

African Women on the Move: Exploring Female Migration in Contemporary African Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation of female African migrants in novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Chika Unigwe, Amma Darko, Zoe Wicomb, and Leila Aboulela. Essentially, the thesis explores the intersection of gender, feminism, and migration. African women's migration is often shaped by intersecting forces of patriarchy, economic precarity, cultural expectations, and racialisation in host societies. Through a feminist literary analysis, this research examines how these novels portray the lived experiences of female African migrants, exploring issues of identity negotiation, cultural hybridity, gendered violence, female solidarity and empowerment. It also highlights themes of displacement, identity, agency, and resistance, highlighting the nuanced ways in which gendered experiences shape migration narratives. This study argues that these novels not only challenge Eurocentric feminist discourse but also foreground the specific struggles of African women in transnational spaces. This study also examines how African feminist narratives challenge dominant migration discourses and offer alternative frameworks for understanding mobility, belonging, and the negotiation of self-identity. By centring the voices of migrant women in literature, this thesis contributes to feminist literary criticism and migration studies, offering insights into the complexities of gendered migration experiences within African and global contexts. Also significant is the exploration of home and unhomeliness, as well as the possibility of return-migration. The selected novels reveal the complexities of migrant subjectivity, highlighting how female characters navigate cultural dislocation, racialised othering, and gendered precarity in transnational spaces. Drawing on transnational and postcolonial black feminist theories, this research argues that the notion of "home" becomes both a site of nostalgia and a site of contestation as the represented women struggle to belong in host societies while maintaining relationships with their homelands. The study also examines return-migration as a transformative yet fraught process, in which return is not only physical (voluntary or forced) but also psychological or imagined (as not all female migrants in the novels explored can return home even when they wish to, because of their legal status). By employing a comparative literary analysis, this thesis highlights the significance of literature in shaping and redefining African feminist perspectives within the context of migration discourses. The findings of this study centre on African women's voices in migration literature, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on feminism, mobility, and the (re)construction of African women's identities in diasporic contexts.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Feminism, Migration, Identity-Negotiation, Return-Migration.

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INTRODUCTION

As a literary scholar, I have long been interested in the literary representation of African women's experiences; I am intrigued by how fiction affirms or undermines the "place" of African women in literary narratives. My Bachelor's and Master's degrees examined the experiences of African women as represented by female African writers, including Mariama Bâ, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and the Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi. However, these writers primarily focused on the experiences of African women within Africa, rather than outside of it. Focusing on fictional narratives by selected female African writers – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, NoViolet Bulawayo, Ama Darko, Zoe Wicomb, and Leila Aboulela – my PhD research explores the literary representation of migrant African women in various host countries, including the US, Britain, Germany, and Belgium.

These writers have been selected because their texts examine the global phenomenon of migration, establishing that African women are active participants in the migratory process (both in Africa and elsewhere). Indeed, they have been active from pre-colonial times through to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and especially in contemporary times (late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries), which have seen an increase in African women's migration. However, as stated above, my research critiques this representation of African women's experiences in fictional narratives by the female African writers under review.

These writers have also been selected because they are migrants themselves, and they use fiction to tell the stories of African women's migration in the West. Their novels – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Ama Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Zoe Wicomb's *October*, and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* – chronicle the literary representations of African migrant women's experiences. My thesis thus explores a gendered, feminist perspective on African women's migration experiences. I explore these experiences of migration from a nuanced perspective because there is no single (female) African experience of this phenomenon, as women from different African countries migrate to different Western countries for varied reasons. As an African woman who made the deliberate decision to migrate from Nigeria for both economic and personal reasons, my lived experience in Scotland has significantly shaped and reinforced the central argument of this research. While migration is often framed as a pathway to opportunity and liberation, my experience suggests a more complex reality – one in which pre-existing gendered and racialised challenges are not left behind, but rather reconfigured within the diasporic context. Living in Scotland, I have

encountered forms of marginalisation that intersect across race, gender, and migrant status, revealing that migration does not mark an endpoint to struggle for African women, but instead introduces new layers to it. This perspective informs my reading of the six novels examined in this study, where African migrant women are similarly portrayed as navigating persistent and evolving constraints. Across these texts, migration does not dissolve patriarchal pressures, economic precarity, or identity tensions; rather, it relocates and reshapes them within new socio-cultural environments. By situating my own experience alongside these literary representations, I position African women's lived realities as central to critical discussions of migrant literature. This approach underscores the need to move beyond reductive narratives of migration as purely emancipatory, and instead recognise the nuanced, often contradictory experiences that define African women's migratory journeys.

Thus, this thesis does not examine African migration in isolation, especially when African women are involved, because, as will be established, the experiences of migrant African women are not homogenous – there are various motivations and intentions behind their migration. This is why the selected writers examine these from different perspectives based on the countries of origin of the female protagonists, the countries of destination they migrate to, and the challenges as well as opportunities open to them in the course of their migration.

The female writers, therefore, imaginatively represent the challenges that female African migrants face in their home countries, which inform their decision to migrate. This representation of the migration experience is what distinguishes literature from other fields, such as anthropology, history, and the social sciences, which also examine migration. Mala Pandurang (2007) affirms this when she says:

Social scientists mainly record the social, demographic, and economic aspects of contemporary migration. The literary theorist, on the other hand, is more interested in how inherent tensions within migratory processes are reflected in narrative strategies, in ways more subtle than depersonalised empirical data. (29-30)

A crucial distinction between literary and sociological approaches to African women's migration lies in their differing epistemological commitments. Sociological accounts of migration privilege empirical generalised knowledge of this phenomenon. Where African women are mentioned, they often appear as categories – “migrant women”, “trafficked women”, international female students or professionals”, or “illegal migrants”. This categorisation flattens individual subjectivities. In contrast, literature produces what may be understood as experiential truth – a mode of knowing grounded in affect, subjectivity, and lived

experience. According to Martha C. Nussbaum (1990), literary narratives offer forms of ethical and emotional knowledge that cannot be captured through abstract or quantitative frameworks, instead cultivating finely tuned perceptions of human experience. Literary representation of migration foregrounds subjectivity and embodies various accounts of migration – legal or illegal, economic or personal, or as a result of war or conflict. Here, migration goes beyond being a demographic phenomenon that deals with numbers and statistics, but becomes a felt condition, influenced by dislocation, alienation, longing and memory.

In the context of African women's migration, this means that while sociological accounts may document patterns of displacement, labour, or exploitation, literary texts such as *Americanah*, *On Black Sisters' Street*, and *Beyond the Horizon* render the interior landscapes of migration – capturing ambivalence, desire, trauma, and agency in ways that resist quantification. Through narrative voice, focalisation, and affective depth, these texts foreground the complexities of gendered migration as lived experience rather than abstract data. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) further suggests, the novel form enables a dialogic representation of truth, one that emerges through multiple, often conflicting voices and perspectives. Thus, literary representations of African women's migration do not simply complement sociological accounts; they challenge their epistemic limits, revealing dimensions of migrant experience – particularly those shaped by gender, embodiment, and affect – that cannot be captured by purely empirical modes of analysis. As Carole Boyce Davies (1994) argues, the reliance on empirical categories risks obscuring the “migratory subjectivity” of black women, whose experiences are marked by fragmentation, contradiction, and self-reinvention (17).

Thus, the writers under review are not interested in providing an empirical or statistical overview of migration; rather, they use literature, an imaginative work of art, to account for African women's involvement in contemporary migration. As an important tool, literature therefore “provides an important means of understanding and interpreting aspects of society such as politics, religion, social conflict, class struggle, and the human condition” (Ezeigbo, 1991: 1), not as factual experiences, but as fictional representations of these experiences.

These female writers are part of a new generation of female African writers who are reclaiming their voices, especially in relation to African women's involvement in contemporary African migration literature. However, as this research will establish, they are continuing in the literary tradition of the earlier generation of female African writers like Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Amma Ata Aidoo, and Flora Nwapa, to mention a few, who represented how African women were suppressed and marginalised to the margin, and how

they struggled to break from various patriarchal cultural limits, even when they migrate out of Africa, like Emecheta in *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Through their works, the six selected writers are accounting for the active participation of African women in contemporary migration, and they represent this through nuanced perspectives and literary elements which this thesis explores.

In *Americanah*, Adichie reconfigures migration as an intimate negotiation of race, desire, and belonging, particularly through Ifemelu's evolving consciousness of Blackness in the United States. Rather than presenting migration as a linear trajectory, Adichie employs a nonlinear narrative structure that reflects what Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as the "orientation" of bodies in space – how migrants come to inhabit and be shaped by unfamiliar social worlds (6). Here, migration is not merely movement across borders but a reorientation of the self.

Similarly, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* engage critically with sociological discourses on trafficking and sex work, which often frame African women as passive victims of transnational exploitation. While acknowledging structural coercion, both authors complicate this narrative by foregrounding ambivalent agency. Sisi, Efe, and Mara are not reducible to sociological typologies; rather, they embody what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) might term the difficulty of recovering the subaltern voice within dominant discourses. Their choices emerge from constrained circumstances but are nonetheless marked by aspiration, intentional calculation, and survival. In this way, literary narratives resist the reductive binaries of victimhood and autonomy that often structure sociological analysis.

Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* further illustrates the limitations of sociological frameworks by foregrounding the affective dimensions of displacement. Through the child narrator Darling, migration is rendered as a process of disillusionment and fractured identity, exposing what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls the "melancholic migrant" – a subject caught between loss and adaptation (140). The novel's shifting tonal register – from playful to tragic – captures the emotional volatility that statistical accounts cannot adequately represent.

The questions of in-betweenness and return are most poignantly explored in Wicomb's *October* and Aboulela's *The Translator*. Both texts disrupt the linear temporality that underpins sociological models of migration (pre-departure, transit, settlement). Instead, they depict migration as a recursive condition, marked by memory, longing, and partial belonging. Wicomb's elliptical narrative style reflects the instability of diasporic identity, while Aboulela's focus on faith and interiority introduces dimensions of spiritual negotiation often absent from secular sociological discourse.

As Brah's (1996) notion of diaspora space suggests, identity is not fixed but continuously produced through the interplay of past and present, here and elsewhere. Crucially, literary texts also foreground the politics of voice and representation. Sociological accounts, despite their empirical rigour, often translate lived experience into analytic language, thereby risking the erasure of linguistic nuance, silence, and affect. In contrast, the multilingualism, code-switching, and narrative experimentation in these novels restore the texture of migrant voices. This is particularly significant in the context of African women's migration, where experiences of trauma, exploitation, and resilience frequently exceed the limits of conventional discourse. Taken together, these texts demonstrate that literature functions not merely as a reflection of social reality but as a critical intervention into dominant knowledge systems. While sociological analysis maps the structural conditions of migration, literature reveals its embodied, affective, and ethical dimensions, thereby exposing the limits of empiricism.

As Davies (1994) argues, Black women's writing "rewrites the terms of migration itself," shifting the focus from movement as a socio-economic phenomenon to migration as a lived, contested, and deeply gendered experience (21). Thus, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach that reads literary texts alongside, but not subordinate to, sociological accounts. By doing so, it positions African feminist literature as a vital site of knowledge production – one that re-humanises migrant subjects, complicates reductive narratives, and foregrounds the nuanced realities of African women's transnational lives.

NEW VOICES, SAME PREOCCUPATION?

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed the emergence of contemporary female African voices, many born in the 1960s and 1970s, who are concerned not just with tracing the trajectory of the mass migration of Africans to the West, but also with situating the pivotal involvement and participation of African women. What is often described as the "emergence" of contemporary African women's writing on migration is more accurately understood as a continuation and radical expansion of an earlier feminist literary tradition, rather than a rupture from it. Writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Amma Darko, NoViolet Bulawayo, Zoë Wicomb, and Leila Aboulela do not inaugurate a new concern with African women's mobility; rather, they extend and reconfigure a lineage of feminist interrogation already evident in the works of earlier writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, and Ama Ata Aidoo. As Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* demonstrates, the gendered violence, racial marginalisation, and economic precarity that structure African women's

migration to the West have long been central concerns, particularly in the representation of Adah's struggle for autonomy within patriarchal and diasporic constraints. Similarly, Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* offers a significant critique of the ideological seductions of Europe, exposing migration as a site of disillusionment and neo-colonial encounter rather than uncomplicated aspiration.

Contemporary writers inherit these thematic preoccupations but intensify their focus on agency, subjectivity, and narrative self-articulation, thereby refusing the historical marginalisation of African women within both migration discourse and African literary production. Where earlier male-authored migration narratives frequently rendered women peripheral or symbolic, contemporary texts insist on African women as central epistemic subjects – individuals who not only experience migration but interpret, narrate, and contest it. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, for instance, Sisi, Efe, Joyce, and Ama are not merely victims of transnational exploitation; they are complex subjects negotiating constrained choices within global systems of inequality, thereby complicating reductive victimhood narratives. Likewise, Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* embodies the brutal intersections of patriarchy and global capitalism, yet her narrative voice simultaneously exposes and resists these structures. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's migration is not simply a movement across space but a critical reconstitution of selfhood, mediated through race, gender, and transnational consciousness.

Thus, rather than marking a departure from earlier African women's writing, these contemporary texts consolidate an African feminist project: the transformation of African women from objects of narration into self-defining subjects and epistemological authorities. This shift is not merely representational but ideological. As Carole Boyce Davies (1994) argues, Black women's writing enacts a movement from "silencing to self-naming," a process through which African women reclaim narrative agency and redefine their positionality within both national and transnational spaces. The contemporary corpus extends this project into the terrain of global migration, foregrounding how intersecting structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape the lived experiences of African migrant women. Consequently, themes such as hybridity, sexual economies, trafficking, solidarity, and transnational identity are not new preoccupations but evolving sites of feminist critique, made more evident through the intensified conditions of contemporary migration.

In this sense, contemporary African women's migration narratives do not simply "add" African women to an existing migration discourse; they fundamentally reconfigure the terms of that discourse, exposing the epistemic limitations of earlier male-dominated narratives and insisting on migration as a deeply gendered, embodied, and affective experience. By centring

the voices of characters such as Sisi, Efe, Joyce, Ama, Mara, and Ifemelu, these writers produce what may be understood as experiential truths of migration – truths that resist abstraction and instead illuminate the complex, often contradictory realities of African women’s transnational lives.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate the representation of African female migrants’ lived experiences in selected novels, foregrounding gender and feminism as significant analytical frameworks. Drawing on transnational and postcolonial black feminist theories, it examines the specificities of African women’s migratory experiences within a global context structured by unequal power relations. Central to this inquiry are questions of hybridity, belonging, identity negotiation, and return migration – concepts that illuminate the shifting, often contested, subjectivities of African women in diaspora.

While it may be tempting to frame contemporary African women’s migration writing as a recent development, such a position, as argued above, risks obscuring the historical continuity of African women’s engagement with mobility, displacement, and identity formation. African migration has long been gendered, even though scholarship and literary representation have disproportionately privileged male experiences. Similarly, African women writers have, for decades, engaged themes of movement, belonging, and alienation. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, and Ama Ata Aidoo mentioned above, were already interrogating the intersections of gender, culture, and displacement, particularly in relation to colonial and postcolonial transformations. For instance, Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* foregrounds the racialised and gendered precarity of African women in Britain, while Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* offers a sustained critique of Europe as a site of both aspiration and alienation.

What distinguishes the contemporary writers examined in this study – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, NoViolet Bulawayo, Leila Aboulela, Zoë Wicomb, and Amma Darko – is not a departure from these earlier concerns but a reconfiguration of them within the contexts of contemporary global migrations. Many of these writers are themselves migrants, and their positionality enables them to engage migration not as abstraction but as lived, embodied experience. In this sense, their works produce what may be understood as *experiential truths* of migration mentioned earlier. Their narratives are therefore not merely representational but epistemological interventions into how African women’s migration is understood.

Moreover, contemporary African women writers move decisively beyond the marginalisation that characterised both male-authored migration narratives and earlier critical frameworks. As I argued above, they do not simply insert African women into an already existing migration discourse; rather, they redefine the terms of that discourse by positioning African women as central, self-defining subjects. This is evident in the ways they construct female characters who migrate not as passive dependents but as active agents negotiating complex socio-economic and cultural terrains. Importantly, while some writers such as Unigwe and Darko draw on empirical methods – interviews, research into trafficking networks – their ultimate intervention is literary: they transform lived realities into narrative forms that foreground interiority, voice, and agency, thereby resisting reductive victimhood narratives.

A central preoccupation in the works examined in this study is the fluid and often unstable construction of identity in transnational spaces. While earlier writers such as Aidoo, Nwapa, and Head were primarily concerned with the tensions between tradition and modernity or the aftermath of colonialism, contemporary writers extend these concerns into the domain of global migration, where identity is shaped not only by local cultural dynamics but also by race, class, gender, and geopolitics. However, to suggest that these thematic concerns are entirely new would be misleading. Rather, they represent an evolution of earlier feminist concerns, now refracted through the conditions of diaspora and globalisation. As Carole Boyce Davies (1994) argues, Black women's writing is characterised by a continuous process of "migration of the subject," in which identity is constantly reconstituted across spaces and histories. The contemporary texts under study exemplify this process, foregrounding the multiplicity and instability of African women's identities in transnational contexts.

Furthermore, the repositioning of African women from the margins to the centre of migration discourse must be understood as both a literary and political intervention. As Modupe Kolawale argues in "Feminine Preoccupations in African Literature" (2000):

Feminine issues have emerged as one of the most recent perspectives in African literary scholarship. One cannot deny the impact of gender on the writer and critic of African literature. Gender has become ubiquitous in modern humanistic studies. It becomes inevitably significant in Africa because the earliest writers and critics were male and logically, there was a dearth of feminine representation. (115)

Thus, the emergence of strong female African voices addresses the dearth of female representation in African literature, in general, and African migration literature, in particular.

Contemporary African women writers directly confront this gap, producing narratives that foreground women's participation in migration as complex, multifaceted, and deeply gendered. In doing so, they align with what Pauline Ada Uwakweh (2023) identifies as a new generation of writers who function as "chroniclers of African immigrants' realities," who are "making bold and remarkable contributions to the growing corpus of literature centring on the African migration experience" (1), offering readers nuanced insights into the lived experiences of African migrant women. Uwakweh also asserts that these contemporary voices serve as "the lenses through which readers can glimpse and appreciate the challenges facing African migrants especially women, in the transnational diaspora" (15).

At the same time, this study complicates dominant sociological narratives of the feminisation of migration. While scholars such as George Masanja argue that African women's migration is often driven by familial survival strategies (83), this thesis contends that such explanations, though valuable, are insufficient. The literary texts under consideration reveal a more complex picture in which many African women migrate as autonomous subjects pursuing personal aspirations – education, economic independence, self-realisation – even when these aspirations are shaped by structural and familial constraints. Characters such as those in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* illustrate that migration may emerge from both necessity and agency, often simultaneously. Thus, rather than reducing African women's migration to economic determinism, these narratives foreground the interplay between constraint and choice.

Ultimately, this study argues that contemporary African women's migration literature must be read as part of a continuum of feminist literary production, one that moves from earlier critiques of patriarchy and colonialism to more complex engagements with globalisation, transnationalism, and identity. By centring African women's voices, these writers not only fill a representational gap but also challenge the epistemological limits of male-dominated migration discourse, offering instead a nuanced, embodied, and deeply human account of migration as lived experience.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it examines the various ways gender and feminist literary frameworks can contribute to the acknowledgement of African women's involvement in migration. This study examines how the identities of African women can be affected as a result of the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality during migration. Thus, the selected novels are analysed to explore the representation of African women's migration experiences in

literature. The writers examine various aspects of the experiences of female African migrants in different Western locations. For instance, Unigwe and Darko explore sex work and the dehumanising experiences of African women in Europe, where they have to sell their bodies to survive; Adichie and Bulawayo explore the challenges of young African women like Ifemelu and Darling, who left their countries in Africa for a better life in America; and Wicomb and Aboulela interrogate belonging, and the feeling of “homeliness” African women like Mercia and Sammar have to grapple with in the United Kingdom. It is therefore important to consider the following questions, which will help provide critical insights to this study:

1. In recent times, what are the drivers of female African migration to the following locations – Europe, America, and Britain? and how have the writers captured these in their novels?
2. In what ways are the writers “repositioning” African women’s involvement in migration?
3. What critical theories can be utilised to explore the experiences of African women living at the borders of Western societies as captured by the novels under review?
4. How do the writers interrogate belonging, identity negotiation, and the possibilities of return in their fictional representation of female African migrants’ experiences?

To answer these questions, I will critically examine the push and pull factors that have continued to drive African women's migration over the last two decades, taking into consideration the motivations behind the choice of destination countries for the protagonists in the selected novels. It is important to note that the choice of the host country is a determining factor for female African migrant characters. As stated above, Ifemelu and Darling choose America as their destination country because it is believed to be the land of opportunity where dreams are made and achieved. Germany and Belgium are major hubs for human trafficking and major migration routes in Europe. Prostitution is legalised in these European countries, and due to the high demand for sex work in these locations, young African women are lured to work as sex workers in exchange for a better life. This promise of a better life is one of the reasons some of the women in Unigwe’s and Darko’s novels choose to migrate, even though they are aware they will be selling their bodies to strangers. The UK is a desired destination for the protagonists in Wicomb’s and Aboulela’s novels due to the colonial connections between Britain and certain African countries, such as South Africa and Sudan. South Africa was colonised by the British in 1910, and the British played a significant role in shaping South

Africa's history, particularly its political and racial dynamics. The coloured population, which was the result of this relationship, has since continued to face discrimination and marginalisation as a result of not being accepted by the white and black populations in South Africa. Mercia's decision to migrate to Britain is to escape the racial identity challenges she faced while growing up. For Sammar, who was born in Britain before relocating back to Sudan with her parents at the age of seven, returning to Britain following her marriage to Tariq can be considered a return to the place of her birth and early childhood. Even after Tariq's death and burial in Sudan, Sammar will return to the UK, as that is the place where she can make sense of her grief. Thus, the choice of destination as well as the condition of their home countries are important factors in the decision to migrate for the female protagonists in the selected novels.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theoretically informed literary methodology that goes beyond thematic analysis to engage critically with the aesthetic, formal, and representational complexities of fiction. While it draws on interdisciplinary insights from migration studies, gender studies, and feminist theory, its primary commitment remains to close literary analysis, with particular attention to how meaning is produced through narrative form, genre, and representation. This study approaches the selected texts as constructed literary artefacts, instead of being reflections of social reality, because they actively shape, mediate, and interrogate the lived experiences of African migrant women. In this sense, the analysis is informed by an understanding of representation not as mere depiction but as a discursive and aesthetic process through which meanings are produced, contested, and reconfigured. The study therefore examines not only what is represented but how it is represented, and to what ideological and affective effects.

Methodologically, this research combines close textual analysis with thematic and discursive reading practices, foregrounding the interplay between form and content. This involves detailed attention to narrative voice, focalisation, temporality, characterisation, and language, as well as to the generic frameworks – such as the migrant novel, the Bildungsroman, and the transnational narrative – within which these texts operate. By situating the selected works within these literary traditions, the study interrogates how contemporary African women writers both draw on and transform established genres to articulate gendered experiences of migration. In addition, the study engages critically with the concept of literary realism, not as a straightforward mirroring of reality but as a strategic mode of representation that constructs

“experiential truths” about migration. The novels are thus read as sites where lived experience is mediated through narrative techniques, affective registers, and symbolic structures, enabling a more nuanced understanding of African women’s migration than is available through purely empirical or sociological accounts.

The analysis is further informed by transnational and postcolonial black feminist frameworks, which provide critical tools for examining how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in the production of migrant identities. These theoretical perspectives enable the study to interrogate the power relations embedded in both the narratives themselves and the broader discourses of migration within which they are situated.

Primary sources for this research consist of six selected novels by contemporary African women writers (Adichie, Bulawayo, Unigwe, Darko, Wicomb, and Aboulela), while secondary sources include scholarly monographs, journal articles, and critical essays that engage with African literature, migration studies, and feminist theory. These materials are used not as supplementary background but as critical interlocutors, enabling a dialogic engagement between literary texts and theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, this methodology reflects the central aim of the thesis: to demonstrate that literary representations of African women’s migration are not merely illustrative of social realities but constitute complex sites of meaning-making, where gendered experiences of mobility, identity, and belonging are imaginatively produced, contested, and re-imagined.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Structurally, this thesis is divided into three main sections. The first section (Chapter One) comprises a review of relevant literature on the existing research on African women’s migration experiences. The second section comprises the analysis chapters, namely chapters two, three, and four. Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* are explored in chapter two. Adichie’s *Americanah* and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* are explored in Chapter Three. The final analysis chapter focuses on the migration experiences of African women in the United Kingdom, critically exploring works by South African Zoe Wicomb, in *October*, and Sudanese-born Leila Aboulela, in *The Translator*. The conclusion provides an overview of the key points discussed in this study. It outlines the gaps not covered as well as the limitations of this study. This section also presents the study’s contribution to existing and new research on African women’s experiences of migration in African literature, and provides recommendations for future research in other Western countries to which African women migrate.

By pairing two writers in each analysis chapter, this study aims to explore the intricate ways in which the selected writers represent the experiences of African women in various settings, through their literary narratives. Each chapter explores the inner workings of the minds of the female protagonists as the reader is exposed to what can make young African women engage in migration in the first place, with some of them even going through illegal trafficking channels to escape their home countries. Each analysis chapter also examines the significance of the location the novels are set in, because the experiences of the characters are not homogeneous, even though they are all female African migrants. There are experiences that are specific to the various locations, and this study explores the nuanced nature of female African migrant experiences. The reader is also invited to view migration from an African woman's perspective, which differs from how male African writers explored it in some of their works, like Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Benjamin Zephaniah's *The Refugee Boy* (2001), and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007).

The ordering of the analytical chapters is deliberately structured to reflect both a conceptual progression and a geographical mapping of African women's migratory experiences, thereby reinforcing the central argument of this thesis as outlined in the introduction. Chapter Two begins with *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Beyond the Horizon* because these texts most explicitly foreground the structural constraints and material conditions – including economic precarity, cultural marginalisation, and sexual economies – that often precipitate African women's migration. By starting here, the thesis establishes migration not as abstract mobility but as a gendered and often coercive process, shaped by global inequalities that leave African women with limited choices. Chapter Three then moves to *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, where the focus shifts towards the affective, racial, and identity-based dimensions of migration, particularly in the United States. This progression allows for an exploration of how migrant subjectivity is reconstituted through encounters with race, belonging, and transnational consciousness. Finally, Chapter Four examines *October* and *The Translator*, situating African women's migration within the United Kingdom, a country in which I deliberately chose to live with my family, and where I am currently engaging in research, thereby foregrounding questions of home and return, memory, spirituality, and intellectual belonging. This final positioning is significant, as these texts offer more introspective and reflexive engagements with migration, enabling the thesis to move from conditions of departure and survival towards more complex (personal) negotiations of identity, home, and diasporic consciousness. The pairing of texts within each chapter is therefore not arbitrary but comparative, allowing for a sustained interrogation of both shared thematic

concerns and divergent narrative strategies across different geopolitical contexts. Collectively, this ordering mirrors the thesis's broader intervention: to trace African women's migration as a continuum of experiences – material, affective, and epistemological – while foregrounding the ways in which literary narratives construct nuanced, location-specific, and gendered meanings of migration. This structural progression also reflects the study's methodological commitment to close, comparative literary analysis, as outlined in the methodology chapter, by enabling a layered examination of how different narrative forms and genres produce meaning across shifting contexts. In doing so, it reinforces the central claim advanced in the introduction that African women's migration, as represented in fiction, must be understood not as a singular or linear phenomenon but as a complex, evolving, and narratively mediated experience. Beyond its comparative analysis of six contemporary African women's novels, this thesis contributes to African literary studies by identifying the diverse formal and thematic features that together trace the diversity of literary approaches to African women's migration experiences, which are also diverse as represented in the six novels, making it centred on gendered mobility, displacement, and transnational belonging.

CHAPTER 1: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRANT AFRICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by comparing transnational African women's migration narratives through a critical examination of six texts by female African writers set in the United States, Europe, and Britain, with particular focus on Scotland. While existing studies have examined individual authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or NoViolet Bulawayo within diaspora and transnational frameworks, this thesis offers a robust examination of African women's migratory experiences across diverse geographical contexts and how these experiences impact their identities; thus, it explores a comparative analysis of the texts, to critically examine how the writers represent migration and their protagonists' lived experiences in Europe, America, and Britain. Significantly, this study foregrounds "blackness" as a defining condition of African women's migration, as it considers the gendered dimensions of contemporary African mobility. By doing this, it addresses a critical gap in literary scholarship – examining race and gender as mutually constitutive forces that shape recent migratory experiences.

African migration has a complex history interwoven with the continent's social, economic, cultural, and political realities. Throughout history, the African continent has experienced numerous waves of migration, both within and beyond its borders. Many of these movements have been influenced by factors such as climate change, economic opportunities, slavery, wars and conflicts, natural disasters, and the search for better living conditions. However, the experiences of African migrant women in previous and contemporary migrations have not been properly acknowledged. Writings about African women's migration experiences gained prominence in the late 20th century, although African women had been migrating for centuries. Most of the literature and critical writings on African migration focused on a collective migration experience or were written from a predominantly male perspective, ignoring or failing to acknowledge the African woman's perspective. Very little importance has been given to the suffering endured by African women during the slave trade, where many of them were turned into "baby-making machines" to sustain the slavery project (Robertson and Klein, 1983; Hine and Thompson, 1998; Morgan, 2004).¹

¹ Robertson and Klein (1983), and Hine and Thompson (1998) highlight how African women's rights were abused during slavery, and how sexual violence has been sustained in migration.

While African men also experienced exploitation through migration and slavery, this chapter emphasises that African women faced and still face distinct forms of exploitation, shaped by the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality, from slavery to contemporary migrations (Crenshaw, 1991; Robertson and Klein, 1983). Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues that the “silence” surrounding black women’s role in migration does not reflect absence, but the limits of dominant historiographical frameworks. This chapter critically examines how the gendered configuration of mobility resonates in contemporary African migration and is represented in literature, especially the six novels under review.

While the conditions of twenty-first-century migration differ significantly from those of earlier periods, persistent logics, such as the commodification of black women’s bodies, racialised labour, and constrained agency within global economic structures, continue to shape African women’s migratory experiences. Thus, the relationship between the past and the present is not one of equivalence, but of historical echo and structural continuity, which the six novels illuminate in nuanced ways.

This chapter, therefore, examines relevant critical works by feminists and scholars who interrogate the experiences of migrants, particularly African women. It examines how they explore the interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and identity to illuminate the diverse range of experiences of African women during the migration process. Barbara Smith (1977) argues that any discussion of writing by women of African descent must embody the realisation that the politics of sex, race, and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of African women writers because, without these, she states firmly that “one will not ever know what these writers mean” (23).

Recent critical works extend Smith’s argument by examining migration as an affective and embodied process, yet a gap still exists and there is a need to integrate comparative literary representations of African women’s migratory experiences across multiple global locations into migration debates. This thesis addresses that gap by examining the intersection of literary analysis and migration studies, demonstrating how literature not only reflects but also actively theorises migratory experiences of African women. Collectively, the novels under review map African women’s migration across the Europe, the United States, and Britain – from the intersection of migration, sexual exploitation, and precarity in Europe (*On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Beyond the Horizon*), to racialisation in the United States (*Americanah* and *We Need New Names*), and to the intellectual, postcolonial, and spiritual negotiation of life in Scotland (*October* and *The Translator*). Across these locations, as the novels establish, migration emerges as a process of continual negotiation rather than a linear journey from origin to

destination. The novels not only document contemporary experiences of migration but also rework historical continuity in gendered mobility. The writers who have experienced migration themselves use their novels to challenge dominant migration narratives that prioritise economic rationality, while also highlighting the affective, relational, and gendered dimensions of migration. They explore how these politics of sex, race, class, and gender are interwoven, offering important insights into why African women, especially in contemporary times, migrate, how migration impacts their identities, and why their stories (from an African woman's perspective) are worthy of being told through literature. Through their novels, they frame blackness as an important aspect of their female protagonists' lives.

