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Trafficking black women in Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail and Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street

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Abstract

In the last two decades human trafficking for sexual exploitation has become the focus of many narratives which investigate the condition of black women in sex slavery. Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (OBSS, 2010) and Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* (BA, 2006) explore the spectral and ghostly world of sex trafficking for sexual exploitation, bringing to light the atrocities committed by this illegal trade. The present work examines the two literary texts from a postcolonial angle, and confirms that trafficking African women for sex work is a form of modern slavery which dehumanizes black women by reducing them to mere ghostly figures, denying them any possibility to claim their right to have rights. In particular, the discussion notes that the current trade of trafficking black women for sex work is based upon the old practice of objectifying, or commodifying, the black woman's body. The process of reducing African women to mere passive sex objects for men's pleasure places women and girls in the vulnerable position of being illegally exploited by a huge system whose key players are both African traffickers and European criminals. In Europe these sex trafficked black women are further exploited by a political and legal apparatus which seems to legitimize the human trafficking networks by adopting some procedures that are actually unable to respond adequately and effectively to the social-cultural and political crisis presented by Uniqwe's and Abani's black female characters. This thesis suggest that, in the fictional space of the novels, the narration of the traumatic experiences of trafficked women allows them a sort of redemptive agency, while readers are given an inside critical perspective on human trafficking discourse.

sex trafficking, black female body, irregular migration, ghostly existence, the act of telling

0. Introduction

Recent years have seen a rapid proliferation of interesting narratives concerning human trafficking for sexual exploitation. The novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (OBSS, 2010) by Nigerian-born Belgian writer Chika Unigwe and Nigerian author Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* (BA, 2006) explore the darkest aspects of humanity in bringing to light the invisible world of human trafficking, an illegal oppressive system which trades humans from one country to another for the purpose of profit. The two authors have the great ability to narrate cruel moments of suffering of those trafficked people who are turned into objects, or animals, by the current (sex) trafficking networks.

Escaping from war, sexual abuses, poverty and political corruption in their African hometowns, Unigwe's four characters Sisi, Ama, Alek(Joyce) and Efe are lured into prostitution by Dele, a Nigerian man who runs a company that exports black girls to Europe where they are turned into sex slaves. When they arrive in the Flemish city of Antwerp, their illegal status makes them vulnerable to be exploited by the sex market. Unigwe's illegally trafficked women therefore become sex slaves, passive erotic objects that satisfy white men's sexual pleasure and enrich the sex industry. Forced to use their black bodies in terrible circumstances, they must survive to the worst forms of psychological and physical humiliation in order to pay the human trafficking networks, so as to eventually be free to embrace their future. Although Sisi loses her life when she decides to escape from Madam's bondage – she is actually murdered by Madam's menacing assistant Segun – the other three young women are able to make their dreams come true.

Such a similar scenario, but with more disturbing situations, is depicted by Abani in his short novel *Becoming Abigail*. Abigail is a young black girl from Nigeria who is illegally trafficked by her cousin Peter to Britain for the purpose of prostitution. In London she experiences the brutal conditions of slavery. Chained in a doghouse, sexually violated and psychologically

manipulated by Peter, Abigail is turned into an animal. Living without documents and under a false name, she is totally isolated from any social interaction and she is unable to give voice to her rights. As Unigwe's four trafficked characters, Abigail is definitely a voiceless ghost in the spectral, illegal world of human trafficking. Abigail eventually manages to escape from Peter's house and she falls in love with Derek, a social worker who is married and much older than the girl. Since Abigail is underage, their love affair is condemned by the British protection Law which refuses to understand Abigail's right to love and to be loved. Abigail's sense of frustration finds expression when she opts to throw herself into the Thames in the name of love.

On the basis of an analysis of such narrative experiences, supported by critical interventions concerning human trafficking discourse, the aim of the present work is to confirm that in contemporary times sex trafficking is definitely one of the worst dehumanising practice based on black women's subjugation. This social and cultural pre-constructed idea finds its roots in the link between racism and sexuality in the age of Colonialism (Spivak, 1985; Spillers, 1987; Young, 1995) as well as in the practices of the slave trade (Cooper, 2015), and still works nowadays within the human trafficking for sexual exploitation. While in Africa persisting social trends such as poverty, war and corruption, and cultural norms such as gender inequalities and patriarchal subordination encourage African young women to travel abroad to look for other opportunities (Omuteche, 2014; Reinares, 2019; Ligoga, 2019), in Europe the inadequate welfare state is responsible to cast trafficked black women into the role of passive victims who deserve protection only if they remain such (Hall, 2015; Davidson 2006, 2010; Doezema, 2005; Oboe, 2022). Despite the failure of any tangible efforts of these black women to assert their will upon their body and life, or to claim their right to have rights, they eventually succeed, finding in the act of (self) narrating a way to assert their identity and therefore become visible (Nadalini, 2011; DeMul, 2014; Eze, 201; Okolo, 2019). The study also suggests the need to assume a critical perspective on the assumption that

slavery is not an old practice of the past but it still exists today in various forms and places around the world. As Bales (2000) observes: “Modern Slavery hides behind different masks, using clever lawyers and legal smoke screens”(6). However, paradoxically, since the entire social and political apparatus is often reluctant to talk openly about such crimes in the name of a democratic world, literature seems to have the amazing power to “convey what is often unnarratable” (Oboe, 2022), shedding light on such dark aspects of humanity.

In order to develop these points, the present study is structured as follows. The first chapter of the work examines the relation between sex and slavery, demonstrating some considerable parallels between old and new slavery for what concerns the process of dehumanisation, a cruel practice by which people are deprived of human dignity. Especially, in the current human trafficking for sexual exploitation black women are turned into (sexual) objects as their African female ancestors during the slave trade in the Black Atlantic. In *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Becoming Abigail* these displaced black bodies are constantly perceived only in terms of their potential for gaining profit, an image that finds its roots in the age of Colonialism, and it still works in Europe as in Africa in contemporary times. The second chapter therefore discusses some of the main social and cultural factors which can be responsible for considering black women as mere passive objects without any power to express their voice both in their homeland and in Europe. In Africa, Unigwe's four characters and Abani's young woman Abigail are constantly placed in an inferior, or subordinate, position where they are rejected, humiliated, excluded and (sexually) violated by their fellow African men. In fact, postcolonial Africa, especially Nigeria, is a place shaped by socio-cultural unequal power dynamics that do not allow women and girls to succeed in their country, making them invisible to the blind eyes of their male relatives. Similarly, when these women are illegally trafficked in Europe for sexual exploitation, they realize to be ghostly figures within the illegal trade of human beings without any possibilities to claim their right to have rights. Although the second chapter provides

evidence of trafficked women's spectral connotations, highlighting therefore a certain degree of passivity and victimization of these black women, the first part of Chapter 3 identifies some moments of agency, such as erotic love or consensual sex, by which Unigwe's women and Abani's girl Abigail can assert their will upon their bodies and lives moving out of their subaltern position of invisibility and ghostliness. Whereas these acts can express independence, freedom and empowerment of women from the protagonists' perspective, they are definitely condemned by a socio-cultural and political system which is unable to understand trafficked women's anxieties and desires. The second part of Chapter 3 examines the amazing power of narrative, or literature, in making trafficked women visible, using the process of (self) narration as a way by which these characters can establish their lost identities in relation to their past events, current experiences and future aspirations.

Chapter One

SEX AND SLAVERY. THE FLESH MARKET

Slavery in Africa is not a thing of the past.
Eze, 'Feminism with a Big "F"

In the two novels *On black Sisters' Street* (OBSS, 2010) and *Becoming Abigail* (BA, 2006) the characterization of the black female body is central, and relevant in order to explain how their sexual exploitation in contemporary times could be a legacy of certain nineteenth-century cultural, social and scientific ideas, particularly in the age of the British empire. All the African female protagonists seem to be perceived not as humans but as something else, through sexist, racial and gender categories. What derives from this assumption is the pre-constructed image of black female bodies as mere erotic commercial goods used and abused by a patriarchal modern day slavery system.

1.1 Sexualizing the black female body

In postcolonial studies the term body asks to take into account some familiar terms such as colour, race, gender, slavery, hegemony and subjectivity. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin confirm: "How people are perceived controls how they are treated, and physical differences are crucial in such construction" (2013, 202). The visibility of such physical differences (skin colour, hair type, facial features, etc.) appears to be not just a criterion which people use to socially evaluate others but also the aesthetic parameters employed to distinguish specific groups. Such view of the body may therefore become "prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific groups (…) or to control indigenous populations in colonial possessions by emphasizing their differences and constructing them as inferior" (202).

According to this statement, it appears that physical differences are relevant in discerning people who are superior from those who are inferior. The novel *On Black Sisters' Street* shows how this sort of social construction of racial images works within hegemonic discourses to put black women in a subordinate position, and leads to their being potentially exploited as sex workers. In other terms, there seems to exist a relation between the fact of being black women and modern African sex exploitation. This link may be explained by what I believe is called "sexualisation of the black female body" or in Brouillete's words "strategic exoticism" (2007). In OBSS, what is extremely remarkable is Unigwe's great ability to show how black women are perceived as inferior through racial and sexist categories, as the following passage suggests:

> They like black women there [in Europe] (…) And as for liking black women, Dele had told her they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting a bit of colour and spice. (OBSS, 84)

The Nigerian author Chika Unigwe reveals the racial hegemonic dynamics within the sex trafficking industry. In doing so, she points to a form of "colonial desire" (Young, 1995) which inevitably reminds the reader of a sort of exoticism typical of Victorian colonialism. My perception is that thanks to the presence of the two verbs "like" and "want", and two nouns as "colour" and "spice", Chika Unigwe has the amazing power to evoke fantasies about the African female body as a sexualized and exotic protagonist existing from the nineteenth century, or even before, from the times of the slave trade. In addition, the use of two contrastive adjectives as "black" and "white" highlights not just the racial interpretation but also expresses gender discrimination thanks to the qualified nouns "women" and "men". This may find compelling evidence in Young (1995), who demonstrates the link between sexuality and colonial culture mainly by supporting the idea that colonialism is an example of a hegemonic dynamic which implies racism and gender hierarchies. He definitely admits that the relation between the (white-male) colonizer and the (black-female) colonized is pervaded by sexual

exoticism. It is not by chance that, as De Mul (2014) also suggests, the four female sex-slave protagonists of the novel OBSS are constantly "socially constructed through exotic, sexualized codes of black womanhood":

> You be fine gal now. *Abi*, see your backside, *kai*! Who talk say *na dat* Jennifer Lopez get the finest *yansh*? Make *dem* come here come see your assets! As for those melons *wey* you carry for chest, *omo*, how you no go fin' work? He (Dele) fixed his eyes, moist and greedy, on her beasts. (OBSS, 42-43)

In this passage Dele, the Nigerian man who runs the women's trafficking network from Lagos to Europe, is literally sexualizing Sisi's womanhood by seeing her just in sexual physical terms[1]. The language used by the man is extremely sexist, rude and disrespectful. Sisi appears to be really disturbed by Dele's attitude, and this uncomfortable situation may also derive from Dele's behaviour in staring at Sisi's body in a lustful way. The sexualisation of the black woman seems to be linked to certain criteria of black beauty evoking a sense of attractiveness or desirability of the other as Young (1995) suggests by referring to Gilman (1985): "the links between sex and race were developed in the nineteenth century through fantasies derived from cultural stereotypes in which blackness evokes an attractive but dangerous sexuality."(97). Chika Unigwe furthers this idea in the following impressive narrative sequence:

> "Number three is the type of women white men like. Thin lips. Pointed nose. Sweet *ikebe".* He slapped her bare buttocks. Number three smiled. "Imagine her inside a window. This one is material for catching plenty white men. Look at her colour". Number three's skin was the colour of honey. "She is one good investment". Number three's smile grew wider. (OBSS, 279)

[1] Omuteche (2014) proposes: "Dele's working concept is that the black female body entices white males, arousing in them irresistible erotic urges. Hence they are ready to pay, as part of a ready, never ending market. (…) A discourse [which is also] reinforced by Madam in training the girls once they get to Antwerp." This quotation may suggest how the raced and sexualized pre-constructed image of black beauty is used as a strategy by African traffickers in order to gain profit by being, in this way, complicit in the sex trade with Europe.

In order to understand the remarkable passage, it is convenient to recall the narrative context. Several African girls are going to be sold at the auction sale in Brussels, where madams buy the young black women for sex work. In describing what is happening, I believe that the ability of Chika Unigwe is to recall such images and fantasies relating to the Middle Passage, when African lives were sold and bought as forced labour. Unigwe's depiction seems to be focused on differences regarding skin colour and facial features which are "hot stuff" for attracting white male clients in Europe. In addition, I could suggest that the use of the verb "imagine" is functional in evoking such idea of exoticism relating to African female bodies. At this point, it seems that the process of sexualizing the black women creates an attractive picture in the white man's mind by which the young African bodies are seen just as "erotic urges" (Omuteche, 2014). The following passage from *On Black Sisters' Street* provides another compelling narrative evidence supporting the idea that the black body is "considered as sexualized exotic" by European men[2] in the sex industry (Vaughan, 1991 in Okolo, 2019).

> She learned to twirl to help them make up their minds, a swirling mass of chocolate flesh, mesmerising them, making them gasp and yearn for a release from the ache between their legs; a coffee- coloured dream luring them in with the promise of heaven (OBSS, 237)

The selected five lines also reveal what I mentioned before in relation to Brouillette's conceptualization of "strategic exoticism". The four black sex workers seem to be aware that how they dress up and behave in the red-light district is a tempting sexual spectacle for white clients. According to De Mul (2014), and it is also my perception, the novel has the great ability to describe this manifest race-gender dynamics which is constructed upon the

[2] It seems that within the sex trade the process of sexualising the black women's bodies as a form of exploitation works in the white man's mind as well as in the black man's mind, as Dele's sexist comments on Sisi's body may confirm (OBSS, 42-43). This may suggest that black women are first figured as just erotic commodities by their fellow Africans in their hometowns. For this point, see Abigail's case concerning the sexual abuse committed by her cousin Peter, Ama's sexual violence by her stepfather Cyril and Alek(Joyce)'s gang rape in Sudan. In Chapter 2 I will further elaborate the significance of African socio- cultural scenarios concerning the inferior position of black women.

exotic codes of black womanhood as inherited from colonialism. As Young (1995) admits, Victorian colonial discourse is pervaded by images of "transgressive sexuality" and "sexualized exoticism". The white male slave owner preferred sexual intercourse with black female slaves within an ambivalent double process of repulsion and attraction: "the white male's ambivalent axis of desire and repugnance" (152). Young, by arguing Gobineau's thesis about sex and inequality, believes that sexual attraction is a force driven by two laws: one of repulsion and one of attraction. Both authors suggest that "It is the white races who are inclined to be sexually attracted towards the other races" (107) and "the white male's response to the allure of exotic black sexuality is identified with mastery and domination" (108). At this point, in my view, the black prostitute's body could be seen as the site of this double process of repulsion and attraction. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the figure of the black prostitute often stands in society as a transgressive and miserable object, but at the same time this condition appears to constitute a favourable situation for the white male clients in order to satisfy their erotic desires.

A similar process may be found in the late eighteenth century with the institution of slavery: "The controlling power relation between slave-owner and slave was eroticized" (Young, 1995). Black women in any forms of dominance structure, as the colonial oppression and slavery, seem to be relegated to their inferior position not just for their race but also for the fact that they are women. This allows them to be eroticized and sexualized by their male colonizers. At the extreme level of this interpretation, it might be believed that all black women could be victims of sexual attacks because of their sexualisation which derives both from their exotic beauty and their inferiority. By using Spivak's words, in my view, the young Nigerian woman Abigail and Unigwe's four black female sex-workers could be perceived inevitably as victims of what the Indian feminist critic called "double colonization". This process, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013) suggest, is clearly evident in any colonial context where women are placed in an inferior position for the fact that they are both colonial subjects and women.

