kill him to do that and how could she have thought that he would? Abi you want to turn me into a woman?"* (34). This contrasts with her experience back in Nigeria. *"Before they got maids, they had shared the chores. But that was different, Agu said"* (34). This underscores how migration is gendered and how gender inequalities in the societies of destination affect the experiences of migrant women. Ladele and Omotayo opine that the nuances of female migrant experiences are useful tools for re-imagining *"a feminization of migratory realities especially, because women's experience as migrants greatly differs from those of men"* (53).

The extent to which gender roles are internalised is strongly communicated in Prosperous' restriction to the domestic precinct. The kitchen becomes her odyssey, as if cooking is a kind of marriageability test for women or the knowledge of it comes preinstalled in the vagina. It is supposed to be a life skill that both men and women should possess. In this story, Agu invites his friends over every weekend and makes Prosperous cook whatever they want to eat. In fact, *"This is her job: to anticipate the needs of Agu and his friends. How has she allowed her life to boil down to this: the anticipation of the needs of these men as if they were her children"* (37). She labours alone in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning, while her husband and friends settle on the game of Whot. Indirectly, she becomes *"a 'wife' to whichever guest her husband invites home: cooking, cleaning"* (43). As a show of superiority, Agu always finds himself feeling the need *"to assert himself as a man. Now he orders her around in a voice that is also new"* (39). Kufre Akpan and Isonguyo Akpan say that *"the above development, most often, shatters the women's psychic identity and damages their sense of perception and representation"* (31). It is against this development that Antonia Tejero finds parallels between colonialism and the subjugation of women. In her views:

"Colonialism and patriarchy have been closely entwined historically, but an end to formal empire has not meant an end to the oppression of women in the former colonies. Postcolonial feminists point out the ways in which women continue to be stereotyped and marginalised, ironically sometimes by postcolonial authors who might claim to be challenging a culture of oppression." (253)

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's physical assault of his wife, Anasi, for failing to *"provide his meal"* (26), demonstrates this gender power play and underscores the consequences for women who try to exhibit unorthodox behaviour.

In a twist of event, Prosperous is suddenly overtaken by a new consciousness when she learns of her friend's ambition to contest for a governorship position in her

state, back in Nigeria. This news becomes, for her, a catalyst that forces her out from the cocoon of self-denial and abnegation. She becomes assertive, with a conviction that, if her friend, a woman, could dare to become a governor, she could achieve all her dreams, even as a female migrant. She regrets her hitherto docile and facile lack-lustre human being she has been, and wishes she had towed the path of her friend Oge, who resisted her husband and joined her friend in London. *"Look at Oge! I should have taken language lessons, gone for that teaching degree, refused to settle for this...In fact, why can't I do it now?"* (33). Prosperous' new resolve is in tandem with one of the major tenets of postcolonial feminist theory which is not only to challenge ideologies that have belittled the status of women, but to eradicate stereotypes that define them as subordinate, pointing out that, despite the decline of imperialism, they are still subject in many ways to the pressure of neo-colonialism.

It is noted that in some migratory spaces, language policies, most times, construct some kind of intimidation and growing self-degradation on the psyche of the migrants. In this story, the ability of migrants to access some basic infrastructure and opportunities is dependent on the acquisition of languages spoken in the country. On their arrival in Belgium, Prosperous mutes the idea of enrolling in a language class to help her secure a decent job. But her husband vehemently dissuades her, considering it as unnecessary. *"Haba! All those languages and a teaching degree to be able to teach mathematics to a bunch of kids!"* (32). She had accepted to back off her personal aspiration to conform to the confines of wifhood. Chukwuma argues that *"a woman's limitations are many. In an argument, the husband is always right. You do not argue with your husband. A woman who tried to win an argument over her husband was regarded as "he woman", a type of monster maybe"* (132). In one of the job centres, a young man asks them: *"Do you speak any Nederlands? Nee? Frans? Nee? They could not hope to get the kind of jobs they were after, working in a bank or teaching, if they spoke neither Dutch nor French"* (32). She is now overwhelmed by regret and wishes she never gave in.

Prosperous' new identity, therefore, is a means through which the author explodes the myth of passivity and docility and blaze a new trail in female migrant's consciousness. Unlike the "former" Prosperous, she now demonstrates the will to assert herself as a significant and indispensable half of humanity. Apart from her readiness to commence language classes against her husband's initial opposition, she now resists being ordered around by Agu and his friends. *"Nwunye anyi? A voice yells from the sitting room. Prosperous! Agu yells at the same time. Fuck off! Prosperous shouts back"* (47). Through this, Uniqwe reconstructs female migrants' realities and bestows voice to the hitherto voiceless and hapless women.

The vulnerable condition of female migrants is also audibly communicated in the next story; "The Transfiguration of Rapu". In this story, Uniqwe explores a migratory space that strips women of every self-worth, pitting them against themselves to the advantage of the male migrants. As if female migrants lead a one-dimensional existence, most of them are conditioned to accept the status of a "paper wife"; a kind of contractual marriage that guarantees the legibility of the purported husband to formalise permanent

residency in the host land. Most of them enter into this marriage in good faith, only to realise, to their disappointment, that the man was not actually interested in the marriage, but was only seeking the status of a permanent resident alien that goes with such marriage.