BLACKNESS AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S MIGRATION EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

One important trope connects the six female African migrant writers: their framing of blackness. Across their novels, blackness is not represented as a stable or singular identity marker; rather, it is a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent condition that is shaped by migration. Collectively, the novels demonstrate that it is not simply carried from "home" to the "host" country; rather, it is produced through encounters with race, gender, nation, history, and labour. In the novels, the writers nuance the concept of blackness differently, depending on the conditions of migration, the destination, and the experiences of their protagonists in the host countries.

In *Americanah*, for instance, Adichie frames blackness as a learned identity, rather than an inherent one. Ifemelu informs the reader that, prior to her migration to America, she never considered race important because in her country, Nigeria, it was not an issue. She only became "black" when she came to America. This highlights how blackness is socially constructed through specific historical and racial contexts, rather than being an inherent or "universal" category. In many ways, Adichie's representation reflects Stuart Hall's argument that identities are not fixed essences but are "produced" within historical and cultural representations (Hall, 1990). Adichie also uses Ifemelu's blog (a significant narrative device) to further expose intra-black hierarchies, distinguishing between "American Blacks" (African Americans) and "Non-American Blacks" (African immigrants), and this destabilises notions of diasporic unity. This distinction resonates with Paul Gilroy's (1993) conception of the Black Atlantic, which understands diasporic identities as heterogeneous and historically constituted through transnational encounters with race and modernity. Although Gilroy's analysis primarily

addresses the Atlantic diaspora shaped by slavery, his framework provides a useful lens for examining the racialisation and identity negotiations experienced by contemporary African migrants in the United States. Moreover, Ifemelu's observations demonstrate that African immigrants must "learn" racial codes to navigate social belonging, reinforcing Sara Ahmed's position that identities are shaped through processes of orientation and social encounters rather than existing prior to them (Ahmed, 2006). This is why Ifemelu starts off by warning her readers, whom she addresses as "Dear Non-American blacks", undermining the assumed universality of the African American experience as black experience. Through these representations, *Americanah* interrogates blackness as a shifting relational and transnational identity produced within global systems of race and migration.

Similarly, in *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo frames blackness as a condition of cultural displacement and linguistic alienation. Through the novel's fragmented narrative structure, Bulawayo mirrors the instability of Darling's migrant experience and the fractured identity that emerges from her relocation to America. Darling gradually learns that social acceptance largely depends upon her ability to "speak" and "act" American, revealing the pressures of assimilation that accompany migration. In this regard, language becomes not merely a communicative tool but a mechanism through which racial belonging and exclusion are negotiated. Bulawayo's representation reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) argument that migrant identities are produced within an ambivalent "third space" of cultural negotiation, where subjects are compelled to constantly translate and remake themselves between cultures.

Bulawayo further uses Darling's experience to demonstrate a shift from national identity to racial categorisation, as her Zimbabwean identity becomes subsumed under the broader racial category of "blackness" in America. This reflects Stuart Hall's assertion that diasporic identities are continuously reconstructed through historical and social processes rather than grounded in stable origins (Hall 1990). The novel also reveals how blackness is mediated through systems of assimilation and exclusion, where belonging remains conditional despite attempts at cultural adaptation.

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* frames blackness as inseparable from the commodification of the female African body within European sexual economies. The four women's migration to Belgium exposes how blackness is romanticised, racialised, and economically exploited. There is repeated emphasis by their clients on the women's skin colour and how it increases their desirability, revealing what bell hooks (1992) describes as the commodification of racial "otherness" within consumer culture, where difference becomes an

object of pleasure and consumption. Thus, the fetishisation of African women in Belgium, as the novel represents, frames blackness as a marketable identity that is shaped by demand within global circuits of labour and desire. *Moreso*, the novel illustrates how gender and race intersect with transnational migration systems, reinforcing Patricia Hill Collins' argument that black women's bodies are frequently positioned within a "matrix of domination", shaped by race, gender, class and sexuality (Collins, 1991). The narrative's shifting polyphonic perspective further emphasises how the women negotiate identity within constrained conditions.

Similarly, Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* exposes the intersection of blackness, gender and class through Mara's experience in Germany. Her reality is totally different from her expectations. Her experience reveals how migration impacts identity and produces blackness as a condition of structural vulnerability. Mara's body becomes a site of continuous exploitation, controlled by both African patriarchal systems and European economic structures. Mara's exploitation also reflects Sylvia Wynter's argument that Black subjects have historically been positioned within colonial systems that reduce Black bodies to labouring and exploitable entities within global capitalist economies (Wynter, 2003). With the use of linear narration, Darko underscores the gradual realisation of Mara's exploitation, highlighting how blackness intersects with gender, class, and sexuality to produce multiple layers of marginalisation (Collins, 1990).

In terms of existing critical gaps, scholarship on both novels frequently frames African women primarily through the discourse of trafficking, prostitution, and victimhood, a tendency that risks flattening the complexity of black female subjectivity. Such readings often privilege suffering over agency and reduce African women's experiences to spectacles of exploitation. This thesis challenges these interpretations by demonstrating how these novels construct forms of agency, voice, and resistance even within highly constrained conditions. In doing so, the study aligns with Saba Mahmood's argument that agency should not be understood solely as resistance to domination, but also as the capacity to act and negotiate within structures of constraint (Mahmood, 2005). Consequently, these texts complicate dominant representations of African women as passive victims of transnational sexual exploitation and instead foreground the contradictory, negotiated, and multidimensional nature of black female migrant subjectivity.

In *October*, blackness is negotiated through silence, distance, and cultural estrangement, rather than overt discrimination. However, Mercia's experience in the academic and social spaces in Scotland reveals a more subtle but persistent form of racialisation. Wicomb's use of a restrained narrative style reflects her framing of blackness as an unspoken

yet visible structuring presence that determines Mercia's sense of homeliness or unhomeliness in both Scotland and South Africa, where she is classified as "coloured". This subtle negotiation of identity resonates with Sara Ahmed's argument that belonging is shaped by spatial orientations, in which certain bodies are made to feel "out of place" despite formal inclusion (Ahmed, 2006). Mercia's experience also reflects Homi Bhabha's conception of unhomeliness in his essay "The World and the Home", in which the postcolonial subject inhabits an ambivalent space between cultures and national identities, never fully belonging to either the homeland or the host nation (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 141-148). Moreover, Wicomb's attention to the category of "coloured" identity exposes the instability of racial classifications themselves, reinforcing Stuart Hall's assertion that racial identities are historically produced, contingent, and relational rather than fixed essences (Hall, 1990).

Conversely, in *The Translator*, blackness intersects with migration, race, and religion, complicating Western secular notions of identity. Through Sammar's experience in Aberdeen, Aboulela frames blackness around Muslim identity, and this produces a layered form of difference that exceeds racial categorisation alone. In this regard, the novel reflects Edward Said's argument that Muslim identities within Western discourse are frequently constructed through orientalist frameworks that mark them as culturally and politically "other" (Said, 1978). Sammar's experience demonstrates how racialisation operates not only through skin colour but also through religion, language, and cultural practice, thereby complicating reductive understandings of blackness. Aboulela's emphasis on spirituality and interiority also aligns with Talal Asad's critique of secular modernity, which argues that Western secular frameworks often fail to account for the centrality of faith in shaping subjectivity and belonging (Asad, 2003). Here, migration is not represented as a simple journey from origin to destination; rather, through a narrative that focuses on interiority and spirituality, Aboulela reframes Sammar's migration as an ethical and emotional journey, where belonging is negotiated through faith as much as through race. Hence, the novel is as much about Sammar's "migration" as it is about Rae's, and only mutual understanding through "translation" guarantees both parties a sense of home and belonging. At the same time, Aboulela challenges dominant Western narratives that position Muslim migrant women solely within frameworks of oppression or cultural incompatibility, instead foregrounding the complexity of spiritual and emotional belonging.

A gap in the criticism of Wicomb and Aboulela is the tendency to frame their novels primarily through postcolonial identity, hybridity, and exile, with insufficient attention to how blackness operates within a specifically racialised Scottish context shaped by national and

historical encounters. This thesis addresses that gap by foregrounding Scotland as a critical meeting point where blackness is negotiated through both British imperial histories and contemporary global migrations. In doing so, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on Blackness in Scotland and extends Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic by examining Scotland not as peripheral to racial modernity, but as deeply implicated in the historical and cultural production of race.

Blackness in these texts is neither fixed nor universal; rather, it is a dynamic, historically mediated condition produced through migration and shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and power. With close attention to both thematic and narrative forms, this thesis demonstrates that the selected female African writers do not simply represent the migration of their female protagonists as a movement from Africa to the West, but they also reconfigure in nuanced ways the meanings of blackness within contemporary transnational contexts and how it impacts their protagonists' identities. Thus, this thesis addresses critical gaps in existing scholarship and criticism on African migratory experiences. Significantly, this thesis also examines how, within their framing of blackness, the selected writers incorporate gender as a significant factor in their protagonists' experiences.

INCORPORATING GENDER INTO MIGRATION DISCOURSE

As this chapter argues, it is important to examine African migration through a gendered lens because the study and representation of this phenomenon have been shaped by gender, with the experiences of African men receiving more acknowledgement, while there has been a dearth in the representation of African women's participation and experience in migration. Feminism provides a gendered perspective on migration. Feminism addresses systemic inequalities against women, while also seeking to challenge and dismantle patriarchal systems that perpetuate discrimination against women. It seeks to make women's participation in every field of endeavour, including migration, worthy of acknowledgement. Feminist scholarship aims to achieve two things: to deconstruct a predominantly male cultural and historical paradigm, and to reconstruct a female perspective in an effort that has silenced and marginalised women. Pam Morris (1993) defines feminism as:

[a] political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) That gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systemic social injustice; and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity, but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda: to understand

the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality, and then to change them. (1)

Contemporary feminists, such as Morris, have taken on the responsibility of situating or incorporating gender into discourses related to women, including migration discourse, which is the focus of this research. In their view, however, gender does not relate solely to sex. Molar Ogundipe (2007) argues that “gender is not sex as sex is not gender. Gender is the stated roles that are ascribed to men and women based on what is perceived to be their sex in society” (12). This echoes Morris’s claim that gender is not biological. Gender is thus a social paradigm, not a biological feature, that defines individuals based on certain social and cultural expectations, and it impacts migration (who migrates and how they migrate, including the motivation behind such movements). Stephanie Nawyn (2010) also considers gender as a constitutive element of migration. She examines how gender permeates many facets of reality, identity, and institutions. Gender is a practice or ideology that shapes power relations in families, communities, and whole societies, and as such, should be worthy of proper representation in research (749-65). Nawyn also laments how mainstream migration studies have not fully embraced feminist migration analysis and theory as worthy of interrogation and research.

While the volume of migration scholarship addressing gender has increased significantly in other fields, its integration into other aspects of migration literature has remained limited in recent decades. Monica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco (2003) decry the absence of or, at most, the limited representation of migrant women’s experiences in traditional migration theories. They argue that these traditional theories fail to help us understand the circumstances that encourage women to become transnational migrants, to enter into trafficking channels, or to seek refugee status. Incorporating gender into migration theory, according to these authors, involves becoming conversant with the various types of migration, including temporary, permanent, illegal, labour, and conflict-induced migrations. They also argue that gender is integral to migration and is deeply embedded in determining who moves, how this movement takes place, and the resultant futures of migrant women. Thus, migration does not happen in a vacuum, especially in contemporary times; the experiences of individuals, both men and women, in their home countries that make them want to migrate, and in the host countries that attract them, determine the migration processes, including the routes or means of migration.

The majority of the critical literature on migration has attempted to theorise immigration mainly in terms of the “push and pull” factors that propel humans to leave their

countries of origin for other places, especially for economic, political, safety, and personal reasons. However, gender has not typically been considered as a significant factor that might influence migration and the attendant experiences of immigrants. It was not until the late 20th century that critics, especially feminists, began to interrogate the specific effects of migration on female immigrants. According to Christiane Timmerman et al. (2018), research on migration has made significant progress. In traditional migration research, we found that the pioneering male labour migrant would often be followed by women for family reunification or formation. Jorgen Carling, in *Global Migration Perspectives* (2005), identifies four different causal relations between gender and migration. First, gender may have an impact on the size, direction, and composition of migration flows, as well as the motivation and perception of migrants, particularly for men and women. Secondly, migration can conversely impact gender relations and experiences between men and women, and even between migrant women. Carling argues that “Even within the same community, the consequences of migration can be very different for married and single female migrants” (7) because the challenges faced by young and single women may be different from what older or married women face during migration; a clear example is the difference in the experiences the female protagonists in Unigwe’s novel face as single women, which are different from Darko’s Mara, who is married. Thirdly, gender can also define the wider consequences of migration because “The changes in gender relations as a result of migration is itself a social consequence” (7). Lastly, the representations of migration are embedded in gender relations as they “influence not only migration itself but people’s ways of thinking about migration” (8), which makes it important for there to be a balanced examination of migration from not just men’s point of view but also from the perspective of female migrants.

This is what the selected female African writers who have experienced migration themselves do with their fictional narratives that explore migration from the perspectives of female migrants. They project gender as an important factor in the migratory experiences of their protagonists – it affects them in their home countries, where they face gender inequalities, abuse, and violence; it also affects them in the host countries to which they migrate, as some of them continue to face gender abuse as well as other forms of exploitation. Mara in Darko’s novel is a typical example. In her home country, Ghana, she faces gender and sexual exploitation from her husband, Akobi; some of these were steeped in culture and tradition that place women in inferior positions. Her exploitation continues in Germany, where she learns that she is not the only woman whose husband has turned his wife into a commercial prostitute;

there are other helpless African women who have become sex workers managed by their husbands for their selfish financial and patriarchal benefits.

Gender is, therefore, a key factor that should be considered in the discussion of African women's migration experience. Palmary et al (2010) argue that gender has come to be imagined as central to our understanding of migration, both politically and economically. They explore visibility, vulnerability, and credibility as three key thematic areas of inquiry in migration studies, particularly in relation to women's involvement. Like Carling, these feminist critics also consider migration as an intensely gendered experience. Gender is a key variable of the new migration-driven super-diversity, intersecting with other dimensions of diversity, such as immigration status, education, age, and occupation (Vertovec, 2007).² With the new shift in modern migrations, one that takes into account the migration of women in recent times (what scholars term the feminisation of migration), gender intersects with other defining factors such as the legal or illegal status of migrants, the opportunities open to them, their educational qualifications, their age, and the type of jobs they can do (Piper, 2005).³ However, scholars like Katharine Donato and Donna Gabaccia (2015) argue that feminisation of migration is not simply about numbers, but must be understood in terms of agency, visibility, and structural constraints, rather than just demographic shifts. The experiences of migration to Europe of the female characters in Unigwe's and Darko's novels clearly support this point; they are illegal migrants, they are black women, their educational qualifications do not count, and they can only work as prostitutes because their immigration status makes them "unseen" and open to being exploited.

As already explained above, my research examines the integral role of gender in the migratory experiences of African women, utilising selected novels by female African writers as case studies. Like the aforementioned feminist critics, I also argue that gender should be incorporated into African migration discourse. It is important to consider African migration from a female perspective to avoid what Chimamanda Adichie terms "The Danger of a Single Story" (TED Global, 2009).⁴ Historically, the experiences of men in almost all facets of life in Africa have been given prominence, while those of women have been ignored or neglected, making African women occupy inferior positions, even in issues that concern them. The

² Vertovec (2007) introduces the concept of "super-diversity" to describe the increasing complexity of contemporary migration patterns, which are shaped by multiple intersecting variables, including legal status, education, ethnicity, gender, and age.

³ In "Feminisation of Migration and the Social Dimensions of Globalisation", Piper (2005) explores how gender intersects with legal status, labour segmentation, and social vulnerability.

⁴ Adichie (2009) emphasises the importance of diverse narratives in reclaiming agency, particularly for African women whose stories have been marginalised.

perceived inferiority of African women can be revisited and possibly corrected in migration discourse if issues concerning women – their bodies, their opinions (voice), their specific experiences, and their choices – are considered worthy of research and protection. Thus, my research interrogates how the writers under review act as “agents” for African women’s experiences of migration. Being agents means that they take active and intentional roles in shaping their narratives about these experiences. They also provide new perspectives that challenge stereotypes, and their works highlight the unique struggles African migrant women face and celebrate their resilience as they navigate survival in foreign and sometimes hostile places.

EXAMINING AFRICAN WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVES IN MIGRATION LITERATURE

We have already discussed how feminists such as Stephanie Nawyn, Monica Boyd, and Elizabeth Grieco, among others, have advocated for the incorporation of gender (especially in relation to women’s experiences) into migration discourse. In their view, having just a male or universal perspective on migration is misleading and unrepresentative of half or more of the people who engage in contemporary migration – women. Similarly, African feminists such as Omolara Ogundipe (2007) and Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2018) have critiqued the examination of African women’s experiences through a “male-centred” or Western feminist lens. Helen Neville and Jennifer Hamer in “We Make Freedom” (2001) call for the need to develop a new framework within mainstream feminist literary criticism that will cater to women of African descent and other women of colour, because this framework is required to address the gaps in the literature of black women globally; they argue further that “black women’s experiences are in part, shaped by a myriad of interlocking systems of oppressions that are framed within the context of the political economy of a given society” (438-440). In my view, Neville and Hamer argue that migrating women are not spared the experience of oppression in host countries where they find themselves, but writing about these experiences by female African writers will help give a voice to African migrant women; it will create a counter-narrative of African migration experience, this time from an African woman’s point of view. Instead of African women occupying insignificant or limited roles, as seen in migration literature written by African men, the selected female writers create stories about African women. Their female protagonists are the central characters, and they are given the power to direct their own destinies and face the consequences of their decisions. Thus, their works explore the journey or *migration* of African

women from limited positions to the centre, especially within African migration literature, where a dearth of African women's experiences existed.

The journey motif, which was mentioned above as central to both migration literature and travel writing, is an important feature of female African migrant literature. The novels explored in my corpus chronicle the journeys from various parts of Africa to different Western countries, as well as the psychological journeys of the protagonists from pre-defined objects to self-defining subjects, as I argued earlier in this chapter. A prominent voice of the second-wave feminist movement, Mary Helen Washington in *Midnight Birds* (1980) argues that the journey for an African female writer is "part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimisation to consciousness" (43). Agreeing with this position, Susan Willis (1985), another important figure in the second-wave feminist movement, argues that every journey by African women represents a growth in consciousness, and no matter how perilous it may be, the journey provides a means for defining the self (220). This is why female African writers such as Adichie, Unigwe, Darko, Bulawayo, Wicomb, and Aboulela represent female protagonists who undertake migration for self-gratification and fulfilment, even though the journey is "perilous". Some of the protagonists make a conscious decision to migrate to escape cultural, socio-economic, religious, racial, and gender limitations prevalent in their home countries. Hence, their journeys are self-motivated.

The journey motif in migration and travel writing is therefore employed repeatedly by writers to develop plots, characters, settings, and themes. The development of characters is significant in the journey motif; any journey they undertake can affect them physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Olanda Collins (2003) argues that physical change in the environment is intrinsically valuable to the character's development (22). Similarly, Andrew Nyongesa (2014) argues that:

The character journeys for the simple personal ambition into far territories to explore environment and opportunities as well. In short, the journey motif is the recurrent use of different kinds of journey in a work of literature for a given purpose. A literary writer uses it to develop and sustain the structure of a story. (6)

The journey in the earliest African travel and migration writings (fiction, biographies, and autobiographies) did not involve the positive exploration of the new place nor of opportunities, as Nyongesa argues. However, it almost always meant the Middle Passage or the movement of enslaved people from Africa to the Americas to a life of servitude. Olaudah Equiano's 1789 slave narrative is an example, as it recounts his journey from freedom in West Africa to

enslavement in the Americas and his eventual liberation. In contemporary African women's writing on migration, the journey now goes beyond physical displacement or a change of environment; as argued above, it also encompasses a movement towards the actualisation of selfhood. Contemporary feminist Deborah McDowell (2017) also argues that the journey motif is a recurring theme in the novels of female African writers; even though we can find this motif in the works of male African authors, it is not used in the same way by male African writers:

For example, the journey of the [African] male characters in works by [African] men takes him underground [...] and is primarily political and social in its implications [...] The [African] female's journey, on the other hand, though at times touching the political and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey. (610)

While this assertion is not always true, as there are also personal, economic, and psychological reasons behind contemporary migration by African men, African women's migration in recent times has been driven by personal motives (the need to escape problems in Africa). Hence, some of the young female African protagonists in the selected novels decide to migrate, even illegally, as in Unigwe's novel.

Apart from the journey being an important element of female African migrant literature, African women writers explore a sense of community and sisterhood in their fiction. The writers in my corpus represent female protagonists who face isolation, discrimination, and exploitation in the host countries they find themselves in; however, they emphasise a strong sense of solidarity among their protagonists. *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Beyond the Horizon* are two novels that reflect the importance of female solidarity and a sense of commitment among female African migrants facing exploitation by sex-trafficking networks – Oga Dele and Madam in the former, and Akobi and Osey in the latter. The four women in Unigwe's novel end up sharing stories about themselves when they realise that they are all they have in the lonely streets of Antwerp, and they build a strong connection that transcends their time working together as prostitutes. Mara and Osey's wife, Vivian, become not just friends bound by the shared experience of exploitation by their husbands; they become "sisters" who stand up for each other as they navigate ways to escape the bondage their husbands have put them in. Hence, a strong sense of community and solidarity among female African migrants is key in the literature about their experiences.

Another important feature of female African migrant literature is the exploration of sexuality. Sexuality is explored by African female writers in different ways. It can be viewed in terms of an African woman's physical attributes, which are most often considered in the

biological sense. A woman, especially in the African worldview, is not considered beautiful and complete unless she fulfils her biological roles (which most times are considered sexual roles), which include the satisfaction of a man's pleasure and procreation. Akachi Ezeigbo (1996) argues that the problems that "follow the [African] female" as an inferior human being are rooted in the insistence by society that "a woman's body makes the woman" (8). African feminist writers and critics in recent times have begun to contest this ideal of the African woman's sexuality as being tied to the African man's (or society's) approval or satisfaction. What is particularly evident in my corpus is that the contemporary writers create spaces where their female characters challenge traditional sexual expectations of women; these characters sometimes define the kind of men they want to have, and the terms of their engagement. Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah* is an example of an African woman who does not care about other people's or societal opinions about her life and choices. In America, she dates a white man, cheats on him for the fun of cheating, and breaks up with him after a while. She eventually ends up with her childhood lover, Obinze, who is already married. Her actions, to some people, may be considered immodest for a "respectable" African woman, but Adichie is more concerned with presenting African women who break stereotypes. The four prostitutes in *On Black Sisters' Street* also find ways of negotiating their sexuality, sometimes at their own expense; for instance, Sisi is murdered because she decides she will no longer continue in the prostitution trade but rather wishes to settle with a white man who falls in love with her. Her decision angers the pimp, Oga Dele, an African man who does not see any value in a woman other than the money her body brings.

By creating strong women in their works, these writers not only challenge the erroneous notion that a woman's body defines her but also present women who are capable of reclaiming their bodies, their sexuality, and their voice, even if it means dying like Sisi in *On Black Sisters' Street* or being called names like Ifemelu in *Americanah*. The writers do not examine migration in isolation; instead, they interrogate the issues that lead African women, especially young and promising women like their female protagonists, to migrate in the first place, even taking illegal routes. They advocate for the appreciation of an African woman's perspective on the African migration experience in different ways. They are also interested in representing the general and specific experiences of migrant African women in the settings of their novels, thereby fulfilling literature's objective of representing the human condition. Migration is a crucial aspect of the human condition, and it has become a global issue in contemporary times, as growing numbers of people move from different parts of the world. As established above, there has also been an increase in the migration of women, particularly young African women. My study is therefore

interested in exploring African women's migration through critical theoretical frameworks. This will help us understand not only the experiences of African women when they migrate but also provide insights into how migration impacts their identities as migrant women in foreign countries, such as America, the United Kingdom, and Europe.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO FEMALE AFRICAN MIGRATION EXPERIENCES IN THE SELECTED NOVELS

This study is informed by various interdisciplinary theories, concepts, and perspectives, including feminist literary theory and criticism, which were discussed briefly earlier in this chapter. Feminist critical theory examines how literature and other cultural productions reinforce or undermine women's economic, political, social, and psychological oppression. It is interdisciplinary, cutting across various fields and disciplines. However, it has often been seen by non-white women as a Western ideology. This is because the earliest proponents of feminism were predominantly white, middle-class women, whose concerns differed significantly from those of women from other continents, cultures, races, and classes. Thus, some feminists, especially those who are non-white, tend to debunk some feminist claims of speaking for women globally and addressing their issues as equal victims of oppression. This knowledge that feminism as a broad framework cannot fully provide answers to women's problems globally has given rise to what in feminism is called "multiple voices", where specific ideologies are established to cater to the needs of specific or collective groups of women. This study examines the experiences of migrant African women in Europe, America, and the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is necessary to consider relevant theories and concepts that account for the specific and diverse experiences of African women who reside within, between, and at the margins of nation-state boundaries.

Feminism is broad, as discussed above, and has been criticised for not taking into consideration the specific needs of non-white women globally. As a result, some new feminist ideologies have been developed to address the concerns of non-white and non-Western women, such as African women migrants living at the margins of Western societies. For female African migrants whose migration decisions are influenced by their historical, political, and economic backgrounds, this study examines theories and frameworks that account for these factors. While black feminism or African feminism might seem suitable for this study, the core principles of black feminism were initially designed to serve the needs of African American women (hooks, 1981). In contrast, African feminism focuses on African women residing in Africa (Arndt, 2002). Both feminist approaches critique Eurocentric feminist perspectives but

are shaped by different geographical and socio-cultural contexts. Consequently, both have limitations when applied to African women's experiences outside the United States or Africa. This highlights the need for feminist theories that specifically address the experiences of migrant African women at Western borders, examining why they migrated and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their new environments. Therefore, this study explores two interconnected feminist frameworks—postcolonial and transnational black feminism—to analyse the experiences of female African migrants in the selected novels.

Postcolonial black feminist theory helps our understanding of the novels under review. Postcolonial black feminism is an offshoot of postcolonialism, a theory that emerged in the late 20th century and has been applied in various fields, including history, sociology, and literature, among others. A brief understanding of postcolonialism will enable us to appreciate its application in feminism and its relation to the novels under review, written by women from countries that have been impacted by colonialism. Postcolonialism as a theoretical field extends beyond the temporal meaning of “after colonialism” to examine the ongoing cultural, political, and epistemological effects of colonial power in the present. However, postcolonial critics conceptualise these legacies differently. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991), for instance, critiques essentialist notions of postcolonial identity and nationalism, arguing that postcolonial societies are shaped by complex transnational and cosmopolitan encounters rather than fixed cultural identities. In contrast, Homi Bhabha (1994) focuses on hybridity, ambivalence, and the “third space” to demonstrate how colonial authority is destabilised through processes of cultural negotiation and mimicry. Postcolonialism also examines time and space as important factors in determining how formerly colonised people interact with or challenge colonial legacies through various means, such as writing, theorising, and, more recently, migration. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988; 1995), however, is primarily concerned with questions of representation and subalternity, particularly the ways in which colonised subjects, especially women, are excluded from dominant systems of knowledge production. For Spivak, postcolonial theory establishes spaces for non-Western or non-white people, which she termed “subaltern” peoples, such as African women, to speak for themselves in their own voices, thereby balancing the imbalanced relationship between colonists and colonial subjects – the us-and-them/self and other binary power relationship. The subaltern woman, according to Spivak, occupies a doubly marginalised position produced through both colonial and patriarchal discourse.

As a period, colonialism has shaped the lives of more than three-quarters of the world's population. These experiences can be examined politically and economically, but the general

impact or influence on ordinary people is often less evident. Here is where literature comes to the fore. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, in the introduction of their book, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), define literature as a tool that:

[...] offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing and through other arts [...] that the day to day realities experienced by colonised peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential. (11)

Thus, literature written by writers from once-colonised countries explores the day-to-day realities of the people, including their experiences of migration within and outside their countries. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin proceed to define “postcolonial” as a term that “covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process, from the moment of colonisation to the present day” (16) because they see a continuity of the effects of colonialism, some of which make individuals from formerly colonised nations embark on migration. Andrew Smith (2004) argues that postcolonial studies centres on “the idea that the relationship between narrative and movement takes place on a new and qualitatively different significance in the context and aftermath of colonialism” (242). Postcolonialism can also help us understand the gendered nature of movements captured by migrant writers, such as the female African writers under review, who explore some of the residual effects of colonialism that compel African women to migrate.

As argued above, feminism is inherently interdisciplinary; it informs and influences other theories and frameworks. It shares some similarities with postcolonial theory, as both examine how women, in this case, African women, are represented in literature, particularly in African migration literature. Bahri (2004) explains that “feminist theory and postcolonial theory are occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalisation, and the relation between politics and literature” (201). Both frameworks have been considered together, as they allow for the avoidance of “blind spots.” For instance, postcolonialism may not be attentive to gender issues, and likewise, feminist studies might not be attentive to the residual effects of colonialism. Thus, a combination of both frameworks will focus on the experiences of women in postcolonial societies (societies that have been impacted by colonialism) or in societies where they exist as the “other”, like the societies represented in the selected novels (America, Europe, and the United Kingdom). According to Bahri (2004):

A postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention both to the subject and to the medium of

representation. It also requires a general critical literacy, the capacity to read the world (specifically, in this context, gender relations with a critical eye). (201)

Postcolonial feminism, therefore, examines how women and their experiences are represented in literature, enabling readers to understand how and why women face oppression and exploitation.

This is why Rosemary Marangoly (1999) argues that “[f]rom the early 1980s onward, postcolonial feminism [...] has been culturally concerned with the terms in which knowledge about non-Western women was produced, circulated and utilised” (211). She identifies some features of postcolonial feminism:

[...] postcolonial feminist scholarship has at its characteristic markings: the fashioning of cautionary signposts, the disclosure of absences, an insistence on what cannot be represented in elite texts, an emphasis on the more than ‘purely literary’, and the persistent embedding of gendered difference in a larger understanding of race, nationality, class, and caste. (211-212).

She argues further that “gender must be understood as operating in tandem with the pressures of race, class, sexuality, and location” (213). This is why the selected texts can be considered postcolonial black feminist novels, as they interrogate the intersections of history, race, gender, and sexuality, and the specific locations within the identities of the female African migrant characters. Hybridity, a crucial concept in postcolonialism, plays a significant role in the characters’ renegotiation of identity in the novels. The protagonists undergo various “shifts” in their identities as a result of their migration to Western countries. As a concept in postcolonial theory, hybridity therefore refers to “a third space that gives birth to new signs of identity through a negotiation of differences” (Bhabha, 1994, 25). Homi Bhabha lists three key concepts that constitute hybridity: ambivalence, mimicry, and unhomeliness. Some of the characters in the novels, like Adichie’s Ifemelu and Bulawayo’s Darling, experience that feeling of being here and there, as they also struggle to imitate the way of life of the host land; others, like the protagonists of Zoe Wicomb’s *October* and Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*, experience that sense of not feeling at home in Scotland.