Such interpretation finds undeniable evidence in the fact that Abigail, Ama, Efe, Joyce and Sisi are victims of sexual attacks, rapes and sexual exploitation performed by "predatory men" (Reinares, 2019). In both the selected texts, all the black female protagonists are sexually violated, subjugated, manipulated and intimidated by men who always take advantage of their inferiority position both in their homeland and in Europe.

Abigail's life is shaped by patriarchal forces both in her natal village and in globalised London: "None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her" (28). At ten she is sexually abused by one of her cousins, Edwin, who frightens the little Abigail: "I will kill you if you tell anyone" (30). After, the fourteen-year-old Abigail constantly struggles against her father's incestuous desire towards her (McCallum, 2015). Then, she is trafficked, raped and brutalized by Peter. According to Reinares (2019) it is also possible to read the passionate affair between Abigail and the older male social worker Derek as an "unequal relation" because Derek "benefits from the girl's emotional instability". By analogy, a similar situation is depicted in Unigwe's novel where Ama, for example, at the age of eight is repeatedly sexually molested by her stepfather:

> Her father floated into her room (…) covering her mouth with one broad palm and smothering the scream in her throat. With the other hand he fumbled under her nightdress, (…). That was the first time it happened. (…) The next night he floated into her room again. (OBSS, 132)

What is also remarkable in Ama's story, as Eze (2014) argues, is how patriarchal oppression is able to turn "mothers against daughters". Ama's mother does not believe her when she tells about the actual sexual abuse: "her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness" (133). The reader may suppose that Ama's mother is obliged to turn a blind eye to the sex crime of her husband upon her young daughter in respect for the patriarchal roles, because "she depended on her husband for sustenance" (Eze, 2014). At the age of sixteen, the other character, Efe, is first seduced and then abandoned by the forty-five-year old man Titus. He takes

advantage of the fact that Efe needs cash to help the precarious economic conditions of her family. Titus "needed someone with young bones to make him happy. He told Efe she made him the happiest man in Lagos. The happiest man in Nigeria, even" (54). Despite her initial painful sexual experience with Titus, Efe learns how to trade her body in return of money, and inevitably having sex with Titus becomes a routine:

> Every afternoon, for the next four months, Efe saw Titus at his insistence. He said she had taken possession of him, he had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her. (…) His need was buying her the things she wanted. (…) Sex with Titus did not get better but it certainly got easier. It no longer hurt her so much to have him between her legs. (OBSS, 57)

Titus abandons the girl the night when she informs him about her pregnancy. It is the moment when Efe realizes to be a mere sexual object and not a human being who requires understanding, respect and dignity.

> "I am pregnant, Titus." That was all it took to get out of the bed, get him dressed: first the black trousers with the cord pulled tightly under his stomach, and then the kaftan reaching down to his knees. Then he got up, turned his broad back to her, picked up his car keys from the bedside table and walked out of the hotel room, closing the door so gently behind him that it made no noise. (OBSS, 59)

In my view, Unigwe prefers to focus the narrative description on the process of how the older man Titus put his elegant clothes on after he had sex with the girl. The author does not describe his feelings or emotions about such delicate situation. This choice, I suppose, remarks the lack of Titus' compassion for Efe's pregnancy. Consequently, what comes from this functional narrative choice is the portrait of a man who is unable to feel and show sympathy for the girl. He does not care about Efe's situation, and predictably he does not express a wish to help her. However, I believe that one of the most relevant narrative sequences in OBSS that may confirm the brutality of female abuse is when Alek (Joyce) is gang raped by the Northern

Janjaweed militia during the civil war in her African natal village. The following passage, I think, is one of the most violent and cruel sequence in the book:

> The soldiers looked at her. A beanpole. Breasts like baby mangoes straining against her flowered dress. One of the soldiers smiled. A lopsided grin that caused her instinctively to cross her arms over her chest. He laughed. (…). He slapped her hands away. Grabbed her breasts. Pinched them as if he was testing out some fruit for firmness before buying. Her nipples hurt under his fingers. "Stupid African slave!". (…) He tore my dress. I fought, but he tore my dress. And. And. And threw me on the bed. She tried to bite him. (…) slapped her. (…) Another slap. (…) A pain in her shoulder. One of the other soldiers had hit her with the butt of a rifle. She could not stop it.(…) "Stupid bitch!" Slap. Slap. (…) When he thrust his manhood inside her, when he touched her, (…). One by one the other men came and thrust themselves into her, pulling out to come on her face. Telling her to ingest it; it was protein. Good food. Fit for African slaves. (OBSS, 190-191)

What emerges from the passage above is a description of what Spillers calls "pornotroping" (1987). The pornotroping practice seems to be developed into the following steps:

> 1)The captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time- in stunning contradiction- it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; 3) in this distance from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness", the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into more general "powerlessness" (Spillers in Weheliye, 2008)

Analysing Alek(Joyce)'s brutal rape through Spillers' conceptualisation of pornotroping, it is possible to state that the girl is experiencing "the simultaneous sexualisation and brutalization of the (female) slave" (White in Weheliye, 2008). Alek(Joyce) is clearly stripped of her human dignity, and therefore made into the object (mere flesh) of violent and sexual impulses. After the military attack of her natal village in South Sudan, some of the Janjaweed soldiers kill her whole family, and rape her in turns with atrocious satisfaction. We can suggest that Alek(Joyce)'s body becomes the captive body of the pornotroping process, since she finds herself being in a position of inferiority which recalls inevitably the female black slave during slavery.

Similarly to those women's bodies during transatlantic slavery, Alek(Joyce) seems therefore to have to struggle with her inferior condition, which derives both from being a subaltern subject and a female being.

> Female slaves not only had to combat their inferior social status because of their race, they also were discriminated against for the sole fact that they were women. Therefore, the gender hierarchy that existed during this time period ensured that women were always regarded as inferior to men. (Cooper, 2015)

This condition of inferiority is clearly expressed by some soldiers of the Janjaweed militia who call her "stupid African slave" and "stupid bitch" showing therefore an unequal power dynamic in terms of race and gender. As Eze (2014) suggests, the soldiers do not perceive themselves as Africans, consequently Alek(Joyce) is considered as she belongs to another ethnic group. Furthermore, in a captive condition the phrase "stupid bitch" reveals how the female black body could become inevitably "an endless potential for pornotroping" (Nadalini in Oboe, 2011) or that source of such incontrollable and destructive (sexual) desires which may emerge from any hegemonic and oppressive situation.

1.2 Dehumanizing the black female body

The process of dehumanizing the black female body seems to be one of the most relevant issues in trafficking discourse. The two novels *Becoming Abigail* and *On Black Sisters' Street* explore female prostitution as a process by which the black African women are deprived from their human qualities, and inevitably they become something else. Those captive black female bodies find themselves being constantly controlled, exploited, harassed and tortured both physically and psychologically. In OBSS the process of commodification of the black woman, which stands for considering women as mere commodity to satisfy men's sexual needs, emerges clearly. Unigwe's four prostitutes are constantly humiliated as erotic commercial goods in order to satisfy man's sexual needs within the sex market. Similarly, but at an extreme degree of violence, in Abani's novella the young girl Abigail is atrociously brutalized to the point of becoming a dog. She finds

herself subjected to a process of “animalisation” (Oboe, 2012). These cruel situations clearly show how human sex trafficking is a form of violation and abuse against human dignity and human rights. The following selected passage taken from BA, may be compelling evidence in supporting this idea:

> “You want to bite like a dog? I’ll treat you like a dog”. (…)
>
> The ground was cold and wet with drew and frost. (…) He stopped in front of the empty doghouse. He handcuffed her to the chain lying in front of it. (…)
>
> “This is what we do to dogs”, he said. He spat at her (…) Pulling his penis out, he peed all over her. (…)
>
> “That’s my dirty dog” (…)
>
> And that is how she was made. Fifth. Hunger. And drinking from the plate of rancid water. Bent forward like a dog. Arms behind her back. Kneeling. Into the mud. And the food. Tossed out leftovers. And the cold. And the numbing of limbs that was an ever deeper cold.
>
> Without hands, she rooted around her skin with her nose. Feeling for the brandings, for the limits of herself. And then the urge came, and she held it away (…) she couldn’t feel the warmth wash down the frozen limits of her skin.
>
> (…) Bending. Rooting. Biting. Her shame was complete.
>
> (…) A girl slowly becoming a dog. (BA, 90-92)

The selected long sequence taken from Abani’s *novella* describes the high degree of Abigail’s dehumanization, specifically Abigail’s becoming an animal. What comes from the ungodly descriptive narrative passage is an explicit shocking coercive scenario of pain and violence where a young girl is reduced to a dog. The human dignity here is reduced to “zero degree” (Spiller, 1987) by removing not just human features but also all the fundamental conditions of being human: Abigail is tied up in handcuffs to the chain in a doghouse, she is humiliated by Peter who urinates on her, he beats her as well, and she is also obliged to drink from the plate of rancid water. In my view, the feelings of extreme disgust and intense discomfort, which certainly arise in the reader, may derive from Abani’s amazing ability in depicting Abigail’s condition by using lexical choices related to filth,

hunger, slavery and oppression. The point is that Abani seems to create such an extreme inhuman situation that violently crashes with the moral and ethic codes of the reader. By analogy, the visual association with transatlantic slavery may be inevitable, especially thanks to the use of the word “chain”. In this sense, the word “chain” could be a synecdoche for the entire process of becoming a slave subject by losing any possibility of agency, freedom, respect and human dignity. As Eze (2014) suggests, people cannot “own others the way we own pets or other animals”, since humans are born free and have the right to life, liberty and security, according to article three of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We can therefore admit that Abigail’s bondage reflects this bestial situation depriving one of the dignity which each individual deserves.

A similar scenario of shame and humiliation is also depicted by Unigwe in OBSS, when Sisi has sex with her first client in the bar’s dirty toilet in Antwerp.

> In a toilet cubicle, Dieter pulled his trousers down to his ankles. (…) Heaving and moaning, one hand tore at his boxers and the other at Sisi’s skirt. His breath warm against her neck, his hands pawing at her, he licked her skin. Sisi shut her eyes. Raising his head, he stuck his tongue into her ear. In. Out. In. Out. (…) He held her close. Pushed her against the wall, his hands cupping her buttocks, and buried his head in her breasts. (…) His penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus. (OBSS, 212-213)

Her first client Dieter makes Sisi lose her sense of honour and respect not just in terms of human dignity but also in terms of womanhood. Sisi feels to be violated in her female intimacy, and Dieter’s sexual attack hurts her, as being burnt “with a razor blade that had just come off a fire” (213). It is my perception that Unigwe prefers to focus the description of Sisi’s first time on just the mechanics of the sexual intercourse in order to make the sexual act nothing more than a neutral mechanical process. This choice, I strongly believe, points both the lack of empathy in the client and the sexist consideration of black women as mere (sex) machines, “dehumanized (and) built for endurance and little else” (Bennet and Dickerson, 2001).

Furthermore, focusing the attention just on the mechanical movements of the two bodies, it permits to consider Sisi as a mere physical part (flesh) separating from her emotional part (soul), and this interpretation could be seen as another narrative example which may confirm Spiller's conceptualization of pornotroping, in particular the distinction between "body" and "flesh". This distinction appears to provide the basis for dehumanising any human being. Since considering individuals as mere flesh – which implies not taking into account their social and emotional component – human beings are perceived as "mere biological life" (Agamben in Weheliye, 2008). Consequently, the loss of Sisi's human dignity, according to Spiller's distinction, allows her to be treated as non-human, and inevitably she can be abused, violated and brutalised. As I have already observed, my perception is that Unigwe has the ability to highlight Sisi's loss of her human value by using a neutral and objective narrator's viewpoint in the description of Sisi's first time. However, the reader knows Sisi's psychological condition just after the client's sperm had "trickled down her legs like mucus" (OBSS, 213):

> inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she baptised herself into it with tears, hot and livid (…) feeling intense pain wherever he touched, like he was searing her with a razor blade that had just come off a fire. Her nose filled with the sudden stench of the room, and the stench filled her body and turned her stomach. (OBSS, 213)

At this point, we may definitely admit that during her first sexual experience as a prostitute Sisi performs "her own dehumanization and leads to her severe alienation" (Omuteche, 2014). The traumatizing experience reveals therefore how Sisi is experiencing her dehumanizing process in being considered not a female individual who deserves respect, but a mere mechanic object who is able to satisfy men's desires. Such a similar consideration of the female black body was commonly depicted during slavery:

> [In slavery] the black body was made to perform as a labouring body, as a working machine dissociated from the mind that invents or operates

> the machine. (…) The black woman not only carried out the physical labour demanded by plantation economy, she also performed the sex work that satisfied the slaveholders lust (…). (Peterson in Bennet and Dickerson, 2001)

Taking into account both Unigwe's description of Sisi's first time and Peterson's words, it is clear that within the sex market in contemporary times the image of the black female body is the equivalent of the one which was depicted during the slave trade. Sisi's and her flatmates in Belgium are in the same equivalent status of their female ancestors: they are basically just labouring (sex) machines. This perception is certainly an extreme form of a broader issue called "objectification" or "commodification" of the black female body which derives inevitably from the institution of slavery. In fact, as Cooper (2015) observes,

> Over time, the replication of individual choices to capture, buy, trade African slaves created a social structure that equalized the value of human life with a market value. (…) Bodies became objectified for future use in slavery. When lives revolve around market values and are believed to be valuable only for the potential profitability they may bring.

Especially, in referring to Smallwood (2007), Cooper develops the process of "commodification" in slavery by identifying several specific methodologies: food rationing, specific language and social annihilation. In both novels, the black female (sex) slaves appear to experience one of Cooper's methodologies at least. In Abani's *novella*, for instance, Abigail is subjected to near starvation when she is literally imprisoned by Peter in the doghouse (93). Furthermore, her captive condition does not permit her to have any kind of social contacts: "A human being alone is nothing more sad than any lost animal and nothing destroys the soul like aloneness" (95). However, concerning the use of language as a "primary tool to render African captives inhuman" (Cooper, 2015), the following impressive narrative passage taken from OBSS could confirm the inevitable association between the commodification of the black female body in slavery and in the contemporary sex market:

> The women would be called into the room one at a time for the buyers to see and admire. They would all have numbers, for names were not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off their tongues. Nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with the odd combinations of consonants that make African names difficult for fragile tongues. (OBBS, 278)

What is particularly relevant in this passage – which evokes memories of slavery and slave market in the age of the British empire – is the use of a descriptive language in economic terms, or as Spillers (1987) suggests "the business of dehumanized naming". Nouns such as "buyers", "clients" and the verb "bought" contain a semantic allusion to a mercantile context. Furthermore, the sentence "They would all have numbers, for names were not important" assumes an important role to develop the commodification of the black women in contemporary (sex) slavery. The African women in the auction scene are all numbered, and they are waiting to have a more appropriate western name by theirs buyers. The fact to be firstly numbered implies a process of humiliation of the individual by eliminating his/her identity, and this dehumanising practice is expressed by the process of (re)naming (Okolo, 2019). Unigwe here clearly highlights that the need to rename all the trafficked black women is certainly an economic strategic choice concerning the commodification of black women within the sex market. My perception is that all the African girls need new names as new commercial products need attractive names for being launched in the (sexual) market place. Consequently, it seems that choosing a new name appears to be a persuasive strategy in order to attract more western male clients. Choosing a more suitable name for being introduced in the European sex market means inevitably obtaining a huge amount of economic profit for Dele who is the owner of the import-export company (the company which is specialised in trafficking women from Nigeria to Europe), as the following narrative passage may also confirm:

> The name has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. *Oti oo*. Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her (…).