In this story, Gwachi is married to Rapu, with a child back in Nigeria, but as an immigrant in Germany, he enters into a dubious marriage with Hilde, a German, to secure permanent residency. Obviously, in this kind of marriage, love is never a binding factor. The relationship is stage-managed with individual benefit in mind, and for Gwachi, it is for the possibility of improving his immigration status. And so, after the marriage and, on Hilde's suggestion, both of them relocate to Belgium. *"She gave up her life in Germany for him"* (2).

Gwachi is however planning to divorce Hilde and later relocate Rapu, his "original wife" from Nigeria to Belgium. He contracts his kinsman, Shylock, to visit Nigeria and arrange a court marriage with Rapu and bring her to Belgium. The narrator reveals that Shylock *"...was the sort of middle man you wanted if you were after an "arrange" marriage. He would know whom you could trust"* (4). Back in Belgium, Rapu pretends to be married to Shylock and is to divorce him and move in with Gwachi immediately when he divorces Hilde. *"Once he divorces Hee.. Hilde, and I divorce Shylock, we'll be too... too... together again. I am tired of sleeping on the-the-the sofa. My neck hurts. Everyday."* (6).

However, this reprieve will not come soon as Gwachi seems to be even more cordial with Hilde. For instance, he travels to Turkey with Hilde for a vacation and later gets her pregnant. This underscores the ugly condition of women in a landscape that primarily caters for the whims of men while perpetrating injustice on the side of women. To Rapu, Gwachi's continued flirtation with Hilde is seen as a sign that her expectation may not materialise. And so, to avert her utmost fears, Rapu begins a tortuous and unconventional process of self-assertion by shifting her emphasis from marriage to individualism and autonomy. Instead of waiting endlessly for a marriage that will not come, she finds an unnamed love of her life and gets pregnant for him. *"I met someone. I loh... love him. So now Gwachi can keep his oyibo wife.... I am not a bad person; you know? But I'm only human. I tried. Every time I asked Gwachi how-how much lon-lon-longer it w-would be, he-he would tell me, soon"* (13). Rapu stirs the social conscience and breaks the limitations migration places on some women. Prosperous says this of her: *"How brave.... How freeing it must be not to care what anybody thought, not to mind losing the close-knit community she had built up here..."* (14). Through this, the author firmly moves away from the single female migrant story and creates assertive female migrants, who now make choices that negate the stereotypical narrative of a disappointing, disillusioned and subservient women in migratory spaces.

The tortuous reality of female migrants also runs through "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am". In this story, Godwin, an illegal migrant from Nigeria, is poised to legalise his residency in Belgium by any means, and captures this plan in his popular mantra: *"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do"* (75). And that is, apparently, to marry a Belgian woman. Thus, his marriage to Tine is nothing but a skewed arrangement to

actualise his plans for a shortcut to permanent residency. He graphically projects his plans thus: "...marry a Belgian, follow an integrating course for a few days a week. Get your papers in order. Ride it out a few years. Divorce. Then go back home and pick a proper spouse" (83). This informs his description of his Belgian wife as his 'passport' (79).

Immediately after the marriage, he stops going out with Tine and will not stay at home to do something together as a "*Koppel*" (81). He brings his girlfriend to his house and lies that she is his cousin, who speaks only the Igbo language. Prosperous who regrets her complicity in this marriage fraud also draws a correlation between Tine's experience and that of hers.

".... here, going out was a frivolity they could not afford. And besides they had become other people. Living here and surviving here and waking up every single day to go to a job neither of them liked had changed them. She was starting to accept that there was nothing left of their marriage to salvage. Yet she could not leave." (82)

This depressive pressure, occasioned by an obvious discrepancy between the aspirations and achievements of these women, further heightens their sense of disappointment.

However, Tine also, like other female protagonists in the stories examined, refuses to be used as a "passport". Through her new consciousness, she indicts Prosperous and others for their complicity in Godwin's evil intention against her marriage and threatens to dissolve the marriage before Godwin is able to secure the papers. "...one day when I get tired, when I stop liking him even a little...because I will one day.... When that day comes, I will tell him it's over.... I have the feeling that that day is soon, Very, very soon. There won't be time for him to have those papers" (87-88). Tine's consciousness is a way of rewriting the one-sided narrative of women participating in migration. Monica Udoette avers that: "*The idea of female consciousness is part of the process of redefining the woman's place within her society and culture and this re-definition has been the concern of many female writers...*" (74). Thus, Uniqwe, through this, dismantles the stereotypical male chauvinistic impression about women both in the homeland and host land.

4. Conclusion

This paper, as shown from the analysis of some extrapolations in Uniqwe's *Better Never Than Late*, has attempted to highlight some harrowing experiences female migrants are subjected to, as a result of gender, class and race. The paper also interrogates the artistic representation of the author which imbues the female characters with a new consciousness that helps them survive and transcend their experiences. Besides the deconstruction and reconstruction of the monotonous narrative of women participating in migration, this paper views the depiction of female characters in their point zero and their acute feeling of nostalgia as artistically and stylistically motivated to repudiate the

general assumption that migration actualises the search for a better lease of life and provides an escape from the sufferings that characterise developing nations.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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