Similar to postcolonial black feminism, transnational black feminism also interrogates the intersection of these factors, particularly examining the various ways they impact the identities of female protagonists in transnational spaces. Transnational black feminism is also an offshoot of transnationalism, a theory that examines processes and activities that extend beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Transnationalism refers to the movement of people,

cultures, and capital across national borders. According to Conway (2019), the term “transnational” is a “way to name the dramatically increasing flows of people, things, images, and ideas, across the borders of nation-states in an era of globalisation” (43). As an important framework, then, transnational black feminism examines the interconnectedness of black/African women’s experiences across different geographical and cultural contexts. It also explores how race, gender, class, and other social categories intersect to affect black women’s identity and experiences in a global context. Afropolitanism, a key concept in transnationalism, is also crucial to our understanding of the protagonists’ identity formation and repositioning in the six selected novels. Afropolitanism has come to mean different things to various critics, including Taiye Selasi, Achille Mbembe, Jack Taylor, and Caroline Lyle. As a concept, Afropolitanism has been employed over the past decade to describe the transnational African identity, particularly in relation to migration. Previously used to describe the experiences of Africans born outside the continent but connected to Africa through familial ties, Afropolitanism has now come to denote a new phenomenology of Africanness — a way of being African in the world (Selasi, 2005; Mbembe, 2009; Gikandi, 2011). According to these critics, Afropolitanism involves examining the histories and antecedents that make up modern migration of Africans, for instance, colonialism.

In *Transnational Black Feminism and Qualitative Research* (2021), Tanja Burkhard interrogates local and global contexts of colonialism, race, and migration, especially as they relate to black women. Feminists like Filomina Chioma Steady (1981), Carole Boyce-Davies (1994), Emejulu and Sobande (2019), and Tanja Burkhard (2021), among others, argue for a transnational black feminism that advocates for the liberation and sense of sisterhood/solidarity among black women in contested spaces around the globe. This framework caters to the vast and heterogeneous experiences of black women across the globe, who resist all forms of cultural, social, gender, and sexual hegemony.

As a qualitative research framework, therefore, transnational black feminism centres on the narratives of black women; according to Burkhard, it is a method of analysis and storytelling that conceptualises “Black women’s ways of knowing by placing them in front and centre in the qualitative research process” (3), taking into consideration the historical, geographical, and social forces that shape black women’s complex and changing lives. A transnational black feminist approach is an accumulation of black feminist, African feminist, and transnational feminist practices, which, according to Burkhard, aim “to produce a methodological and theoretical lens that both attends to the particular lived experience of Black women as well as consideration of colonisation and the pursuit of anti-colonial practices

throughout the conceptualisation, implementation, and presentation of research” (4). Furthermore, any such work is required not only to contend with the genealogies of the feminist scholarship from which these ideas emerge, but also to work to de-essentialise hegemonic ideas about blackness and womanhood, and consequently black womanhood. Thus, “blackness” serves as a unifying political ideology for transnational black feminists such as Tanja Burkhard and Chioma Steady. Burkhard further argues that the experiences of black immigrants in general and women in particular have not been the focus of much research. The few studies that exist often fail to explicitly discuss who counts as black, an identity marker that has become politicised. Critical Race Theory, for instance, highlights how racial identity is not only socially constructed but also politically charged. Cabrera (2019) argues that this theory was not designed to represent a racial theory but to help scholars and activists develop theories about racism within societies. For example, in the United Kingdom, the term “black” includes Africans, Caribbeans, and mixed-race individuals. However, this inclusivity often obscures specific experiences and needs. Thus, being a black woman in a foreign country comes with challenges.

The writers examined in my study explore blackness or race as one of several factors that impact the identities of their female protagonists. These characters experience discrimination, alienation, and exploitation as a result of their skin colour. Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Darling in *We Need New Names*, “discover” that they are “black” in America, an identity marker that did not make sense to them before they migrated. The characters engaging in prostitution in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Beyond the Horizon* face dehumanising experiences working in the red-light districts in Antwerp and Brussels in Europe, as a result of their colour and other factors like their immigration status, gender, and sexual abuse. As stated above, feminists like Burkhard, Steady, Emejulu, and Sobande argue that transnational black feminism advocates for a sense of sisterhood or solidarity among black women in contested spaces. The writers, therefore, emphasise a strong sense of sisterhood between their female protagonists. Unigwe does this succinctly in her novel. The women she created, regardless of their vulnerability and their traumatic experience of daily selling their bodies to strangers, still find solace and solidarity among themselves. Efe declares that “the women are all that she has. They are all the family that she has in Europe” (40). This shows that the women have each other to run to, to hold hands with, and to dream, even though their present circumstances may seem bleak.

The writers also imbue their characters with feminist traits such as resilience and resistance in the face of challenges. Recent research has shown that migrant African women

face more challenges than men in host countries and have less access to economic resources. Oniwe Bernard (2017) asserts that there is a “stark difference in the [migration] experience between African men and women. The women, it appears, are more prone to become victims of dehumanisation on migrating to the countries of the global North” (21). One important positive theme these African feminist writers project in their narratives exploring African migrant women’s experiences is the dogged resilience with which their female characters navigate their everyday existence. Resilience is the ability to overcome life’s challenges and transform such challenges into positive growth. It can be asserted that resilience is one of the measures that migrant African women deploy to forge ahead, irrespective of the challenges they face in the countries where they find themselves. Olutoyin et al. (2018) argue that African migrant women’s resilience has received little attention in migration studies, despite their increased mobility. It is only when their resilience is celebrated and considered worthy of research that a clear pathway for the future of African migrant women will be established. The selected writers represent women who refuse to be silenced by their experiences of racism, sexual and gender exploitation, but instead find ways to “become” and “belong” in foreign countries, even if they lose their lives while striving to reclaim themselves, like Sisi in *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues that the challenges women of African descent face in the diaspora are linked to the “intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (228), which are considered universal concepts of domination. Collins coined the term “matrix of domination” to account for the exploitation and oppression of women based on the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. She argues that “the significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity” (415).

A transnational black feminist approach is therefore necessary for analysing the novels because it centres on the experiences of black women in transition. A “black-consciousness” approach, according to Burkhard, avoids the problem of theorising black identities and experiences through the nation or country of origin, as black migrant women face various challenges when they migrate based on factors such as their immigration status and their race. Transnational black feminism thus ensures that identities and movements can be considered across and beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Burkhard adds that a transnational black feminist framework challenges a “mono-directional way of conceptualising immigration and migration, as it allows for considerations of the ties, cultural practices, and identities that are

maintained, contested, imported, or muted in the context of analysis” (14). A transnational black feminist perspective, therefore, interrogates black migrant women’s experiences and identities before and after migration, as these shape their realities, especially when the issue of prostitution is considered. This is why Coleman King (2014) argues that a transnational perspective on black women’s lived experiences “allows us to move away from deterministic and static notions of blackness to incorporate a wider array of diasporic realities” (10). Like Collins and King, feminist scholars such as Emejulu and Sobande (2019) and Burkhard (2021) argue that intersectionality, which is an important principle of transnational black feminism, is the understanding that identities are multiplicative, complex, and never limited to just one identity marker such as race, class, gender, or sexual identity.

The term “intersectionality” was coined by the feminist Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1989 essay “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex” to discuss the various ways black women’s racial, sexual, and gender experiences are intertwined. For Delgado and Stefancic (2001), intersectionality is the “examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings” (15). Intersectionality scholars such as Crenshaw, Burkhard, Delgado, and Stefancic, among others, examine how the aforementioned factors interact to form a matrix of oppression or domination, one that affects the identities and experiences of African migrant women, as seen in the selected novels. Burkhard further argues that intersectionality may offer both individual and systemic analyses of oppression and lived experiences:

Taking a transnational stance means that we must consider the ways these systems translate or do not translate from place to place, meaning that raced, classed, or gendered or migrant identities and solidarities or divestments that rise to the fore after one immigrates may not have been important to an individual before migrating. (19)

Burkhard seeks to establish that some of the oppression and exploitation experienced by migrants, especially black women, come to the fore at the point of migration, rather than before they migrate. This is evident in the novels explored in this research. For instance, most of the women did not see race as one of their problems in their home countries, even though they were affected by economic, political, social, and gender inequality. As argued above, Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Darling in *We Need New Names*, regularly attest that they never knew they were “black” until they came to America which is a racialised society. The prostitutes in Unigwe’s and Darko’s novels experience untold exploitation and oppression as a result of their race in Belgium and Germany, and the female characters in Aboulela’s and Wicomb’s novels

struggle to belong to a society that sees them as different, even after living in Scotland for a very long time. Thus, transnational black feminism takes into account the specificity of the experiences of African or black women in locations outside their home countries, exploring how these women navigate belonging or not belonging in societies that consider them “other.” The texts can therefore be considered transnational black feminist texts because they explore what it means to live or belong at the margins of societies where multiple factors, like those mentioned above, intersect to shape the female characters’ identities. They have been chosen because they look at ways that African women have experienced exploitation, oppression, extortion, discrimination, and or racism both in Africa and in the Western countries to which they migrate.

Both postcolonial black and transnational black feminist theories examine how the selected female African writers represent female characters in their fictional narratives. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) see a relationship between both feminist theories because they highlight social and structural factors that continue to ensure power differences, including colonialism, racism, gender, and sexual and economic exploitation. Chandra Mohanty (2003) recommends a transnational and postcolonial solidarity approach that does not presume the existence of identical priorities or a common identity but focuses on concrete interconnectedness and interrelated issues that can lend themselves to producing activism and alliance-building across borders. Thus, a postcolonial-transnational framework provides a comparative global perspective, which, according to Gayatri Spivak (1990), “can gradually help us understand how our multiple identities function in different situations” (12). This perspective is interested in the stories of African migrant women living in-between cultures, and who occupy “marginalised” spaces because of their race or their class in society. It is interested in “recovering” the neglected voices of women who occupy marginalised spaces, especially when they migrate, and who become “othered” in foreign spaces. Ashcroft et al. (1995) state that:

In many different societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘others’, ‘colonised’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in postcolonial theory. Feminist and postcolonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist postcolonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance a female tradition or traditions for a male dominated canon. (249)

My selected writers are interested in situating African women's migration stories within the mainstream of what was once a male-dominated canon, and their stories can be analysed through the lens of both postcolonial and transnational black feminist theories as they challenge the cultural, racial, economic, and transnational domination of migrant African women. They tell their stories (both their personal stories and the stories of their female protagonists) in captivating ways that compel the reader to see reality or life from an African woman's perspective. They are also interested in how African women negotiate or re-negotiate their identities during migration, beyond the one-sided, inaccurate, or assumed framework of diaspora and Africa itself.

Ladele et al. (2017) posit that African female migrants' identities "may have to undergo new processes of transmutations, as people may have to individually or collectively negotiate social, economic and psychological transformations" (53). This burden of identity redefinition or re-negotiation has been undertaken by a vibrant class of African female writers, some of whom are examined in this thesis, and who, as I have argued above, can be considered postcolonial and transnational black feminist writers. As postcolonial black feminist writers, they write against repressive and discriminatory practices in host countries that hinder the actualisation of selfhood or self-identity of their female protagonists. They are audaciously uncovering various forms of racism, gender bias, and sexism that structure the oppression of migrant African women in those countries. They are also fast moving beyond the discussion of cultural domination, resistance, and subversion that African women face as seen in the literature of the earliest female African writers like Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, and Mariama Ba; this time, they are interested in how contemporary female African identities are altered, redefined, and re-negotiated by migration. To this class of African female writers and feminists, the "new" spaces where African migrant women find themselves affect or influence their femininity, abilities, sexualities, and familial obligations. One important issue explored by this class is the objectification of women's bodies, through prostitution and sexual abuse. We see this vividly in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Beyond the Horizon*, where migrant African women are lured by the promise of a better life in the West but are forced into prostitution and subjected to inhumane sexual practices. Through their fictional narratives, these writers show that African migrant women are more vulnerable than their male counterparts. However, these female writers are interested in creating strong female characters that move beyond their vulnerability both in Africa before they migrate, and in the host countries, to become self-defining individuals.

A conscious effort to trace migrant African women's lived experiences must take into account their national histories and post-immigration status in the host countries. Most feminist literature like *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* has argued that patriarchy is one of the major problems faced by African women, whether in their home countries or the diaspora. Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2018) argue that patriarchy, as a result of Western colonialism and African nationalism, has placed African women in an inferior position in the gender hierarchy and family structure. These issues have led more African women in contemporary times to desire to migrate to escape patriarchal control and social and economic limitations, like some of the women in Unigwe's novels. Ama for instance makes the conscious decision to leave Nigeria to escape from her past trauma of sexual abuse from her stepfather and also the economic hardship she has to grapple with daily. Efe, Sisi, and even Joyce (formerly Alek), all embark on their journey of "freedom" to escape challenges that tried to stifle them in their home countries. However, literature that focuses on African migrant women's experiences shows that these women face other challenges when they migrate beyond what they had hoped for in the West.

As stated above, the selected writers can also be considered transnational black feminist writers because they explore the challenging experiences of female African migrants through their fictional narratives. They examine how racism, gender, and sexual exploitation, among other issues, affect African women when they migrate. However, they do not solely focus on the negative aspects of migration on their female characters, as they also explore the ways in which these female characters can "survive" in societies that consider them as "others". Thus, they imbue their female protagonists with attributes to enable them to survive in migration. According to Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2018), any feminist inquiry or research on African migrant women should focus on fundamental questions about voice, power, and responsibility, as the "official" interpreters of African women's experiences (428-444). Adichie does this succinctly in *Americanah*; she gives Ifemelu, the central character, a voice and an inner strength which she wields. Ifemelu can "become" even after the earlier setbacks and racism she encounters when she comes to America. Adichie imbues Ifemelu with the power to reclaim or renegotiate her identity as an African woman in a foreign space. In a TED Talk delivered in December 2012, titled "We Should All Be Feminists", Adichie declared that she is an unapologetic feminist; she thus embraces her sexuality and everything that makes her a "female": "I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and for my femininity. And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness, because I deserve to be". Thus, she creates strong female characters in her fiction (novels and short stories), especially in *Americanah*, with Ifemelu

being unapologetically “feminist”, embracing her “femaleness”, even against African (patriarchal) and American (racial) expectations. Other writers in my corpus also represent female characters who strive to “rise” beyond the limitations and setbacks they experience, like illegal migrants (Unigwe’s and Darko’s women), or those struggling with belonging (Wicomb’s Mercia and Aboulela’s Sammar).

While this thesis is informed by African feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminism, and transnational Black feminism, it has also traced within a comparative framework, a range of aesthetic approaches that exist across African migrant novels. These approaches are not presented as new or comprehensive literary frameworks, but they are literary analytic strategies that emerge from a comparative reading of the selected novels. Existing traditions of African feminist literary criticism have been primarily concerned with recovering African women’s voices, interrogating patriarchal structures, and foregrounding culturally specific feminist epistemologies, while black feminist aesthetics has largely explored the relationship between black cultural expression, political resistance, memory, and identity within the broader black Atlantic experience. Although these approaches provide indispensable critical foundations, they do not fully account for the distinctive literary strategies through which African women writers represent migration as a gendered, transnational, and continually negotiated experience. This thesis argues that, across the selected texts, migration functions not merely as a thematic concern but as an organising principle of literary form. Features such as fragmented subjectivities, non-linear temporality, polyphonic narration, embodied memory, and relational forms of belonging collectively suggest the comparative nature of African feminist migrant literature. Rather than seeking stylistic uniformity or a singular representation of African womanhood, these aesthetic approaches are defined by multiplicity, mobility, and the negotiation of identities shaped by intersecting histories of colonialism, race, gender, displacement, and cultural encounter. The thesis therefore contributes not only to scholarship on African women’s writing and migration but also to ongoing debates about how literary form itself responds to the complexities of African women’s transnational experiences.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this chapter examines relevant critical theories that enhance our understanding of African women’s migration to Western host countries, particularly by analysing how the selected African female writers have represented this experience in their novels. This chapter establishes that feminism is a crucial theory in the analysis of women’s experiences in

literature, history, and other fields. However, due to the specific experiences of women of African descent, who have been historically affected by colonialism and engage in migration for various reasons, postcolonial and transnational black feminism(s) have been considered for the examination of the selected works. Also important is our understanding of how these theories find meaning or expression in the novels, and how the selected writers adopt them through their representation of female characters that defy African patriarchal and Western racial/gender expectations.

In addition, this thesis conceptualises a comparative set of literary aesthetic strategies through which African women writers represent the gendered experiences of migration, displacement, belonging, and the negotiation of identity. It is characterised not by a shared style but by diverse formal, thematic, and affective patterns that emerge across migrant narratives by African women. Significantly, this chapter argues that African women's migration has not been sufficiently theorised within broader migration discourse. By bringing feminist theory, migration studies, and literary analysis into dialogue, this study positions African women's writing as a critical site for rethinking migration itself. Methodologically, this chapter establishes the theoretical framework that underpins the thesis, drawing on intersectional, postcolonial, and transnational feminist approaches to guide the close textual analyses that follow. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for the subsequent chapters, which examine how each novel engages with specific migratory contexts while contributing to a broader understanding of African women's lived experiences across different geopolitical spaces.

CHAPTER 2: WOMEN IN TRANSITION: VULNERABILITY, EXPLOITATION, AND FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND *BEYOND THE HORIZON*

INTRODUCTION

“Armed with a vagina and the will to survive, she knew that destitution would never lay claim to her.” (Brian Chikwava’s “Seventh Street Alchemy”, epigraph to Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, 2010)

“But Mara, Mara, oh Mara, even if you don’t want to, you will still have to. For an illegal nigger woman like you, there is no other job in Germany. If you don’t get a housemaid job then there’s only this. You understand? Because you are too illegal and too black for any proper job, you get it?” (*Beyond the Horizon*, 1995, 114)

This chapter examines how Chika Unigwe and Amma Darko represent vulnerability and exploitation in their respective novels, especially how they frame female solidarity as a necessary tool needed by African women in a precarious situation like sex-trafficking in Europe. As this chapter establishes, the “sex work” motif is not new in African literature; male African writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi have previously addressed this issue in their fiction. However, their earlier representation examined sex workers in derogatory ways. Transnational sex trafficking is a significant issue interrogated by female African migrant writers like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, author of *Trafficked* (2008), and Abidemi Sanusi in her novel *Eyo* (2009), as well as the two novels explored in this chapter, *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2009) by Chika Unigwe and *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) by Amma Darko. In these novels, the writers represent the trafficking and selling of African women in the European/Western sex market as a twenty-first-century version of the slave trade (Hodge and Lietz, 2007). Pietro Deandrea (2015) describes sex trafficking as a “new slavery”, which involves at least one of the following types of vulnerability: economic exploitation, the denial of human rights, and coercion by violence, which the protagonists of the two novels under review experience. Deandrea argues that “the process by which new slaves are animalised, dehumanised [is] a necessary step towards their exploitation” (81), and that “the gruesomeness of the sex trade is probably most representative of this wasteland reducing humans to commodities or, again, to beasts” (82). This is true about the women in Unigwe’s and Darko’s novels, whose experience of exploitation in Europe is marked by a complete reduction of their humanity and identity. Relating the experiences of the women involved in sex trafficking to the slave trade, Rasheed Olaniyi (2003) describes them as “slaves of the new millennium” (49).

Unigwe and Darko explore the experiences of young African women whose lives are impacted as a result of their migration to Europe, in these cases Belgium and Germany. These two nations are considered “multicultural”, as well as the places where dreams of financial and material success can be achieved by Africans who escape to Europe. However, both writers destabilise the notion of Europe as the “Eldorado” through their representations of their protagonists’ realities. Critical reception of both novels focuses on how they expose Europe differently from the Eldorado narratives. Although both *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* have generated important scholarly discussions, the critical corpus surrounding them remains comparatively modest when measured against canonical African migrant novels such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* or NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*. Several factors may explain this disparity. First, both novels foreground prostitution, sex trafficking and migrant precarity, themes that have often led critics to read them primarily through sociological, feminist or human-rights frameworks rather than through broader literary, narratological or aesthetic approaches. Consequently, criticism has tended to revisit similar concerns – gender oppression, migration, exploitation and agency – rather than opening multiple new theoretical conversations.

Second, the publication histories of the novels partly explain their differing scholarly reception. Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* predates the contemporary surge of transnational African migration studies and Black diasporic literary criticism that accelerated during the 2000s and 2010s. By the time migration literature became a dominant field, critical attention had increasingly shifted towards later writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo and Imbolo Mbue, whose works became central within global literary debates. Third, both novels have often been examined alongside other African migration texts such as *Americanah* or *We Need New Names* – texts that are set in different geographical locations and focus on different migrant experiences. Finally, although scholarship on both texts has grown considerably in recent years, particularly regarding trauma, precarity, sex work and feminist negotiations of migration, these emerging studies also demonstrate that significant areas remain underexplored, including narrative form, literary aesthetics, memory, affect, temporality and comparative representations of diasporic belonging, especially in relation to Europe as a significant location.

Elisabeth Bekers (2008) argues that, until recently, it was difficult, for instance, to find any literary works by African writers in Belgium, a pattern similar to that seen in the German literary space. In his essay on racism and sex work in Antwerp, British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips (2004) in a Guardian Newspaper article stated that “non-white writers in Belgium have

no visible role in the society [...] non-whites in Belgium are yet to find a literary voice” (no. pp). Phillips lamented the invisible, often insignificant role of Africans or non-white writers in Belgian society. He argues that the story of black prostitutes in Belgium is not his to tell, but “others in Belgium have to tell it”. Unigwe’s response to that challenge was to engage in rigorous research on sex work involving African women, and *On Black Sisters’ Street* is the result of that academic and creative exercise. Darko’s novel is also borne out of the writer’s enquiry into the sex trade that involved African women in their novels. Rose A. Sackeyfio (2021) argues that novels like Unigwe’s and Darko’s, written by African women, highlight the double marginalisation of African women through both domestic abuse and global economic entrapment. Bawa Kammampool (2017) explores how Darko uses her novel to expose the harrowing physical and emotional toll of human trafficking. Both writers employed their creative and literary skills to critique a global phenomenon – migration; however, they examined how and why African women find themselves in precarious and vulnerable situations and become subjects of sex work and trafficking. A substantial body of criticism on both Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* converges around the question of female vulnerability in contexts of migration, patriarchy, economic deprivation, and transnational exploitation.

In this chapter, vulnerability plays an important role in discussing the protagonists’ experiences. Both novels have received critical attention, especially in relation to their representation of the vulnerable experiences of their female protagonists who are subjects of sex trafficking for sex work. Both novels reveal two forms of vulnerability that impact the protagonists’ lives – domestic and transnational. These influence their migration experiences. Most scholarship on trafficking and sex work tends to explore trafficked subjects as victims; however, neither Unigwe nor Darko not represent their protagonists as outright victims of transnational sex trafficking. Dina Ligaga (2017) argues that the protagonists in Unigwe’s novel are “vulnerable”; however, they “retain an ambiguous agency contained within their ability to survive and remain resilient in the face of atrocities as border crossers” (74). Ligaga conceptualises what she calls “ambiguous agency” – a feminist epistemology that demands the recognition of suffering and resilience as a way of navigating extreme violence. She argues thus, “I take vulnerability to mean exposure to danger, hurt, pain and violence. Yet, I read vulnerability as a form of action for survival and protest” (74). Therefore, this chapter acknowledges the vulnerability of the women in both novels, but it resists the urge to portray them as victims of their actions.

Both Chika Unigwe and Ama Darko, in their novels *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), offer harrowing portrayals of their female protagonists, who, in their pursuit of economic emancipation, become ensnared in transnational networks of trafficking and sex work. Although they examine the same issues, they do so with different intentions and in different ways, which this chapter critically examines. Unigwe's personal experience of living in Antwerp, Belgium, exposed her to the realities of African migrant life, particularly the sex trade in Europe. Her encounter with Nigerian and other African women working as sex workers in Antwerp's red-light districts inspired her to conduct rigorous research, weaving their stories into fiction. Backed by interviews and time spent observing Antwerp's red-light district, Unigwe "understood" the women's circumstances and their backstories, and her fiction blends these observations with creative imagination to give voice to African women whose stories and voices are often silenced.

Conversely, Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, first published in Germany under the title *Der verkaufte Traum* ("The Sold Dream"), reflects her rootedness in the German milieu. Her time in Germany gave her both first-hand, "eyewitness" insight into African migrant women's disillusionment, and then the narrative setting for Mara's forced descent into sex work. In the 1980s, while living in Germany, Darko was exposed to the harsh realities of African women navigating cultural displacement, racial prejudice, and economic marginality. She witnessed how many African women migrated to Germany with high hopes of prosperity, but ended up trapped in exploitative relationships, illegal marriage arrangements, or forced into sex work.

The lived experiences of the two authors are not similar, nor are their representations of their protagonists' experiences. The epigraph above from Unigwe's novel and the excerpt from Darko's highlight the differences in their portrayal of the experiences of female African prostitutes in Europe. Unigwe's epigraph presents a specific representation of prostitution as a potential expression of female agency, even though the author questions this by representing different angles her protagonists' stories take. Using a multifocal narrative technique where the experiences of four African prostitutes are related, Unigwe does not engage in a moralistic critique of the sex trade; instead, she reveals the different motivations and backstories of her protagonists, including their decisions to become illegal migrants, ready to "survive" with their "vaginas." Thus, Unigwe's language is multilayered, offering a polyvocal narrative structured around temporally complex experiences of transnational sex work, migration, and her characters' realities. On the other hand, the quote from Darko's novel foregrounds Mara's vulnerability as a result of her illegal status and the attendant exploitation that will become her reality in Germany; Darko thus employs a condemnatory approach to her representation of

African prostitutes in Europe. In contrast to Unigwe, her language is emotionally charged and figurative, dramatising patriarchal violence and female vulnerability.

Both writers employ other literary elements which will be discussed extensively in later sections of this chapter. They also employ terminologies like “sex work”, “sex workers”, “prostitutes”, and “prostitution”, which are used interchangeably. The semantic characterisation and lexical choices used to describe the female protagonists in both novels cannot be reduced to a simple binary choice between “sex workers/sex work” or “prostitutes/prostitution”. Instead, both writers intentionally navigate both terminologies to mirror the dialectical tension between neocolonial subjection and individual agency. The novels oscillate between the derogatory and oppressive institutional framework of the “prostitute”, enforced by the capitalist, patriarchal gaze of the trafficking network of pimps and overseers like Dele, Akobi and Osey) and the self-actualising, labour-conscious identity of the “sex worker”. Unigwe, for instance, humanises her protagonists by dismantling the singular stigmatised identity of the “prostitute” through a deeply nuanced vocabulary of survival, economic labour, and domestic sisterhood. Efe tells her sister Rita that Dele will get her a “job” in Belgium, where she will work and “earn easy money” (84). The narrator hints about Ama making the decision to travel abroad to work where “strange men” would “pay” for her services, and she would “earn” respect for being overseas and not “standing outside nightclubs in Lagos Island” (166). In these examples and others from Unigwe’s novel, there is a blurred line between the reference to prostitution and sex work, and this is also evident in Darko’s novel. Mara makes reference to what she is brought to do in Germany as “work”; even Osey tells her as evident in the excerpt above, that it is the only “job” available for an illegal migrant like herself: “This work that I am talking about, it is different and brings in plenty money too” (114), relating to the economic value Mara has to offer. The term “prostitution” also appears at different instances in the novel (pp. 116, 117), and at other places both terms are used interchangeably. At the end, Mara accepts her “job” as “once a prostitute, always a prostitute. The stamp would never leave me” (119). Therefore, this chapter will employ both terminologies interchangeably, depending on the contexts, as they relate to the vulnerability and exploitation African women experience at the margin of Western societies, where they are illegal and invisible.

The representation of African women’s vulnerability and exploitation in literature is shaped by historical, socio-economic, and gendered realities. African women writers have portrayed the dire circumstances that force African women into precarious migrations, which often culminate in systemic exploitation. For example, *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black*

Sisters' Street align with longstanding traditions in African literature that critique patriarchal and neocolonial structures, as evident in the works of female African literary pioneers, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Bâ. The novels by Darko and Unigwe, however, offer new directions in the discussion of the migrant experiences of African women in contemporary times, offering insights that were overlooked by pioneering female African writers, especially in their representation of sex trafficking and exploitation of African women in the West.

African women's migration to the West is typically considered an escape from hardship, exploitation, and other limiting situations in which African women find themselves. Literary representations reveal the harsh realities of displacement and systemic abuse that come with their migration experiences. Emecheta and a host of female writers of her generation explored how economic vulnerability curtails female autonomy; they questioned oppressive cultural practices that limit women's agency (Conde, 1989; Farida and Dass, 2024).⁵ Their literary offspring, like the two examined in this chapter, also follow that tradition of challenging the representation of African women's voices and experiences, especially in the context of contemporary African migration. They embed in their narratives what Florence Stratton (1994) refers to as "a discourse of resistance against patriarchal subjugation" (128), as seen in their representations of the "deep-seated structures that sustain female oppression" (128).⁶ This is exemplified in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009).

This chapter examines how Darko and Unigwe re-imagine African women's migration to the West, especially to Europe (Belgium and Germany), where both novels are set. Sex work is also critically examined, exploring the different ways in which each writer represents reality, because, as argued above, both writers address the same issues but in different ways. Building on Liz Kelly's (1988) "continuum of violence", this chapter explores vulnerability and exploitation as a continuum that begins in Africa before the women represented in both novels migrate, and that is sustained in Europe, opening them up to more forms of abuse and violence. Also critical is the exploration of feminist arguments regarding the legality or condemnation of sex work; this chapter examines both Darko's and Unigwe's stances on this issue and how

⁵ Conde in "Three Female Writers of Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Grace Ogot" (1981), and Farida and Dass in "Deconstructing Gender Equality: A Critical Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's Selected Novels" (2024), argue that the works of early female African writers challenge myths and ethnological generalisations that obscure African women's voices.

⁶ Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) calls for a re-evaluation of African literature through a gender-conscious lens.

these stances shape their representations of their protagonists' experiences in Germany and Belgium, respectively. The chapter concludes by examining female solidarity in both novels. It establishes that, regardless of their social visions and the different ways both authors represent the realities of female African migrants working as prostitutes in Europe, they both propose the formation of a strong female solidarity central to the women's ability to survive and make sense of their harsh realities as sex workers.

DARKO AND UNIGWE: PRO-SEX OR ANTI-SEX WORK?

Debates about the morality of prostitution have led to two dominant feminist perspectives, which are the anti-sex-work or radical feminists and the pro-sex-work or liberal feminists. Radical feminists view prostitution as the epitome of violence against women; hence, they condemn it. On the other hand, liberal feminists argue that most sex workers exercise their free will in their decision to participate in the sex trade. The radicals consider sex-work as exploitative, and they stress victimhood and subjugation as features of the sex-trade, while the liberal feminists support prostitution on the premise of the consent of the females involved. Radical feminists such as Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin, Shelia Jeffreys, and Janice Raymond, argue that prostitution is sexual slavery that leaves the victim with no choice, even when they consent. Kathleen Barry (1979), for instance, argues that prostitution, especially forced prostitution like Mara's in Darko's novel, is a form of exploitation, which she calls "sexual slavery." She states that "[f]emale sexual slavery is present in all situations where women or girls cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence; where, regardless of how they got into these conditions, they cannot get out, and when they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation" (139). This is also true of the female protagonists in Unigwe's novel; even though three of them agree or consent to work as prostitutes, they find it difficult to escape from their "debts" to Dele and Madam, which seem unending, and one of them, Sisi, dies trying to free herself from the shackles of the exploitative network.

These radical feminists consider women who engage in the sex trade as victims of circumstances, and they use terms such as "prostituted women," "survivors," and "victims," and they examine the trade as a form of "modern slavery" or "paid rape." They also reject the term "sex workers." Instead, they argue that such women are "sex objects." These feminists also consider sexual desires, satisfaction, and economic factors as the drivers of sexual exploitation across the world, as these factors give rise to movements of people, especially women, across borders, thereby creating a market for the selling of sex. Thus, **sex workers'** bodies become objectified to satisfy the sexual desires and fantasies of men across the globe.