(…) Joyce is a much better name! (OBSS, 230)

In OBSS this reduction of the black female body into a mere economic commodity becomes even more explicit in the moment when Dele praises Sisi's body (42-43) by using terms such as "melons" in referring to Sisi's breasts. My perception is that Unigwe's lexical choice makes the reader feel as at an open-air market where some traders try to convince the customers to buy their special exotic products. Furthermore, the following descriptive passage may be another compelling evidence for supporting the commodification of the black female body in the contemporary sex trade.

> Huge windows like showcases, the edges of the windows lined with blue and red neon lights, and behind the windows, young women in various poses. Mostly poses that involved their chests being pushed out, eyelids fluttering, a finger beckoning. Pretty girls all in a row. Bodies clad in leather or half dressed in frilly lingerie. Boots way up to the thighs. The street was mainly populated with men. (OBSS, 203)

Unigwe describes the prostitutes who are sitting in the glass showcases in the red lights district of Antwerp as commercial products. The commodification of black women seems to derive here from how their bodies are displayed in the glass showcases. The absurd scene appears to be a collection of objects which are put on display for people to look at or to buy. The women are wearing alluring clothes, and acting explicit sexual poses to attract possible male clients' attention. In my opinion, the repetition of "window" may have a double interpretation. First, since the glass is often used for displaying commercial products, it highlights clearly the objectification of the women "like [they are] fried chicken or hamburger" (Otu, 2016). Second, the glass showcase may be perceived as something which divides what is morally wrong from what is morally right reinforcing therefore the Victorian stereotype of the black woman as an image of transgressive sexuality, discussed earlier, whose "body (…) has often been hypereroticized or exoticized and made a site of impropriety and crime" (Bennett and Dickerson, 2001). This idea may also find compelling evidence in OBSS when some couples are strolling along the red light district, and the female partners are making their men go away quickly from the sexual

spectacles performed by the prostitutes who are sitting behind the lighted picture windows: “The few women Sisi saw held their men around the waist, or dragged at their hands (…) walking rapidly with their leashed men behind them.”(203). The image is clear: men – maybe either husbands or boyfriends – are induced to taste the pleasures of the flesh, and their women act against them by pulling them along the street. It seems as if the female partners are responsible for maintaining integrity and moral principles in the couple, and consequently the intercourse between white men and black prostitutes may be interpreted as sexually lascivious from a perspective which evokes colonial dynamics, as Cooper (2015) affirms:

> In this sense, the entire system of white superiority during slavery relied upon the sustained purity of their white women[3], set in contrast with the impurity of the black woman.
>
> (…) Black women were both fetishized and regarded as impure, when seen in contrast to the modesty of white women; therefore at the height of slavery, relationship with slave women were decidedly culturally unacceptable. (32)

However, analysing the commodification of the black body for sexual exploitation in contemporary times as a legacy of slavery, the concept of “human cargo” (Moorehead in Dawson, 2010) needs to be taken into account. In doing so, what I would like to point out is the clear association between Unigwe’s black bodies and those African captive bodies who were transported across the Middle Passage as merchandise. Using Moorehead’s conceptualisation of the term “human cargo” seems therefore to help in explaining this relation between old and new slavery. It is possible to state that Unigwe’s four female protagonists are definitely considered as “human cargo” with a certain reference to their African ancestors during the Middle Passage for the semantic mercantile allusion evoked by the noun “cargo”. As it is known, the commercial word “cargo” refers to the goods which are transported via land or sea in trade routes. In OBSS the four diasporic sex workers who are trafficked from Africa to Europe for the purpose of profit are similar to “Those African persons in “Middle Passage” [who] were literally

[3] The word “white women” here refers to white planters’ wives.

suspended in the “oceanic” (…), removed from the indigenous land and culture (…) [and] taken into “account” as quantities” (Spillers, 1987). The female protagonists are just goods transported from one country (their African natal villages) to another (Belgium) in order to make profit, as it happened during the “triangular trade” where millions of enslaved Africans were considered trade goods to be sold and bought. Narrative examples in OBSS may confirm this assumption: Efe describes herself as “damaged goods” (75) and Sisi feels to be as “a commodity for sale, a slab of meat at the local abattoir” (182). Furthermore, it is my perception that using the conceptualization of “human cargo” could be also extremely useful to highlight how those captive black bodies are reduced to non-human beings by considering the word “human cargo” as an oxymoron. Since “human” is an adjective which commonly describes those qualities, feelings and functions that belong to individuals, on the contrary, “cargo” is a collective noun with a clear reference to a group of items, goods and things which do not have any human features. Consequently, the combination of the adjective “human” and the noun “cargo” appears to be contradictory or paradoxical from a semantic perspective, but whose proximity shows the atrocious effect of contemporary (sex) slavery in treating individuals as non-humans by reducing them to mere profitable commodities.

1.3 Conclusion

Analysing various narrative examples taken from both OBSS and BA by using a postcolonial perspective has provided a comprehensive framework in order to explain the relation between sex and slavery within the current trafficking discourse. In the light of these interpretations, significant evidence has shown considerable parallels between old and new slavery concerning the perception of the black female body. What has emerged from this analysis is clearly the statement that modern sex slavery can be described as one neo-colonial commercial activity whose roots are definitely in certain nineteenth-century cultural, social and scientific ideas which circulated in the age of Colonialism, as well as in the practices of the slave trade in the Black

Atlantic. The sexualisation of the four black protagonists in Unigwe's novel has revealed how this practice of (sexual) objectification was commonly used in colonial culture in the age of the British empire, when the black female colonized was considered as both free labour and erotic object, evoking a certain sense of dangerous attractiveness in the white male colonizer's mind. Such pre-constructed image seems to still work within the contemporary sex trade business, where black women are clearly perceived as non-humans by their fellow Africans and European men. Both Abani and Unigwe have the impressive stylistic ability to depict those captive black female bodies which have been displaced from their sexist home country to inhospitable Europe, showing to which degree an individual can be reduced into an animal, or commodity, by other individuals. The trafficked girl Abigail's atrocious torture (90-92) described by Abani is certainly one of the most compelling narrative examples to describe the process of animalisation as one specific form of dehumanizing someone. Similarly, for their sense of extreme disgust and excessive shame, both Sisi's first time in having sex with her first client (212-213) and Alek(Joyce)'s gang rape have revealed the total destruction of human dignity. In turning the black female slave's body into mere property, Spiller's conceptualization of "pornotroping" has been useful as well as Spivak's principle concerning the process of "double colonization" within the field of colonial oppression. As explained, any hegemonic and oppressive scenario could be a "fertile land" to turn these black women into victims of violence, rape and sexual exploitation. The (sexual) objectification depicted here as one specific practice for dehumanizing black women has also been explained by a clear reference to the use of a certain mercantile language which inevitably evokes memories of the Middle Passage. Evaluating these displaced African female bodies in terms of economic profit appears to be both an old practice during slavery and a current process in human trafficking discourse. The female protagonists in OBSS and BA resemble their African female ancestors who were transported across the triangular trade for the purpose of profit. As Okolo (2019) suggests, all these African women "fall into the category of

exotic supply for the European market". The narrative passage taken from OBSS concerning the prostitutes depicted behind the glass showcases (203) has consequently revealed how the trafficked black women are just "meat on sale". At this point, it has been possible to state that "Slavery in Africa is not a thing of the past; it is very much alive just as it is in many other societies, including the West" (Eze, 2014). Analysing Eze's words, trafficking black female bodies from Africa to Europe for sexual exploitation is clearly a moral issue of our times and society, and it recalls inevitably those black bodies who were exploited in the Middle Passage. As Oboe and Scacchi (2007) also suggest:

> More importantly, from this view point slavery and the Atlantic slave trade – as both history and icon of a counterculture of modernity – can be turned into a reference point (an inheritance) for today's phenomena of global dislocation. (…) The contemporary passage from Africa (…) to Europe implies re-enactments of the self that go through rememoryings of the by-now "traditional" Middle Passage. (7)

However, what emerges from this first part of the work is the fact that the process of (sexual) objectification seems to work both in Europe and in Africa. Abigail, Efe, Ama and (Alek)Joyce are first exploited in their homeland, where women and particularly girls are considered as sexual commodities. In this sense, as Out (2016) also suggests, Dele's language (OBSS, 42-43) reflects the dominant way by which African women are seen as just "an object of beauty or sex, a commodity, a chattel" by their family or parents. The "predatory men" (Reinares, 2019) are not just European men, but are first of all Africans. Unigwe's characters and Abani's Abigail are therefore first used and abused by their fellow Africans in their hometowns, where the combination of colonial imaginary, male power, and racial attitudes creates the figure of the black woman as just erotic means to make money. This point, in addition to other relevant causes which could increase the sexual exploitation of these African women, will be further developed in the next chapter.

Chapter Two
SPECTRALIZED WOMEN

…in other words they do not officially exist…
Phillips, "The European Tribe"

In OBSS and BA the female protagonists are all young women who are illegally trafficked from Africa to Europe for sexual exploitation. Escaping from their homelands where they only experience war, sexual abuses, poverty and political corruption, they (un)willingly migrate to Europe with the promises of a better life. After their arrival, they will soon realize, on the contrary, that they will be turned into slaves by the illegal power game of sex trafficking, a well organized global underground system which enslaves people for the purpose of economic profit. From the subaltern position of being a young woman in Africa to the undocumented status of being an illegal migrant in Europe, the main female characters of the two novels carry spectral connotations.

2.1 Invisible African women in their homeland

As argued before, the colonial legacy seems to have a relevant impact on trafficking African female bodies for prostitution: it has handed over the social and cultural pre-constructed image of the black woman as a subaltern figure whose life is only seen in terms of her potential for sexual exploitation (Sealy in Deandrea, 2011) and reproductive labour. Human trafficking for prostitution, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013), is particularly intense in those countries where "the combination of poverty, powerlessness and social marginalization has meant that the former colonies have become prime sources for human trafficking" (263). Both the novels OBSS and BA also depict frustrating and traumatic circumstances in Africa as the main reasons that make the subaltern black woman ready to take the risk to become a vulnerable illegal migrant in Europe. Sexual abuses, poverty, political corruption, war, teen pregnancy, sense of abandonment, racial and

gender inequalities, and patriarchal subordination are just some of the common examples of those conditions that may act as factors encouraging the young female protagonists to be (un)willingly trafficked from their homeland to Europe in order to reach a more stable life there. In their home countries all these women attempt to cope with their invisible, non-hegemonic and subordinate positions which derive clearly from considering women culturally, socially and economically as inferior beings. In the two novels, this prejudice appears to impede their self-realisation not just in terms of female identity but in the wider sense of being human.

Unigwe's protagonist Chisom (Sisi) lives with her parents in Lagos in a "one-bedroom apartment, with a communal kitchen, and a shared toilet, at times without water, stinking of waste and infested with maggots" (Reinares, 2019). Despite her Bachelor of Commerce degree, her intellectual capability and her great expectations for herself and her family, she feels entrapped in a frustrating scenario which seems to close down her opportunities to escape from this material penury:

> Chisom dreamed of leaving Lagos. This place has no future.
>
> Sisi studied hard at school, mindful of her father's hopes for her: a good job once she graduated from the University of Lagos.
>
> Yet, two years after leaving university, Chisom was still mainly unemployed.
>
> "There is no room to breathe here!"
>
> "We are all stuck here, baby" Peter told her.
>
> "And I am tired of being stuck"
>
> (…) it was not Peter's fault that she had no job or that he did not earn enough or that the entire economy was in a mess so that her father had nothing to show for his many years in the civil service.
>
> I must escape. (OBSS, 27-35)

As Omuteche (2014) observes, Unigwe shows how in post-colonial Nigeria it is difficult for young people to realize dreams and desires: "the impact of economic inertia in Nigeria (…) undermines the ambitions of the young", due to the lack of job opportunities for those who are educated. Sisi's aspirations

of both becoming rich and helping her family are demolished by a socio-economic African system which is unable to materialize her dreams. Her sense of deep frustration and hopelessness certainly derives from her bitter awareness of living in a country which denies any success to her: “Nigeria is not a place from which to dream” (Ligoga, 2019). Sisi’s desires are systematically demolished “because of burocracy, corruption and nepotism ingrained in neoliberal Obasanjo’s Nigeria” (Reinares, 2019). Both poverty and lack of job opportunities shape her motivation to escape from constantly “being stuck” in Lagos, and consequently she accepts Dele’s proposal to travel to Europe in order to earn a leaving there by selling her body in the sex slave market.

By analogy, but with a more gender-prejudiced and socio-cultural accent, Efe’s precarious life in her homeland shows how these young women always have to cope with unequal power relations in post-colonial Nigeria. At the age of sixteen, Efe’s mother dies and her father spirals into alcoholism, consequently she is obliged to quit school and take care of her siblings. Titus, an older man, persuades the girl to have sex with him by offering her money to buy insignificant things such as clothes and cosmetics. She soon becomes his lover, and after telling Titus that she is pregnant she finds herself humiliated and alone. Efe experiences this feeling of being ashamed in two situations: the night when she tells Titus about her pregnancy (59)[4] and when Titus’s wife accuses the girl to be just a “shameless whore”:

> [she and the baby] went to Titus’s house at the other side of the town.
>
> (…) She wanted him to grow up away from the slum she was raised in. Titus had enough money to ensure that.
>
> When Efe was shown in by a maid, husband and wife were eating a supper of eba and egusi soup.
>
> (…) Titus said nothing and neither of the two invited Efe to sit.
>
> (…) no sign of recognition.
>
> (…) It was his wife who washed her hands, (…) walked over to Efe and planted herself before the younger girl.

[4] See the analysis of this relevant moment in Chapter 1

> "You." She pointed a finger. "You come into my house and accuse my husband of fathering your baby. How dare you?"
>
> (…) "Useless girl. May a thousand fleas invade your pubic hair. Useless goat. Shameless whore, *ashawo*. Just take a look at yourself. Small girl like you, what were you doing with a man? (…) spreading your legs for a man, eh? Which girl from a good home goes around sleeping with a man who is old enough to be her father, eh? Answer me, you useless idiot. (…) with your thing in your hands, eh? (…) Now, I am going to shut my eyes and before I open them I want both you and that bastard of yours out of my home". (OBSS, 69-70)

In the passage above, as Omuteche (2014) also suggests, the words expressed by Titus's wife reveal a classist society dominated by patriarchal norms. In this unequal scenario, while Efe is depicted by Titus's wife as one of the several disrespectable young girls coming from a bad family who are only able to have sex with rich men for money, Titus is definitely absolved (by his wife) of all his wrongdoing: "What Efe had not known (…) was that she was the sixth woman in as many years to come to Titus with an offspring from an affair" (OBSS, 71). Titus's wife seems to be obliged to turn a blind eye to the immoral behaviour of her husband in respect of the patriarchal norms, and consequently, Efe appears to be the real culprit, while Titus is the innocent victim. After this dismissal, Efe also realises that, in this patriarchal society, for those young women who have a baby out of wedlock it will be extremely difficult to get married:

> "She was *damaged goods.* Now there was very little hope of marriage to a rich man rescuing her from the pit she lived in. Which kin' man go marry woman wey don get pikin already? If the man that got you pregnant did not want you there was no chance of any other person doing so". (OBSS, 75)

In order to provide for her child and her siblings, Efe works on multiple cleaning jobs in different offices. Underpaid and overworked, the young woman ends up to meet Dele who helps her move to Europe to work as a prostitute in Belgium. Despite knowing the risks of being trafficked from one country to another, Efe is "determined to provide her son with the kind of life she had dreamed for him when she thought she would be able to get Titus's help" (77). At this point, Efe is ready to take any sort of risk hoping to earn

enough money in Europe to ensure a good future for her child. This choice could probably derive from her "will to succeed and make a difference for her family in the face of economic [and gendered] disparities that characterize her social space" (Omuteche, 2014). Women's inferiority related to gendered social position and socio-economic conditions emerges clearly when Ama's mother refuses to understand the abuse of her husband on her young daughter.