This objectification of women's bodies is one of the ills of the sex trade, according to radical feminists. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) propounded the objectification theory that argues that when women are sexually objectified, they are treated as objects to be valued for their use by others. Women's bodies are erroneously perceived to belong more to men than to themselves, especially when it concerns sexual satisfaction, and this further portrays women's bodies as public domains meant for the satisfaction of men's pleasure. This is why Kelser (2002) argues that the institution of prostitution is the "absolute embodiment of patriarchal male-privilege" (219). Okolie-Osemena (2017) further argues that it is the objectification of women, owing to patriarchy, and usually sustained by gender inequality, that drives human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Thus, the sex worker is constructed as a representation of women's economic, sexual, and social repression in society as a whole.

Sex work or prostitution is not only considered violence against the women involved in the trade but also represents patriarchal oppression and violence against all women. Radical feminists consider the sex industry to be a male-driven market created to ensure male gratification, which does not act in the interest of women. This is why radical feminists consider men who receive sex from sex workers as "abusers," "users," and "perpetrators" of abuse. They argue that the root cause of trafficking for sexual exploitation is men's desire for sexual gratification. They also argue that the solution to the societal menace of sex work is to eradicate the sex industry completely. They advocate for the complete criminalisation of prostitution. For Shelia Jeffreys (1997), it is important to target the "perpetrators, both the men who abuse women and those who profit from the trade, such as pimps, whilst decriminalising and giving practical support to the women who have been abused" (6). This is why they consider women who engaged in the sex trade as victims.

Liberal feminists, on the other hand, argue that women have the right to decide to take part in the sex trade. To this group, women have the right to do with their bodies as they wish. They, however, recognise that some women engage in sex work out of lack of choice. Yet, they view the trade as a "potentially liberating terrain" (Chapkis, 1997, 1), offering some economic and financial independence. Liberal feminists distinguish between voluntary and forced migration in the sex trade. Instead of arguing for the eradication of the sex industry, liberal feminists seek the legalisation of the sex trade, as sex work is considered a legitimate form of employment that many migrant women engage in to escape poverty. In terms of language, these feminists adopt terms that are not suggestive of shame or disgust, unlike those used by the radicals. Instead of "prostitute," they prefer the term "sex-worker," a term coined by Carol

Leigh in the 1980s, because they recognise sex-work as a form of employment or exchange between a buyer and a seller.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, the way both writers explore prostitution is quite different. While Darko employs language suggestive of shame and disgust regarding Mara's and other women's experiences in *Beyond the Horizon*, Unigwe does not outright condemn the act. Instead, she represents her characters (three of them) as women who deliberately choose to "work" to be financially independent and to take care of their poor families and relatives back home. This is in line with Ifeanyi Onyeonoru's (2004) argument that African women who are subjects of prostitution and sex trafficking do so to improve their social and financial status, as well as their dependents back home. Unigwe's narrator tells us that the character Ama has chosen to come to Belgium to work for Dele, even enduring the sex she had with Dele in Lagos, because she wants a better life than the monotonous one she is used to in her Aunt's Buka: "It was this dream that spurred her to Antwerp; the men she slept with were, like Dele, just tools she needed to achieve her dream. And her dream was expansive enough to accommodate all of them" (169). In another instance, she tells the other women, "I am in Europe. I am earning my own money" (177). Thus, Unigwe paints sex work as a means for the women to make their own money, as we find in her representation of the other characters.

From the foregoing, Darko can be argued to be aligned with the anti-sex work or radical feminist stream because Mara's vulnerability and victimhood are evident in the novel, and the reader follows through the unpleasant experiences of Mara from Ghana to Germany. Darko does not paint sex work positively because Mara and other women in the novel do not enjoy any form of autonomy or agency. Even after Mara frees herself from Pompey, the pimp that Akobi places in charge of her and who exploits her, she falls under the control of another pimp, Oves, who treats her "better." At Oves' place, Mara exercises some autonomy, unlike when she was under Pompey's control, as Oves obtains her permission before allowing customers in. However, the point the writer tries to establish through her representation of Mara's experiences is that sex work, whether experienced on the woman's terms, with her consent, or by force, is a negative experience. Mara's life cannot be the same again following her introduction into prostitution. This is one of the negative sides of trafficking that Darko seeks to question in *Beyond the Horizon*. One may be forced to ask whether Mara, or women like her, ever truly enjoy freedom. Darko's novel provides, through Mara, a response that there is never true freedom for African prostitutes in Europe. This may, however, not be the case for the four prostitutes in Unigwe's novel. The women can gain their "freedom" once their debts to Dele have been paid. In fact, their motivations for coming to Europe differ from Mara's. While

Darko's protagonist comes to "join" her husband in Germany, but ends up becoming a sex worker, three of Unigwe's protagonists knowingly travel to Belgium to work as prostitutes, and know when and how they can become free, which is after the last euro is paid.

It is therefore difficult to characterise Chika Unigwe's depiction of sex work in the novel as an expression of either the radical or liberal feminist stance because, while her novel presents sex work as a modern form of slavery, she "redefines" sex work and the ways sex workers are portrayed and also invites her readers to use a different lens to engage, or rather, reconsider the subject critically. Although Unigwe presents a fictional account of the experiences of African women engaging in sex work in Europe, it is mediated by extensive research and based on interviews with real participants in the trade. In an interview, she narrates her encounter with African sex workers in the red-light district, displayed in glass windows like wares, and this informed her decision to engage in research and write about their stories:

Then, after I moved to Belgium, I made a journey by train from the north of the country to Brussels, and I remember passing through Brussels North and seeing all the prostitutes in the display windows. It struck me that here was a place where sex was not only very openly talked about but was also openly up for sale. That was one of my first cultural shocks. And when I realised that many of the African prostitutes in Antwerp were from Nigeria, I became really curious. *On Black Sisters' Street* was my way of answering all the questions I had. It was a book I wrote to satisfy my own curiosity. (Tunca et al., 2013, 55)

The novel thus tries to provide insights or "answers" into the many reasons why African women might choose to engage in sex work in Belgium and across Europe. This is why Unigwe does not entirely subscribe to the radical feminist view. She does not present her female protagonists as outright "victims;" instead, through each woman's backstory, she invites the reader to consider the many reasons why they engage in sex work. For instance, Chisom (Sisi) agrees to accept Dele's offer after she graduates with good grades, but still cannot get a job after two years because she has no "connections;" economic pressures and material longing are Sisi's reasons for choosing the life she finds herself in in Belgium. Efe and Ama agree to Dele's offer because they want better lives for themselves and their families back home. Only Alek (Joyce) can be argued to have no reason to choose sex work. However, circumstances beyond her control bring her to Belgium to "work" like the other women. This is why I argue that Unigwe wants her readers to look at the sex trade critically without being judgmental. As has been established elsewhere in this chapter, the sensitive nature of prostitution and sex trafficking makes some African writers avoid exploring it, but Unigwe is among the few who have

undertaken the task of telling the “truths” of African sex workers in Europe. She undertook rigorous research, which left her less judgmental, as she explained in an interview:

So I went to the red light district in a miniskirt and high boots and soon as I started talking to the girls, I began to completely unburden myself of whatever view I had of prostitutes. [...]. But also, the more I spoke to the women, the less judgmental I became, because I started to see them as human beings in whose shoes I can easily have been, had I been born into a different family. (Tuncan, et al., 2013, 55)

As a result of her interactions with real sex workers, Unigwe’s story makes the reader aware of various reasons African women engage in transnational sex work. According to Ifeyinwa Okolo (2019), “[i]n Unigwe’s hands, the women’s back stories are nuanced and morally complicated, asking the reader to consider their situations from many facets, rather than arriving at easy conclusions” (113).

Unigwe expressly imagines migration and the sex trade as contentious, politicised topics in her fiction, and *On Black Sisters’ Street* provokes questions from many conflicting, even contradictory angles. According to Okolo, “the novel is created as a contested space or site of struggle over ideas which are analogous of the struggles of the female characters” (117). Thus, Unigwe does not advocate looking at sex workers through a derogatory lens or as victims of their choices. Laura Reineras (2019) argues that Unigwe employs a unique narrative style (discussed earlier in this chapter) that gives each character a voice and resists standard categorisation. She presents four women who are endowed with their individual strength or subjectivity and, regardless of their circumstances, can tell their own stories, irrespective of how complicated their experiences have been.

Unigwe’s novel often seems to shift between the pro- and anti-sex work debates. Her women justify their moves as a means of attaining a better life and escaping poverty and frustration. They are all aware of the consequences of their decisions, which one of them, Sisi, finally experiences when she decides to break from the network she had initially consented to before embarking on the journey. Unigwe’s novel provides a middle ground between the two feminist stances on sex work and trafficking. This makes the novel a more nuanced narrative than Darko’s, which seems to follow a single argument about the evils of sex trafficking. This is what Reineras suggests when she says:

Without ever resorting to melodrama, Unigwe offers a wide array of realistic sex-trafficking scenarios that push readers beyond the limits of pro-sex work/anti-

prostitution rhetorics and forces them instead to acknowledge the context and consequences of these characters' (free) choices. (58)

Thus, the reader is faced with both the need to question the characters' choices and to feel empathy for them in their plights, especially Sisi, who faces the harsh consequences of her "new" choice to leave prostitution and become a free woman. Her death further shows the vulnerability of migrant sex workers. The female characters Unigwe portrays are not perfect; the reader can relate to their choices and predicaments. This is not to discredit Mara in Darko's novel, but unlike Mara, the four women in Unigwe's novels are not docile or "silent". Rather, they struggle to escape situations that try to stifle their selfhood.

Mara does not entirely escape her exploitation as the reader would expect, because even when she leaves Akobi's and Pompey's control, she comes under the less-controlling Oves; this is still a way Darko suggests that women who are sex-trafficking subjects can never be free – they cannot escape that life, as that is the only life they know or can ever live, as we find in Mara's experience. Unigwe's decentred or fragmented narrative therefore mirrors her position on sex work and trafficking, as her protagonists' stories are nuanced in a non-linear way, giving room to look at each woman's story as important, and their "linked" experience in the house at Zwarte Zusterstraat as a collective story of exploitation and resistance. Unigwe's fragmented structure is characterised by extended flashbacks providing a nuanced engagement with human trafficking. According to Gilson (2016), this narrative technique brings about a sense of "shared vulnerabilities" – a reckoning of one's own vulnerability in the face of others'. According to Tunca (2009), the fragmented style and flashback technique allow Unigwe "to move one step further away from the conventional linear reading which had already been disrupted by the recounting of the protagonists' pasts" (4). Thus, Unigwe uses the fragmented technique and the flashbacks to introduce some degree of complexity in the portrayal of her protagonists. On the other hand, Darko's linear narration and her use of a homodiegetic character provide a monolithic perspective of prostitution, indicting the "reason" behind Mara's migration. This perspective provides a limited and subjective exploration of Mara's vulnerability and exploitation, and blurs the prospect of agency for Mara, as the reader is confronted with Mara's subservient position from the beginning of the novel to the end. While Unigwe's women are single, with varying reasons for embarking on their journey to Europe, Mara's reason is tied to the familial – she has been invited to join her husband abroad. And the reader empathises with her when her experience does not align with her expectations. Each writer's style of "telling"

and “showing” their protagonists’ experiences through the narrative techniques mentioned above goes a long way to establishing how they represent sex work.

Unigwe introduces a positive possibility to the experience of her protagonists, who are sex workers in Belgium, something that Darko does not consider in the same way. While both writers question the absolute freedom of their characters, Unigwe proposes an end to or “freedom” from the sex trade when the women pay up their debts to Dele. Only Sisi dies because she reneges on the terms and conditions she agreed to. The other three women are able to “achieve” their goals after fulfilling their side of the bargain. However, for Darko, this is not possible. One reason for this, as I argued above, is that her literary commitment and the way she views the sex trade are different. Her representation of Mara as a wife whose husband turns her into a sex-slave does not give her the leisure of choosing how her life would end. Darko’s language condemns prostitution, and she does not proffer a “happy” ending for Mara, who leaves Akobi’s control only to be exploited by yet another man.

While Unigwe equips her protagonists with the choice and desire to work as **prostitutes** (except Joyce), Darko’s Mara does not make that decision; she is represented as lacking agency because she does not consent to work as a prostitute when she goes to join her husband, Akobi. This is why I argued that Unigwe shifts between the radical and liberal feminists on the issue of prostitution. She nuances the concepts of consent and agency in ways that call for re-examination of her female protagonists’ experiences, more than Darko does with Mara and the other female prostitutes in Germany. However, both writers invite readers to re-examine migration differently, especially the migration of African women to Europe to work as transnational sex workers. They also implore closer consideration of the different ways they narrate their protagonists’ experiences before and after migration – through fragmented, multivocal narratives or a monolithic first-person point of view.

MIGRATION RE-IMAGINED

The protagonists of *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* embody a transnational vulnerability engendered by their socio-economic difficulties and the exploitative mechanisms that govern female migration. This transnational vulnerability perhaps informs Ifeoma Nwankwo’s (2007) assertion that African women’s migration narratives demonstrate a shift from one form of subjugation to another, thus illustrating how both local and global structures conspire to perpetuate gendered oppression (67). Consequently, the commodification of female bodies reflects broader critiques of neocolonial exploitation, where African women become economic pawns in a global system that thrives on their disenfranchisement. This also aligns

with Liz Kelly's concept of the "continuum of sexual violence." Kelly (1988) argues that women's experiences of violence exist on a spectrum, as these experiences are interconnected, and they take different forms, depending on the context. Thus, both novels explore the representation of the experiences of African women who are subjects of sex-trafficking for prostitution, in two European countries – Germany and Belgium. Both writers tell the stories of African women's vulnerability and exploitation differently, employing various narrative elements and thematic preoccupations because, as this chapter and my overall thesis demonstrate, African women's migration experiences are not entirely uniform, and their representations are not uniform. There are location-specific experiences, as well as experiences that arise from the migratory routes (legal or illegal) the women undertake. Most importantly, both writers frame the vulnerability and exploitation of their protagonists as a "continuum" – a series of experiences that transcend one location to another. Through the various literary and narrative elements employed, such as Unigwe's fragmented narration and Darko's first-person confessional narration, the writers establish that migration does not end the negative experiences of their female protagonists; rather, it accentuates them, as there are multiple layers of patriarchal, economic, and social barriers that the women would face in Europe. *Beyond the Horizon* tells Mara's story from her point of view. Uche Umezurike (2015) states that "Mara acts as the homodiegetic voice. As a homodiegetic voice, she is both the narrator and the protagonist. Further, by participating in the action, she presents to the reader different perspectives implicit in the actions she is presenting" (156). Thus, the reader gains insight into the novel's events through Mara's first-person narration and active participation. Mara's story elicits pity for Mara, anger at Mara's husband, and everything that has combined to put Mara in a vulnerable position, making her more susceptible to exploitation. The novel's point of view lends it a highly subjective and confessional tone. This direct approach immerses the reader in Mara's emotions, thoughts, and personal disillusionment. It also allows the reader to experience Mara's naivety, shock, pain, and eventual resignation through her own eyes. The narration follows Mara's vulnerability and exploitation from her childhood in Ghana until her marriage to Akobi as a repayment of debts owed by her father to Akobi's father. Her marriage to Akobi is filled with abuse, physical, emotional, and sexual, and this culminates in her eventual commodification as a prostitute in Germany by her husband.

On the other hand, *On Black Sisters' Street* tells the compelling stories of four women – Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce – who migrate from Africa to Belgium, lured by the promise of a better life. Pauline Uwakwe (2023) argues that Unigwe's novel is "a representation of modern slavery in which the author engages the subject of global human trafficking and exploitation

from a unique female viewpoint” (48). She sees the novel as a classic example of the twenty-first-century “neo-slavery” narrative that “exposes the complexities of the modern global trade in humans. It draws attention to the need to redefine slavery to capture its modern metamorphoses” (49). Using a multi-vocal narrative technique, the novel chronicles the experiences of these four young women sharing a house in “Zwarte Zusterstraat,” a street in Antwerp, who sell their bodies as sex workers in the red-light district of “Vingerlingstraat” in their glass showcases. Aside from the use of multi-vocal narrative technique, Unigwe also employs a non-linear narrative style, which allows her protagonists to move back and forth between their present realities and their past experiences. Through these literary techniques, the reader has a glimpse of the motivation behind each woman’s reasons for embarking on their journey to Belgium – reasons ranging from trying to escape poverty, frustration, incessant rape and abuse, and, most importantly, their desire to have a better life. Their stories are nuanced to offer multiple perspectives on four African women’s experiences, in recognition that African women’s experiences of migration are not homogeneous. It is also important to note that Unigwe’s non-linear and multi-vocal narrative styles give the reader a sense of the cyclical nature of the women’s experiences of exploitation and vulnerability, from Africa to Belgium, as their past and present are interwoven to provide that “continuum” of violence, based on Kelly’s argument.

Another important literary element employed by Unigwe is satire. According to Talabi (2025), it is an important aesthetic strategy used by postcolonial African writers like Unigwe and Darko. It is used as a weapon of criticism against colonial discourse and postcolonial contradictions (157). It is characterised by its rhetorical, probing, and unsettling form. According to Griffin (1994), even when a work of satire is fiction, it “does not forsake the real world entirely. Its satirist victims are from that world, and it is this fact (together with a darker or sharper tone) that separates satire from pure comedy” (1). Beyond its aim to attack, ridicule, or subvert real-world issues, satire is characterised by its open-endedness – a kind of ambivalence that allows the reader to look beyond the surface. As a literary element, satire has aesthetics such as irony, ridicule, and an absence of poetic justice, and these are evident in Unigwe’s intersections of sex work, gender, and illegal migrant status. Unigwe’s use of irony is sharp. She contradicts the postcolonial reality in relation to the Afropolitan sex work pipeline. Talabi (2025) affirms that “Unigwe ultimately satirises not the women and the choices they have to make, but reformist agendas that are given to sanctimonious and propagandist narratives while failing to critically examine the autopoietic nature of our social system as a whole” (163).

Darko's use of satire in *Beyond the Horizon* functions as a sharp critique of patriarchal values, materialism and postcolonial disillusionment. Through ironic characterisation and the exposure of social contradictions, she ridicules the belief that migration to Europe automatically guarantees prosperity. Akobi's pursuit of wealth and status is repeatedly undermined by the moral degradation that accompanies his exploitation of Mara, exposing the hollowness of masculine ambition built upon female suffering. Similarly, Darko satirises patriarchal customs that socialise women into unquestioning obedience, revealing how cultural expectations become instruments of their own oppression. Her satirical treatment of both Ghanaian patriarchal structures and the exploitative reality of Europe demonstrate that neither space offers genuine liberation for women. In this way, satire becomes a vehicle through which Darko condemns gender inequality, consumerism and the false promises of migration while inviting readers to question the social systems that normalise exploitation.

Both authors represent African migrant women working as sex workers in Europe as their protagonists; they also represent other characters, both male and female. However, the ways in which both authors represent their characters differ. Not all their characters are portrayed equally. Some characters are dynamic, while others are flat. In Darko's novel, although the story revolves around Mara, her character development does not progress significantly. From the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as subservient, accepting the patriarchal norms of her society. Even when she gets to Europe, Mara does not become a woman on her own terms. She continues to allow Akobi to mistreat her, and even when she leaves his control, she falls under the control of another pimp. Nor are the other female characters, Mama Kiosk, Vivian, and Kaye, dynamic; they do not develop significantly, despite playing important roles in supporting Mara. The male characters in *Beyond the Horizon* are also flat. They are represented as selfish, opportunistic, and violent, and they treat the women in their lives as tools for their personal sexual and financial benefit. Akobi, Osey, Pompey, and the different men who engage the services of Mara and other African women turned prostitutes remain the same in their delineations from the beginning of the novel to the end.

In terms of character delineation, Unigwe creates both dynamic and flat characters in *On Black Sisters' Street*. The four women, Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce, are dynamic characters because they undergo significant growth and development during their migration to Belgium. The women mature significantly from innocence, ignorance, and emotional weakness to psychological and emotional maturity. The exuberance and enthusiasm that propelled them to decide to migrate to Belgium give way to the pessimism, sadness, and anxiety they now feel every day in Belgium. It is this feeling of despondency that makes Sisi lose interest in the

monotonous nature of sex work, propelling her to revolt against Dele and Madam. Initially, the women are secretive, refusing to share any information about themselves, but after Sisi's death, they realise that they have only themselves as "family" in Belgium. Thus, their relationship also undergoes significant development. Their psyche also changes due to their experiences before migrating. For instance, Efe would end up being a "Madam" after she gains her freedom from Dele and their Madam, as she considers herself "better equipped" to do well in the sex trade, having learnt from Madam (Unigwe, pp.278-279).

The male characters remain "flat" as they do not grow or change from their negative attributes and attitudes. Dele does not change from being an exploiter; characters like Polycarp and Titus do not even attempt to remedy the harm they inflicted on Efe and Alek (now Joyce). Instead, the narrator informs the reader that Efe was the sixth woman Titus had impregnated and abandoned; there is also the possibility that he would take advantage of other unsuspecting young girls. Unigwe's portrayal of the male characters is similar to Darko's; they are selfish, greedy, unfaithful, abusive, and deceitful. On the other hand, the female characters in Unigwe's novels are dynamic, evolving as the story progresses, and the reader can experience the full range of emotions that their lived experiences evoke. Essentially, character development in both novels reflects the different authors' respective narrative styles and attitudes towards prostitution.

Both authors explore migration, sex work, and female solidarity among African migrant women in Europe. However, as this chapter establishes, they examine the same issues – prostitution and sex-trafficking differently, and with varying intentions. While Darko portrays the experiences of her protagonist, Mara, as morally unjustifiable, Unigwe explores prostitution and her characters' stories pragmatically, without sounding judgemental. Through different literary and narrative elements, they offer a powerful critique of gender oppression faced by African women both in Africa before they migrate and in Europe after they migrate – experiences that make them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Both novels are interpreted through a transnational black feminist lens, a rich tool for analysing the fictional lived experiences of African migrant women in transnational spaces, such as Germany and Belgium. According to Kempadoo (2011), "[a] transnational feminist theory and politics on prostitution and other forms of sex work also includes a rethinking of practical strategies and progress to address the specific situations for women of colour in the global sex trade" (43). Thus, this thesis employs elements of transnational black feminism to examine the experiences of female African migrants working as prostitutes in Europe.

AN INTERROGATION OF PROSTITUTION: DARKO AND UNIGWE

Okolie-Osemene (2017) defines prostitution as a sexual transaction for monetary gain and pleasure to the receiver (6). Prostitution, sex work, sex trafficking, or the commercialisation of women's bodies have been explored by sociologists and women's studies scholars; however, the topic has just begun to gain prominence in postcolonial literary studies. In fact, Laura Barberan Reinares (2019) argues that by 2013, not much had been written on the subject of sex trafficking from a literary perspective. Some reasons for this include the fact that most contemporary African migration literature focuses on "voluntary" migration, highlighting the search for opportunities, the experience of racism and cultural displacement, and the loss of home or nostalgia, among others, leading migration through trafficking or sex work to be sidelined. Equally, some African writers do not feel adequately equipped to handle the complexity of sex trafficking narratives – they require research, nuance, and sensitivity (Awogu-Maduagwu and Orimogunje, 2022; Otuegbe, 2025). Awogu-Maduagwu and Orimogunje note that African women writers often feel a moral burden to represent victims of sex trafficking authentically, especially when drawing from real-life testimonies, and this demands rigorous research and ethical storytelling. They highlight how graphic depictions and psychological depth are necessary to convey the full impact of sex trafficking, and that these can be emotionally demanding and culturally fraught for the writers. However, Darko, Unigwe and other female African migrant writers such as Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (*Trafficked*, 2008), have opened up space for this narrative. Their works centre on African women trafficked into sex work in Europe, offering a textured and empathetic portrayal of the harrowing experience of prostitution through their female protagonists.

According to Chielozona Eze (2014), the works of twenty-first-century African female migrant writers such as Darko and Unigwe share one thing in common: "they tell of bodies in pain, and they provoke pertinent questions in that regard" (89). In addition, they draw attention to feminist issues such as women's rights and the dignity of the woman's body. Unigwe and Darko are among contemporary African female writers whose narratives confront the patriarchal oppression of African women. They are preoccupied with the task of questioning the various ways in which African women are objectified and commodified both in Africa and in the diaspora. Their novels go beyond prostitution or sex trafficking and explore issues such as gender exploitation, political and economic corruption, unemployment, and poverty, which make African women victims of trafficking networks. Their novels also decry the objectification of African migrant women's bodies, especially when they become sex workers for pimps and other transnational exploiters, irrespective of whether they consented to this or

not. Thus, an issue like prostitution or sex-trafficking needs to be critically examined because the experiences of African migrant prostitutes in Europe sometimes go beyond what the women have bargained for or envisaged, even when they consent to migrate to sell sex like Sisi, Efe, and Ama in Unigwe's novel.

The twenty-first-century exploration of prostitutes and the sex trade by female African writers presents young women who are introduced into the profession for various reasons. According to Ikenna Kamalu and Blessing Ejezie (2016):

The construction of prostitution by some twenty-first century writers such as Amma Darko, Chika Unigwe, and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo is [...] not a mere intertextual extension of the discourse as established in the works of writers like Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Meja Nwangi, Chinua Achebe, and several others. It is a shocking revelation of how brutally exploitative and internationalised the trade has become in the present century. (108)

These male African writers, especially Ekwensi in *Jagua Nana* (1961),⁷ portray prostitution as a dehumanising profession that offers a complex survival strategy to the women involved. They treat the issue as symptomatic of societal decay, often sidelining female agency. On the other hand, Darko, Unigwe, Adimora-Ezeigbo,⁸ and Ajaegbo,⁹ reframe or re-imagine prostitution as a consequence of structural violence, economic desperation, and transnational exploitation. Through their female protagonists, they foreground female subjectivity, trauma, and resistance. Their works act as social commentaries on the global sex trade.

Through their novels, Darko and Unigwe explore the sexual exploitation of African women as a continuum, something that does not stop at one location but can follow the women wherever they find themselves. This is also true of some of the other female African writers in my corpus. Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) experiences sexual and racial exploitation when she is abused by a tennis coach for whom she works briefly to raise money for her rent. Even Aunt Uju is not spared this exploitation, both by the system that continues to fail her during her licensing examinations and in her relationships with men – Alhaji in Nigeria and Bartholomew in America. Darling's Aunt Fostalina in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is exploited by her white boss, with whom she begins an affair to keep her job, and this extramarital affair ultimately costs her marriage to her African husband. Aunt Faustalina not

⁷ Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) portrays the experience of Jagua, an aging sex worker; it challenges traditional gender roles, while embodying contradictions – she is both a victim and an agent.

⁸ Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008) follows Nneoma, a young Nigerian woman deceived into sex-trafficking; it critiques patriarchal complicity and economic desperation.

⁹ Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* (2012) follows Nita, a girl abducted into a trafficking ring, and forced into prostitution.

only succumbs to this sexual relationship with her boss, but also strives to be “white” by consciously slimming down to be accepted by the American system.

While Adichie and Bulawayo represent the sexual exploitation of their female characters within specific locations – Nigeria and the U.S., – Darko and Unigwe explore the commodification of their protagonists across transnational borders – as subjects of sex-trafficking. Both Darko and Unigwe present different positions in their representation of sex-trafficked women’s experiences. As stated earlier in this chapter, Darko adopts a condemnatory tone, using a first-person narrative voice, that limits how and what the reader perceives about Mara’s story, while Unigwe is not rigid in her stance, opening avenues for considering her characters’ backstories without being judgemental, since not all trafficked African women have the same story. She gives expression to various perspectives within her narrative, such as a multivocal narrative perspective, the flashback technique, fragmented sentences, and the free-indirect style, which nuance the stories of the four women who find themselves in the right light district of Antwerp. Thus, their approaches open the door for debates about the morality, condemnation, or acceptance of prostitution by female African migrant writers and critics, discussed in this chapter. Both writers, as has already been argued, examine the vulnerability and exploitation of their female characters as a continuum, both in Africa and in Europe, and they suggest that the women’s experiences as subjects of transnational sex trafficking networks do not start at the point of migration. Instead, their experiences in Africa make them susceptible to various forms of abuse when they migrate.

VULNERABILITY AS A CONTINUUM IN *BEYOND THE HORIZON* AND *ON BLACK SISTERS’ STREET*

Vulnerability is a significant issue in the literature written by African women. Early African writers, including Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, and Buchi Emecheta, among others, explored how patriarchal systems and oppressive customs render African women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, both physically and psychologically. For example, Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966), Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1979), and Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) shed light on different forms of vulnerability endured by African women as a result of patriarchal cultural expectations, such as marriage and motherhood, as well as socio-economic limitations. Contemporary African female writers like Darko and Unigwe represent not just patriarchal limitations, but also gender, economic, and structural limitations, which “sustain female oppression” (to cite Florence Stratton’s terms). While both novels expose the precarious lives of African women caught within global systems of inequality, this chapter argues that

vulnerability functions differently in each text. In *Beyond the Horizon*, vulnerability is presented primarily as a condition produced by patriarchal domination and female socialisation, whereas in *On Black Sisters' Street* vulnerability emerges as a complex intersection of gender, migration, race, illegality, and global capitalism. The literary forms adopted by both writers are crucial to how these vulnerabilities are represented and understood.

Thus, this section examines the theme of vulnerability experienced by African women before they migrate to Europe, as seen in *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, utilising Liz Kelly's concept of the continuum of women's experiences of violence as a critical framework. Kelly's continuum challenges the perception of gendered violence as isolated incidents, instead positioning it as a series of interconnected experiences shaped by patriarchy, economic necessity, and migration. Kelly's ideas are relevant to the analysis of both novels, especially as they explore the experiences of African migrant women working in red-light districts in Europe as sex workers. The novels trace the harrowing experiences of their female protagonists as a series of events that put the women in vulnerable situations and, in turn, inform their migration as illegal subjects of sex trafficking and prostitution in Europe.

Drawing on Liz Kelly's "Continuum of Sexual Violence", I argue that through their depictions of African women's migrant experiences, both Darko and Unigwe imply that vulnerability is a recurring factor that takes various forms in the lives of their female protagonists. They provide ample examples that their female characters do not become vulnerable when they migrate or as a result of migration. Rather, they have been vulnerable in Africa before migrating, and their vulnerability increases as a result of their experiences as illegal migrants in Europe, as well as their race. Pauline Uwakwe (2023) lists some push factors, which have already been discussed in the theoretical chapter, that propel African women to migrate and become sex-trafficking subjects:

[...] female vulnerability, burden of family responsibility, the frail state of the nation's economy, absence of employment for the growing youth population, graduates vying for too few jobs, and more. In addition, and perhaps most significant, are the forces of instability, displacement caused by wars, conflicts, ethnic rivalries, and terrorist groups. These are underscored [...] as causal culprits of migration and sex-trafficking trade, specifically. (50)

Through their depiction of female migrants' experiences, both novels present African women's vulnerability as a continuum. The women in both novels do not become vulnerable during migration or in Europe; rather, their vulnerability can be linked to cultural, economic, and patriarchal structures that stifle African women, from patriarchal expectations, sexual

exploitation experienced by some of the women, to war and crisis, unemployment, and economic and educational instability. The women's lives show a continuity of one form of vulnerability to another, from Africa to Europe. Through the use of flashbacks and multivocal storytelling, for instance, Unigwe's protagonists' backstories are relayed, revealing a consistent preoccupation with one form of vulnerability after another. This technique also mirrors the fractured lives of female African migrants whose identities are dispersed across different geographical and cultural locations. The form itself represents vulnerability; the women's lives are marked by discontinuity, displacement, and instability, and the narrative reproduces these conditions through techniques such as the flashback and a fragmented free-indirect perspective. On the other hand, Mara's recollection of her experiences from Ghana to Germany, through a confessional first-person narrative, also establishes the cyclical nature of her exploitation at the hands of her husband Akobi and the patriarchal systems in her country, which also continues in Europe, until the point she hardly recognises herself. Darko's use of Mara's retrospective voice creates an intimate account of victimisation and survival. This narrative strategy allows the reader to experience Mara's vulnerability from within rather than observe it externally. Mara's voice exposes the psychological consequences of oppression while simultaneously charting a growing awareness of her exploitation, and consequently her resistance.

Mara, the protagonist of *Beyond the Horizon*, has always been vulnerable since her childhood in her village in Ghana. First, she is married off to Akobi as a repayment of debt without her consent. Through this depiction, Darko shows that the patriarchal status quo in Mara's African village, Nanka, does not uphold the rights of women. In fact, men have absolute control over the lives of women, be they wives, daughters, or mistresses. Mara's marriage to Akobi is a clear example of how vulnerable African women are in patriarchal African societies. Her greedy father contracts the marriage, just as he did her elder sister's, without considering what his daughters want. Thus, when her mother informs her that her father has found a husband for her, she recounts:

All I did was grin helplessly because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that my mother had given my older sister two years before. Found, too, by father. And my sister was now a wreck. Naturally, not all husbands made wrecks of their wives. [...] And some good men still existed in Naka. But father, it appeared, had a different formula for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters, which took more into consideration the number of cows coming as bride price than the character of the man.
(4)

Darko's choice of phrases, such as "grin helplessly" and "sister was now a wreck" (4), establishes Mara's and her sister's vulnerabilities and sense of their own helplessness as a result of their father's greed. To some extent, Mara's experience after seeing how her sister had become a "wreck" establishes a continuity or a "continuum" of vulnerability in Mara's home, where the females, from their mother, do not have a say in everything about their lives, and as established above, her confessional tone foregrounds her vulnerability from the beginning of the novel to the end, and this allows the reader feel empathy towards Mara, who the men in her life consider as a piece to satisfy their pleasures. Their father does not care about his daughters' happiness or the good character of their husbands but rather focuses on the financial outcome of the "transactional" marriages he arranges for them. Her father is a microcosm of most men in Mara's village, who see themselves as superior within a patriarchal hierarchy and view women as property to be possessed. As the reader discovers, Mara eventually becomes a "wreck" herself at the hands of Akobi, who subjects her to dehumanising treatment for his own selfish interests, acting as a patriarchal figure himself. Mara's vulnerability is heightened by the cultural norms that govern the lives of many African women, leading to cultural expectations about their behaviour. Liz Kelly argues that the continuum of oppression and vulnerability is reinforced by patriarchal structures, social norms, and economic inequalities. This situation makes some women, like Mara, more vulnerable than others. For example, Comfort, Akobi's mistress, enjoys better treatment than Mara, as a result of her education and exposure to modernity. However, Mara's experience as a "greenhorn" – a naïve village girl and a "debt repayment"- heightens her vulnerability.

Darko criticises African systems that continue to sustain women's oppression, like the institution of marriage, which makes women like Mara lose their self-worth and identity. Mara has been culturally conditioned, especially by her mother, that as a wife, she does not have a say in whatever happens, even in the face of abuse. Her mother had passed down that culture of subservience to her, and she feels it is the norm:

Initially, things that happened to my marriage appeared to me to be a matter of course, things that happened in all marriages and to all wives. I didn't see much difference from my parents' marriage either, so why should I think differently just because I was living in the city [...] after all, mother had taught me that a wife was there for a man for one thing, and that was to ensure his well-being, which included his pleasure [...]. So that even those nights when he ordered me to sleep on the thin mat on the hard floor, even if I laid there and could not sleep, I still regarded my suffering as part of being a wife, and endured it just like I would menstrual pain. (12-13)

Mara's vulnerability is heightened by her ignorance. First, her mother has "schooled" her to be a very good wife who must respect her husband. Even though she does not like the way she is treated as a wife by Akobi, she does not object because, as she says, "For me, not obeying and worshipping Akobi would make me less of a wife, just as having no menstrual period would make me less of a woman. And I didn't want to be less of anything" (16). With this mindset, Mara inadvertently makes herself vulnerable to further exploitation by not just Akobi but also other men when she migrates to Germany.

Darko's characterisation of Mara and other women in similar circumstances, including Mara's mother, underscores their vulnerability. Due to their cultural and social conditioning, the women represented by Darko (except Mama Kiosk and Akobi's mistress, Comfort) lack agency, and, sometimes, they promote their own abuse by accepting these norms. This is not the case with the women in Unigwe's novel. As established above, both writers have different social vision and literary approaches. While Darko portrays women like Mara and her mother who accept the status quo, Unigwe's women break free from cultural and social restraints. Mara is portrayed as a woman who does not even recognise her own oppression as a problem initially, and this makes her vulnerability transcend the shores of Ghana. When Mama Kiosk asks Mara what her husband has bought for her since their marriage, having seen Akobi in a new embroidered shirt, Mara's response that he got "nothing" for her "because he is the man" clearly shows that even though she is aware of her oppression, she has accepted it because there is little she can do about it at that time. This response annoys Mama Kiosk, who tells Mara that even though Akobi is a man, he "is a bad husband" (13), because good husbands should buy things for their wives when they buy things for themselves. Again, Mara's response exemplifies her acceptance of her second-class position in the family and is symbolic of the position of women in African society.

While for Mara, anything goes, Mama Kiosk is conscious of the need to reject the social conditioning that stifles women's progress in society. Mara makes the reader aware that Mama Kiosk does not accept abuse of the type she endures herself: "But all these things that I considered to be normal, Mama Kiosk did not find them normal" (13). Indeed, Mama Kiosk makes Mara realise that Akobi is a bad husband: "Tradition demands that the wife respect, obey, and worship her husband, but it demands, in return, care, good care of the wife. Your husband neglects you and yet demands respect and complete worship from you. That is not normal" (13). Mama Kiosk is characterised as self-assertive, not docile like Mara. The depiction of Mama Kiosk's character is, therefore, Darko's way of giving a voice to women who are assertive (even though just a few, like Mama Kiosk), as well as creating a balance in

the roles and responsibilities assigned to both men and women by society. She portrays Mama Kiosk as one of the first and few women who sow the seeds of consciousness in Mara, as later in the novel, Mara will acknowledge the elderly woman's role in her life, when she decides to escape Akobi's control in Germany. Mara tells the reader that this woman had tried "to let me see and understand that my husband was not treating me right. But I saw none of it, or maybe I simply lacked the ability to understand it enough to see" (13). Mara's vulnerability as a result of her ignorance, which begins before her migration, is therefore sustained throughout, enabling her exploitation in Germany. Thus, using a linear narrative plot, Darko traces Mara's journey of vulnerability from Ghana to Germany.

Unigwe represents the vulnerability of her female characters very differently from Darko. Unlike Darko's plot, Unigwe's narrative does not follow a linear or chronological direction, which highlights the characters' vulnerabilities as they travel from Africa to Belgium. Through a non-linear plot, the women's vulnerabilities (which are different from each other) before they migrate are foregrounded through flashbacks and memory. Unigwe sees less of a direct causal link between her protagonists' vulnerability and their exploitation in Europe. Even though the women in *On Black Sisters' Street* experience vulnerability before migrating to Europe, they are not presented as docile in the same way as Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* at the point of their migration. However, this does not negate the fact that they are indeed vulnerable before migration, and that their existing vulnerabilities increase their susceptibility to further vulnerabilities and exploitation upon migration.

Efe's vulnerability is heightened by poverty; her father was poor, and her mother had died. This makes Efe assume the role of a mother to her younger siblings, as their father, who has become inconsolable after the death of his wife, resorts to drinking. Her desire to be like other young girls her age – wear the type of clothes and hair they wear, and live the kind of life they live – brings her into the path of Titus, who has been stalking her for "two and a half weeks [...] since setting eyes on Efe as she admired a tricoloured handbag in a stall close to his 'Everything For Your Hair' supermarket" (50). Titus can tell that the young girl wants that bag and many more things, so he starts to groom her, promising to fulfil all her longings, as he plans to take advantage of her in the long run:

He had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth. And everything else she fancied between the two as long as she let him have his way. 'Jus' tell me wetin you wan', I go give you. I swear! You don turn my head, dey make me like man wey don drink too much kai kai. I go do anytin' for you!' He called her his Miss Nigeria. Told her that she was so beautiful that if she had been light-skinned, surely she would have

made even angels jealous. ‘God make you dark so you no go fine pass his angels, true!’ (49)

Titus preys on Efe’s vulnerability. As the reader will discover, he is 45 years old and described by the narrator as “old.” He is definitely rich, which gives him some level of power and control over this poor young girl. He not only promises Efe material things but also gives her a lot of money, finally making Efe agree to his whims after two and a half weeks of consistently wooing her. Thus, the narrator informs us that “Efe discovered sex at sixteen at the back of her father’s flat” (49), an experience so painful that she spends days crying.

As in Darko’s novel, where Mara’s vulnerability is heightened by patriarchal norms that give men control over women, Unigwe suggests that financial stability and economic influence make some men, like Titus, prey on the vulnerability of poor women, as in the case of Efe. Significantly, Unigwe makes a case about Efe’s vulnerability and that of other women, highlighting the power dynamics between men and women. She differentiates between characters: for example, Titus is represented as irresponsible, like Akobi in Darko’s novel. Titus deceives Efe and abandons her with a pregnancy that he denies, because he is already married. Efe is shocked to find out that she is not the only young girl Titus had impregnated and abandoned:

What Efe had not known, for who would have told her, was that she was the sixth woman in as many years to come to Titus with an offspring from an affair. And all six the wife had dismissed in more or less the same way, marching them to the door with orders never to return, asking the house help to bolt the door behind them. (71)

Efe’s traumatic experience of abandonment increases her vulnerability. As this chapter establishes, Unigwe explores vulnerability as a continuum. Following her mother’s death and assuming the responsibility of caring for her siblings, Efe becomes vulnerable to an irresponsible rich man like Titus. The narrator paints Titus as a heartless man who takes advantage of poor girls like Efe: “Titus had the good sense to stick with inexperienced young girls, young women like the one who had disturbed their lunch [...]. They all had the same hopeful look of the poor when they came with their babies” (74). Thus, poverty and desperation make poor young women like Efe vulnerable. Efe’s vulnerability is heightened by her new responsibility as a single parent, coupled with her role as provider to her siblings. All these contribute to her decision to migrate by whatever means necessary when the proposal for “a better” life comes from Dele, as the narrator paints her predicament:

She had agreed to his terms before she asked what she was expected to do abroad. ‘Clean?’ To which Dele had laughed and said, ‘No. Sales’. And it was the way he sized her up, his eyes going from her face to her breasts to her calves under her knee-length skirt, that told her what sort of sales she was going to be involved in. She would be Dele and Sons Limited’s export. L.I. would get a better life. Go to good schools, become a big shot and look after her when she was old and tired. L.I. was a worthy enough investment to encourage her to accept Dele’s offer. And even though leaving him would be the hardest thing she would ever do she would endure it for his sake. (82)

As a result of her vulnerability, borne out of the desperation to offer her son a better life, Efe does not hesitate to take Dele’s offer.

Another character, Ama, experiences vulnerability stemming from her childhood experience of sexual abuse by her stepfather. She grew up knowing Brother Cyril as her father and was never aware that her mother was pregnant with her out of wedlock; she was “lucky” Brother Cyril overlooked the pregnancy and married her. This backstory, through the use of flashbacks, foreshadows not only Ama’s mother’s vulnerability, but also Ama’s, as Brother Cyril subjected her mother to domestic abuse, and then later Ama to sexual abuse. The narrator captures the beginning of Ama’s sexual abuse on the night of her eighth birthday:

[h]er father floated into her room in his white safari suit. In the dark and dressed all in white, Ama thought he was a ghost and would have screamed if he had not pre-empted her by covering her mouth with one broad palm and smothering the scream in her throat. [...] That was the first time it happened. [...] The next night he floated into her room again. (131-132)

The author’s use of language here is noteworthy. The father’s intrusion is framed through the metaphor of “floating”, a verb that evokes a ghost-like, almost otherworldly presence. By choosing “floated” rather than “walked” or “entered”, the author layers a chilling otherworldly atmosphere onto the scene, where the father, rather than being simply a physical threat, assumes the quality of a spectre — an embodiment of terror itself. Moreover, the “white safari suit” functions ironically. The colour white, conventionally associated with purity or innocence, is here tainted by the father’s predatory act on the vulnerable girl. The juxtaposition between the colour white and the immoral deed of the father, on the one hand, and “the dark” background on the other, underscores a perversion of innocence, and marks the beginning of a cycle of abuse. This is reinforced by the repetition — “the next night he floated into her room again” — which enforces the cyclical, inescapable horror of the abuse. The calm, almost dispassionate repetition of the earlier imagery suggests not only Ama’s growing entrapment but also the normalisation of violence within the domestic space, which marks the beginning of Ama’s

vulnerability, as this continues for many years, and she cannot help herself: “Every night her father came and as time passed she came to expect it, her palms clammy and her mouth dry” (133).

Even though this chapter explores the vulnerability of female migrant characters who become prostitutes in Europe, Ama’s mother’s vulnerability in Unigwe’s novel is noteworthy. As a result of her past, she endures physical and domestic abuse from her husband and does nothing to save her daughter from the same. She feigns ignorance of her daughter’s sexual abuse because she wants to keep her marriage. Years later, when Ama tells her mother that her father repeatedly raped her, she refuses to believe her. She tells Ama: “I made a mistake. One mistake that could have destroyed me completely. Yet Brother Cyril took me in and married me. He saved me” (150). Her vulnerability is clearly evident in her subservience to her husband, whom she views as a saviour. When Brother Cyril sends Ama out of his house, Ama’s mother blames Ama for wanting her thrown out as well: “How many men would marry a woman who was carrying a child for another man? [...] He could have sent both of us out tonight. [...] Yet out of the goodness of his heart he didn’t” (151). Here, Unigwe demonstrates that the past experiences of some women, such as Ama’s mother, can make them vulnerable and also increase the vulnerability of their children; this also establishes a continuum of violence and vulnerability experienced by both mother and daughter. This is why Ama finds it difficult to hate her mother, who does nothing to save her from abuse by her stepfather. The narrator reveals Ama’s thoughts about her mother’s silence: “When she got older and wiser, she would think that her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness” (133). Nevertheless, Ama feels pity for her mother as she realises that the woman cannot help herself, being bound by the religious expectations of a Christian wife. Instead, she prays to leave the house in Enugu, to go to London, Las Vegas, or Monaco, then come back to liberate her mother from her abusive marriage to a worthless man like Brother Cyril. Thus, the vulnerability Ama experiences with her mother in Enugu, and the feeling of being stuck in Lagos working at her Aunt’s restaurant, inform her decision to migrate when Dele’s juicy “offer” is proposed.

Unlike the other women in the novel, the third woman, Alek, is not Nigerian. However, her experience in war-torn Sudan makes her vulnerable to sexual and other abusive experiences that shape her life. She is Sudanese; she was born in Daru and lived with her family until the morning, when they decided to leave town due to a tribal and political crisis. As they make plans to leave for Khartoum, the Janjaweed militia, who are carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing in the region, storm their house. At the end of the day, Alek witnesses her parents and only brother being killed. As if that is not enough, one of the soldiers grabs her breasts, tears

her dress, and throws her on the bed, calling her “Stupid African slave” (190). She tries to scream but is physically assaulted, struck with the butt of a rifle, hard slaps, and kicks, and the soldiers then proceeds to rape 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” (191). Here, Unigwe’s language is graphic, providing the reader with a vivid picture of what Alek has experienced and evoking sympathy towards this teenage girl, who not only loses her family in one day but also loses her innocence and self-worth in the most dehumanising way for a fifteen-year-old girl.

Unigwe also paints different experiences of sexual assault that the women encounter. It is Alek’s experience that has the hallmark of extreme violence, and which also symbolises the kind of life she will lead from that point. After these horrible incidents and enduring life in a refugee camp, she meets Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier serving with African Union troops in Sudan. She falls in love with Polycarp, who promises her a better future, and returns to Nigeria with him on his redeployment. However, the better life Joyce has planned never happens, as Polycarp’s family considers her a “foreigner” and disapproves of their relationship. Joyce is shattered once again in her young life when Polycarp tells her: “I’m the oldest [...]. I’m the oldest son and my parents want me to marry an Igbo girl. It is not you, Alek, but I can’t marry a foreigner. My parents will never forgive me” (225). She not only experiences sexual vulnerability, but she also becomes emotionally vulnerable when Polycarp disappoints her, after she had trusted him to the point of moving back with him to Lagos, following his military service in Sudan. It is actually her emotional vulnerability that leads her to accept to “work” as a nanny in Belgium, when Polycarp, with the support of Dele, makes the arrangement for her to leave Nigeria, to go somewhere far away, where she can heal from her breakup with Polycarp, whose parents refused to allow him to marry a foreigner.

The final woman in the novel, whose story comprises a significant portion of the narrative, is Sisi. While the other women’s experiences of vulnerability relate to sexual abuse, Sisi does not experience rape or sexual assault like Ama and Alek. Instead, she is drawn into sex work as a result of her frustration with the Nigerian economic system not providing jobs for promising youths like Chisom (Sisi’s real name), which leaves them economically vulnerable. Sisi graduates with good grades but struggles to find a suitable job after two years. Her parents had invested all they had to ensure she received a good education, hoping that after graduating, she would secure a job and lift them out of poverty. But this does not happen because she has no “connection” unlike some of her friends who are not as brilliant as she is, so even after writing and submitting multiple job applications: “No envelopes came addressed

to her, offering her a job in a bank considerably humbler than the banks she had eyed while at school, and in which less intelligent classmates with better *connections* worked” (22). Chisom’s experience of joblessness and feelings of betrayal by the system make her vulnerable and desperate to leave: “So, when she got the offer that she did she was determined to get her own back on life, to grab it by the ankles and scoff in its face. There was no way she was going to turn it down” (23). In this excerpt, Unigwe illustrates Sisi’s vulnerability, which appears distinct from that of the other women. While hers is economic as stated above, Unigwe still emphasises its importance, especially as it becomes the reason she decides to leave Nigeria. In fact, the women’s scars and traumas from their past experiences of rape, loss, and lack of fulfilment leave them desperate to find an alternative way out – which is migration. Their vulnerability, as argued above, exposes them to further vulnerability and exploitation, ultimately leading to their migration to Europe. Through multiple focalisations, Unigwe nuances her protagonist’s experiences of vulnerability, which lead them to migrate, even illegally. This chapter, among other things, argues that there is no single way to view African women’s migration experiences in Europe and that Unigwe offers different perspectives on these experiences. This chapter also establishes that the women’s experiences in Africa make them open to exploitation in Belgium, where they are not just sexually or economically vulnerable, but also racially vulnerable. Likewise, in Darko’s novel, Mara’s vulnerability, stemming from her childhood in the village, through her marriage to Akobi in the city in Ghana, and through all the many injustices she endures at Akobi’s hands, makes her more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation when she migrates to Germany. Both Darko and Unigwe use their novels to challenge patriarchal structures, societal norms, economic inequalities, and other factors that reinforce African women’s vulnerabilities and their exploitation before and after their migration. While *Beyond the Horizon* conceptualises vulnerability as the consequence of patriarchal conditioning that renders women susceptible to exploitation, *On Black Sisters’ Street* expands vulnerability into a transnational condition produced by the intersection of gender, migration, race, and global economic inequalities. In both novels, vulnerability is not merely a state of victimhood but a critical lens through which the authors expose the structures that govern the female African migrant experience. The differing narrative forms – the confessional first-person testimony of Mara and the polyphonic migrant narratives of Unigwe’s protagonists – shape distinct but complementary understandings of how vulnerability is lived, narrated, and resisted. As this chapter establishes, they consider their protagonists’ vulnerability as a continuum, from Africa to Europe, as this informs their exploitation as they become illegal subjects of sex trafficking and prostitution.

EXPLOITATION IN MIGRATION: A EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

African migrant literature by women often explores the recurring theme of African women's exploitation. Through their works, Unigwe and Darko use their female characters to expose various forms of exploitation that African women experience in Europe. Both writers present critical representations of Europe — specifically, Belgium and Germany — as complex and contradictory spaces that oscillate between promise and disillusionment. While America, in Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, is depicted as a land of opportunity prior to migration, Europe is initially portrayed as an Eldorado of financial fulfilment, with women who migrate there lured by the promise of easy money. Efe in Unigwe's novel tells her sister about this: "My boss. Oga Dele. The kind one [...]. He'll get me a job. In Belgium [...]. He says a woman can earn easy money there. They like black women there [...]. He says before I know it, before one year even, I'll be rich. I'll buy a Mercedes-Benz!" (84). Similarly, in Darko's novel, Osey tells Mara about the "job" she has been brought to do in Germany which promises lots of money: "This work I am talking about, it is different and brings in plenty money too. Much much more plenty marks. And you will see that in a short time you will be able to make money for yourself, for your husband here who brought you over, and even be able to afford to send things home to your mother and sisters" (114).

Even though this is the image of Europe in the minds of their protagonists prior to migration, Unigwe and Darko demystify this by representing Europe as a site of racialised exploitation, gendered violence, and neocolonial power dynamics. Both writers expose how structural and interpersonal violence and exploitation intersect in the lives of female African migrants. They dismantle the myth about Europe as a space of empowerment for African women. Monica Udoette and Joy Nwiyi (2015) argue that Unigwe's and Darko's novels provide evidence of the writers' feminist ideological stance, which interrogates the objectification and commodification of African women in Europe. Through their novels, they highlight how dreams of economic independence are often built on deception, coercion, and systemic sexual exploitation.

Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo (2019) identifies three significant forms of exploitation that African female writers, such as Darko and Unigwe, explore in their works: sociocultural, economic, and sexual. She describes sociocultural exploitation as "the social conditioning of women to accept patriarchal notions and values which devalue them, reinforce their supposed inferiority to men, and leave them open to manipulation and exploitation" (138). This is true of Mara. From her childhood, Mara has been conditioned to see her exploitation as "normal," and this is why Akobi can continue exploiting her in Germany. Economic exploitation,

according to Nutsukpo (2019), “embraces value systems that commodify women. It manifests through the manipulation of women for financial gain or gratification” (138). This is demonstrated in the lives of each of the female protagonists represented by both authors. The men in both novels see women as “tools” that can generate wealth. Mara’s father marries his daughters off to pay debts and acquire material possessions, and does not care if his daughters are happy in their marriages. In Germany, Akobi forces Mara into prostitution for his own selfish financial interests. Dele, the man who connects the four women in Unigwe’s novel, is not concerned about the women’s welfare. Even his promise to them about making “plenty” money abroad is designed solely to snare them into a trap of perpetual servitude to him, while he enriches himself through the women’s labour. The women in both novels experience sexual and other forms of exploitation.

Unigwe and Darko portray their female characters as prone to exploitation as a result of their experiences of vulnerability in Africa. Thus, before or at the point of their migration, they have become what Elabor-Idemudia (2003) categorises as “the new, natural resources that are used as items for export and exploitation on site in a globalised market” (104). The women, therefore, lack agency when they get to Europe, as they are perceived as “items” meant to enrich their exploiters, like Dele and Akobi. One significant reason for this is the illegal status of the women when they arrive in Europe. The two novels examine how the illegal migration of African women impacts their experiences of exploitation in both Belgium and Germany.

After the negative experiences Mara endured at the hands of Akobi in Ghana, her exploitation continues in Germany. Mara is forcefully introduced into prostitution by Akobi, who has married a white woman. Her earnings are used to sustain Akobi’s cheating lifestyle with his lover from Ghana. When Mara arrives in Germany, accompanied by an “anonymous man,” she is taken to a room by this man to watch a pornographic film, something she feels is psychologically and sexually abusive, especially as the man proceeds to sexually assault her by touching her indiscriminately. This man informs her that Akobi has not paid the full fees for the traffickers to bring Mara into the country illegally.

Mara’s illegal status thus opens her to unimaginable exploitation. Unlike some of the female protagonists in the novels my corpus explores, whose migrations to America and the United Kingdom are legal, Mara and other women in Darko’s novel enter Germany illegally. This establishes one of the overarching arguments of my thesis: that the migration experiences of African women are not homogeneous, as they vary by location and immigration status. Thus, the women in both novels find themselves at the mercy of their exploiters because of their

illegal status. The anonymous man tells Mara that he is free to do as he pleases with her, because:

Crossing women over the border, Madam Akobi, is not just the passport trick, unless the full fare is paid. Your dear Cobby knows the rules. And he deliberately did not pay the full fee, which makes laying you for free part of the deal. You got it? (66)

Mara, who is shocked, does not know what to make of this information, and the man, Osey, who turns out to be Akobi's accomplice, does not help Mara understand why she is in Germany if Akobi had not paid the full fee for her "crossing." She is also perplexed to find Osey, who has been trying to take advantage of her, feigning anger when she refuses his advances. Osey is angry because he already considers Mara as a "tool" to fulfil his pleasure, with the consent of Akobi. Osey tells Mara what other African women are doing in Germany, opening her eyes to a world of exploitation into which she will soon enter:

There are many pretty African women like you here Mara [...]. They do what I wanted to do with you in the train, for which you killed my appetite. But for money, not free like I would do with you or like your husband Akobi did once upon a time with you back home. They are rich, profanely rich, so very rich that they can buy your chief and all of your village. (68)

Indeed, Mara's life is about to take a drastic turn, just as Osey has hinted. In Germany, Akobi continues his exploitation of Mara, which started back home in Ghana. The first time he has sex with her on her arrival in Germany, Mara narrates the pain she feels:

He was brutal and over-fast with me, fast like he was reluctantly performing a duty, something he wouldn't have done if he had his way, but which he must because he must. And then he was up and I was still kneeling there, very much in pain because what he did to me was a clear case of domestic rape. (84)

As argued earlier in this chapter, Darko's language condemns the exploitation of Mara and other female characters in her novel. With words like "brutal" and "over-fast" and the description of the pain Mara feels as she kneels to endure this "domestic rape," the reader empathises with her. The use of "domestic rape" connotes that this "rape" is different from what Mara had been used to in Ghana, where Akobi made her sleep on the hard floor, and only invited her to his bed when he wanted to sleep with her. What happens in Germany during her

meeting with Akobi, is a clear case of experiencing the same form of abuse, not privately, but this time with Osey and his wife being in hearing distance, in fact, being “still at it” themselves. Mara is embarrassed by this knowledge, and shocked at the same time that Akobi could even allow Osey into what supposed to be a private moment between a husband and his wife: “I stood up and was putting on my underpants when Akobi drew the curtains, not caring at all about Osey, who was standing directly behind him, seeing my nakedness, his eyes fixed on my genital area [...]. I emerged from the bathroom feeling embarrassed and ashamed. I kept my eyes down” (84-85). Mara’s exploitation is clear here.

Soon, it becomes a commercial rape, as Akobi arranges with Osey for Mara to be drugged and have sex with different men: “Then suddenly the room was filled with people, all men [...]. And they were completely naked! There must have been at least ten men for what I saw were at least twenty images. Then they were all around me, many hairy bodies, and they were stripping me, fondling me, playing with my body, pushing my legs apart, wide, wide apart” (111). Here Darko’s language is graphic, as she paints the gory experience of sexual molestation Mara experiences, which is planned by her own husband. This sexually exploitative episode is filmed, and Akobi and Osey use this pornographic video to blackmail Mara and force her, finally, against her will, into full-blown prostitution: “And this was what Osey and Akobi blackmailed me with so that I agreed to do the job at Peepy” (115). Darko thus represents Akobi as an abuser who lacks conscience or feeling towards his wife. Mara tells the reader that “Akobi, I realised that moment for the first time, was and still is a coward [...]. He was greedy and he was a coward” (115). Using a condemnatory tone, the narrator emphasises Akobi’s cowardice repeatedly to demonstrate how insensitive and wicked he is.

Mara discovers that she is not the only one facing this traumatic experience. Osey’s wife, too, has been forced to become a commercial sex worker, pimped out by her own husband. These men, Osey and Akobi, have white wives, while they keep their African wives in brothels, where they and other men come to have sex with them. As stated above, Darko is condemnatory in her language, as she paints the despicable manner in which Mara and other women in Germany are treated. When Mara asks Osey’s wife if she is happy with this arrangement, especially sharing her husband with a German woman, her response shows how vulnerable she has become and how exploitative her situation is:

I don’t know, Mara. I am not that sad but I am not that happy either. [...] You ask me if I am happy with the situation as it is. Hm. I do miss little things, you know; little wifely things [...] like going to bed with him, sleeping beside him all the night through and waking up in the morning with him. [...]. You know, petty things like that. [...] But it’s

a situation I have to survive with. And you too must, Mara. It's the only survival open to us. (85-86)

Using evocative language, Darko represents Mara and Osey's wife as women who do not have a choice and cannot question their exploitation by their husbands. They have to accept their situation as normal and the only available "survival" option, even though they obviously do not like it. Their precarious situations come about as a result of their illegal migrant status, which opens them to exploitation, first by their husbands and then by other men. This reinforces this chapter's main argument that African women's exploitation in Europe is a continuum; it does not begin during migration, rather it started in Africa and is sustained when they migrate by cultural and patriarchal norms that make women like Mara and Osey's wife helpless. David Bazie and Alfred Kiema (2025) argue that economic dependence and pressure, deceptive human trafficking strategies, and patriarchal control by men like Akobi and Osey, combine to sustain the exploitation of women like Mara in Europe. Through Darko's confessional narrative lens, Mara recounts and reflects on her experiences, thereby indicting the structures that limit her choice over her body and finances. By contrast, Unigwe presents her women differently from Darko. She enables them to make certain choices in their lives, even though some of those choices are not easy ones.

Through the use of fragmented and polyphonic narration that link the past to the present, Unigwe nuances her protagonists' stories to explore the experiences of different African women who find themselves together, experiencing the same forms of exploitation in Europe, a situation different from what they envisaged before embarking on their migration to Belgium, and still a continuation of the violence they had been used to in Africa before migration, establishing Kelly's argument about the continuum of violence against women. All but one of the women make the decision to migrate to sell sex, and they must pay off their debts to Dele and their "Madam;" it is only when they do this that they can have their "freedom." However, one of the women, Sisi, is murdered because she reneges on paying money to her pimps. Her death makes the other women, Efe, Ama, and Joyce, vulnerable to more exploitation than they have previously experienced. They fear for their lives, as they wonder "Who will be the next ghost [...]?" (39). Sisi's death, which is revealed in the early pages of the novel, foreshadows the inescapability of the sex trade, even though the women have "chosen" to come abroad for "work."