> "Shut up, Ama!"
>
> "(…) No, I will not shut up. Mama, do you know what he did to me when I was little? He raped me. Night after night. He would come into my room and force me to spread my legs for him (…)."
>
> Ama's mother lifted a hand and slapped her on her mouth.
>
> "Mother, you have to believe me", Ama begged. "(…) He raped me. (…) Papa raped me."
>
> "Do not call me that. Do not call me father. I am not your father, you stupid lying girl."
>
> "Not now, Brother Cyril. Please?" Ama's mother was on the floor, kneeling, hands stretched out in front of her, palms outwards: the same position she assumed when she prayed and called on her God to forgive her, a poor sinner. There was something deeply shaming in her posture and Ama wanted to drag her up. Brother Cyril laughed (…).
>
> "I took in your mother and this is all the thanks I get. All the thanks I get for saving you from being a bastard. (…) I want you out of my house. I want you out. (…) Today!" (OBSS, 147-149)

Concerning this refusal, Ligaga (2019) suggests that "there is a possibility that the mother is aware of the abuse, but chooses not to confront her husband for fear of losing her livelihood." Ama's mother is totally subjugated and intimidated by her husband, consequently she appears to be unable to condemn the man and to support the girl: "her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness" (OBSS, 133). Especially, when Ama confesses to her mother about the abuse, the woman refuses to accept the reality, and Ama is forced to leave home. As Oboe (2022) observes, the problem of sexual violence in Africa could be a consequence of those patriarchal forces that are deeply rooted in cultural norms and in family relations. According to

her, such factors allow to commit sexual abuse of younger women by older male relatives. Gender-based discriminatory practices appear therefore to create an intimidating atmosphere where women are often the disadvantaged object. In this power dynamics, men always have the right to abuse women's body, considering it as a mere sexual object ready to be appropriated and abused. Not only sexual abuse, utter poverty and civil war seem to be among the main factors which drive that motivation which drives African women to escape from their homeland. A certain degree of corruption appears also to force Unigwe's four women to leave Africa. Sisi is unable to get a job despite having a good education, a Bachelor of Commerce degree, and a father who works for the Ministry of Works as a civil servant:

> Yet, two years after leaving university, Chisom was still mainly unemployed, (…) and had spent the better part of two years scripting meticulous application letters and mailing them along with her résumé to the many different banks in Lagos. (…) But she was never even invited to an interview. (OBSS, 22)

According to Reinares (2019) "only those with the right connections or willing to pay bribes (…) can access coveted employment", therefore Sisi's effort to find an employment in any of the banks in her homeland seems to be unproductive. It is possible to identify a similar experience of "societal imbalance and corruption" (Omuteche, 2014) when Ama twice fails the university entrance examination:

> She had failed to score enough in the JAMB examination to get a place at the university of her choice. If she'd had the money to pay someone to take the examination for her she would have. Everyone was doing that. She knew people less deserving of a place at the university than her who had either bought examination papers from corrupt JAMB officials and practised at home, or who had paid others to sit the examination for them. (OBSS, 146)

Ama feels inevitably frustrated and depressed because the only opportunity that would have allowed her to escape from her stepfather's hypocritical hands had been denied by social injustice and corruption. Despite the fact that she finds an alternative home in Lagos thanks to a female relative, Ama feels unsatisfied, and she desires a new life. Europe presents a new chance

for the young woman, and she voluntarily meets Dele who promises her a more favourable position in Belgium.

Such injustices, but with a more cultural accent, also appear to be displayed when Alek(Joyce) is rejected by her boyfriend's family:

> Polycarp's mother, freezer eyes and hissing lips, rejected the hug with a ferociousness that landed Alek on the floor, buttocks first. *Pwa*! The humiliation! The shock! And when she looked at Polycarp he averted his eyes and said something in Igbo to his mother. Mother and son walked into the spare bedroom and left Alek sitting there, like a scene from a film, her mouth opening to form a surprised, silent "O". And around her she felt the stirrings of a dust storm.
>
> (…) At lunch table Polycarp's mother only spoke to her son. They chatted in Igbo (…). She had been there for an hour and had yet to say a word to Alek. Nor had Polycarp.
>
> Alek had made lunch in silence, alone.
>
> She had imagined loving Polycarp's family and in turn loving her. Nothing had prepared her for such a slighting. (…)
>
> After lunch, (…), mother and son retired to the sofa and left Alek to clear up alone. They sat side by side, conspirators, speaking (…) Igbo, a language Alek did not understand.
>
> And then Alek knew. She knew that it had come to an end and she did not know why.
>
> "I'm the oldest", (…) I'm the oldest son and my parents want me to marry an Igbo girl. It's not you, Alek, but I can't marry a foreigner. My parents will never forgive me" (OBSS, 223-225)

At the refugee camp, Alek(Joyce) meets and falls in love with a very kind Nigerian soldier called Polycarp who brings her to his natal village. As soon as Alek(Joyce) is introduced to Polycarp's mother, the girl is aware of her incompatibility with the boy. According to his community's cultural system, the couple does not have any possibilities to get married because Alek(Joyce) is from Sudan while Polycarp is Nigerian. Despite Polycarp's effort in convincing his mother that Alek(Joyce) could be a worthy wife for him, his mother insists that he has to marry a girl from his hometown. In this scenario, Alek(Joyce) feels rejected, humiliated and excluded by Polycarp's

family. Alek(Joyce)'s perception to be treated as an outcast by Polycarp's family is even more highlighted by the following narrative example:

> After lunch, Alek's food barely touched, mother and son retired to the sofa and left Alek to clear up alone. They sat side by side, conspirators, speaking in soft tones even though they spoke in Igbo, a language Alek did not understand so it would not have mattered if she had heard them (OBSS, 224).

Being a Sudanese girl, Alek(Joyce) is not able to understand the Igbo language. This linguistic factor, I suggest, makes the girl inevitably aware of her foreignness. Furthermore, Alek's sense of exclusion is also stressed by Unigwe's choice to use the noun "conspirators" as the right term for describing Polycarp and his mother as a couple who is secretly planning to do something bad towards the girl. As Omuteche (2014) observes, in this way Unigwe clearly displays how such firmly rooted cultural traditions still characterize the norms and the practices in institutions of marriage and family in Nigeria by exposing women and girls to various situations of subjugation. It is also possible to argue that these trends and attitudes indicate a social context which is extremely xenophobic and unwelcoming towards those people who come from another different socio-cultural group. At this point, in the light of these dramatic narrative examples, all the circumstances discussed above seem to reveal that the combination of social, economical and cultural problems puts the African woman in an inferior position. Tired of being constantly humiliated, excluded and betrayed in their homeland "where the violence of poverty meets the violence of exploitation" (Deandrea, 2011), these girls and women become likely candidates for being trafficked from Africa to Europe.

2.2 Invisible trafficked black young women in Europe

Escaping without papers from poverty, joblessness and violence, the female characters of OBSS and BA try to leave such precarious and traumatic situations in their homeland in order to embrace wealth, social standing and general well-being in Europe. Instead of fulfilling their dreams and desires, these young women find themselves caught in a well organized

underground trade where human beings are enslaved by physical or psychological violence for the purpose of profit. Unigwe's four black women and Abani's young girl Abigail certainly can be defined as victims of the present-day slave trade, commonly known with the term "human trafficking". According to Art.3 of the Palermo Protocol[5], it is possible to define trafficking as:

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal or organs.

These girls and women are actually all transported to Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation, by which women are generally forced by local and international criminal organizations to sell their bodies for profit of others. Their condition in Europe seems to carry "the hidden and ghostly existence of new slave" (Deandrea, 2011), a condition which seems to be deeply related to the following factors: the illegal status of undocumented migrants, the contemporary mainstream trafficking discourse (Dawson, 2010) and the contradictory current migration policy (Davidson, 2010). Starting from the trafficked women's spectrality in relation to the invisibility of illegal migration, it can be observed that this spectral condition derives from the fact that all these women in OBSS and BA are undocumented migrants. As Deandrea (2015) suggests:

> New slaves constitute the lowest sector of British society, and their isolated existence is still largely undocumented. (…) The isolated and fragmented existence of undocumented migrants is rarely recorded; hence, they have access to few rights and are often referred to as 'invisibles', 'ghosts', 'non-persons', 'unpersons'. (Deandrea, 2015)

[5] The Trafficking Protocol (the protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children) was adopted by the United Nations in Palermo, Italy, in 2000. The protocol is the first global, legally binding instrument on trafficking in over half a century and the only one that sets out an agreed definition of trafficking in persons. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2011)

Unigwe's four prostitutes in Antwerp and Abani's Abigail in London certainly belong to that invisible category which is made by people who have been stripped of any form of law protections and rights because they are without papers or they have fake documents. In this way, they are potential slaves to be exploited.

The young Nigerian girl Abigail is trafficked from her homeland to London by one of her cousins, Peter, who fakes her documents and tries to turn her into a prostitute:

> It was like she didn't exist. And she didn't, because Peter had used a fake passport and a forged visa to bring her in the country and she was registered everywhere under that fake name, a name she had forgotten.
>
> She was a ghost. (BA, 112)

Abigail's spectral condition in England, as Hall (2015) observes, derives from the following basic facts: she is an orphan, she is homeless and she is stateless. Under these dangerous conditions anyone could find it difficult to claim such rights and law protection in order to assert social and legal identity. In London, Abigail is not recognized as a person by the state because of her loss of her real identity, and this anonymity means she is excluded not only from civil rights but also from fundamental rights. Without documents, and consequently without any sort of social recognition, and law protection, Abigail is an unnamed ghost who can be constantly violated, humiliated and abused by the invisible world of sex trafficking. As Lombardi-Diop (2008) suggests: "As migrants without papers, they become easy prey for local organized crime and their destiny is the underworld of (…) inhuman exploitation". The importance of documents emerges also in the following passage taken from OBSS:

> 'This paper is no concern of yours. All you need to know is that you're *persona non grata* in this country. You do not exist. Not there' (…)
>
> Now you belong to me. It cost us a lot of money to organise all this for you' (OBSS, 182)

After Sisi's arrival in Belgium, her passport is confiscated by Madam who runs Dele's prostitute business in Antwerp. Using a false name and without

migration papers, Sisi is forced by the woman to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to declare her status of asylum seeker. Sisi tells “the typical ‘African life story’” (Okolo, 2019) of a girl who has escaped from the atrocities of the civil war in her homeland. The office worker refuses to register Sisi as asylum seeker in Belgium, and orders her to leave the country within few days. When Sisi returns from the Ministry, Madam tells her that, according to the national law, she is “*persona non-grata*”, an undocumented illegal migrant in Belgium. As Omuteche (2014) suggests: “she did not exist any more in terms of identification records.(…). Once the victims are declared *persona non grata*, the Madam is in full control of their lives”. Consequently, Sisi suddenly realizes to be literally a slave without any possibility to escape from Madam’s power. Traffickers commonly hold or fake the trafficked person’s documentation to prevent the possibility for the trafficked person to leave (Ligaga, 2019). This form of control, in addition to other forms of physical and psychological violence, clearly intimidate the trafficked victim who can no longer take decisions and make independent choices concerning their body and life. Only when Sisi is able to pay up the large sum of money that has been invested on her, she can have her passport back, and consequently she can be free. In addition to the modern slave’s spectral condition related to its illegal status, it may be possible to consider the spectrality of Unigwe’s four women and Abani’s young girl Abigail as a consequence of victimhood in mainstream trafficking discourse and policies. Scholars such as Dawson (2010) and Hall (2015) demonstrate their critiques of both mainstream trafficking discourse and governmental policies concerning the stereotypes related to the status of victim of the trafficked person. They both argue that many mainstream trafficking representations are responsible for creating an image of the trafficked person as a helpless victim who is unable to speak and act. Furthermore, this helpless trafficked victim is often represented as a non-white young woman who deserves public sympathy and protection, denying therefore her agency. In OBSS the narrative sequence when Sisi has to play the role of a Liberian asylum seeker at the immigration office in Belgium seems to confirm such dominant

racial-gendered stereotypes around the black migrant woman in human trafficking discourse:

> "Tell them that (they) killed your entire family: (…). Tell them you heard a soldier (that they) were under obligation to kill you all, (…). Look sad. Cry. Wail. Tear your hair out. White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking each other's heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story the better."
>
> (…)
>
> Talk about seeing the corpses of your dead family. About stepping on the corpses as you made your way out of the house. (…) Don't forget, cry. Make sure tears come out. Real tears, eh?
>
> (…)
>
> You have no passport. You escaped Liberia with only your head and the clothes on your back. A white man took pity on you and helped you escape. (…) gave you a letter for a friend of his who worked on a ship. (…). You survived for two weeks on what food you could get from the rubbish. You had a plastic bag for your personal business." (OBSS, 121)

As mentioned before, from "the typical 'African life story'" (Okolo, 2019), which has been invented by Madam in order to obtain Sisi's asylum, Sisi appears to conform to the common vulnerable migrant woman who escapes from war and poverty in her homeland. I believe that Unigwe's use of strategic lexical choices reveals how Sisi's account is constructed upon the victimization of the African woman from a gender and a neo-colonial perspective. In this scenario, it is the "white European man" who helps "the poor African woman" who needs the assistance to escape. These roles, as Novak (2008) underlines, "remain locked into dichotomous vision of women as victims and men as social agents", a common neo-colonial power relation which inevitably reinforces and is reinforced by gender and racial dominant stereotypes within human trafficking discourse. Such accounts, as Dawson (2010) also suggests, clearly remark the subordination and the vulnerability of these African immigrant women who are often involved in modern-day sex slavery by reducing them to ghosts in the grand scheme of things. In BA the social and legal pre-constructed image of the trafficked woman as absolutely helpless and naïve victim emerges clearly during Abigail's frustrating

encounters with the legal institutions concerning her relationship with Derek, a white, older and married social worker:

> She had loved him so completely and he her. But what are the limits of desire? The edges beyond which love must not cross? Those were questions she had heard others discuss in these last few days. Discuss as if she was a mere ghost in their presence. Called this thing between Derek and her wrong. How could it be? (BA, 81)

As Hall (2015) observes, Abigail's sense of spectrality derives from the problem that "no one is interested in listening to Abigail's feelings about her relationship with Derek. (…) Her consent[6] flies in the face of state's understandings of her as a victim":

> Derek was fired from his job and brought up on charges for the abuse of a minor. Nothing Abigail did helped. Her impassioned denial. Her letter saying it was her fault. Her choice. But they were doing this to protect her. (…) And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had choice in the matter, it was taken way. (BA; 119)

Despite Abigail's effort to insist that her love affair with Derek has been a willing choice, the legal system dismisses her opinion, and the relationship is condemned. Consequently, Derek is accused of having sex with a minor while Abigail "is cast again in the position of the victim of male abuse" (Oboe, 2022). Abigail's sense of powerlessness derives from her legal status as illegal trafficked underage African girl, and therefore this condition does not give credit to her voice: "[The] female African voice (…) still remain[s] cut off and silenced" (Novak, 2008). This subaltern position is a "denial not only of her agency but also of her identity" (Hall, 2015). The girl inevitably feels to be like a ghost, invisible again to the blind eyes of a state that "sees only victimization" (Dawson, 2010). In order to obtain protection, she has to remain a passive victim who is unable to claim her right to have rights, even if she feels as a desiring female subject who wants to love and to be loved[7]. As Oboe (2022) observes: "This is one of the greatest contradictions inherent in the human rights project: through infantilisation and victimisation, 'protection' protocols produce new forms of spectralisation". International