Unigwe represents her characters as having a certain level of agency which Mara in Darko's novel lacks; they are not portrayed as passive victims. Although they are imbued with

agency, their choices are complicated and do not represent the future the women envisaged before embarking on their migration to Belgium. Their experience of vulnerability in Africa, explored earlier in the chapter, motivates their decision to migrate. However, after their migration, they become susceptible to exploitation. Their decision to migrate leads them to become illegal migrants, controlled by the pimp, Dele, who convinces them to work for him in Belgium, where they will have better opportunities than in Africa. “Thrown together by a conspiracy of fate and a loud man called Dele” (26), the women’s stories become interwoven. When Efe meets Dele, one of the many bosses she works for, to provide for her son and siblings, she shares her struggles with him. It is Dele who suggests to her that she could earn more money working abroad for him, in order to give her son, Lucky, a better life. Efe does not hesitate to accept the offer because “Who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition and people died trying to fulfil that ambition” (81-82). Efe thus accepts to be “exported” to Belgium to engage in sales for Dele and Sons Limited (82). The narrator’s voice helps us understand not only Efe’s predicament but also other people’s, which leads them to make certain decisions irrespective of the risks involved: “People knew the risks and people took them because the destination was worth it [...]. Nobody wanted to stay back unless they had pots of money to survive the country. People like Titus and Dele.” (82)

As established in this chapter, Unigwe examines her characters’ exploitation differently from Darko. Efe agrees to migrate to work for Dele, even though she is aware of the risks involved, as it is her only way out, to give her son a “better life.” If Mara, in Darko’s novel, had known that she was going to Germany to work as Akobi’s commercial sex worker, she would not have gone, as her motivation for migrating in the first place was to meet her husband and continue her role as a “good” wife. However, the women in Unigwe’s novel, except Alek, view their migration to Belgium as a means to escape their problems in Africa and enjoy a better life, as Dele has promised them, even though they are aware it involves selling their bodies to white men. Darko’s women, most of whom are married like Mara, are not aware that they would be prostituting their bodies when they migrate to Europe, as their intentions are very different from Unigwe’s single women. Based on their awareness of what it is they are coming to do in Belgium, Unigwe gives her protagonists (except Alek) the liberty to choose whether to stay back and wallow in their problems, or to get up and leave, as Ama does, when she finally escapes not just her irresponsible stepfather Brother Cyril, but also the monotonous work at her Aunt’s restaurant in Lagos: “[I]n the ten months Ama stayed in Lagos, her life followed a routine that began to bore her in its insistent monotony” (158). As she encounters the different customers that frequent Mama Eko’s restaurant, especially the women in their

ostentatious attire and fancy hairstyles, she longs for that kind of life: “She saw the life she could live (she had a right to it as much as these women did, didn’t she?), fluttering about the room, long after the woman had eaten and gone. They left a longing, like footsteps in the mud, and Ama knew she had to leave” (161). Here, Unigwe effectively uses free indirect style to convey Ama’s inner thoughts, enabling the third-person narrative voice to slip into the character’s thoughts. This technique gives the reader remarkable depth and intimacy, which Darko’s novel lacks, as Mara is both the narrator and the protagonist, limiting important information to only what she reveals.

When Dele (whose interest is in young, vulnerable women), one of her regular customers, who has been taking note of her longing for material things, brings up the discussion about travelling abroad, Ama seriously thinks about the idea. Dele asks her: “You been working here now for how long? Seven months? Eight months? Almost a pregnancy! You na fine woman. You deserve better. You want better?” (162). He does not stop there; he knows she is desperate to have a better life like the young women who frequent the Buka: “If you wan’ make easy money, if you wan’ go abroad, come my office on Randle make we talk. But only if you dey serious o” (163). Out of desperation, Ama rushes to see Dele, who tells her the kind of job she would be travelling to do: “I go tell you wetin it be. I need women. Fine, fine women like you make dem go work for abroad for me. For Europe. For Belgium” (165). Ama flares up at Dele: “Stupid fucking man. What do you think I am? I look like *ashawo* to you?” (165), and she leaves his office. Dele, who has experience dealing with desperate young women like Ama, laughs because he knows Ama is desperate to live a better life, and her desperation will make her “rethink.” Ama’s desperation for a better life makes her consider becoming a sex worker abroad under Dele – a situation that I argue suggests that some of Unigwe’s women make choices, even though not ideal ones, to be exploited as sex-workers for Dele. They do this, as I have argued, because of traumatic or negative experiences in their lives. Ama’s experience of abuse at the hands of Brother Cyril and the hard life she currently lives in Lagos with Mama Eko, finally makes her reconsider her stand:

At night, when she tried to sleep, mosquitoes buzzed in her ear and kept her awake, and being unable to sleep, she thought. [...] Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted, no questions asked. No please or may I or could I. Discarding her when she no longer sufficed. And strange men taking and paying for her services. And it would not be in Lagos. But overseas. Which earned you respect just for being there. So. Why not? [...] She could never save enough money from working in the buka to set up her own business. So why not? (166)

The reader can empathise with Ama as she ruminates about her current situation. In this excerpt and elsewhere, Unigwe employs short, fragmented sentences and statements to convey her characters' thought processes. She employs free indirect style again here. These features not only distinguish the narrative but also alert the reader to the characters' thoughts and actions at a given moment. As the excerpt above shows, the narrator presents the state Ama finds herself in as she considers Dele's offer, unable to sleep due to the buzzing mosquitoes. However, the narration shifts to Ama's thoughts, considering taking the offer, with a finality that the reader cannot dismiss; she would rather work and earn as a prostitute in Europe than work in her Aunt's restaurant in Lagos.

Two days later, as Dele had anticipated, Ama goes back to him to apologise and accepts his offer. Before Dele accepts Ama's plea, or "forgives" her as he says, telling her blatantly that "I shall sample you before you go" (168), meaning he will sleep with her before forgiving her for refusing his offer in the first place and walking out of him after insulting him. He must do this before he makes her one of his "many girls" working for him abroad. He repeats this for emphasis: "But I must sample you. I must. I swear!" (168). Unigwe employs repetition to emphasise the power dynamics between Dele and Ama; Dele is certain he will have his way with Ama, whether she likes it or not. In fact, he is already aware that, due to her desperation resulting from her vulnerability, that Ama would readily submit to his whims. Unigwe shows how power and wealth allow men like Dele, who are obviously illiterate, to take advantage of desperate women like Ama and Efe because they claim that they can lead them to a better life, even though, as the reader will find out, this is not true. Unigwe's representation of men like Dele and Titus reinforces this social and economic imbalance; they may not be educated, but they can control and exploit people, especially vulnerable young women, because of their privileged position as men. This is why Dele laughs as he fondles Ama, and the narrator highlights this:

He laughed. The sound that stretched itself into a square that kept him safe. Lagos was full of such laughter. Laughter that ridiculed the receiver for no reason but kept the giver secure in a cocoon of steel. It was not the sort of laughter that one could learn. It was acquired. Wealth. Power. Fame. They gave birth to that kind of laughter. (168)

Thus, Ama can do nothing but comply as Dele moans and undoes her bra and skirt as he proceeds to have sex with her. Unigwe uses dispassionate language here to paint the power dynamics between Ama and Dele. Dele is the key to her success abroad. Her mind has been made up already, and she does not resist what is happening. Instead, she focuses on the future

she sees ahead of her: “[...] a new life far from here, earning her own money so that she could build her business empire. And once she was a big woman, people would respect her, even Brother Cyril” (169). Ama therefore makes the choice to migrate to work as a prostitute, regardless of the risks involved, just like Efe, a situation, as argued earlier in this chapter, that is the result of the past experiences of these women that make them desperate to leave, and in turn open to exploitation when they finally migrate.

Joyce’s or Alek’s past experience of losing her whole family in one day and the gang rape she endures set the tone for her exploitation in the novel. Her failed relationship with Polycarp further increases her susceptibility to exploitation. Like the other men in this novel, Polycarp does not consider Alek’s feelings. To cover up his deception and to offer Alek a “better” alternative since she cannot marry him due to obvious family reasons, Polycarp introduces Alek to Dele (the common denominator that connects all four women), who promises to secure her a “nanny” job in Belgium. When he takes Alek to visit Dele, he tells the man: “Oga Dele, this is Alek. I told you about her already” (230). As the reader discovers, Polycarp is aware that the job Alek is being assigned is not that of a nanny, but rather to work as a prostitute, because he has already spoken with Dele beforehand and knows the kind of services Dele provides as a “travel agent.” He, therefore, takes responsibility for paying her “debts” so she can gain her “freedom” as soon as possible, and this helps Alek enjoy some level of preferential treatment over the other women:

Sisi [...] told her how lucky she was that she could keep most of her earnings, unlike the rest of them, because she had a benefactor who was paying off her debt. Although Joyce had to stay until her debt was cleared, Madam treated her differently, deferring to her in a way she never would to the others under her control. Joyce could choose her own clothes, she could knock off work earlier than the others, and when she said she was ill, Madam took her seriously, even becoming solicitous on occasion, cajoling her into eating soup to make her feel better. [...] Once Polycarp finished paying – and he had not even once defaulted – Joyce would become her own woman. Madam would return her passport to her. She was saving her own money too. She was not sure what she would do with the freedom. (235)

This example demonstrates how Unigwe nuances her protagonists’ migration stories differently from Darko. Unlike Darko’s protagonist, Mara, and other women in her novel, whose husbands bring them to work as prostitutes in Germany, Unigwe’s women find themselves in Belgium for personal reasons, except for Alek/Joyce, who finds herself among the others due to circumstances beyond her control. Unigwe presents her story differently from the others.

Alex/Joyce's experience as a sex worker is obviously different from the other three women because of her backstory, and this allows her to enjoy some level of agency in the trade.

This does not in any way suggest that Unigwe supports the exploitation of her female protagonists under the false guise of empowerment, even though she explores the issue more pragmatically than Darko does in her account of Mara's experiences. As mentioned above, she endows her characters with limited agency, which is absent from Darko's portrayal of Mara and other women in her novel. She represents prostitution as a survival strategy shaped by poverty, systemic exploitation, and migration, rather than a moral failure on the part of the women. Thus, her language is less judgemental than that of Darko who condemns it outright, without room for understanding the reasons behind it; she only imagines coercion and represents how African men oppress and subjugate African women through illegal migration and other exploitative actions in the diaspora. Nevertheless, both writers condemn the role of men in the exploitative experiences of their characters who become prostitutes in Europe. Like Darko, Unigwe also represents the men in her novel, such as Dele and Polycarp, as greedy and manipulative figures who see women as possessions and items to satisfy their financial and sexual gains.

The first thing Dele says about Alek is his displeasure about her name: "The name has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. we no wan' men. [...] Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her" (230). Thus, Dele begins the task of finding a suitable name change for Alek, giving various suggestions until he arrives at "Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name wey dey always jolly. Joooooyce!", with Polycarp agreeing, "Yes. Yes, Senghor Dele. Joyce is a much better name" (230). Alek's name change becomes an act of exploitation, as these men consciously decide to change her identity, make plans to take her abroad without her consent and do not care at all about her feelings: "Arrangements that she understood neither head nor tail of were made. She was to have passport pictures taken. A passport and visa would be organised. [...] She would be taken to Belgium" (231), where she would work as a nanny to look after children. As in *We Need New Names*, Unigwe employs naming and renaming as a significant literary element in her novel. Chisom changes her name to "Sisi" of her own volition; however, Dele's renaming Alek "Joyce" is an act of exploitation because the young woman has already found herself in a vulnerable position following Polycarp's betrayal. According to Tunca (2009), Alek's renaming

symbolises the erasure of the woman's identity on at least two levels. Firstly, the procurer deems her real name to sound too much like a "man's" and proceeds to eliminate this unwelcome trace of masculinity. By attempting to reduce Alek's entire personality to her

biological status, it could be argued that Dele metaphorically re-enacts the rape suffered by the “tomboy[ish]” Alek at the hands of ruthless soldiers in the Sudan. Secondly, since the young heroine was called after her grandmother. Dele’s obliteration of the name also amounts to the blotting out of her family history. The erasure of Alek’s identity goes hand in hand with her objectification. (8)

Unlike the other women who consent to travel to Belgium to “work” for Dele, Alek does not know the true nature of the work she is going to do abroad. It is only when Alek, now in her new identity — “Joyce Jacobs, a ‘Nigeria’ from Benin City” — gets to the house in Zwarte Zusterstraat and asks about the children she would be babysitting that she begins to comprehend what she has been brought to do. “Madam” gives her two days of grace so she can come out of her confusion and face reality, and “start.” Having no passport, no money, and no means to help herself, Joyce is forced into prostitution against her will. In this novel, as argued above, Unigwe presents various circumstances that make African women vulnerable to exploitation – sexual, economic, cultural, and, in Alek’s case, the need to escape emotional heartbreak from Polycarp – and which inform their decisions to consider migration as the only way out. Udoette and Nwiyi (2015) argue that Unigwe’s “characters’ sexual exploits and job function in Antwerp are what could be described as a position of no alternatives” (249).

Sisi’s (Chisom) desperation to escape poverty and leave Nigeria at all costs leads her to Dele. When she meets Dele, the proud man tells her without mincing his words, in his crude manner:

‘If you wan’ comot from dis our nonsense country, come see me make we talk’ [...] ‘Here. Take.’ He stretched out the hand with the card. Chisom took it out of politeness. She did not think she could take him seriously. Who offered a total stranger the chance to go abroad? She put the gold-edged card in her purse. (32)

When she goes to see Dele at his office, Dele informs her, “I dey get girls everywhere. Italy. Spain. I fit get you inside Belgium. Antwerp. I get plenty connections there. Plenty, plenty!” (34). As argued above, Unigwe employs repetition for emphasis, and it is obvious that Dele, from his mannerisms, is an illiterate, but a wealthy individual, and due to his wealth, he is certain that desperate young women like Chisom would fall for his persuasive power, as he convinces them of a better life abroad. Like Ama, Chisom gets angry; she insults Dele and leaves because she cannot imagine herself, a university graduate, becoming a prostitute in Europe. But as occurs with Ama, she later returns to Dele to apologise for insulting him and to accept the offer. Dele tells her that it would cost her thirty thousand Euros, which is to be paid

in instalments of five hundred Euros every month “unfailingly.” When Chisom asks how she could make that kind of money, Dele tells her boastfully:

I get connections. Dat one no be your worry. As long as you dey ready to work you go make am. You work hard and five hundred euro every month no go hard for you to pay. Every month I send gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid. My gals dey there. Every month, four gals. (42)

Chisom does not hesitate further; she accepts Dele’s offer to become a sex worker in Belgium due to her desperate circumstance and her dreams of a better life, one that will take her family out of poverty. Her father’s civil servant salary can barely provide for the family in their cramped one-bedroom apartment, and her boyfriend’s salary as a teacher can hardly meet her material desires. Going abroad is the only way out for Chisom. And meeting Dele becomes the start of possibilities for Sisi, as the narrator puts it: “Dele, the big man with an office in Randle Avenue. Dele had brought her to her destiny” (246).

As stated earlier in this chapter, Chisom/Sisi’s story is the most prominent in Unigwe’s novel. Udoette and Nwiyi (2015) consider Sisi as Unigwe’s most disillusioned character. The novel begins with Sisi’s story. Unigwe shows her “escape” from the sex trade, and then hints at her death, and she weaves a temporally complex and multi-vocal narrative perspective that introduces the other characters as well as their back stories, making the reader understand how they all come to live in the house in Zwarte Zusterstraat, and the significance of Sisi’s death. I would argue that Unigwe uses Sisi’s story to demonstrate how exploitation affects the psyche and identity of the women. Even though they have “agreed” to be “exported” as Dele’s “property” controlled by “Madam,” they soon realise that the better life promised to them is a façade, and indeed, they have become pawns in the hands of the traffickers and must obey all the rules. Sisi has not even rested from her journey from Nigeria to Belgium; the next morning, she is greeted by “Madam,” who informs her, “Today you start work. We haven’t got enough time to lose” (116). Not only is Sisi shocked to learn that she must start work immediately, but she is also surprised that “Madam spoke good English” (116). She expects Madam to be like the illiterate Dele but finds out that “Madam had a master’s in Business Administration from the University of Lagos. And not only did she speak perfect English, but she spoke perfect Dutch too. And was at this moment taking lessons in French. Madam’s accent was sophisticated. Her words well enunciated [...]. The closest thing to the Queen’s English Sisi had ever heard” (117).

Here again, Unigwe uses register to differentiate her characters. While Dele is illiterate and controls the movement of girls to Europe, Madam is well-educated and utilises her business administration skills and multilingual abilities to not only manage the girls when they arrive in Europe but also to communicate with the outside world on their behalf. She maintains good relations with the police, the immigration authorities, and other relevant bodies in Belgium, which helps her cover up her exploitative activities, as she presents herself as a law-abiding immigrant. Madam is an exploiter; together with Dele, they make the young women go through untold hardship, even though they have consented to work as prostitutes in Belgium. They confiscate the women's passports and give them "new" identities before they start their "work." Madam tells Sisi the next day after she arrives: "Ah, hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it" (119). Thus, Sisi and the other women have no option but to put their lives into Madam's hands, and she has the right to do with them as she chooses, and the women have no right to question her. When Sisi asks "Why?", as she is instructed to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Madam's response sums up the women's precarious situation: "My dear Sisi, it's not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you're told and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. *You understand?* [...] Silence and obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. *Capeshe?*" (120). It is evident from this excerpt that the women are in for a rough ride, and there is no way of escaping, except to pay up their debts or die trying to escape, as is the case of Sisi. She not only goes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but she also accepts the new identity Madam gives her – a Liberian, whose family was killed by British soldiers, and who manages to escape and finds herself in Belgium. This loss of identity, which is a form of exploitation, is captured by the narrator: "Not only would she be Liberian, in the next months, she would be other things. Other people. A constant yearning to escape herself would take over her life, so that being Sisi would no longer suffice. It would take Luc to put a stop to that. Briefly. And then she would be gone" (121).

Using fragmented sentences, the narrator exposes the poignancy of Sisi's predicament, and a continuation of the economic exploitation she experienced in Nigeria before migrating, and how that impacts her experience in Belgium. She becomes many "things" as her identity changes until she meets Luc, the Belgian man who falls in love with her and tells her she has worth and must not continue to be a prostitute. However, even when she assumes "freedom" by moving in with Luc, the narrator informs the reader that Sisi's exploitation, and indeed the other women's, is not something they can easily escape, it is a continuum, unless they "fulfil" their side of the bargain, that is, paying off their debts of thirty thousand Euros:

She had the love of a good man. A house. And her own money – still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green – the thought of it buoyed her and gave her a rush that made her hum. [...]. What she did not know, what she would find out only hours from now, was just how absolute the transition would be. (1)

It is important to note that, from the very first page of the novel, the reader is alerted to Sisi's impending death, which foregrounds the height of her exploitation. Her death causes a profound shift in the other characters' lives, and it is frequently referenced in key moments of the narrative. As stated above, Sisi's story is the most prominent character in *On Black Sisters' Street*. At one point, Sisi dreams of her own death:

That night, just before she was shaken by Madam, Sisi saw her car. [...]. But she could see the driver. And it was not her. It was being driven by a headless form with a candlewick for a head. When she woke up, she snapped her fingers over her head to ward off any evil that the dream might portend. (201)

The language is poignant, and the use of fragmented sentences sets a tone of dread and uncertainty for Sisi, who is thinking of leaving sex work. The narrative voice at another point goes back to refer to the “absolute transition” that awaits Sisi, mentioned in the first chapter: “[o]n the last day of Sisi's life nothing could have prepared her for her transition” (281). And again, “[s]o the hammer hitting into her skull had come as a shock. She did not even have time to shout” (293), finally reveals to the reader exactly how Sisi dies. Through a series of temporal shifts between past and present, Unigwe paints Sisi's final moments in ways that leave the reader feeling pity for the young woman, who only wants to make a better life for herself, culminating in her bold decision to leave prostitution and settle down.

Leaving the house in Zwarte Zusterstraat does not entail freedom for Sisi. Indeed, Unigwe does not offer “absolute” freedom to her female characters who become sex workers. I argue that Unigwe, just like Darko, believes that the exploitation of African women who are victims of prostitution and trafficking networks in Europe is a continuum. As I posited at the beginning of this chapter, this is in line with the concept of the continuum of sexual exploitation and violence by Liz Kelly (1988). Despite her “emancipation” from Akobi, Osey, and Pompey in Germany, and her “acceptance” of another pimp, Oves, Mara never truly becomes free; her exploitation has eaten deep into her fabric, and her identity changes. She cannot remember how to be Mara again, a situation that Kaye makes her realise: “[b]ut Mara is no more [...] she is standing before me, but she isn't the same anymore. You are no more you, Mara. You've changed” (127). It is only towards the end of the novel that Mara acknowledges this fact: “I am

so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine being a non-whore. I have problems recollecting what I was like before I turned into what I am now” (139).

Similarly, Chisom in Unigwe’s work first metamorphoses into Sisi before becoming “Other things. Other people” (121), and then acknowledging her changed personality as a prostitute, working to satisfy different kinds of men: “*This is not me. I am not here. I am at home sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is somebody else. Another body. Not mine. This is not me [...]. This is a dream*” (212; emphasis in the original). Here, Unigwe not only uses fragmented sentences to expose Sisi’s thoughts, but she also makes use of repetition to emphasise her sudden realisation of her changed identity, as well as the use of italics to differentiate Sisi’s thoughts from the narrator’s description – a feature of the free-indirect style discussed earlier in this chapter. And when Sisi meets Luc, who promises her a “new” life, Sisi decides once again to become “another” person, “and now she could reclaim her life and she would. She would get rid of Sisi, let a fire consume Sisi, char her and scatter her ashes” (276).

It is not only Sisi who changes; Efe changes too; even after paying off her debts, she does not know how to return to being Efe. She ends up becoming a “Madam” herself, showing how exploitation affects the exploited, even after escaping from the webs of their exploiters: “Years later, Efe will claim to understand why Madam is the way she is: detached; cold; superior. ‘If you’re not like that your girls will walk over you’, she will tell Joyce. ‘If you become too involved, you won’t last a day’” (40). Efe will, in the future, become cold and detached like Madam. She will become an exploiter too, bringing in girls from Africa to work for her while, like their Madam, she “settles” the police and other local authorities to cover her exploitative deals:

She would buy girls from Brussels because it was more convenient, she said, to get girls who were already in the country. [...] 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. [...] She would do well in the business, buying more girls to add to her fleet. (278-279)

Essentially, the exploitation of the female characters in both novels continues to open them to exploitation and affects their identities even many years after their initial migration. Sisi dies when she tries to escape the shackles of her exploiters. As stated earlier, Efe becomes an exploiter as she continues in the trade, becoming a Madam herself. Efe’s story suggests that vulnerability and exploitation affect the psyche of these women, enabling them to become exploiters themselves. Her story also establishes that the exploitation of women is not only

orchestrated by men; women can become active or passive participants in the process of making other young women vulnerable and prone to exploitation.

Efe's personal story of exploitation makes her assume the position of the exploiter in the long run, bringing other women from Africa to "work" for her. According to Reinares (2019), Efe repeats "the cycle of exploitation" by doing exactly what Dele and Madam do. Even after leaving prostitution and returning to Nigeria, Ama's life never returns to normal. Yes, she finally gets her freedom after four years and opens a boutique in Lagos; she dies at "ninety-three, a tiresome old woman" (112), whose youthful strength had been spent working for Dele and Madam. Even when the women in both novels become "free" temporarily, like Mara in Darko's novel, or permanently, like Efe, Ama, and Joyce in Unigwe's novel, they lose their self-identities. Mara would continue working as a prostitute "in her own terms," but under a "new" pimp, until her old age, sending money back home to her children, as she cannot bear to go back to Ghana, because she can barely remember who she was before migration. Unigwe's surviving women, likewise, could hardly return to who they were before migration, even though they are free and have the means to do as they please. The women in both novels, therefore, do not remain the same as a result of the exploitation they endure in their early years working as prostitutes in Europe. The two writers do not idealise Europe as a land of promise for female African migrants working as prostitutes in red-light districts in Germany and Belgium. However, they have different sociological views in their representation of their characters' experiences as prostitutes in Europe, which position them on either side of feminists' debates on the morality or otherwise of prostitution, which had been explored earlier in this chapter. Both writers also complicate the terms "consent" and "agency" as ambiguous in their representations of the "before" and "after" experiences of their female protagonists.

THE AMBIGUITY OF CONSENT AND AGENCY: UNIGWE AND DARKO

As established above, feminists have divergent opinions on the issue of prostitution, as regards the obtaining of consent from the person "trafficked." Consent is a significant issue in the literature around sex trafficking, especially in the novels under discussion in which the writers have divergent views. Consent is considered legal if it is well-informed and given freely. On the other hand, agency is the sense of control an individual feels, especially the capacity to influence their own thoughts, behaviours, and actions. In the twentieth century, international organisations such as the United Nations introduced regulations regarding human trafficking. However, there have been disagreements regarding the nature of trafficking, especially if it

involves the consent of the trafficked person. To put an end to this debate on consent, the 1949 Trafficking Convention recommended that states should punish “any person who, to gratify the passions of another: (1) procures or entices or leads away, for the purpose of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of the person; (2) exploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of the person” (Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, December 2nd 1949, Article 1). Thus, sex trafficking for prostitution is considered criminal, irrespective of the consent of the trafficked person. This led the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (otherwise known as Trafficking in Persons Protocol) (2000), to declare that trafficking in persons is punishable if it exhibits the following three elements:

- (i) an ‘action’, being recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons; (ii) a ‘means’ by which the action is achieved (threat or use of force or other forms or coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, and the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent of a person having control over another person; and (iii) a ‘purpose’ (of the action): namely, exploitation. (Trafficking in Persons Protocol, Article 3)

The article further states that all three elements must be present to constitute trafficking. This UN protocol also proposed that the consent of an adult victim of trafficking is considered irrelevant when any of the stipulated “means” are used. In *On Black Sisters’ Street and Beyond the Horizon*, some of the “means” such as deception, abuse of power, or a position of vulnerability, and most importantly, the giving or receiving of payments, are employed to make the female characters consent to becoming subjects of sex-trafficking and prostitution.

When examining fictional representations of sex trafficking, this study establishes that consent and agency are ambiguous, as feminists have divergent views on them. Liberal feminists consider consent to be a positive feature, something that distinguishes sex work from trafficking for sexual exploitation. On the other hand, radical feminists consider the giving of consent as something born out of the lack of choice. Thus, according to the radical feminists, irrespective of consent, most sex workers or prostitutes are victims of sex-trafficking networks, and consent does not mean much because exploitation takes place in the sex trade, either by the pimps or the male clients. Jean (2015) argues that “consenting to sexual acts defined by patriarchy and by the market is more of a survival strategy than any real sexual agency in which women can choose the terms of their sexual encounters” (54). By implication, the giving of consent by women to engage in sex work or prostitution, especially when they are “trafficked”

outside their countries of origin, is not the result of any form of agency but the expression of a desire to escape poverty, and the act of prostituting one's body for financial gain is considered a crime by radical feminists, regardless of whether consent is given. This is why Barry (1995) states that "when the human body is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human body has taken place" (23). Consent, according to radical feminists, does not justify exploitation and should not be considered valid. Melissa Farley (2013) argues that only a tiny percentage of all women in prostitution are there because they freely choose it. Radical feminists argue that women who engage in prostitution do not have any form of agency, whether they give their consent to be trafficked or are forced into it. They cannot choose their terms of engagement. While this is the experience of sex workers from any nationality in the transnational sex trade arena, the possibility of African women escaping the powerful trafficking networks is slim because of their race and their illegal status.

Kempadoo (2001) argues that "in the context of discussing 'trafficking' of women for sex work, domestic service, marriage, sweatshop labour, farming, and other unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, Third World Women are the most frequent 'victims'" (3). African women (as "Third World Women") are considered "others" and are open to various forms of exploitation. As argued above, most African sex workers enter the trade to escape poverty and to provide for their families back home, as Efe does in *On Black Sisters' Street*, sending money back home regularly for the care of her son, Lucky, and her younger siblings. It is thus imperative to take into consideration the various reasons why African women become subjects of prostitution and trafficking, regardless of whether they give their consent or not. This is why Kempadoo further argues that:

It would seem erroneous, if not socially irresponsible, to ignore these national and geopolitical contexts, as well as specific histories and experiences, when talking about women in the global sex-trade. Reducing sex work to a violence inflicted upon women due to notions of a universality of patriarchy and masculinist ideologies and structures, or through the privileging of gender as the primary factor in shaping social relations, dismisses the great variety of historical and socio-economic conditions, as well as cultural histories that produce sexual relations and desire. (38)

She further argues that the representation of black women or women of colour as highly sexual and ideal for sex work has continued, even into the twenty-first century. Arguably, the global sex trade leans heavily on the bodies of women of colour. The narrator in *On Black Sisters' Street* paints this picture clearly: "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” (84). Even the narrator of Darko’s novel states that black women are in demand in Germany and they are a source of wealth for their “pimps.” This is why black men like Akobi, Osey, and Pompey bring in their wives from Africa to come “work” for them as sex workers. Mara tells the reader that she and Vivian are victims of the same experience: “She was like me. Our husbands brought us here and we were at their mercy” (90). Farley (2013) further argues that other prostitutes from Eastern Europe and other Western countries may not face the double disadvantage African prostitutes face, as a result of their skin colour and their illegal immigration status. Hence, with other radical feminists, she calls for the complete eradication of the sex trafficking of African women, regardless of whether consent was given or not.

Liberal feminists, even though they consider sex work as legitimate work, condemn forced prostitution, as it robs the sex worker of the right of consent. They, however, advise caution when considering consent, as an individual may not fully understand the details of what they have consented to, and this ignorance may place them in a disadvantaged or vulnerable position. Judith Butler (2011) sheds more light on this issue:

Consent is often considered as a discrete act that an individual performs and so draws upon the presumption of a stable individual. What happens to this framework if we maintain the view that the ‘I’ who consents does not necessarily stay the same in the course of the consent? In other words, does the ‘I’ give itself over to a certain transformation, not fully knowable in advance through the act of consent? (406)

Butler argues that consent could change from that point of agreement to a point of full knowledge during the course of the agreement. This is the case of Sisi in *On Black Sisters’ Street*. She had consented to leave Nigeria out of frustration and agreed to do anything, including selling her body, to escape poverty. Part of the consent is that she remains the “property” of Dele and Sons Limited until she pays off 30,000 euros, which is the supposed cost of moving her to Belgium. However, later on, Sisi changes her mind and breaks that agreement, because her Belgian boyfriend makes her believe she has “rights,” which further echoes the liberal feminist view that women have the right to consent to be sex workers and also to decide when to leave. However, Sisi does not go scot-free. It is this breaking of an agreement, reneging on her own consent, that ultimately leads to her death.

On the issue of consent, Unigwe’s women, except Alek (Joyce), are fully aware of what they are going to do in Belgium, and they are not coerced into acceptance, even though they are lured by the promise of a better life and so much money if they do “well.” Alek’s consent

is never sought in the whole transaction that brought her to Belgium. The reader is encouraged to sympathise with Alek/Joyce and the other women due to their vulnerability. Thus, Unigwe blurs or even dismantles the gap between the pro-sex-work and anti-prostitution binaries, especially when consent is involved. Sisi, Efe, and Ama all consent to migrate to Belgium to escape poverty, deprivation, and abuse. In other words, their consent makes them voluntary prostitutes according to liberal feminists. Otuegbé (2025) states that many of Unigwe's women "were knowingly trafficked, having been privy to the arrangements or having ignored their better judgement before embarking on the journey abroad" (56).

However, because of their reasons for choosing this path, which are borne out of the lack of choice, according to radical feminists, they are still "victims" of circumstances (economic, financial, and psychological) that make women vulnerable to sex-trafficking networks like Dele and Madam, even when they give their consent. There is a sense of fluidity in the narration, as readers can find instances in Unigwe's novel where the narrator condemns sex work and other instances where they are sympathetic to the women's plight, considering why they entered the trade in the first place. Reinares (2019) argues that, by endowing her female protagonists with the power of consent, Unigwe generates a rich space of ambiguity, which would not have been possible had the women been forced into sex-trafficking and prostitution like Mara in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Thus, it can be argued that Unigwe represents consent in sex trafficking and prostitution in a more nuanced way than Darko, which could position her characters as directors of their own destinies. On the other hand, Darko explores the negative side of sex trafficking, especially using some of the established "means" highlighted by the United Nations, such as Mara's vulnerability, Akobi's abuse of his powerful position as a husband, and his deception of his own wife. Mara does not consent to become a prostitute, as some of the women in Unigwe's novel do; she is forced by her husband, and as established above, she cannot choose to leave. Darko portrays Mara as a victim.