[6] For a deeper analysis of the pivotal term "consent" in human trafficking discourse, see ch.3.
[7] See "Love as a form of Agency" in ch.3.

legislation and local institutions do not seem to be prepared to give the real help and the effective support that Abigail deserves, on the contrary they are just able to construct her as a female young victim abused by Derek. A further related example can be found in Abigail's encounter with a female social worker during Derek's trial:

> Thin-lipped and angry, the woman bumped into her, and looking from Abigail to Derek and back, and mistaking the anguished look on Abigail's face, said to her: Don't worry sister, that monster is going away for a long time. And then the anguished look on the social worker's face as Abigail's not inconsiderable right hook connected with her nose (BA, 120)

The female social worker's words reveal the possibility to set up a certain degree of female solidarity towards the young girl, but Abigail's reaction shows her refusal to accept this kind of support. Ashley Dawson (2010) states that Abigail refuses "to accept the state's definition of her as helpless victim of sexual abuse" because it seems to be the only way by which the state can help the young Nigerian girl. Once again, the entire legislative apparatus does not understand Abigail's real emotional state (Hall, 2015), and it just identifies the black young girl as a helpless victim who needs to be defended from a monster (Oboe, 2022). Both Abigail's and Sisi's condition of invisibility related to victimhood could also be explained within a "postcolonial framework" which catalogues Western women as agents and non-Western woman as helpless subjects (Hall, 2015). In this power relation, European women are perceived as those who have the mission to help and rescue non-European and poorer women. Inevitably, the African migrant woman is placed in the inferior position of vulnerability, acting the apparently helpless victim. It is possible to find another narrative evidence of such frustrating encounter with institutions in OBSS when Alek(Joyce) arrives at the refugee camp, and she meets the female United Nations worker who has to register the Sudanese girl as new refugee:

> For the first time she told her story to someone else: a white-haired United Nations worker who spoke through her nose like a European even thought she was black. *The woman did not blink as she listened to my story.* She did not wince as Alek told of how she heard the shots that

> killed her parents. Of how the soldiers took turns raping her. Of watching her brother die, his brains splattered on the walls of her parent's room. *The woman did not blink*! She handed Alek a ration card, told her it was for food. Gave her plastic sheeting for her tent. And shouted out for the next in line. Where Alek had thought that her grief would singe ears and stop the world, the woman's reaction convinced her that the camp was a collection of sad stories. Hers was nothing special. "Next!" the woman called out. Next! So that all the way to the end of the queue they heard her. Nextnextnext. She dispensed of the refugees. Doing the job she was there to do. NEXT! (OBSS,194).

Alek(Joyce)'s personal experience with the United Nations female worker may reflect, in my opinion, what Hall (2015) identifies with the term "insensitivity" making reference to Okpala's concept (2009). In reporting the atrocious crimes experienced personally in her natal village, the impressive Alek(Joyce)'s words seem not to have any relevant effect on the woman's imperturbable behaviour. She is not shocked by the young Sudanese girl's personal case, therefore she shows a lot of indifference towards Alek(Joyce)'s sufferings. Such similar accounts concerning rape, poverty and war are so common in the refugee camp that the female aid worker is not upset by Alek(Joyce)'s story, a scenario that reminds us of the insensitivity of the Belgian immigration officer in OBSS when Sisi's asylum is rejected (175-176). At this point, it could be observed that while in Abigail's case the state treats her as a victim trying to express a certain degree of solidarity towards the young girl, in both Alek(Joyce)'s and Sisi's experiences the institutions appear to lack in showing such sympathy and emotional support. However, this comparison seems to reveal even more a failure in understanding effectively the trafficked people's anxieties, sufferings and desires when such people are placed outside of the civil society. A problem which seems to arise from the state's necessity to identify trafficked people just with legal terms in order to protect them. As migrants without papers, they are certainly excluded from civil rights, but in this way their human rights may also be violated without any form of punishment. As O' Connel Davidson (2010) demonstrates, in temporary structures for undocumented migrants such as detention centres, residential centres and refugee camps these displaced people are often deprived of their human dignity. In such overcrowded and dangerous places, migrants feel being constantly violated

by those people who should instead protect and promote their fundamental rights. In OBSS a relevant example in supporting this assumption is possible to be found when Alek(Joyce) describes her daily routine in the camp:

> The refugee camp at the other side of the river was a six-kilometre stretch of tents. Dust. People. Soldiers guarded the camp. (…)
>
> Alek could not settle into life at the camp. Standing in line for food and soap. Enduring the shoving of those behind her. Impatient for their turn. During the day she went with some of the women and young children to fetch firewood for cooking. Escorted by soldiers from the African Union Peacekeeping Force. There was something humiliating in the routine of her daily life. (…)
>
> Sometimes she wished the soldiers had killed her. Having been left alive she felt an obligation to survive, *but what kind of survival did I have, living in a tent? I hated the camp*. (OBSS, 194-196)

Unigwe's description of Alek(Joyce)'s daily life in the camp shows the humiliating conditions of those undocumented migrants who attempt to survive in such places. Alek(Joyce) is subjected to various forms of deprivations and discomforts reducing her human substance to basic facts such as food, shelter and hygiene. The situation described by Unigwe, I believe, may fit well Agamben's theory (1998) concerning the analogy between the concentration camp prisoner and the figure of the refugee in contemporary times. Both the prisoner in Nazi concentration camps and the undocumented migrant in the refugee camps are reduced into *Homo Sacer* as "someone who was deprived of any of the rights usually pertaining to humankind, and thus reduced to 'bare life'" (Deandrea, 2015). In this scenario, where human rights are constantly violated by means of dehumanizing conditions, the figure of the undocumented migrant in the refugee camp may inevitably arise questions concerning the failure in the human rights project. The various institutions, committees and organizations appear to lack in guaranteeing the effective human rights' protection because of the "gap between the human subject and the legal person" (Oboe, 2022). The separation between human being and citizen seems to create a certain crisis within migration policies and humanitarian organizations. They appear to be unable to recognise illegal displaced

people as human beings, on the contrary, they can identify them as just stateless persons. In this way, undocumented migrants do not receive that dignity and that respect which all people should deserve from their birth without any sort of distinction and discrimination. Other critiques of the current migration policies seem to emerge from considering undocumented migrants as criminals who have to be condemned by authorities in order to prevent human trafficking. O' Connell Davidson (2010) widely denounces such political approach. Especially, she observes how the whole entire political apparatus tends to criminalize undocumented migrants. According to her, the state seems to violate illegally displaced people's human rights by treating them as criminals with the use of violence, restrictive procedures and coercive pressure. It is my perception that this process of "criminalization of migrants" (Deandrea, 2015) appears to increase the invisibility of the spectral world of human trafficking. In BA, as Hall (2015) suggests, Abigail refuses to testify against Peter because "her fears are likely justified in terms of both what Peter may do to Mary and what the authorities may do if it were discovered that she did not possess legal immigration documents". In OBSS a related example may be found when Sisi's new Belgian boyfriend Luc tries to convince the girl to tell the police about her slavery condition:

> "We could go to the police. This man [Dele] has no right to make you work for him. It is against the law even. He has broken rules. He got you a false passport. He is the one who ought to be afraid. Not you. You are innocent."
>
> It was exasperating explaining to him that she was as complicit as Dele. (OBSS, 269-270)

Despite the fact that prostitution is not illegal in Belgium, Madam's women live illegally in Europe. In this way, Madam detains them against their will. Given their irregular status, Sisi and her flatmates are afraid of speaking to the police authorities about the situation. Testifying against Madam's business might be a wrong choice for these four undocumented women for the following reasons. First, they can be arrested by police, transferred to an immigration detention centre and targeted for expulsion by immigration

officers for their irregular status (Omuteche, 2014). Second, as happens to Sisi, they may be killed by traffickers, if they attempt to escape from their slavery condition. Third, the fact that "Madam has the police in her pocket" (OBSS, 290) denies any possibilities to the four trafficked women to be heard by police officers. Furthermore, the cycle seems to be even more complex to break because Abigail, Sisi and her flatmates are morally trapped by their captors:

> Victims are intimidated not just into submission but into dependence on their captors. Traffickers tend to ensure that their victims are complicit with illegal movement across borders in various ways and to emphasize their moral compromise by the acts in which they are forced to engage. As a result, victims often feel guilty about their behaviour despite the fact that they have clearly been forced into such behaviour. (Dawson, 2010)

My perception is that both Unigwe's trafficked women and Abani's young Abigail appear to suffer from a certain guilt complex which makes them unable to speak about their situations. While Abigail's guilty conscience may derive from testifying against Peter and Mary, as I observed before, Sisi's guilty feelings, in my opinion, could emerge from betraying her flatmates:

> It occurred to her that the other women might not like it. She would be literally forcing them to give up their jobs and she was not entirely sure she was ready to take on that level of responsibility. (…) There was no way she could avoid implicating them if she went to the police. (OBSS, 273-274)

Trafficked people are therefore afraid of declaring their slavery situations, and consequently this silence increases even more their spectrality. Undocumented migrants are clearly turned into ghosts by a socio-political and cultural apparatus which is unable to respond adequately and effectively to human trafficking.

2.3 Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter I attempted to analyse the socio-cultural and economic realities where Unigwe's four young women and Abani's girl Abigail live. The various narrative examples seem to prove that their home country is shaped by a combination of factors that tends to place African

women in an inferior position. In postcolonial Nigeria patriarchal norms, gendered attitudes and classist trends appear to create a hostile social context firmly dominated by unequal power relations which do not allow women and girls to realize their dreams. Sisi's sense of frustration derives clearly from her bitter awareness of living in a place that is unable to guarantee her a stable future despite her Bachelor of Commerce degree (27-35). Efe's social marginalization is clearly a consequence of her teen pregnancy which condemns her to be constantly excluded from having any possible relationship with other men (75). Alek(Joyce)'s sense of humiliation emerges from a social context which is extremely xenophobic towards those people who belong to different communities (223-225). Both Ama's and Abigail's sense of abandonment derive inevitably from a contradictory parenthood which dismiss their daughters' sufferings (OBSS, 147-149; BA, 46). Tired of being constantly rejected, humiliated, excluded and (sexually) violated in their home country, these women and girls find in traffickers' proposals the way to move out of their invisibility in Africa. Escaping from their dramatic pasts, they are ready to travel dangerously and to embrace their new lives in Europe. As soon as they arrive in the continent, they realize, on the contrary, to be invisible again. This time Unigwe's four women and Abani's girl Abigail are spectral figures within the illegal trade of human beings, commonly known as human trafficking, or modern slavery (Davidson, 2010).

In the second part of the chapter, therefore, it has been possible to analyse the invisibility of these spectral trafficked women in Europe. What has emerged from this analysis is a deeper connection between their ghostly existence of being modern slaves and their illegal status of undocumented migrants in Europe. Sisi, Alek(Joyce), Efe, Ama and the young Nigerian girl Abigail have been illegally trafficked to Europe for sexual exploitation. Their ghostliness in Europe is therefore connected to the fact that all these displaced woman and girls are undocumented migrants. Living in a foreign country without papers has terrible consequences upon the destiny of Unigwe's four women and Abani's young Abigail, who can be exposed to a

range of risks without the possibility to denounce such crimes. Sisi and her flatmates are exploited by the well-organized underground sex slave market, while Abigail is constantly harassed sexually, beaten physically and tortured psychologically by Peter who forces her into prostitution. Testifying against their captors could be the best solution to break the chains of slavery, but their status of illegality does not give them any possibilities to claim their civil and fundamental rights. Abigail's frustrating encounters with legal institutions (119), Sisi's asylum refusal (175-176), Alek(Joyce)'s experience of the refugee camp's daily life (194-196) have provided narrative evidence of the greatest contradictions inherent in migration policy in the context of human trafficking discourse. Especially, Unigwe and Abani expose the limits in the human rights project and the deficiencies of the welfare state. It seems that such political apparatus is unable to respond effectively and adequately to the complexity of the human trafficking discourse in the context of illegal migration.

On the basis of the previous narrative examples, supported by various postcolonial critiques of human trafficking discourse and policies, it has been possible to identify the process of victimisation and that of criminalisation as the two procedures by which the state appears to be able to manage the problem. While the former is commonly associated to the image of the trafficked person as a helpless victim who deserves public sympathy and legal protection, the latter is often linked to the figure of the illegal migrant who must be condemned and expelled by authorities. At this point, it has been argued that both victimisation and criminalization are social products of those racial-gendered stereotypes within the mainstream trafficking discourse which inevitably seems to increase the spectrality of undocumented displaced people. Abigail's treatment by the state (119) and Sisi's fear of speaking to the police (269-270) has confirmed this last assumption. In order to be protected by law, the young Nigerian girl Abigail "must remain confined to the role of the passive, ghostly victim" (Oboe, 2022), while Sisi and her flatmates are afraid of testifying against Madam and Dele because of the dangerous consequences related to their irregular

status of being undocumented migrants in Europe. At the bottom of these contradictions, as Annalisa Oboe (2022) has also observed, there seems to be a separation between the human subject and the legal person. When human beings are placed outside the civil society, the state appears to be unable to guarantee them fundamental freedoms, exposing these people to any sort of abuse and violation. OBSS and BA underline therefore the need to assume a critical perspective on the current phenomenon of human trafficking in the context of illegal migration, in order to erase the gap between the two terms: humanity and citizenship. I strongly believe that only when this gap is filled, such displaced people will be considered as human beings before the law. Having discussed African women's subaltern position both in Africa and Europe, it remains to be further clarified whether Unigwe's four women and Abani's young Abigail could be read effectively as just powerless and voiceless figures unable to speak and act, or as desiring and responsible subjects able to speak and act for themselves upon their dreams. Further work is needed to determine sex trafficked women's ambiguous agency, especially to explain the fragile limit between victimhood and empowerment within human trafficking. Next chapter will attempt to analyse different forms of agency in both novels in order to prove that, despite these women's efforts to assert their will upon their bodies and lives, they will still remain invisible. The only effective way to affirm their identities, and therefore to become visible, would be the act of telling their stories.

Chapter Three

BECOMING VISIBLE

CONSTANCE:I tell the story to let me sleep.
BLACK HARRIOT: I tell the story to keep me wake.
CONSTANCE: I tell the story to pass it on.
MARY: I tell my story so the story will stop.
Jackie Kay, The Lamplighter

As argued previously, the current mainstream human trafficking discourse appears to be responsible for representing trafficked persons as non-white, young, innocent and helpless women unable to assert their will upon their bodies and lives. On the contrary, both titles seem to show various circumstances where the black female protagonists appear to reject this stereotypical image, displaying moments of strength and agency. It will be possible therefore to analyse various narrative examples as evidence for arguing the complex idea of agency in the context of sex trafficking. However, discussing different abilities to move out of the subaltern position of invisibility and ghostliness, may reveal, in my opinion, a certain failure of these efforts. Only the act of telling could be the best way for these trafficked women to affirm their voices and identities.

3.1 Ambiguous acts of agency in sex-trafficked women

On the basis of what has been argued previously, there seems to be a certain tendency in mainstream trafficking discourse and politics to consider trafficked persons only as passive victims instead of recognizing them as assertive subjects. On the contrary, this part of the study suggests that both BA and OBSS contain various moments of agency where trafficked women may reveal a certain degree of ability to move out of their ghostly existence. This necessity to become visible appears to emerge from the different tangible behaviours of both Abani's young girl Abigail and Unigwe's four women. Reading BA and OBSS by taking into consideration this specific analysis allows us to discuss the complex idea of agency in displaced people in the context of sex trafficking.