For her part, Unigwe breaks away from the portrayal of the four prostitutes as absolute victims. They have been "armed with a vagina and the will to survive" (epigraph), and they are determined "to make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs" (26). Using language that is not suggestive of shame, Unigwe examines sex work pragmatically and represents her characters as women who engage in it to enrich themselves financially, even though there are risks and consequences involved, as is seen in Sisi's death. Even before they migrate, they are mostly young, unmarried women, desirous of a better life that takes them beyond the limitations and frustrations they have faced in their home countries. Sisi replies to Luc, who wants her to quit prostitution: "[Dele] didn't exactly tie my hands and feet and dump

me on the plane, you know. I could have chosen not to come. I was a grown woman, and he did explain the situation to me” (270). Thus, Unigwe’s women, like Sisi, consent to come to Europe to work as sex workers. In Darko’s novel, however, Mara is married, and she has accepted the culture of subservience. To her, victimisation is not strange. In fact, wives are seen as possessions and expected to do whatever their husbands demand, including giving up their bodies as sex workers at their husbands’ orders. Mara’s position as a victim of exploitation and sex trafficking is established from the beginning of the novel and is sustained to the end.

The way both authors explore agency is also different. Even though Unigwe creates female characters who consent to become sex workers, there is no guarantee that they can enjoy full agency or control of the terms of their engagement in the sex trade. In fact, the four women can only enjoy certain rights or privileges after they have paid off their debts to Dele and Madam. Until then, they are just pawns in the hands of the network of pimps, who control their lives. However, Unigwe gives her women the freedom to dream of their lives after prostitution, and through patience and “hard work,” they achieve these lofty dreams, except Sisi, who could not wait patiently, and she pays the ultimate price for “impatience.” Talabi (2025) argues that “Unigwe handles the agency of her protagonists to reflect the heterogeneity of the black diaspora and depart from Western and patriarchal clichés” (153). The women are not portrayed as victims of their choices. Ironically, through their “hard work” in the sex trade, except Sisi, the other women achieve their dreams. After paying her debts, Ama opens a large boutique in Lagos. Joyce owns a school, which she names after Sisi, and Efe remains in Belgium to continue in the sex trade, this time as a Madam.

Through Sisi, however, Unigwe seems to be making a statement about the ambiguity and ambivalence of agency; that is, questioning if sex-workers can truly exercise agency, especially when they had given their consent at a point in time, before migrating. Sisi’s decision to exercise some level of agency ultimately costs her life. Thus, Unigwe again embraces part of the radical views that prostitution with or without consent does not afford the women involved freedom; in fact, the women can only be “free” when they fulfil the terms of their consenting agreement. Anything short of this could be detrimental to the sex workers, as in Sisi’s case. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Darko outrightly condemns prostitution and sex trafficking and does not propose agency for Mara. She takes the radical feminist stance from the beginning of her novel to the end; she does not shift between the two feminist stands, unlike her contemporary Unigwe. Even though Mara demonstrates resilience by breaking free of the shackles of Akobi’s control, she does not enjoy full subjectivity, as she ends up under the control of another pimp, Oves. By implication, this chapter argues that agency, like consent, is

a complex issue. Sex trafficking subjects like the female protagonists in both novels cannot enjoy full agency, regardless of whether they consent or not, because their illegal migration status, as well as their race, makes them vulnerable and opens them up to exploitation.

Reinares (2019) further states that “when dealing with a complex issue such as transnational trafficking, one must recognise that consent and agency are shifting, unstable and intimately dependent on the specific material circumstances a person may be experiencing” (13). The women’s circumstances before migration sometimes propel them to consent to be trafficked for sex work. However, they may not fully exercise that same level of choice when they migrate, as their illegal status places them at the mercy of their traffickers. Thus, even in the context of apparent autonomy, one cannot always determine the blurred lines between empowerment and exploitation in the face of the systemic vulnerability that transnational sex trafficking can entail. This underscores my argument that the women’s experiences of vulnerability and exploitation are a continuum; they do not end, even when it seems some women have agency over others in the sex trade. Unigwe’s novel explains this better than Darko’s, as she blurs the lines between the two feminist stances. While her female protagonists exercise some agency, first by consenting to migrate and then by agreeing to pay up Dele within a set period, they are still exploited in Belgium. One of them eventually dies, and their “Madam” feels untouched because “Sisi’s death is nothing more than a temporary discomfort” (39). The same fate awaits any of the women who reneges on the agreed terms of their engagement; thus, agency is complicated in Unigwe’s novel.

While pro-sex or liberal feminists may consider consent and agency as positive features, anti-sex or radical feminists like Reinares argue that a more productive approach would be “to focus on the structural contexts that precipitate the characters’ exploitation” (68). Their illegal migrant status, race, class, and gender intersect to ensure their continued exploitation. All of these factors combine to place these women in disadvantageous positions in predominantly white countries like Belgium and Germany, and the only option these women have to survive is to continue to prostitute themselves or die trying to escape the web of sex-trafficking like Sisi. Vivian tells Mara in *Beyond the Horizon*: “it’s the only survival open to us” (86). Having no recourse to justice or agency in Europe, both novels emphasise various ways in which their female characters can support each other – a kind of support that would transcend their experiences as prostitutes, like the life-long friendship between Mara and Kaye in Darko’s novel, and the one developed by Unigwe’s women after Sisi’s death. The women in both novels begin to see themselves as “sisters” to make sense of their present and maybe only reality. Both authors therefore emphasise sisterhood and solidarity among their female protagonists.

FEMALE SOLIDARITY: RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT

Chandra Mohanty (2003) argues that feminist solidarity is particularly useful for feminist literature that explores transnational or cross-cultural lines. Her model rejects the notion that women are confined to stereotypical roles as worthless or invisible, emphasising their interconnectedness and interdependence instead. She further argues that relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests are at the heart of feminist solidarity. Also important to Mohanty is the devastating impact of power structures and inequalities on women. This is more evident in Unigwe's novel, where the women's backstories are nuanced to show the many reasons that lead them to become sex trafficking subjects in Europe. Like Mohanty, Reinares advocates a transnational female solidarity because:

[t]his pedagogy provides a fluid border that recognises subaltern trafficked persons as capable 'agents', with the ability to consent to act in their perceived best interest, but who later became 'victims' not because of the clichéd third-world passivity or helplessness represented in mainstream sex-trafficking discourse, but because of the dynamics their choice itself entails. (69)

The women under consideration can only make sense of their experiences through their continued solidarity with each other. Both Unigwe and Darko advocate female solidarity or sisterhood as one of the ways women can overcome some of the complex challenges they face, especially in their work as prostitutes in White European settings like Belgium and Germany. It is evident that women need women; both authors use their female characters to point out that women who find themselves as transnational sex trafficking subjects may not relate to each other in a friendly manner at their first contact, as a result of their past experiences, but over time realise the need to form a bond to survive certain unpleasant circumstances. This is true of the female characters in both novels. When Mara in Darko's novel gets to Germany, she meets Kaye, Pompey's wife. Pompey is the pimp that Akobi places in charge of Mara. At first, the women do not form a relationship, but over time, Kaye draws close to her because of Mara's vulnerability. Kaye has experience of being a wife and a prostitute controlled by her own husband. As a result, Mara not only enjoys Kaye's friendship but also benefits from her counsel. It is through Kaye's support that Mara devises a way to liberate herself from Akobi's control, to become a prostitute on her own terms. In fact, through the women's relationship, Darko suggests that solidarity among women who find themselves as prostitutes in Europe cannot be overemphasised. They, in fact, need each other to survive precarious situations, such as the ones the women in Darko's novel find themselves in.

When Kaye helps Mara get a new “Lord,” Oves, Mara wanted to pay her for her service; she had been instrumental in getting to the root of Akobi’s deception, not only to Mara but also to his German wife. Kaye refuses to take anything from Mara. She replies, “Nothing,” because of “sisterhood solidarity” (135). This sums up the significance of women being able to depend on each other. Kaye decides to help Mara because she realises that she is all Mara has got in that desperate situation. She not only helps Mara to escape Akobi’s control, but she also covers for Mara whenever she needs to make extra money so that her husband, Pompey, the pimp, will not suspect any foul play:

Kaye knew he [Pompey] wouldn’t fall in with any deal to help me behind Akobi’s back. We had to plan carefully. [...] ‘Mara thinks she should go easy and just have one a day, Pee, for the next three months or so’, she told her husband sweetly one morning. [...] She’s been destroyed down there, Pee’, she replied when Pompey asked why. ‘It was that Italian who came to see her for the first time yesterday. He almost completely destroyed her, Pee. I think her decision is wise. After all, that’s her capital and she must take care not to lose it, which is what will happen if she doesn’t slow down, Pee.’ Pompey eventually agreed. Our plan was put in motion. I didn’t reduce my daily customers to one as Kaye had told Pompey. I increased them to seven. [...] with the experienced Kaye as my accomplice, all risks were worth taking and seemed conquerable. (119-120)

This lengthy excerpt from Darko’s novel illustrates the strength of female solidarity between Mara and Kaye. Kaye not only covers up for Mara so that she can raise enough money to buy her “freedom,” she also “passes” some of her clients over to Mara to enable her to raise enough money for a fake marriage with a German man. One key aspect of Darko’s narrative is the simplicity of its language and the clarity of its thought. According to Adjei (2009), Darko’s choice of words is designed to “deconstruct and demolish the patriarchal status quo by reducing men both to worthless, irresponsible, physically grotesque images and to wicked husbands and fathers to engineer a new social order in which women are in control of their destiny” (48). This is why Darko also represents women like Mama Kiosk in Ghana and Vivian and Kaye, the two women who help Mara escape Akobi’s control in Germany, as strong women who support Mara. Darko’s novel, therefore, emphasises female solidarity as transcendental, that is, it extends beyond a single location. She represents Mama Kiosk as the support system Mara needs while in Ghana, who helps open Mara’s eyes to her exploitation by Akobi, even though Mara does not see this until she arrives in Germany. In Germany, Darko presents Vivian and Kaye, especially the latter, as women who finally help Mara to escape Akobi’s control. Through

these women, Darko demonstrates that African women are not merely victims but can also exhibit agency and empowerment by forming strong female relationships.

Unigwe also portrays close female relationships in her novel. The four prostitutes, all illegal migrants who are involved in the same profession, do not always agree and, in fact, are constantly arguing and fighting among themselves. Their individual differences are obvious, and this may be due to their personal stories and experiences, some of which have affected them for life. For instance, Ama's experience of repeated rape by her stepfather leaves her indifferent and sometimes without any form of emotion towards everyone around her. Bastida-Rodríguez captures the women's conflicting attitudes towards each other: "Indeed, it is so superficial that they do not know each other's nationalities, real names or life stories until one of them, Sisi, is found dead in violent circumstances" (205). Unigwe's narrator tells us that at the beginning, "[t]he women are not sure what they are to each other. [...] they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship [...]. And now, with the news they have just received, they have become bound by something so final" (26). It is indeed Sisi's death that brings about the sense of solidarity and sisterhood between the women, because, as Bastida-Rodríguez further remarks: "this event marks the beginning of a transformation in the others as they become aware of their vulnerability and gradually move towards solidarity and the sharing of past and present experiences" (206). As Efe reflects on her relationship with the other women in the light of Sisi's death, she declares that, irrespective of their constant fights and disagreements, there is something that binds them together:

[...] she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done before. Sisi's death has reinforced what she already knew: That the women are all that she has. They are all the family that she has in Europe. And families that knew so little of each other are bound to be dysfunctional. (40-41)

Thus, the women, beginning with Efe, start to share their stories about what led them to become prostitutes in Belgium, especially their shared connection with Dele, the man responsible for bringing them to Europe. This sharing of their stories becomes therapeutic and creates a sense of sisterhood. Indeed, Ifeyinwa Okolo (2019) argues that:

The locale 'Black Sisters' Street' is not only a space of female bondage but of potential female bonding. A fragile 'sisterhood' begins to grow. Until Sisi's death, the guarded histories of the women's individual migrations have been burdening them, gradually corroding their identities, implying that storytelling becomes shared testimony; it performs the dual function of therapy and (re)membering. Therapeutically, by letting one another into their past lives, the women are able to bond together in the face of

Sisi's loss [...]. In sharing, their difficult expressions of self (dreams, hopes and anxieties) also create a new space of mutuality [...]. The process of recalling and verbalising pasts that they have kept so long helps them re-order their sense of present life, and to renegotiate their relationship with one another. A tentative but sustaining female collective is born from the previously secret female life stories that are shared. (119)

Thus, both novels can be considered works of advocacy for female solidarity and sisterhood in contested spaces, such as the red-light districts in Antwerp, Belgium, and Germany. They emphasise the need for women to have other women around them, as this is one way to overcome the harsh realities of migration. Both authors emphasise the importance of storytelling, as it provides an avenue for women to open up about their past and present experiences, as well as their future aspirations and hopes. This also creates the support each woman needs to navigate the ugly realities of their lives. Through the tool of storytelling, each woman's story, especially their past, and how they end up in Europe as prostitutes, is relayed to the reader; the reader gets information about their motivations, their challenges and frustrations, and how they ultimately begin to see themselves as sisters. Significantly, the storytelling helps the reader understand each character in depth, especially their stories of migration from Africa to Belgium and Germany, and how they end up being "controlled" by Dele and Madam (in Unigwe's work), and Akobi, Osey, and Pompey (in Darko's). Thus, female solidarity is presented as both resistance to forces that seek to stifle the female protagonists in both novels and as empowerment, as they begin to see each other as allies, working together towards a common goal – freedom or independence.

CONCLUSION

Both Unigwe and Darko represent the experiences of African women working as prostitutes in Belgium and Germany, and they present the stories of their protagonists through various literary elements that keep readers engaged and ultimately provide a more nuanced, multi-perspectival view of African women's experiences of migration, especially in Europe. They do not represent Europe as a progressive space, but a deeply ambivalent one. Both authors present Belgium and Germany as geographical sites where postcolonial, patriarchal, and capitalist forces intersect to exploit and marginalise migrant African women. They represent the sex trade as being internationalised and demonstrate that it thrives on the exploitation of vulnerable African women, like the ones depicted in both novels.

This chapter, among other things, has examined feminist perspectives about sex work and trafficking in transnational spaces such as Belgium and Germany. While Darko aligns with

the radical feminists that prostitution is evil and should be criminalised and abolished, using language that suggests condemnation of the profession, Unigwe is pragmatic in her approach, as she presents multiple angles to look at why African women engage in the sex trade in the first place. This chapter establishes that it is difficult to place Unigwe as either an anti-sex work or a pro-sex work author, as she oscillates between the two feminist stances; she represents women who engage in prostitution for reasons such as survival, a search for better opportunities, and also to escape challenging situations back home. Using the stories of four different African women, she nuances African women's migration experiences, especially in Europe. However, both authors condemn the roles of men, both in Africa and in Europe, in the exploitation of African women. They also condemn the roles of government and state agencies in making prostitution an "economic" gateway that makes many young African women vulnerable, as a result of false promises of wealth when they come to "work" in Europe. As Nwahunanya (2011) argues, prostitution has remained an economic trade, because of the support, however covert, it receives from state agencies, because some countries, "see prostitution as a source of income to government coffers, since a number of tourists may find the availability of youthful prostitutes a good reason to travel to these countries where prostitutes operate without legal restrictions" (349). Reinares (2019) also argues that the state's failure to provide better life opportunities for its citizens remains the main reason why women enter prostitution; she also indicts government bodies for being complicit in the exploitation of African prostitutes.

As both novels establish, the perpetrators of the women's exploitation – Akobi and Osey in Darko's novel, Titus, Dele, and Polycarp in Unigwe's novel – work with the police and immigration agencies to illegally bring African women to Europe. Efe says about the Belgian police in Unigwe's novel, "*Oyibo* policemen are greedy. They have *big eyes* [...]. They ask for free girls. A thousand euros. Ah!" (40). This shows the police complicity in the sex trade in Europe. Unigwe attests that her research for the novel revealed that most of the African prostitutes she found in Antwerp, Belgium, were there because of "tourism," and as her novel captures, sex-trafficking networks like the one run by Dele and Madam have the support of the police, whom they pay to cover up their shady dealings. Darko also alludes to exploitative men like Akobi and Osey working hand in hand with some government officials, which makes it easy for them to keep bringing vulnerable women like their wives over for their selfish purposes. Mara recounts how her agent bribes an immigration clerk at the airport, on her departure for Germany:

[w]e passed through emigration without such trouble; the desk clerk tried to make a small palaver over some vaccination date of my agent's which had long expired but was expertly tackled with a five-pound note which my agent smartly pushed into the clerk's palm. I saw how the clerk's face lit up and shone when he noticed that the note was no local currency but hard Western currency which, when changed on the black market would feed him and his family for God knows how long. (56-57)

When Mara arrives in Germany, the situation remains unchanged. Akobi and the other men pay the police and other law enforcement to cover up their illegal act of bringing their women in to work in the sex trade. Thus, prostitution of African females in Europe continues to exist because some governments support it as a means of generating revenues. Through their representations of their protagonists' experiences, Darko and Unigwe call for the rethinking of Europe as a contested space where gender, race, and migration produce new forms of vulnerability, as well as new ways of coping and resistance by the female African migrants.

Significantly, both writers confront issues that make African women become transnational subjects of prostitution and sex trafficking in the first place, and they emphasise the necessity of female solidarity among their characters. Umezurike (2015) argues that both Darko and Unigwe are "writers whose narratives confront patriarchal oppression and demonstrate quite evidently through their female characters a resounding feminist position in how women must reconstitute their subjectivity from subaltern positions; positions of disadvantage and subjection" (153). Thus, as distinct as the authors are in their representation of migrant African women's realities, they both advocate strong perspectives that critique the ways African women are commodified for economic exchange across the various socio-cultural formations (Nigeria, Ghana, Germany, and Belgium, respectively). Both authors emphasise the necessity of constituting female solidarity, resilience, and resistance to survive the physical and psychological exploitation African women face, engendered by male power.

CHAPTER 3: MIGRATION AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS IN *AMERICANAH* AND *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

INTRODUCTION

“Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hopes are crossing borders. [...]. Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing – to all over, to countries near and far, [...]. They are leaving in droves.

When things fall apart, the children of the land scurry and scatter like birds escaping a burning sky. They flee their own wretched land so their hunger may be pacified in foreign lands, their tears wiped away in strange lands, the wounds of their despair bandaged in faraway lands, their blistered prayers muttered in the darkness of queer lands.

Look at the children of the land leaving in droves, [...] leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you just cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same again. Look at them leaving in droves despite knowing they will be welcomed with restraint in those strange lands because they do not belong” (“How They Left” in Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, 2014, 145-146)

Following the examination of migration, sexual exploitation, and gendered vulnerability in Europe in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Beyond the Horizon*, this chapter turns to the United States as a significant diasporic location in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*. While Europe in the previous chapter emerged primarily as a site of economic survival, bodily commodification, and patriarchal exploitation, the United States in these novels is represented as a complex social space where migrants must negotiate race, identity, belonging, and cultural citizenship. The movement from Europe to America therefore reflects a shift from the politics of survival to the politics of recognition and self-definition, although both contexts reveal the enduring challenges faced by female African migrants. Both *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* have attracted considerable critical attention and are widely regarded as important contributions to contemporary African migrant literature. Critics have praised Adichie for her incisive engagement with race and transnational identity in twenty-first-century America. Madhu Krishnan (2014) argues that Adichie examines the contradictions of contemporary global mobility by exposing the racial hierarchies that structure migrant experiences (128). Similarly, Ato Quayson (2014) contends that *Americanah* provides one of the most sophisticated literary explorations of African migration and diasporic

consciousness in recent African fiction (156). For many scholars, the novel's significance lies in its interrogation of what it means to become "black" in America, particularly for African migrants who arrive without prior racial consciousness.

The critical reception of *We Need New Names* has likewise emphasised Bulawayo's powerful representation of displacement, exile, and fractured belonging. through migration rather than recovered as a fixed place. Reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, Helon Habila (2013) commended its vivid representation of the emotional consequences of migration while also engaging broader debates about the representation of Africa in contemporary fiction. Oliver Nyambi (2020), for instance, argues that the novel interrogates the complex relationship between home, transnational identity, and belonging, demonstrating that diasporic subjectivity is continually reshaped through migration rather than anchored to a fixed homeland. Likewise, Polo Belina Moji (2015) contends that Darling's migration produces a process of "translational subjectivity," in which identity is continually renegotiated across cultural and geographical boundaries. Josephine Olufunmilayo Alexander (2023) argues that displacement in the novel is simultaneously political, geographical, and psychological, producing unstable identities and precarious forms of belonging.

Critics have particularly celebrated the novel's portrayal of childhood migration and the emotional costs of transnational movement. Despite this substantial body of scholarship, important gaps remain. Much of the criticism on *Americanah* focuses on race, while studies of *We Need New Names* tend to privilege exile, displacement, and postcolonial mobility. Consequently, the gendered dimensions of migrant identity formation often remain secondary concerns. Furthermore, many studies examine the novels independently rather than comparatively, limiting opportunities to explore how different African female migrant experiences illuminate broader patterns of diasporic identity negotiation.

This chapter addresses these gaps by examining how migration transforms the identities of Ifemelu and Darling through their encounters with American social structures. In both novels, the United States functions not merely as a geographical destination but as an active force in the production of identity. For Ifemelu, migration initiates a process of racial awakening. In Nigeria, race is largely absent from her self-understanding; however, upon arriving in America, she becomes aware of herself as "black" within a racialised social order. As Adichie herself notes through Ifemelu's famous observation, she "became black" only after arriving in America. Her identity therefore develops through continual negotiations involving race, gender, nationality, and class.

Similarly, Darling's migration to America produces profound transformations in her sense of self. Unlike Ifemelu, whose migration is largely voluntary and educational, Darling's movement is shaped by political instability and economic hardship in Zimbabwe. Her diasporic experience generates feelings of cultural fragmentation and linguistic dislocation. As she becomes increasingly removed from her homeland, she experiences what Stuart Hall (1990) identifies as the continuous production and reconstruction of identity within diasporic spaces (225). The United States thus becomes a site where belonging is simultaneously sought and denied.

The literary significance of both novels lies not only in their thematic concerns but also in the narrative strategies through which migration and identity are represented. Adichie employs a transnational narrative structure that moves between Nigeria, the United States, and Britain, reflecting the fluidity of migrant identities. The novel's use of blog entries is particularly significant because it allows Ifemelu to articulate critical reflections on race, belonging, and cultural difference. These blog posts function as counter-discourses that challenge dominant American narratives about race while foregrounding the migrant voice. One of the novel's most significant narrative strategies, is Adichie's deliberate choice to begin *Americanah* with Ifemelu preparing to leave the United States for Lagos, Nigeria. This narrative structure positions the novel not as a story about migration alone, but also about return, reflections, and self-assessment. This structure also allows the reader to reconsider the notion of the "American Dream", which in Ifemelu's case, has not provided complete fulfilment. Thus, America is framed not as the destination of the story, but as a stage in Ifemelu's evolving identity. This aligns with transnational theories of migration that reject linear journeys from "home" to "host country", and instead emphasises continual movements, negotiations, and multiple belongings. Through this non-linear narrative structured around extensive analepses, the novel recounts Ifemelu's migration retrospectively, positioning memory as the medium through which diasporic identity is understood.

Bulawayo adopts a markedly different but equally effective literary strategy. The child narrator perspective in the opening sections of *We Need New Names* enables readers to witness social and political collapse through innocent yet penetrating observations. The shift from Zimbabwe to America mirrors Darling's fragmented identity and creates a narrative form that embodies displacement itself. Bulawayo's use of memory, nostalgia, code-switching, and collective narration further reinforces the tensions between home and diaspora that structure migrant consciousness. Unlike *Americanah* which opens at the point of Ifemelu's return from America, *We Need New Names* begins in Zimbabwe, specifically in Paradise. This is a

deliberate narrative strategy that establishes home as the emotional and epistemological centre of the novel. The reader encounters Darling first as a child, a daughter, a friend, and a product of Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis. Through this style, the reader has a glimpse of what Darling is leaving behind before they witness where she is going. Beginning in Zimbabwe means that migration is experienced as loss rather than opportunity. Darling's movement from her country to America is not simply geographical; it marks a shift in language, identity, narrative tone, emotional register, and belonging. The novel is therefore structurally divided into two parts: Part one – Zimbabwe, and part two – America. Thus, migration literally interrupts one world and begins another. This formal structure mirrors the psychological rupture that migration creates.

These literary techniques are central to the concerns of this chapter because they reveal migration not simply as physical movement but as an ongoing process of identity negotiation. Through different narrative forms and aesthetic choices, Adichie and Bulawayo demonstrate that migrant identities are neither fixed nor stable but are continuously reshaped by encounters with race, culture, nationality, language, and memory. Consequently, *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* move beyond conventional migration narratives to offer complex representations of how African migrants construct, lose, recover, and transform their identities within transnational spaces.

The lengthy quote at the start of this chapter from Bulawayo's novel captures the undercurrents of contemporary African migration, particularly the "loss" of identity that results from leaving and the search for new identities suitable for navigating the new environment. It also highlights the push and pull factors, which had already been explored in the earlier part of this thesis. This chapter, therefore, examines how female African migrants negotiate or forge new identities in the United States, drawing on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. Both novels are set in both Africa and America, featuring the experiences of young female African migrants – Ifemelu and Darling — who move to America for education and better opportunities. These texts are "African" migrant narratives as they explore the experiences of migration from Africa to the United States, and by female African migrant writers – Adichie and Bulawayo, who had experienced migration themselves, thereby representing the everyday realities of their female protagonists before and after their migration to the U.S.

This chapter also interrogates the U.S. as a migrant nation that intricately impacts the (re)formation of identity for those entering its borders, particularly African women, as represented in both novels. Therefore, it is important to examine issues such as race, class, and

gender as factors that condition the female African migrant experience in the United States. For African women, whose identities are already shaped by patriarchal structures, colonial legacies, and transnational displacements, their migration to the U.S. introduces both new possibilities and new challenges. Both novels depict the female protagonists' identities as fragmented by the trauma of displacement and reconstructed through a series of experiences in the host country, America. African migrant women, as the novels demonstrate, often navigate between the cultural expectations of their countries of origin and the demands of the new society they inhabit. This tension can result in an "in-between" or "hybrid" identity, which Bhabha (1994) refers to as the "third space" – an interstitial space between cultures that enables the creation of new forms of self.

This chapter therefore argues that identity for female African migrants in these novels is not simply adopted, but rather, actively forged through negotiation, resistance, and adaptation in a racialised, gendered, and multicultural space as the U.S. Both novels present migration as not just a geographical relocation, but as a significant personal transformation shaped by the intersection of race, gender, memory, and social mobility. Emilia Ilieva and Lennox Odiemo-Munera (2011) argue that examining the lives of individual characters, such as Ifemelu and Obinze, and Darling, in both works allows us to understand how they negotiate new identities in a new culture. Their history as people from previously colonised countries and the various reasons behind their migration go a long way to impact their identities as African migrants.

As argued above, critical studies on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* have extensively examined the ways in which migration reshapes identity, belonging, and self-perception among African migrants. Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi (2017) argue that *Americanah* exposes the racial tensions and cultural prejudices that African immigrants encounter in the United States and demonstrates how migrant subjects are compelled to negotiate new identities within racialised social structures. Their study suggests that migration produces a continuous process of identity reconstruction as characters attempt to reconcile their African origins with the demands of American society. Similarly, Muhammad Dahiru (2018) argues that Adichie's novel interrogates race, migration, and return, revealing how experiences of racialisation transform migrants' understanding of themselves and their place within both American and African contexts. These readings position self-identity in *Americanah* as fluid, contested, and constantly reshaped by transnational movement and social encounters.

Critics of *We Need New Names* have likewise explored the relationship between migration and identity formation. Polo Belina Moji (2015) argues that Bulawayo's novel links

migration to processes of displacement, translation, and renaming, demonstrating how migrant identities become fragmented and reconstituted across different cultural spaces. Through Darling's movement from Zimbabwe to the United States, the novel reveals the psychological and cultural dislocations that accompany migration and the struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self in unfamiliar environments. Rocío M. Cobo-Piñero (2019) further contends that Bulawayo presents mobility as a complex negotiation between attachment to home and adaptation to new social realities, while studies of the novel's language and naming practices emphasise the experiences of unbelonging, cultural estrangement, and identity transformation that characterise migrant existence.

Building on these critical interventions, this chapter comparatively examines how female African migrants in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* negotiate identity within the racialised, gendered, and multicultural landscape of the United States. While existing scholarship has explored issues of race, displacement, and transnational belonging in the two novels, this chapter argues that identity is not static; neither is it merely lost or acquired through migration, but it is actively forged through processes of negotiation, resistance, adaptation, and self-reinvention. By drawing on postcolonial and transnational theories, the chapter argues that blackness is an important feature that impact the protagonists' experiences in both novels, and it analyses how they confront racism, cultural dislocation, memory, and social mobility, and how these experiences contribute to the continuous reconstruction of migrant identities within transnational spaces.

***AMERICANAH* AND *WE NEED NEW NAMES*: NEW POSSIBILITIES OR NEW CHALLENGES?**

Americanah tells the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to the United States to continue her university education after incessant strikes in Nigerian universities. The novel follows Ifemelu's life in Nigeria and the U.S., particularly her relationship with Obinze, her childhood lover, and with other men she encounters in America. Ifemelu's emotional and sexual encounters with different men in America are essential to her negotiation of a "new" self, different from who she was in Nigeria before migration. Ifemelu also achieves a significant identity "shift" due to other experiences she has in America. It is in America that she discovers for the first time that she is "black", a marker she never considered would determine the course of her life's journey in America. This realisation plays a significant role in her decision to "reclaim" herself by returning "home". It is therefore significant that Adichie's novel begins

with Ifemelu's decision to leave America after thirteen years, to return to Lagos, Nigeria, to "start" over.

The narration, therefore, focuses on the experiences of Ifemelu, the protagonist, as a "legal" female African migrant who emigrates to America to pursue her dreams but faces challenges in a racialised American society. Ifemelu struggles with her identity to the extent that at one point, she begins to conform to the dictates of American society by subscribing to what is considered "normal" and "acceptable"; she begins to learn the American accent, she relaxes her natural hair to look professional and "American" in order to get a white-collar job. It takes the efforts of a fellow migrant sister, Wambiu, for Ifemelu to realise that she can be herself, regardless of being black, and that, in fact, there is nothing to be apologetic about being who she truly is, with her natural hair and her Nigerian accent. Soon, Ifemelu gains success in the U.S., where she becomes famous for her blog about race in American society, entitled "Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black". After a successful career as a blogger and a fellowship at Princeton University, Ifemelu decides to move back home. In Nigeria, Ifemelu attempts to fit into the system as if she had never left by speaking in Nigerian English, securing a job at a magazine firm, and rekindling old relationships with Ranyiudo and Obinze, the latter of whom is already married. Ifemelu also tries to retain part of her "Americanness" by her regular outings with other returnees like herself, called "Naijapolitans", and especially keeping her American passport, which could come to her rescue whenever the need arises. She tries to be both Nigerian/African and American at once. Adichie's *Americanah* presents a female African migrant who has been imbued with choices in the face of the lack of choice that precipitated her migration to the United States; thus, Ifemelu's identity changes as a result of migration. Therefore, much of the story is told through Ifemelu's thoughtful narrations and her blog, which offer critical insights into America from the perspective of a female African migrant. The author also brings to the fore Obinze's point of view to describe the difficulties he faces as an illegal migrant in London, especially his deportation and return to Nigeria, thereby offering significant points of comparison between Ifemelu's and Obinze's experiences, and allowing the reader to understand how migration is gendered and location-specific (the U.S. and the UK).