Starting from Abigail's moments of agency, the young Nigerian girl's scarification, according to Cumpsty (2020), could be read as "an act of reclamation; an act of agency that asserts her possession of her body". It is a form of "declaration of presence" in time and space because the ritual of marking her skin with scars is a tangible act which allows her to feel her presence here and now: "She uses her skin to mediate her relation to time, place and selfhood (…)". A similar interpretation is also developed by Oboe (2022) who suggests the idea of marking Abigail's body as an "act of claiming herself out of ghostliness". According to her, Abigail needs to mark her own body with practices such as scarring, tattooing and burning in order to claim herself out of her condition of invisibility. Such practices, as Annalisa Oboe remarks, "strategically produce her own bodily discourse, the story of Abigail, which someone else may get to know if they cared to crack the code"[8]. Abigal's body becomes like a living map whose meaning could be understood just by cracking the correct code. In this semantic dynamic, Abigail's practice of marking her skin may assume for the girl the fundamental function to be distinguished from her dead mother:

> She pulled up her left sleeve and absently traced the healed welts of her burning. They had the nature of lines in tree trunk: varied, different, telling. Her early attempts were thick but flat noodles burned into her skin by cashew sap. With time came finer lines, from needles, marking an improvement. But there were also the ugly whip marks of cigarette tips. Angry. Impatient. And the words: *Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody. She stared at them.* (BA, 35-36)

In fact, as Hall (2015) also underlines, Abigail realizes that her impressive resemblance to her mother does not only evoke incestuous desires in her father, but also does not give her the possibility to establish her identity both

[8] Oboe (2022) also suggests that only her lover Derek will be able to crack her code by fingering and connecting Abigail's "bubbles of Braille" (BA, 55) on her body. The result of this, as the scholar proposes, allows Abigail to be seen by Derek, moving out of her spectrality for the first time.

in terms of selfhood and in terms of womanhood.[9] In relation to the practice of marking the black skin, Spillers (1987), referring to William Goodell's contemporaneous study of the North American slave codes (1853) and Elaine Scarry's description of the mechanisms of torture (1985), underlines how "these undecipherable markings on the captive body" are instead "marks of a cultural text" whose meaning lies in "the initiating moments". Taking into consideration these words, it is therefore my perception that Abigail's scars on her own captive body can be definitely read as mysterious lacerations that can gain a sense of agency for the girl when they are read as an initiating practice. In my opinion, it seems that Abigail's body markings carry the symbolic meaning of an initiation procedure by which the girl can exert agency from introducing herself into adulthood. It may suggest therefore that anytime she scars and burns her skin, she starts to assert her subjectivity in terms of both selfhood[10] and womanhood[11].

Another moment of agency in BA is possible to be identified, according to Hall (2015), when Abigail resists Peter's plans to prostitute her. After her arrival at Peter's house in London, Abigail is subjected to physical and psychological tortures by Peter in order to break her will. She eventually gets out of Peter's bondage by biting his penis and running away from the doghouse where she has been kept in dehumanizing conditions:

> One night.
>
> Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of Abigail.
>
> And with her teeth tore off Peter's penis.
>
> (…)
>
> Abigail ran out, half naked, the severed penis clutched in her hand. Though the streets were crowded, only a few people noticed this gorgon with bloody mouth and hands, and the grisly prize she held up like a torch as she ran. (BA, 97-98)

[9] I will further develop the relation between sexuality and female identity.
[10] See Abigail's body markings as an act to be distinguished herself from her mother. (BA, 36)
[11] See Abigail's act of burning herself after her love-making with Derek. (BA, 55)

As Susan Hall (2015) observes, this narrative sequence shows Abigail's strength in her ability to "flee from the doghouse where she has been kept for a number of days in the bitter cold". Especially, it is the atrocious act by which Abigail is able to liberate herself from her captivity that, according to the scholar, assumes a relevant function for Abigail's sense of empowerment and freedom. Abani uses the word "gorgon" with an explicit reference to the female monster of Greek mythology who is symbol of castration. As the scholar suggests, from a feminist perspective, the act of tearing off Peter's penis casts Abigail in the role of a violent avenger who punishes Peter for the atrocious crimes perpetrated against the girl. According to Oboe (2022), this act of biting Peter's penis allows the reader to create a certain association with Abigail's mother. The girl, in her memories, describes her mother as a powerful female judge:

> (…) a woman who was known to confront wife beaters and explain to them, quietly and politely, that if they didn't change she would cut off their penises (…). A woman who was feared by most men for her independent spirit; who at thirty-five became a judge, and set up the first free women's advocacy group" (BA, 46)

In Abigail's mind, her mother is definitely a "source of reference", as Annalisa Oboe suggests, "a role model that speaks of the possibility of empowerment, independence and freedom for women". Her mother "works as a safety anchor for the daughter", and gives such strength and courage to "put into practice what her mother – as an authoritative judge – only threatened to perform". However, it is my perception, that Abigail's agency, in performing the atrocious act of tearing off Peter's penis, may assume Abigail's desire to be more powerful than her mother. It seems that Abigail wants to show her strength and courage in taking the action of biting Peter's penis, an atrocious act that her mother had in her mind only. What may be definitely true, in my opinion, is that both Abigail and her mother are committed to resisting male domination. Moreover, I also believe that the moment of Abigail's self-liberation can assume the symbolic meaning of a victory upon modern slavery for two reasons. Firstly, in the passage when Abigail runs away from her cousin, Abani draws a grotesque comparison

between Peter's penis and a "grisly prize". This metaphor, in my view, may cast the young woman in the role of an Olympic champion. After a number of days in the bitter cold, Abigail has been able to succeed in fighting against her trafficker, as a sport champion who, despite a lot of several difficulties, has been able to achieve their goal. In this way, Abigail could be seen as a powerful example of resistance for the victims of human trafficking. Secondly, the way by which Abigail carries Peter's penis like a torch may assume a symbolic meaning of bringing to light the invisible world of sex trafficking. I think that the parallelism between Peter's penis and the torch allows Abigail, who carries the lighting device, to be depicted as a messiah, a leader who is believed to have the power to solve the world's problems. On the basis of this parallelism, the young messianic figure Abigail has therefore the role to denounce the invisible human trafficking in order to make trafficked people visible. Unfortunately, Abigail appears not to succeed in this kind of effort due to the fact that "only few people noticed this gorgon with bloody hands" (BA, 99).

Related to Abigail's case, another form of agency is possible to be identified in the idea of considering the act of suicide as "a movement from passivity to activity", as Susan Hall (2015) observes. The scholar argues that, although suicide is commonly viewed as a negative thing related to weakness and vulnerability, Abigail's suicide can be read as an act by which the girl exercises her agency. Avoiding the tragic dimension and the reductive reading of her death, Hall suggests to define Abigail's suicide as a form of self-sacrifice, an idea that has been further developed by Annalisa Oboe (2022) who considers Abigail's final act as "the necessary sacrifice to rescue Derek and their love affair":

> The realization that she could not live without Derek was not as sudden and surprising as her difficulty in the face of this task. Here she was trying to find the strength to save him. (BA, 121)

In reporting Abani's words in Paine (2009), Oboe highlights that Abigail's suicide can be read as an "act of courage or act of love" by which "the girl

"becomes both sacrificial victim and sacrificial priestess". In order to accomplish this necessary choice, Abigail seems to find a sort of relief in the following Igbo beliefs: "The sacrifice is always commensurate to the thing wished for. Sometimes a lizard will do, sometimes a goat. Or a dog, sometimes a cow or buffalo. Sometimes, a human being." (BA, 120). On the other hand, Rebekah Cumpsty (2020) prefers to define Abigail's suicide as her "final act of self-reclamation" which starts with Abigail's scarification and ends with Abigail's death: "Ritual scarification has been a vital part of this process, and Abigail takes this a step further by framing her suicide as a sacrifice". My personal interpretation suggests, however, that Abigail's death can be read as the last attempt to gain power and control upon her body and life. Abigail is aware that in her life she has been trying to make choices, but every single decision has been shaped and obstructed by familial, social and political structures both in her homeland and in Europe. The act of killing herself intentionally "in the name of love" (Oboe, 2022), I think, may reverse Abigail's position from victim to agent. Abigail becomes a subject in the moment when she takes the decision to kill herself, and this choice casts the girl in an active position. Abigail now can actually choose for herself, and she opts to throw herself to the Thames.

In OBSS the complex question of agency seems to be identified through an analysis of the four black women's tangible acts both when they live in Africa and when they work as prostitutes in Europe. It may be possible to argue that the solution of choosing to be sex trafficked in Europe in order to escape from poverty and violence could be viewed as a form of agency. According to Ligaga (2019), all the women in the novel, except Alek(Joyce), cross borders into Europe willingly, hoping to embrace "wealth, social standing and general wellbeing". They are ready to take the risk to go to Europe dangerously in order to change their current frustrated and subaltern situation in Africa. Sisi expresses clearly that her choice has been voluntary: "I could have chosen not to come. I was grown woman and he [Dele] did explain the situation to me" (OBSS, 270). Also, Ama remarks: "I made this choice. At least I was given a choice. I came here with my eyes open"

(OBSS, 114). Furthermore, what may be very remarkable in the novel, as Barberán-Reinares (2019) suggests, “it is the women who look for traffickers and not the other way around”, highlighting, in my perception, their voluntary choice in taking the action of travelling to Europe. Ligaga (2019) also observes that the women actually all voluntarily go to meet Dele, who gives them the possibility to leave their problems behind. Even if they have a certain awareness about what kind of job they are going to do in Europe, they do not refuse Dele’s offer, on the contrary they accept his proposal “in the hope of making enough money to support their families back home or earn the means to enjoy an affluent life of material privileges for themselves in Europe” (Barberán-Reinares, 2019). In this way, Unigwe’s women may appear to be active subjects that definitely act upon their desires and aspirations. However, in my opinion, it could be relevant to discuss why Unigwe decides to depict Alek(Joyce) as the only woman of the group who has not freely chosen to be trafficked for sex work. A possible personal interpretation might be related to Unigwe’s desire to avoid easy categorization of all African young women into just easy candidates for sex trafficking. I would suggest that by Alek(Joyce)’s characterisation Unigwe seems to state that not all black women who experience a lot of pain due to poverty, violence and war are ready to willingly migrate in Europe to become sex workers. While Sisi, Ama and Efe seek Dele voluntarily in order to escape from their precarious conditions, Alek(Joyce) does not meet the man on her own. Her boyfriend Polycarp brings her to Dele’s office, and when Dele inspects Alek’s body and decides to change her name “Alek” into “Joyce”, the girl gets suspicious about her effective job in Belgium and tries to resist to Dele’s job offer (OBSS, 227-231). However, Alek(Joyce) “had no energy left for anger. The soldiers that raped her that night in Daru had taken her strength, and Polycarp’s betrayal had left her unwilling to seek it back” (OBSS, 231), consequently she agrees to leave.

When Unigwe’s four women arrive in Belgium, they soon realize that being African sex workers without documents means inevitably being entrapped in the spectral illegal world of human trafficking which reduces

people into slaves. At this point, despite the fact that prostitution can be commonly viewed as a form of sexual violence against women, it might be possible to argue that not all prostitution is definitely a form of violence that reduces women into sexual commodities, but it may be considered as a profession related to empowerment, independence and freedom for a woman. Unigwe's four characters in Belgium are clearly sex workers who know what they want and how to use their body to achieve their aims, as Ama remarks:

> It was this dream that spurred her on in Antwerp; the men she slept with were, like Dele, just tools she needed to achieve her dream. And her dream was expensive enough to accommodate all of them. (OBSS, 169)

According to Ama's words, men are definitely viewed as some pieces of equipment which can be used in order to obtain what she wants. As Okolo (2019) suggests: "Ama actions a reverse objectification of the clients; they are primarily a means to an end". From a gender perspective, within a power relation dynamic, Ama's conception inevitably casts the man in the passive role of an object, allowing the woman to be placed in an active position. In this way, it is the man whom is used by women and not *vice versa*. The four women in Antwerp know they are attractive and economically productive, and this awareness gives them the opportunity to deploy their sexuality for their economic gains, improving their economic position. As De Mul (2014) also suggests "her ultimate goal is not, however, to please white men's desire. The latter is but a means to achieve economic purpose and upward social mobility". Bastida Rodriguez (2014) furthers this idea by stating that Unigwe's four trafficked characters eventually "start their dream business after paying off their debt.". Generally speaking, instead of considering Unigwe's characters as just "exploited women in need of rescue" (Okolo, 2019), they can be seen as examples of female empowerment. Accepting to be sex workers in Antwerp, allows them to save enough money to fulfil their dreams. Both characters Alek(Joyce) and Ama will return to their hometowns: the former will set up a school in Nigeria – whose name pays homage to Sisi –, while the latter will open a boutique in Lagos with her aunt.

Against the reader's expectation. Efe will start her own business becoming Madam herself: "Efe, after paying off her debts to Madam, starts her own business recruiting women into sex work. Unigwe presents Efe's as the pragmatic response of the entrepreneur." (Okolo, 2019). However, the character Efe, as Eze (2014) suggests, seems to "have learnt nothing from her own experience of pain" becoming complicit in "the machinery of oppression", a system that is able to turn the oppressed into oppressors for the mere purpose of profit.

This last point inevitably raises questions about the degree to which sex trafficked women may be actually willingly complicit in the illegal sex trade. In the context of human trafficking, arguing the ideas of agency, choice and consent seems to be very complex. In my opinion, such difficulties are placed because, as Hall (2015) states, human trafficking for sexual exploitation involves issues which are deeply related to sexuality, especially the regulation of women's sexuality. Current debates upon the issue of prostitution has divided scholars and activists between those who consider all prostitution a form of violation of women's human rights, and those who frame prostitution as legitimate labour. Doezema (2005) seems to provide a solution to the problem using the pivotal term "consent" as the marker between "free choice" and "violence" in the context of sex work. According to the scholar, thinking of sex work as legitimate labour may allow women to deploy willingly their bodies for pleasure, money, etc. without the risk to be always considered just inert victims. Taking into consideration Doezema's suggestion, it is possible therefore to admit that the four women in OBSS are clearly agents because at the time of consent to be sex-trafficked they are adults. But the character's sexual consent appears not to be relevant in Abigail's case because she is underage[12]. Consequently, it makes it difficult for the reader to consider the young Nigerian girl as an empowered subject rather than a sex slave (Barberán-Reinares, 2019). Despite the failure of considering Abigail's sexual consent as a form of agency because of her age, it may be possible however to study the fourteen-year-old trafficked

[12] See infantilisation and victimisation as forms of spectrality in the context of human trafficking in Ch. 2.

Abigail's sexual affair with Derek as a way to move out from her subaltern position of invisibility and ghostliness.

In analysing Abigail and Derek's relationship, Ashley Dawson (2010) defines their affair as "mutual desire" or "egalitarian relationship" by which Abigail is constructed as a "woman thirsty for the sense of identity". On the contrary, Barberán-Reinares (2019) suggests that the adjective "egalitarian" seems not to be appropriate to describe the relationship between the young trafficked character and the social worker because of "their age and power difference". Pamela McCallum (2015) appears to partially agree with Dawson in reading Abigail's affair with Derek as a site where the young girl can express a desire of independence, empowerment and freedom. Especially, McCallum questions locating Abigail's agency in "acting out sexuality with an adult whose professional position should preclude such relations with a child entrusted to his care". However, it is my perception that it could be possible to locate Abigail's agency in her love affair with Derek mainly for two reasons. First, as Hall also suggests (2015), "whereas her will and body have been repeatedly violated by Peter, [now] she claims to have an opportunity to give her consent with Derek". Second, the voluntary sexual act with Derek is perceived by the girl as a process of self-definition by which Abigail establishes her identity in terms of becoming a woman.

> Later that night, in Derek's home, while his wife slept (…), they made love on the sofa. And Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken. And she wept for her joy (…). Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking. (BA, 54)

Abani shows a great ability in describing the delicate moment when Abigail and Derek have sex for the first time. The perception that we may have from reading the lines above, as Hall (2015) suggests, could be that of someone who moves from a passive to an active position. I strongly believe that the use of the two opposite verbs "give" and "take" creates such dynamism. Abigail has always been considered as an "inert object" (McCallum, 2015) ready to be taken and abused by men, now she can take the action in giving permission to Derek to access to the most intimate parts of her body. For the

first time, Abigail seems to be in total control of her body, and this power makes the sexual act with Derek an act of agency instead of considering it an act of sexual abuse.

> Abani presents this relationship from Abigail's point of view, so it becomes difficult to see it as exploitative since the teenager seems to be in love, or infatuated, with the social worker and in control of her decision; the character claims it is her choice. (Barberán-Reinares, 2019)

Within this sexual movement of "giving" and "taking", Abigail certainly moves from passivity to activity, from being a passive object to an active subject who claims her desire "to love and to be loved" (Oboe, 2022). Especially, it is the possibility to willingly decide if Abigail wants sex and whom the girl wants to have sex with that gives her some degree of agency within her relationship with Derek. Furthermore, Abigail's sense of being a consenting adult[13], or being an adult female who willingly acts upon her needs and desires, seems to be even more underscored when Abigail feels that having sex with Derek allows her to establish her identity in terms of both personhood and womanhood. Concerning this aspect, I strongly agree with Ashley Dawson in considering the sexual attraction between Abigail and Derek as a way to affirm Abigail's identity. It appears that in the process of having sex with Derek, Abigail feels herself "becoming", and "this sense of coming into self" (Dawson, 2010), I think, may derive especially from a re-appropriation of Abigail's body at physical level:

> She smiled in the dark and pulled him close. They stood there awhile. Then she unbuttoned his shirt and hers. Her breasts, her nipples hard, pressed into his softer chest. This feeling wasn't the familiarity she had expected. Instead she felt passion enveloping her, and she gave into safety, the warmth, looking up into his eyes, eyes blue as the sea she had never seen except on television, eyes looking at her, wanting no more than was here. This was love? To be seen. (BA, 53-54)

Abigail is experiencing erotic love for the first time, and, in my opinion, Abani describes her sexual experience as a sensory overload from Abigail's point

[13] Despite the fact that Abigail is legally a minor, she feels to be like an adult within her relationship with Derek. For a deeper analysis of this point, see Abigail's encounter with legal institutions in Ch.2.

of view. Using Giommi's words (2011), it seems that "Abigail's body, which was ephemeral before, is beginning to collect and solidify". Now Abigail's body can be seen by Derek's eyes, and can be touched by her lover's fingers, allowing the young woman to gain her individuality both as a subject and also as an adult female. As Uko (2014) declares, it is possible to identify sexuality as a fundamental site where women can have the opportunity to define themselves. It is therefore within this physical dynamic that Abigail can have the possibility to re-appropriate her body. Furthermore, Abigail's perception of Derek's eyes on her is relevant for the young woman who now can establish her identity[14] and consequently she can be "this Abigail", the woman who is now distinguished from her mother whose name and resemblance she (unfortunately[15]) carries.

By analogy, I believe, such bodily self-realisation is also depicted by Unigwe in OBSS when Alek(Joyce) makes love with the young soldier Polycarp at the refugee camp:

> She felt like an object that had lain dormant for years and was being excavated.
>
> (…) He undressed her. Delicately, as if she were fine porcelain that might shatter. He lifted her dress over her head. Bent down and plucked her nipples with his mouth. He threw off his shirt. Guided her hand to unzip his trousers. Gently pushed her down onto the bed. (…) She was floating. Flying. A butterfly fluttering. She felt Polycarp between her thighs. There was no pain. No ache. Just a long, long sigh and a happiness that filled in the hollowness in her chest. Her excavation was complete. She had been dug up from deep under. (…) "I'm a woman now, (…). A proper woman". (OBSS, 199)

Analysing the lines above, in comparison with Abigail's experience, it seems that Alek(Joyce), just like Abigail, gains a sense of presence and visibility thanks to erotic love. Especially, Unigwe describes the sexual act between Alek(Joyce) and Polycarp as an "excavation", from the girl's perspective. This lexical choice, I suggest, may even more underscore Alek(Joyce)'s

[14] As Oboe (2022) suggests, this condition of being seen by her lover indicates "how much the Other's gaze (in a deeply Lacanian sense) is essential to one's becoming subject".
[15] Francesca Giommi (2011) suggests: "Her name thus constitutes a heavy legacy, denying the child and young woman her own identity, preventing her from developing her own true self, different from her mother's, reducing her to the evanescent shadow of a ghost".

sense of becoming visible, moving out from her position of invisibility and ghostliness. Alek(Joyce)'s body is similar to a very old object buried in the ground that has been brought to light. In my opinion, this sense of having been discovered derives from Alek(Joyce) appropriation of her sexuality, a sexuality which she is experiencing without having been violated or abused. Now, Alek(Joyce) is able to deploy her sexuality willingly, and this voluntary act gives her the opportunity to establish her identity of being "a proper woman". At this point, it can be stated that the act of agency in relation to female sexuality in both OBSS and BA is therefore possible to be identified within the sexual acts between the young female characters and their lovers because the young women can assert their possession and control of their bodies. Abigail and Alek(Joyce) perceive sex as an act of agency that gives power over their body, especially over their female sexuality. Furthermore, within this dynamic, the two young women are able to establish their identity, moving out from their ghostliness.

However, it is my perception that Abigail's sexual experience with Derek does not seem to satisfy the girl's desire of self-realisation completely. After her love-making with Derek, Abigail scars her body using a needle, and writes on her skin in "bubbles of Braille"(BA, 55), a tactile writing system for blind people. As I mentioned previously, by reporting Oboe (2022) words, the ability of Derek's fingers to give significance to her body markings seems to be the only way by which Abigail is able to emerge from her ghostliness for the first time. Furthermore, according to Rebekah Cumpsty (2020), Abigail's scarification is an act of reclamation of her body in time and space, a way to signify at physical level which allows the girl a certain degree of agency in asserting her possession of her body. Taking into account such scholars' interpretations, I strongly believe that Abigail needs to mark her body immediately after her sexual experience with Derek because erotic love has not completely satisfied her sense of gaining presence in terms of identity. Having sex with Derek appears therefore not to have the fundamental function of making Abigail visible, consequently she engages in the act of scarification to establish her subjectivity. At this point, it is possible

to admit that OBSS and BA certainly contain moments of agency in which the trafficked characters express their sense of empowerment, independence and freedom of women, but in most cases these women do not actually succeed, due to some circumstances that are not under their control, revealing therefore their inability to settle both in their homeland and in Europe.

3.2 Locating agency in sex trafficked women's true stories

The previous analysis concerning the location of agency in Unigwe's four characters and Abani's young Abigail, has shown a certain degree of failure in locating agency only in the tangible behaviours of the female characters. On the other hand, it is my perception that all these trafficked women may exercise their agency of moving out from their position of invisibility and ghostliness through the possibility to (self)narrate their experiences.

In *On Black Sisters' Street* Unigwe has the great ability to create a story-telling situation based on a "choral structure" (Nadalini, 2011)[16] where the act of sharing each individual women's autobiographical experience may perform the dual function of (re-)establishing their real identities and creating a sense of community among the four women. According to Omuteche (2014), the act of telling is a process by which the subject can (re) construct their sense of self in relation to time and space. When Sisi is murdered [17], the three women expose not only their past experiences happened in Africa but they also give detailed accounts about their current situation in Antwerp and eventually they express their hopes and dreams concerning their future. The fragmented life stories, which are narrated in the first person[18], allow therefore both the reader and the women themselves to shape their

[16] The term "choral structure" is used by Amanda Nadalini (2011) especially when she analyses Jackie Key's *The Lamplighter* from a stylistic perspective. In OBSS, as in *The Lamplighter*, "the multiple narratives and choral structure of the work create a communality of experiences which finally enable (…) [the character] to work through the traumatic events of her past".

[17] As Okolo suggests: "Pivotal to the narrative is the murder of Sisi, which prompts the other women to share their stories." Especially, the scholar highlights that Sisi's loss produces the fear that deaths such as Sisi's could happen to any one of them. Bastida Rodriguez (2014) furthers this idea by considering Sisi's death as "[the] event that marks the beginning of a transformation in the others" because the women "become aware of their vulnerability and gradually move towards solidarity and sharing of past and present experiences".

[18] Only Sisi's story is told by a third person narrator. In this way, her story can be told.

identities in relation to their past, present and future. As Okolo (2019) states: "The process of recalling and verbalising pasts that they have kept hidden for so long helps them to re-order their sense of present life and to renegotiate their relationship with one another". The chapters entitled "Zwartezusterstraat" include events that happen in the city of Antwerp, and they are joined with those chapters where the women tell their individual life stories. Their individual stories follow the ongoing movement back and forth between Africa and Europe, creating a sense of mobility within the narration. DeMul (2014) suggests that such mode of using a fragmented narration "reflects the multidimensional mobility of African migrant women". It is possible to identify a similar structure also in BA whose narrative is developed in thirty-four fragments. This fragmentary structure is composed by the "Now" chapters where Abigail is sitting by the Thames, and the "Then" chapters which tell her story from birth. As Annalisa Oboe (2022) states: "The 'Now' sections feature Abigail as she spends her last hours sitting on a London monument, thinking and remembering; the 'Then' sections contain Abigail's recollections of her life in Nigeria and in London. (…) The reader is led in and out of the present moment, in and out of the London location". It is my perception, therefore, that the great stylistic ability to use a fragmented narrative structure instead of a linear chronological flow may derive from the choice to describe human trafficking as a displacing phenomenon in the context of migration, consequently underscoring feelings of destabilisation and dislocation in these unsettled subjects. The fragmented structure, in my opinion, highlights the fragmenting thoughts and experiences that modern slavery inevitably produces in the context of migration. As Omuteche (2014) states, psychological effects such as alienation and confusion are the most common consequences on these trafficked subjects. According to the scholar, human trafficking for sexual exploitation unsettles and dislocates victim's sense of self identity. Especially, prostitution forces these women and girls to become something else, having traumatic effects on their identities[19]. At this point, it can be

[19] See for example Sisi's sense of disembodiment when she has sex with her first client in the

stated that in order to (re-)establish their lost identity in terms of time and space, these dislocated women need to narrate their lives.

As I mentioned at the beginning, in OBSS the story-telling situation based upon a choral structure may also assume the relevant function of developing a sense of community, especially of sisterhood, among the four characters. It seems that when the three women narrate their self-stories "they open up to each other" (Omuteche, 2014) creating therefore "intimate relations" for the first time. (DeMul, 2014).

> It is the first time that Efe has spoken about her life before Antwerp. The first time, as far as they can tell, that any of them has offered a glimpse into her past. Efe clears her throat. She does not know why she feels the urgency to tell her story, but she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done before. (OBSS, 39-40)

> [They have] always had a relationship which skimmed the surface like milk. They have never before stirred each other enough to find out anything deep about their lives. (OBSS, 239)

The selected lines above may prove that before Sisi's death the women in Antwerp know very little about each other. According to DeMul (2014), despite the fact that they are both colleagues and flatmates, there seems to be some "feelings of hostility and suspicion [that] prevent them from developing" relations on the basis of loyalty and intimacy: "They were strangers without words between them" (OBSS, 115)[20]. When they talk through sharing their dreams, hopes, anxieties and fears, they seem to develop a sense of "communal bond" (DeMul, 2014). The act of telling, which takes place in group, gives the possibility to Unigwe's women to relate to each other, creating a sort of "communality of experiences" (Nadalini, 2011), encouraging each character to take part in this story-telling situation.

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bar's dirty toilet in Belgium (OBSS, 212-213), Joyce's first sex experience with a strange in Antwerp which brings back memories of her rape by the Sudan soldiers (OBSS, 234), and Abigail's brutalization in London (BA, 90-91).

[20] I would suggest that such sense of ambiguity and silence may derive from those human trafficking dynamics which force the trafficked subject to live in incognito due to their unregulated status. As Omuteche (2014) highlights concerning the underground sex slave market: "It prefers and insists on silence and indivisibility for its subjects." Similarly, Bastida Rodriguez (2014) finds that their lack of communication may be a consequence of their anonymous condition as illegal immigrants in Europe. Using false names and avoiding to reveal their real identities, according to Rodriguez, "corroborates their mistrust of each other and can be interpreted as a way for them to keep their subjectivities untouched".

In paraphrasing Margaret Atwood's words, Eze (2014) suggests that "one of the reasons we tell our stories and listen to those of others is to invite people to partake of our lives and for us to partake of theirs". According to the two scholars, people are interested in other people's stories because they empathize with them. Sharing people's stories means the opportunity to understand other's inner life, and therefore to realize that our interlocutor is experiencing same fears and joys as we do. Especially, telling their stories in group allows the women to become aware that they are bound by the combination of their common traumatic past experiences – shaped by war, poverty and patriarchal oppression –, their current situation of enslavement, and their shared hopes. As Chielozona Eze (2014) also remarks, "when Efe, Ama, and Joyce tell their stories to one other, they realize" to have in common "the degree to which they have been humiliated" both in Africa and in Europe. In my opinion, when Unigwe's characters share, and especially understand, these common factors, they discover their female solidarity. According to Okolo (2019), "by letting one another into their past lives" the women discover their "female bonding", and a "fragile 'sisterhood' begins to grow (…) in the face of Sisi's loss".

> Their tears mingle and the only sound in the room is that of them weeping. Time stands still and Ama says, "Now we are sisters." Years later, Ama will tell them that at the moment she knew that they would be friends for ever. (OBSS, 290)

Realizing what they have in common shapes their feeling of female solidarity: "she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done before" (OBSS, 41). Furthermore, it can be suggested that since their bond is strong, firm and solid – as the Latin origin of the word "solidarity" means –, the women are able to find such courage and strength to take an action about their future.

The first positive, but unsuccessful, effect of this female solidarity is that the women think about finding out a possible solution in order to escape from their slavery condition. Telling their stories allows Uniqwe's women to

become conscious that the fact of being sex workers is actually a form of slavery which reduces humans to objects, or animals:

> "We're human beings! Why should we take it? Sisi is dead and all Madam can think of is business. Doesn't Sisi deserve respect from her? What are we doing? Why should she treat us any how and we just take it like dogs? (…). We fit go to the police. (…) Madam treats us like animals. (…) Madam has no right to our bodies, and neither does Dele". (OBSS, 289-290)

Efe, at this point, suggests to denounce Madam: "'We fit go to the police', (…) It shocks her because she has never thought of it before now", but Ama laughs: "Madam has the police in her pocket". (OBSS, 290). Secondly, when they share their hopes and aspirations about their future, Unigwe's women declare to be ready to realise their dreams:

> Later when she [Joyce] thinks of this conversation with Ama and Efe, she will think of it as a release from something she had not known held her hostage.
>
> Before today, she had not even thought about it. (…) But she is not amazed at the happiness it brings her. (OBSS, 242-243)

This strategy of telling the traumatic past in order to create solid basis in the present for envisioning a better future is a common issue passionately developed by postcolonial studies. Especially, narrating traumatic experiences upon the slippery connection between what we want to remember and what we want to forget is explored by those texts which instigate human crimes such as slavery, war, holocaust and genocide. Amanda Nadalini (2011), analysing Jackie Key's *The Lamplighter* (2008)[21] in referring to LaCapra's theory (2004), suggests that telling these traumas, which are called "founding traumas", has the role to construct a better future. According to him, from a psychological perspective, it is possible to create a future because the act of telling traumatic experiences allows the subject to gain critical distance on a problem and "enables him/her to avoid being

[21] What is really remarkable is that both *The Lamplighter* and *On Black Sisters's street* are focused on the lives of four black women. Both Kay's characters and Unigwe's protagonists tell their traumatic events in relation to their past. While Key's work explores the dramatic effects of slavery, Unigwe does the same in denouncing slavery in contemporary times. Even though I suggest these interesting similarities, I prefer avoiding a contrastive study of the two texts here. Further work should benefit greatly by using these suggestions in the future.

trapped in the past"[22]. It is in this way that, in my opinion, Unigwe's women can in the end succeed, and achieve their aims [23].

The situation in *Becoming Abigail* appears different. Abigail does not seem to have the possibility to share her fears and hopes with other people, and this aspect, I strongly believe, could be one of the causes that may increase her feelings of abandonment and loneliness in London, and eventually driving the young woman to commit suicide. Unlike Unigwe who chooses to focus the narrative on a plurality of protagonists, especially on the life of four black trafficked women, Abani prefers to write "a book on the tragedy of sex trafficking with a single human being at its core" (Giommi, 2011). Oboe (2022), in reporting Abani's words taken from the article "Abigail and my becoming" (2006), reveals that his intention derives from his effort to stay away from numbers and statistics because "in the end it doesn't matter how many young women are victims of this trade. One is already one too many". It is, however, my perception that Abani's strategy seems to highlight even more how trafficked people are condemned to suffer for extreme loneliness and abandonment due to their ghostly existence and social marginalization. While Unigwe's four women in Antwerp find the way to work through their traumatic situations by talking to each other, Abani's young Abigail does not have such possibility to share her anxieties and fears with anyone[24]. Consequently, in this way, the girl is unable to overcome her trauma and to construct her future. Unheard by the other characters of the *novella*, Abigail's voice can find potential listeners – who are actually readers – only in the powerful world of literature. Just thanks to Abani's great writing

[22] As E.S. Goldberg and A.S. Moore (2012) explain, from a more ethical perspective, it is possible to use cultural texts in responding to social suffering. Personal stories and testimonies seem to have a relevant contribution in arising a critical vision in the context of human rights violations: "[this critical vision] may illuminate both the limitations of those discourses and the imaginative possibilities of alternative frameworks". The link between literature and human rights will be further elaborated later in this chapter.

[23] As the reader of this work has already known, both Ama and Joyce will return to Nigeria. The former will set up a school while the latter will open a boutique. On the contrary, Efe will stay in Belgium working in prostitution as Madam.

[24] The only character who seems to be interested in Abigail's story is Derek, but their relation is condemned to fail because of a system which dismisses Abigail's right to love and to be loved. See previously the analysis concerning Abigail's affair with Derek.

ability Abigail can therefore move out from her invisibility by finding a textual space where she can exert her agency. As Oboe (2022) firmly believes:

> "We should reflect, as Pietro Deandrea also suggests, on the cultural and, in my view, radical potential of narratives to provide nuanced representation of trafficked people, on the capacities of literary texts to convey what is often unnarratable, to "mediate" problematic situations through the power of the imagination."

At this point, it is certainly useful, and inevitably, to take into account the power of literature in bringing to light the invisibility of the spectral world of human trafficking. What both Unigwe and Abani have in common is clearly the ability to describe the atrocities of contemporary slavery, giving their characters a voice by entering in their mind. Especially, the two authors demonstrate how people can devastate their fellow humans in the name of a diabolic system which reduces individuals into objects, or animals, for economic purpose. I think that both OBSS and BA are two authored texts in denouncing such crime, for the impressive realism through which they explore those dark places and obscure dynamics in the context of sex trafficking. As Rebekah Cumpsty (2020) observes:

> Abani does not shy away from representing the darkest sides of human behaviour; (…) he highlights the ethical ambiguity of both the writer's and the readers' position. (…) Abani guides his reader to a feeling of voyeuristic discomfort that challenges the ease of reading.

The discomfort is generated by Abani's elegant and disarming lyrical prose which is able to describe explicit disturbing situations concerning sexual slavery[25]. Annalisa Oboe (2022), in reporting Daria Tunca's words (2014), suggests that Abani's use of specific stylistic traits such as "fragmented syntax, abundant imaginary, emotional passages and musicality" is appropriate "to convey the full horror of sexual violence". As McCallum (2015) also observes, Abani is able to narrate "visceral moments of suffering" which are experienced by trafficked people, offering therefore "important insights into material and psychological mechanisms" of sex trafficking (Dawson, 2010). On the other hand, for what concerns OBSS,

[25] See Abani's intimate descriptions of Peter's sexual abuses and torture.

also Unigwe expresses a certain realism when she describes specific situations of women's objectification in contemporary slavery[26], but, according to Omuteche (2014), she also includes "authenticating" linguistic and paralinguistic strategies, especially idiolects, social dialects and idioms which are specific in African writing in European language: "Dat na de only way he could tink of to stop her *wahalaing"* (5); "Make una no ruin am!" (6); "But I no dey do charity o. So it go cost you. Taty t'ousand euro it go cost you o." (34); "Money wey full everywhere like san' san'" (49); "Dat one na small price to pay" (58); "I ga atakalia Job n'afufu"(125); "Abeg, abeg make I no come now. Abeg mercy!" (168). Unigwe herself admits that in order to give authenticity to her four sex workers' characterization, she attempted to talk to real prostitutes in Antwerp's red-light district, wearing provocative clothes and roaming the streets like a prostitute. This choice to spend time among sex workers definitely has contributed "to the perception of her novel as a testimony of real experience" and it testifies therefore her "intention to be faithful to contemporary reality" (Bastida Rodriguez, 2014). A similar approach has been used by Abani who wrote his *novella* after he had carried an extensive research on the issue of sex trafficking. Especially, as Oboe (2022) reports, the Igbo writer tells that Abigail's story is the result of two separate news items which had appeared in the newspaper while he was living in Britain in the 1990's. The first was about a Nigerian girl who had been taken to London and, after she had refused to accept her servitude conditions at her relative's home[27], she was chained in the back garden in winter. The second concerned a judge in France who had an illicit affair with one of the two parts involved, a teen Moroccan girl whose love for him had consequences for both. At this point, it is clear that the two authors' "determination to search for authenticity" (Okolo, 219) contributes inevitably to identify OBSS and BA as two novels which testify against the cruel and invisible conditions of trafficked people in contemporary times. From an ethical perspective, it can be also stated that such literary texts have the power:

[26] For specific examples concerning women's objectification in sex trafficking, see Chapter 1.
[27] It is not clear whether the girl was trafficked for domestic labour or sex work.

> "to demonstrate how much literature can do to sustain freedom and human rights (…) in our modern democracies (…) where the most elemental human rights still need to be allowed and recognized". (Giommi, 2011)

Because of a system which is not ready to solve problematic situations such as illegal migration, sex trafficking and contemporary slavery, literature encourages us to respond critically. As readers we should be engaged in thinking on the possibility to employ literature in the service of social and political issues, creating connections between character's stories and our everyday life. In this way, we can take action in promoting the idea of the universality of human rights in a world where "people relate to others in dignity" (Eze, 2014).

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the various narrative examples have provided evidence that locating agency in the experience of Unigwe's four sex trafficked women and Abani's young Abigail is extremely complex. For these displaced women, the necessity to move out of the common subaltern position of invisibility and ghostliness in the context of human trafficking seems to be expressed by ambiguous acts which take place both in their homeland and in Europe.

The study of Abigail's scarification has shown this practice as a way used by the girl in order to establish her identity in terms of personhood and womanhood. As in an initiating ceremony, Abigail marks her own captive body with the practices of scarring, tattooing and burning to assert her subjectivity. These body markings allow her to gain presence in time and space (Cumpsty, 2020), but it assumes significance just in the case when someone is able to understand her scars. Abigail finds in Derek the person who is able to "crack this code" (Oboe, 2022), consequently he is the only one who can make Abigail visible. Despite Abigail's sense of self-realisation due to her love affair with Derek, the girl is cast again in the role of a passive ghostly figure by the greatest contradictions inherent in the legal system concerning the human rights project. At the same time, the symbolic analysis of her act of escaping from Peter's bondage by biting his penis

shows Abigail's high degree of agency in changing her current dehumanising situation. Similar to a messianic leader, the girl can be seen as a powerful example of resistance for all those victims of human trafficking who are not able to fight against their traffickers. After her act of self-liberation, the reader can imagine a happy ending. On the contrary, Abigail's desire to be seen and heard flies in the face of a welfare system which seems to be incompetent of giving a voice to these invisible trafficked subjects. At this point, Abigail finds the last attempt to assert her agency in committing suicide (Hall, 2015). Despite the common reductive interpretation that identifies this act as an extreme way which reveals the subject's weakness, Abigail's suicide reveals her last desire to gain power and control over her body and life "in the name of love" (Oboe, 2022). Abigail exerts her agency because she can now decide for herself, and this decision reverses Abigail's position from victim to agent. However, I strongly believe that Abigail's suicide also reveals the failure of the entire system to respond adequately to Abigail's situation. Legal institutions and the UK welfare are therefore once again not ready to give visibility to her ghostly acts of resistance.

Concerning the novel *On Black Sisters' Street*, the analysis of the four black women's moments of agency has shown the possibility to state that Unigwe's trafficked characters may assume the role of agents instead of victims when they admit (except Joyce) that their choice to travel to Europe for sex work has been made voluntarily (Ligaga, 2019). For this purpose, arguing the issue of consent in the context of sex trafficking (Doezema, 2005) has been also relevant in supporting the idea of empowerment, freedom and independence of women in relation to prostitution. Especially, in my opinion, the decision to deploy willingly their body for pleasure, or money, in addition to the idea of considering having sex with strangers as just a means to achieve these women's aims, can place Unigwe's four sex trafficked characters in an active position, considering them as examples of female empowerment. However, the fact that they are illegal immigrants without documents confines Unigwe's women to the invisible and spectral

world of human trafficking where people are reduced to objects, or animals. At this point, the analysis concerning love as a possible form of agency has demonstrated the fact that such displaced African women are deprived from their "right to love and to be loved" (Oboe, 2022) by social, political and cultural factors both in Africa and in Europe. Especially, Abigail's "forbidden" relationship with Derek and Alek(Joyce)'s intolerable love affair with Polycarp have been clear examples of how a dysfunctional socio-cultural and political apparatus still tends to treat black women as subaltern figures unable to assert their will.

In the second part of the chapter, it has been possible to prove, on the contrary, how these black women can actually become visible thanks to the power of narration. In OBSS the act of self-narrating has the powerful function of shaping the identities of Unigwe's four women in Antwerp, also creating a sort of female bonding among them (Okolo, 2019). The process of telling their pasts upon the slippery relation between memory and trauma (Nadalini, 2011) helps the three women to realize what they have in common, establishing therefore a deep female solidarity that gives them courage in order to move out of their current invisible condition of sex slaves and to embrace their dreams. Abigail, on the contrary, in her invisible life in London does not have any possibility to share her story with other people, consequently she is unable to succeed. In this sense, the act of narrating past experiences is a way to "avoid being trapped in the past" (LaCapra, 2022), creating solid basis in the present for envisioning a better future (Nadalini, 2011). Concerning this aspect, the association with Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* has been useful to support the idea that such postcolonial narratives, offer important lessons about how the illegal practice of reducing our fellow human beings to objects, or animals, still exists in contemporary times. Literature therefore seems to be a privileged space to make the spectral and ghostly world of human trafficking visible, especially because literary texts do have the power "to convey what is often unnarratable" (Oboe, 2002). In fact, although Abigail's story seems to remain silent in her mind, due to her impossibility to share her fears and hopes with

other trafficked people, the author Abani is able to give her a voice and denounce illegal sex trafficking.

4. Conclusion

This work it has attempted to analyse various narrative examples taken from the novels *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Becoming Abigail* in order to show that sex trafficking in contemporary times is a form of slavery whose dynamics are based upon black women's objectification. This oppressive process was commonly used in colonial culture, especially in those practices related to the slave trade in which the black female body was considered as both free labour and erotic object. A post-colonial analysis of the two novels has confirmed that such process of objectification, or dehumanisation, of the black female body is still present in contemporary human trafficking discourse, showing that black women's subjugation starts in Africa and continues in Europe.

Socially, culturally and economically placed in a subordinate position in their homelands, the main female characters of the two novels are definitely perceived as mere objects of male domination. In Nigeria, as in Sudan, the patriarchal socio-cultural system reduces women and girls into powerless and voiceless figures, making them vulnerable to be exploited. Unable to settle in their hometowns, these female characters are somewhat willingly trafficked into Europe in the hope to leave their problems behind. On the contrary, European countries seem to legitimize the underground exploitation system, making these people more vulnerable and invisible, instead of giving them wealth, social standing, general wellbeing and law protection. The human dignity of trafficked people is reduced to zero-degree by adopting laws and restrictive policies that reduce the choices, freedom and self-agency of undocumented migrants. The welfare system (re)produces various oppressive and hegemonic dynamics which expose black trafficked women to endless situations of vulnerability and (sex) exploitation which characterize the illegal sex trade. As "*personae non-gratae*" Ama, Joyce(Alek), Efe, Sisi and Abigail are definitely spectral figures in the scheme of things, unable to become citizens in Europe. The social, cultural and political apparatus are not prepared to cope with human trafficking in the context of illegal migration and female prostitution. A study

of the characters' various treatments by public institutions has confirmed this point. The European state is unable to manage the problem, adopting only a combination of discriminatory procedures, coercive pressures, and moralistic attitudes that condemn trafficked black women to play the role of the passive, ghostly victims.

At this point, analysing the complex issue of agency in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Becoming Abigail* has revealed the impossibility for these trafficked characters to (re-)establish their subjectivities in terms of selfhood and womanhood through various tangible acts. Any single effort to assert their presence by gestures of resistance, or rebellion, has shown how these black women remain invisible. Especially, the issue of female sexuality in relation to the term "consent" has highlighted the complexity of human trafficking discourse in relation to female prostitution. Despite the fact that some characters in the novels deploy their body voluntarily for pleasure, or money, as a possible way to express their female independence and empowerment, the cultural-social system avoids to accept this view and prefers to continue to victimize them.

A solution to the problem, far from having any sort of political preference, seems to be offered by the amazing power of narrating stories, a process which works at psychological, social and cultural levels. Through their reminiscences and self-stories, the characters of the two novels are firstly able to reconstruct their sense of self in connection with past, present and future, and secondly to offer real testimonies of the atrocities committed by the human trafficking networks. Both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Becoming Abigail* are therefore two authored texts that give voice to all these silenced trafficked people demonstrating how slavery still exists today. Nowadays the repetition of those trends, norms and attitudes which existed during the old slave trade still characterises women's exploitation in contemporary times. Only a reversal of such hegemonic dynamics could change things, and for doing so we have to learn the ethical lesson given from literature, as Caryl Phillips (2011) suggests:

> "I believe passionately in the moral capacity of fiction to wrench us out of our ideological burrows and force us to engage with a world that is clumsily transforming itself, (…). As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for change, then we have a chance." (16)

However, the present study has looked only at those social and cultural realities that induce the main female black characters of the two novels to be (un)willingly trafficked from Africa to Europe. It remains to be further clarified which economic factors drive African young women to be trafficked for sexual exploitation. Further analysis are needed to determine explicitly how the globalized macro-economic context has a relevant impact on the local micro- economy in Africa, shaping the ambitions and dreams of poor people. Related to this aspect, it would be interesting to (re-)evaluate whether Unigwe's black women actually act freely in choosing to be trafficked into Europe, or their choices have been influenced by the current neoliberal economy.

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