We Need New Names is a coming-of-age novel that follows Darling, the young protagonist, and her friends in a Zimbabwean shantytown called Paradise. Darling, a 10-year-old girl at the beginning of the novel, travels with her friends (Bastard, Chipso, Stina, Sbhoo, and Godknows) to nearby suburbs to steal guavas to assuage their hunger. Through their conversations, we learn that the country is experiencing political unrest that has affected

everyone, including children like Darling and her friends. We also discover that Darling's parents have not always been poor; they used to live in a proper brick house, until the police under the repressive government came and demolished their home and those of their neighbours. They become homeless and move to Paradise, where hunger and poverty ravage them. Her father abandons them and leaves for South Africa; he does not call or send them money, and only returns when he is terminally ill with AIDS. Darling dreams of moving to America; she lives in the hope that her aunt Fostalina might come for her soon, and she cannot wait to leave the "kaka" Paradise for America, where she would have enough to eat and go back to school, as she and her friends have stopped going to school because of the oppressive government of the day.

As the story progresses, we find out that Darling indeed moves to America, but as an "illegal" migrant, as she comes on a visitor's visa. Like Ifemelu, she is shocked to discover that the real America does not resemble her idealised dream of America. This realisation and her harsh experience of racism in America change her from the ten-year-old girl who came to the U.S. to a young woman who struggles to retain a part of herself in America. Also significant is the experience of Darling's Aunt, Fostalina. In order to survive in America, she has to hold down two jobs and struggles to maintain a slim shape like American women because she feels her physique as an African woman is not "sexy" enough. Not only does she want to look "American," but she also succumbs to her boss's advances and becomes his mistress as her marriage collapses. Both Darling and her Aunt Fostalina, among other women in the novel, face the difficult challenge of retaining their identities. Attempting to overcome this challenge, they struggle to *look* American, like Fostalina, or to consciously learn to speak like Americans, as in the case of Darling and her African schoolmates in America.

Adichie and Bulawayo employ significant narrative techniques to tell the stories of African women who migrate to America and how migration, broadly, affects their identities. In *Americanah*, Adichie presents the story in a non-chronological order, employing flashbacks extensively to reveal the past of the protagonist, Ifemelu, and other characters, such as Obinze, her former lover, Auntie Uju, and others. Through these flashbacks, we gain more insight into the events that lead these characters to migrate to the US (and, in Obinze's case, the UK), as well as the changes their lives undergo as a result of their migration, such as the breakdown of the relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the novel begins almost at the end, when Ifemelu is preparing to leave America for Lagos, Nigeria. She visits a hairdressing salon in Trenton, where she meets other female African immigrants who share their experiences of being in America; the majority of these women are

illegal migrants who lack the flexibility of choice that Ifemelu has, and they cannot leave America. They are also illiterate and have accepted their lower social status. It is in this salon that Ifemelu recollects her story – the main parts of it are relayed to the reader through flashback. This non-linear technique adds depth and tension to the story, as the events that lead to Ifemelu's planned return are relayed from this salon, beginning with the making of her "returning" African hairstyle. At first, the reader, like the women in Mariama's salon, is curious to find out why Ifemelu wants to move back to Nigeria after a successful career in America. Adichie uses the "salon" as an important landmark in the novel; it serves as a mid-point in the narrative, as it is here that Ifemelu's story begins to unfold. Through the flashback technique, Ifemelu "remembers" everything that happened to her, including complex thoughts and emotions, and experiences that have "changed" her. The reader, therefore, has a better understanding of Ifemelu's strong desire to "return" home through this non-linear narrative style.

In addition to non-linear plots and flashbacks, Adichie employs a third-person omniscient narrator. This allows the narrator to shift perspectives among characters, primarily focusing on the protagonist Ifemelu and her erstwhile lover, Obinze. This also provides insights into their inner thoughts, emotions, and experiences, creating a multi-layered understanding of their lives and the novel's socio-cultural themes. This shifting of perspectives helps the reader understand not only Ifemelu's experiences, the primary focus of the story, but also those of Obinze, particularly his struggles as an undocumented immigrant in the UK. These shifts also allow the readers to see parallel experiences of migration and identity from different gendered and geographical perspectives. Adichie also uses Ifemelu's blog to provide a first-person commentary and observation on race, culture, and identity in America. By combining these various techniques, Adichie crafts a narrative that is both personal and expansive, exploring significant themes of race, identity, love, migration, and belonging in a nuanced and engaging manner.

Like Adichie, Bulawayo also employs rich narrative techniques that make *We Need New Names* both personal and expansive, detailing not just the story and experiences of Darling, the protagonist, but also those of other characters, such as the young children in Paradise and Aunt Fostalina in America. The story is told from Darling's perspective (first-person point of view), which provides an intimate, subjective lens through which readers experience her world and environment before, during, and after migration. While Adichie's protagonist is a young woman who was an undergraduate prior to her migration, Bulawayo employs a child narrator, Darling. The use of a child narrator is a significant technique that creates a poignant tension

between Darling's perspective and the reader's understanding of events such as political violence, poverty, and migration. Her voice carries a childlike naivety that contrasts with the harsh realities she describes. As a result, the narration is often fragmented and episodic, reflecting the way a child might process and recount memories and experiences. It is also a bildungsroman that captures Darling's childhood and growth in Zimbabwe and later in the United States. It explores Darling's coming-of-age and development, as well as her physical and psychological journey that shapes her identity. Thus, through Darling's episodic narration, Bulawayo mirrors her sense of dislocation and her experiences in two different worlds – Zimbabwe and America. Bulawayo also employs vivid, sensory-rich descriptions to bring Darling's world to life. The reader experiences a shift in tone as Darling grows and her perspective matures. In the earlier chapters, we find a mix of humour, pain, and resilience. In contrast, in the later chapters, we encounter a more reflective Darling as she navigates a new world, burdened by identity negotiation, alienation, and the loss of her innocence, and struggles to survive as an undocumented immigrant in America. Darling's narrative voice is key to conveying themes of migration, cultural dislocation, and the struggles of assimilation through her personal experiences, creating an authentic and deeply human experience.

Both novels have been selected, not only because they deal with the experiences of female African migrants in America, but also because their importance is tied to the negotiation of identities among migrants who are faced with not only retaining their past culture but also accepting the culture of the new environment in which they find themselves. Above all, then, this chapter examines how female migrants from Africa, such as Ifemelu, Darling, Aunty Uju, and Aunt Fostalina, negotiate a "new" identity in a racialised American society.

MIGRATION AND "SELF-IDENTITY"

Identity is a highly contested concept, both theoretically and in practice, politically and socially. It is viewed in relation to issues such as nation, ethnicity, culture, race, and class. Identity in ordinary usage is often viewed as fixed; however, in postcolonial migration contexts, it has become relational and multidimensional. Chielozone Eze (2016) argues, concerning the African migration phenomenon, that "identity is no longer shaped exclusively by geography or blood or culture as understood in oppositional terms; on the contrary, identity is now relational" (234-235). Thomas et al. (2011) define identity as the process of coming to terms with and recognising oneself through beliefs, values, personal experiences, and social identities.

Hasberry (2019) describes identity as developing across multiple social identities, including gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Self-identity, therefore, answers the question, “Who am I?”, and this question has been of particular interest to scholars in the humanities, who interrogate an individual’s perception of themselves and their interaction with other social, economic, political, and geographical forces. It includes markers or “labels people use to describe themselves” (Biddle et al. 1987, 326). Self-identity is a person’s perception of specific traits, qualities, abilities, and characteristics that distinguish them from others. As a concept, self-identity is not static; it can change over time, as experiences, both personal and communal, and other factors, such as others’ perceptions of a person, can influence the construction of one’s self-identity. The self is essential in identity discourse; how an individual conceives of themselves and what their society considers them to be goes a long way toward defining them. The self is also considered a product of social interactions. It is through an individual’s interaction with external forces that their identity is realised. Callero (1985) thus views self-identity as a set of prescriptive behaviours expected of a person based on their social position. The way a person is accepted or rejected within a social environment, or the expected behaviour from a person at a given point, is important in defining their self-identity. This is why Sandra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver II (2004) argue that our self-identity is predominantly influenced by the values of the culture and community in which we live or find ourselves. The culture of our present geographical location determines what is expected of us as individuals, and who we are is shaped by the society in which we live. Thus, “the extent to which you reflect the attitudes and beliefs of your culture and live up to the expectations of your community will determine how you see yourself” (34).

Irina Gomzina (2012) also argues that self-identity, whether cultural, social, ethnic, or personal, helps people to understand who they are; it is concerned with “how one sees themselves” (6). It is, therefore, not out of place to state that being in an unfamiliar geographical location and within an unfamiliar culture leaves immigrants, especially female African migrants like Ifemelu and Darling, with the burden of continuously struggling to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their self-identity. In essence, self-identity is fluid, as prevailing circumstances can influence how a person perceives themselves. Thus, examining this concept in postcolonial African migrant literature by women involves analysing how female African writers such as Adichie and Bulawayo explore and represent the formation, negotiation, and fragmentation of self-identities within and across national, cultural, and gendered spaces. Both *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* are analysed in this chapter to establish how the self-

identities of the two female protagonists, Ifemelu and Darling, are affected, altered, or re-negotiated in their experiences as migrants in America. Essentially, the novels by Adichie and Bulawayo explore what it is to “be” or “become” in a society that considers or recognises people based on specific markers – gender, race, class, and sexuality, especially how female African women negotiate their identities as migrants. Thus, migration impacts the self-identities of female African migrants as the novels establish.

Migration is one of the defining issues of 21st-century African literature; African writers and critics have interrogated this phenomenon from pre-independence to the present. Omolola A. Ladele and Adesumbo E. Omotayo (2017) argue that:

African writers have themselves for long been caught in the flux of migration. Particularly in the period of patriotic and nationalist call for self-rule and independence, many writers had to seek for safe havens in neighbouring countries or in distant lands in Britain, Europe and America [...] Characterising their literary production were motifs and tropes of alienation, isolation and aloneness. (50)

In migration fiction, African writers thus task themselves with exploring the motifs and themes of alienation, isolation, and other identity challenges that Africans face when they migrate. These writers also explore in their works how migration alters the identity of African migrants in host countries, putting them in a state of “being here and there” or “neither here nor there”. As established above, self-identity is not static but fluid or plural, comprising different layers, especially for people occupying contested spaces in which they are perceived as the “other.”

Anne Unterreiner (2017) extensively examines the self-identities of various groups in her seminal work, “The Identity Construction of Nationally Mixed People”. In her analysis, she goes beyond identifying people based on their racial or cultural backgrounds by exploring how individuals are nationally mixed, not necessarily by birth, but by moving into a new environment. There is, in practical terms, no single way to define people with multiple identity ties, or who are “mixed”. This is why she identifies four different identity poles by which people are identified. These are: rooted identity, mixed identity based on heritage, foreigner identity, and an identity other than the national. Individuals with a sense of rooted identity tend to feel a strong connection with their countries of residence; they do not wish to be connected to their countries of origin, and they adopt the language, culture, and worldview of their present location. On the other hand, individuals with a mixed identity through heritage have a mixed family history and thus identify with the countries of both parents. Those with a foreigner identity do not have a strong connection with the country they live in. Instead, they maintain a strong affinity with their countries of birth and feel like “outsiders” in their present

environment. Those who have an identity beyond the national do not have strong ties to a defined nation or country; rather, they identify themselves on their own terms, as human beings, citizens of the world, or by any title they deem fit.

It is essential to recognise that individuals can simultaneously belong to multiple identity poles, as established above, because self-identity is inherently fluid. It is difficult to place the female characters in both novels within one identity pole or the other, especially as migrants, because, according to Unterreiner, “migration could be a turning point during one’s life leading to identity shift” (35). Thus, at every stage of their lives, these characters must negotiate their self-identities, sometimes embracing one identity pole and rejecting others, and at other times embracing multiple identity poles simultaneously. *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* portray African female protagonists whose journeys to the West (America) bring about profound transformations in their self-identities, which differ from who they were before they embarked on migration. Through the migrant experiences of Ifemelu (from Nigeria to the U.S.) and Darling (from Zimbabwe to the U.S.), the novels interrogate how displacement, race consciousness, and gendered realities intersect to shape the postcolonial African female self.

THE QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN *AMERICANAH* AND *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

When discussing the negotiation of identities for the female protagonists of both novels, it is essential to remember that leaving their familiar and familial national environment affects their self-identities. To buttress this point, Unterreiner argues that “when social ties are weakened, national identification to the country of residence is also weakened [...]. It is the rupture or the consolidation of social ties and the migration path that influence the identity of nationally mixed people rather than social class” (29-30). Thus, the experiences (leaving Africa for America) of Ifemelu and Darling catalyse a shift in their self-identities, as they “change” because of their migration. They are not just physically, socially, and psychologically dislocated from their home countries; their identification with the host country is also weakened, hence the need to renegotiate their self-identities.

During her earliest years in America, Ifemelu finds it challenging to belong, and even after spending many years there, she still feels out of place. She enters relationships with American men, learns to speak with an American accent, and even becomes successful as a blogger. Yet, she feels an intense emptiness – a sense of “unhomeliness” to use Bhabha’s term (1994), which makes her consider returning home finally. This is not peculiar to Ifemelu alone. Jane, her Aunt’s neighbour from Grenada, also still feels “unhomely” in America after 10 years:

“You know, this is my tenth year and I feel as if I’m still settling in” (112). This feeling of not belonging forces them to adopt or form new identities that will consolidate their feeling of acceptance in the host country. As they strive to adopt the culture of their new environment, there is still within them an inescapable feeling of disillusionment occasioned by familial dislocation and broader issues such as racism, classism, control over their sexuality, and finding their voice. Therefore, Ifemelu’s migration to the U.S. initiates her into a “new” lived experience of race and social relations in ways she never encountered in Nigeria. She reflects: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (290). This statement captures the constructed and imposed nature of racial identity in a Western society like America. Ifemelu’s self-identity becomes increasingly mediated through the lens of American racial hierarchies, which prompts her to begin a blog that critically interrogates race relations in America. Ifemelu’s blog becomes a social commentary and an act of reclaiming narrative agency.

Similarly, in *We Need Names*, Darling’s perception of America is shaped by mythologies of abundance and freedom. However, like Ifemelu, when she migrates to the U.S., she confronts the reality that her “blackness” confers on her: her initial excitement wanes as she grapples with cultural dislocation and the realisation that America is not Paradise, as she had always dreamed it would be while in her shanty “Paradise” in Africa. Though less overtly analytical than Ifemelu’s narrative voice, Darling’s fragmented, observational narration captures the psychological estrangement of being racialised and othered, particularly as an undocumented migrant. Thus, for the protagonists in both novels, the America they encounter differs from the America they expected.

Their experiences leave them feeling displaced and constantly struggling to assert their selfhood. Susan Stanford Friedman’s (1998) argument on the self-identity of migrants is also important for a better understanding of the two novels: “Identity often requires some form of displacement – literal or figurative – to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of ‘home’, the perception of its identity as distinct from ‘elsewhere’” (151). As migrants move from their home countries to host countries, they are faced with both physical and psychological displacement and alienation, which further forces them to take on “new” identities in order to survive in their new environments. This does not necessarily mean that they “shed” their former identity, but rather that they seek to prevent their past culture from clashing with their present realities, which may leave them with the option of either adopting a new identity pole different from what they identified with before migration, or multiple identity poles.

Rasool and Kifayatullah (2021) argue that diasporic or migrant people are confronted with the newness of the cultures, societies, and atmospheres they encounter in host countries. This, in turn, leads to confusion about whether to retain their indigenous culture or adopt the culture of their new environment. To survive, migrants have to construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, and, in fact, consciously negotiate their self-identities so they can be accepted in host countries. This negotiation often leaves migrants in a state of being here and there, or neither here nor there, as they oscillate between two worlds, cultures, ideologies, and even languages and accents. Living between cultures, according to Amy Kebe (2009), makes female African migrants lose all tangible boundaries because “we live in this ‘neither nor’ state putting on characters and shedding characters all at once” (10).

In analysing Adichie’s *Americanah* and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, it is important to reiterate that both novels are set partly in America, a Western society, and, historically, a migrant nation. Many people who currently reside in the United States have migrated to the country at some point. This migration phenomenon has made the United States a significant site of historical and social representation of migrant experiences. The U.S. is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes and conditions migrant identity. For female African migrants like the protagonists in both novels, forging a new self involves contending with imposed racial identities, resisting gender marginalisation, navigating linguistic shifts, and reconciling with cultural memory. Adichie and Bulawayo depict these processes in nuanced ways, revealing that migrant women are not simply shaped by their experiences but actively remake themselves within and against them. Through their protagonists, both authors invite a reconsideration of self-identity as a dynamic and contested space that is as much about loss and rupture as it is about agency and reimagination of the self. As Nyawira Mwai and Njogu (2020) argue, the American context serves as both a catalyst and a constraint in transforming the identities of African migrant women. The U.S, while promising reinvention, also imposes racial scripts and cultural expectations that reconfigure selfhood. America is, therefore, a significant place for self-identity negotiations and shifts. “Place” is thus very important in examining feminist migration writing. This is because there are usually power relations at work in any given place and time between the dominant culture and the “new” or foreign, and according to Susan Friedman (1998), these power relations impact female migrants “in a given location, and as they migrate around the earth locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally” (10). For Ifemelu and Darling, especially, the power relations in America are reflected in their constant struggle to assert their selfhood in different circumstances, most importantly in the face of

racism. The writers, therefore, explore racism as a crucial factor that impacts the self-identities of their female protagonists.

RACISM, BLACKNESS AND THE (RE)INVENTION OF THE SELF IN AMERICA

Adichie and Bulawayo expose the various ways in which racism, as well as classism and sexism, affect female African migrants in America. In her blog, Ifemelu describes American society as replete with tribalism, which is “alive and well” and expressed in four ways: “class, ideology, region and race”. She explains the racial hierarchy that exists in America: “There’s a ladder of real hierarchy in America. White is always on top [...] and American Black is always at the bottom, and what is the middle depends on time and place” (184). Racism exists in America and can manifest itself in different forms depending on the time and place in which a foreigner finds themselves. Aunt Uju in *Americanah* faces racism in Massachusetts when she moves to live with Bartholomew, her new husband. In Massachusetts, unlike in Brooklyn, Dike, Aunt Uju’s son faces discrimination at school because he is “different”. Aunt Uju complains to Ifemelu that “This place is so *white*”, and then, speaking about her son, she tells her niece that:

Dike’s teacher said he is aggressive [...] Aggressive, of all things. She wants him to go to where they call special ed, where they will put him in a class alone and bring somebody who is trained to deal with mental children to teach him. I told the woman that it is not my son, it is her father who is aggressive. Look at him, just because he looks different, when he does what other little boys do, it becomes aggression. Then the principal told me, ‘Dike is just like one of us, we don’t see him as different at all.’ What kind of pretending is that? I told him to look at my son. There are only two of them in the whole school. The other child is a half-caste, and so fair that if you look from afar, you will not even know that he is black. My son sticks out, so how can you tell me that you don’t see any difference? I refused completely that they put him in a special class. He is brighter than all of them combined. They want to start now to mark him. Kemi warned me about this. She said they tried to do it to her son in Indiana. (171-172)

Aunt Uju’s comments expose so many issues relating to racism. Dike is mistreated because he is black. The moment Aunt Uju revolts against the discrimination meted out to her son, the principal tries to deny it. This also exposes the hypocrisy of American whites towards the issue of racism. Ironically, the American system pretends that racism has been eroded, but prevailing circumstances expose the level of hypocrisy of American society towards the issue of race. A conversation between Ifemelu and Ginika in a store exposes this hypocrisy. They have just been attended to by one of two salespeople. One of the women is black, and the other is white;

the white woman attends to Ginika. At the point of payment, the cashier asks which of the women had attended to them. She goes on and on, infuriating Ifemelu, who considers the questions uncalled for. Ifemelu is quick to disclose her displeasure to her friend:

I was waiting for her to ask, “Was it the one with two eyes or the one with two legs?” Why didn’t she just ask “Was it the black girl or the white girl?”

Ginika laughed. “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things. (127)

Essentially, Adichie explores in *Americanah* what it means to be *black* in America, as one’s skin colour affects one’s opportunities and progress. As mentioned above, Ifemelu’s migration to America exposes the dynamics of race – she only “becomes” black when she gets to America, as she informs her blog readers. This realisation determines the opportunities or challenges she faces.

Thus, in her blog “Raceteenth”, Ifemelu cautions the African migrant who believes America to be only the land of possibilities:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become Black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I am Ghanaian. America does not care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You are in America now. We all have our moment of initiation into the society of Former Negroes [...] (220)

Ifemelu goes on in her blog post to describe the various forms of racism blacks are subjected to in America:

When a crime is reported, pray that it was not committed by a black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by a black person, stay well away from the crime area for weeks, or you might be stopped for fitting the profile. If a black cashier gives poor service to the non-black person in front of you, compliment that person’s shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you’re just as guilty for the cashier’s crime [...] if you’re telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you’re not bitter. Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. (221)

Ifemelu makes her readers and blog visitors see the inherent hypocrisy of American society. Just for being black, a person may face discrimination and prejudice; many times, blacks have been shot by the police for fitting into criminal profiles or being at the scene of a crime, and everyone is expected to behave as if racism no longer exists. Thus, Ifemelu’s blog is one of the

most innovative literary devices in *Americanah*. It functions as both a narrative strategy and a critical commentary, allowing Adichie to interrupt the linear plot with satirical, reflective, and analytical observations on race, migration, gender, and identity in the United States. Through the blog, Ifemelu acquires an authoritative voice that challenges dominant racial discourses while documenting her transformation into a racialised subject; it allows her to critically reflect on being black in America, belonging, and cultural differences. Using a tone that signals warning, the blog functions as a social compass, especially for new immigrants. The blog also blurs the boundaries between fiction and social critique, enabling Adichie to engage readers directly with contemporary debates on blackness, privilege, and belonging. As Madhu Krishnan (2015) argues, the blog creates a transnational space for negotiating identity, while Shane A. McCoy (2018) sees it as a counter-narrative that resists homogenising conceptions of black identity.

During the campaign that leads to the election of Barack Obama as president, Ifemelu and her friends usually gather in the evening to discuss the current situation in America. While the majority of her white friends do not see the possibility of Obama emerging as their president, the blacks among them, including Blain, her African-American boyfriend, see his emergence as the end of racism in America. In one of the campaign rallies before the election, a Haitian woman tells her friends that if Obama wins, he will end racism. Ifemelu replies that racism is a bigger problem that will not just go away because America will have a black president, or even because most people live in self-denial that racism does not exist. Instead, things will not automatically change because of a black president, as there will be little Obama can do as a result of his skin colour. She further tells the group that being “black” in America profiles her as inferior to “white”. Ifemelu emphasises on various occasions that it is in America that she becomes “black”. Even though she decides to migrate to America to achieve her dreams of a better life and education, which Nigeria could not provide, she does not fail to comment on how being profiled as black affects her chances of survival and fulfilment. Adichie uses the identifier “black” beyond its surface meaning; it goes beyond just skin colour to become an identity description that connotes being undesirable in a racialised American society. According to Hammed Adejare (2008), “[t]he word ‘black’ here connotes a conferred identity, a specific profile, and of course, an undesirable space in the American social hierarchy” (1). He argues further that Adichie’s *Americanah* exposes the white/coloured binary of race relations in America:

Americanah reveals how the white-privileging social system in America and Britain constitutes a threat to the African immigrant's survival. Within the narrative, the various characters are confronted with the survival struggle occasioned by their conferred identity as blacks, irrespective of their skills and intellects. (8)

Blackness therefore impacts significantly on the protagonists' daily experiences. Similarly to Adejara's argument, Yogita Goyal (2014) contends that African migrant narratives such as *Americanah* must be read within the broader framework of the Black Atlantic, because they reveal how migration reshapes racial identities and exposes migrants like Ifemelu to racial formations that are often absent in their countries of origin. Thus, Ifemelu struggles in America to be fully recognised as an individual with relevant skills and intellect because she is black. Thus, being black limits the chances of survival, fulfilment, and success of African migrants like Ifemelu and Darling. The only way for them to eke out a living and achieve a form of recognition beyond being black is when they try to imitate the culture and ways of the "place" in which they find themselves. They attempt to become "American-Africans" or "Afropolitans" by modifying their accents, clothing style, and often forming close affinities or friendships with whites.

The latter, according to Adejara, is a form of "cultural immersion" that sees them "meaningfully and tolerantly engaging with natives either in platonic or romantic relations" (9). We see this when Ifemelu enters a relationship with Curt, a white man, and also when Emenike marries a white British woman. This goes to show that it is only when the African migrant establishes a close relationship with a white person that they may not feel the heavy burden of racism that their blackness confers on them.

Ifemelu benefits from opportunities she ordinarily would never have because of her relationship with Curt, because he is white and wealthy. "Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to" (202). His race and class are always considered before others, while people like herself, the "American racial minorities", receive "shit" because of their skin colour. Her black skin opens her up to various forms of prejudice, and one of the ways to avoid this would be to try to look like a white girl or enter a relationship with a white man. This is also the reason Darling's Aunt, Fostalina, in Bulawayo's novel, considers cheating on her husband with her white boss because she feels that is one of the ways to escape the harrowing experience of racism.

Beyond the romantic relationships these women (Ifemelu and Aunt Fostalina) have with their white lovers, Adichie and Bulawayo attempt to illustrate the power dynamics across gender and racial lines. Ifemelu's first experience with a white man is not a pleasant one, in

fact, because of her dire financial situation, as she cannot get a job, she accepts to work for a tennis coach as a “[f]emale personal assistant”, whose job is to offer “help relaxing” (143). After much contemplation about what the job actually entails, Ifemelu takes it on, as she faces the risk of being homeless. The coach tells her that he only wants her to “come here and lie down, [...] Keep me warm. I’ll touch you a little bit, nothing you’ll be comfortable with. I just need some human contact to relax” (153), and she will be paid a hundred dollars. Here, Adichie shows how race or racism can open female African migrants up to sexual exploitation and affect their self-worth. As the reader discovers, Ifemelu is profoundly transformed by this experience; it brings an end to her long-distance relationship with Obinze, and she begins to find ways to “blend” into the American system, which she finds hypocritical, leading her to date Curt, a white man.

Katherine Hallemeier (2005) views romantic relationships between blacks and whites as being shaped by capitalism and a subtle form of control. Thus, she says about *Americanah*: “In the United States of *Americanah*, patriarchal capitalism expresses itself through familial and romantic relationships” (238). In fact, the majority of the romantic and familial relationships of whites and non-whites in both novels show power and racial dynamics. The whites have the wealth and fame, while the blacks, such as Ifemelu, Emenike, and Auntie Fostalina, enjoy the benefits by association. It is the person who has power that determines how the relationship unfolds; that is, they call the shots. Due to their perceived superiority and the hypocrisy that exists in American society, most of the time, the white partners do not fully understand what their black partners experience, especially when they are not with them. Ifemelu speaks authoritatively from “experience”, when she tells her friends about her relationship with her white boyfriend, Curt:

When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don’t talk about it. We don’t even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we’re worried they will say we’re overreacting, or we’re being too sensitive. [...] and when we come to liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn’t matter because that is what we’re supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It’s true, I speak from experience. (290-291)

Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt only affords her a temporary sense of “closure” but does not stop her from experiencing racism or other prejudices as a result of her skin colour. The reader will find out that not all of Curt’s friends and relatives consider Ifemelu as one of them; in fact,

she struggles to become friends with Curt's sister, and before her breakup with Curt, she finds out that he actually prefers women with "blond hair", exposing the hypocrisy in America.

Darling's Aunt Fostalina, in *We Need New Names*, faces racism as highlighted earlier in the chapter. Her experiences in America as a black woman struggling to make ends meet make her feel inferior, and she wishes every day to escape this. She thinks the way to escape racism is by looking like a white woman and associating with a white man. She begins to consciously "work out" to achieve a thinner body size, which is preferred by American women. Aunt Fostalina takes her new weight loss journey seriously, and she constantly asks Darling, "You think I'm losing weight? Who is fatter, me or Aunt Da? Who is fatter, me or your mother? [...] I will be going on a fruit diet" (155). Darling cannot help but feel pity for her Aunt and wonders why she is desperate to change herself: "Aunt Fostalina is thin and very soon she will begin to look like Father's bones drowning there on the bed and just waiting to die" (155). Through Darling's comparison of Aunt Fostalina's new weight and her sick father in Africa, the reader understands that she is not pleased with her aunt's new obsession with looking "American."

It is not only Darling who is concerned about Aunt Fostalina's weight loss. Her husband, Uncle Kojo, is not happy with the changes in his wife. Because of her dieting, the household can no longer eat African food, as his wife now buys only American groceries. He complains not just about her weight, but about her attitudes towards him as a husband and the household in general:

Fostalina, ever since you started this weight thing, you never cook. When was the last time we actually had a real dinner in this house, heh? You know in my country, wives actually cook hot meals every day for their husbands and children. And not only that, they actually do laundry and ironing and keep the house clean and everything. (155-156)

A disconnect is felt in Aunt Fostalina's home. Aside from the fact that she is not meeting her African gender expectations as a wife and mother, she is also losing touch with everything that makes her an African woman, as she drifts towards becoming more "American". This will eventually lead to her extramarital affair with her white boss, causing a rift in her marriage with Uncle Kojo. Darling wonders how long their marriage will survive. She often wonders what America does to people like Aunt Fostalina, her husband, and even herself. She will later find out that America "changes" people – immigrants like herself and her Aunt's family. Darling will also want to become "American"; a new "identity" she adopts to avoid racism.

Darling's experience of racism differs significantly from Ifemelu's in *Americanah*. This may be because she arrives in the States at the age of 10 and transitions into adolescence. Still, she is not spared some of the harrowing experiences of trying to belong in a new environment, like Ifemelu. Through Darling's narration, the reader gains a vivid picture of racism in America. In school, Darling faces humiliation, which could impact the mental health of children:

When I first arrived at Washington I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I talked or said things...When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even things I couldn't change... I felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything. (165)

Bulawayo herself faced this humiliation upon arriving in America. In an interview, she disclosed the disconnection she felt when she arrived there as a young adult; this is what informed her depiction of the growing Darling in America: "I went to America at the age of 18 [...]. You get there, and America makes you realise that you are not one of us" (Obioha, 2014).

Darling is not the only child who faces this humiliating aspect of racism. When a new boy joins her school, he immediately becomes an object of ridicule. The other children in Darling's school soon forget about her and start taunting the boy, Tom. They mock his appearance and the way he speaks because he "came with these crooked teeth and long, greasy hair and large glasses and this sad stutter" (166). They tease the boy, calling him a "freak", a word Darling has to look up on Google to find its meaning. The humiliation Tom faces becomes so great that he commits suicide: "We all knew just a week later, when they found him hanging near the lockers at school, the word *freak!* scrawled in a red marker on a locker behind him" (166). Darling, who is prepared to do whatever it takes to survive in America regardless of the insults and daily challenges she faces, consciously begins to learn everything about America, including the language – American English, because, as she rightly says, "there were a lot of American words and things I was still learning" (166). Like Ifemelu, she considers that speaking and acting like an American would help reduce the negative experiences her blackness brings about.

Thus, in both *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, blackness is represented not as a fixed racial identity but as a socially constructed category whose meanings are radically transformed within the United States. Both novels reveal that African migrants who did not previously understand themselves primarily through race are compelled to negotiate an American racial order in which blackness is historically associated with slavery, segregation,

and systemic inequality. Consequently, blackness becomes an acquired social identity rather than an inherited cultural one.

In *Americanah*, Adichie foregrounds this transformation through Ifemelu's famous realisation that she "became black" only after arriving in America. Having grown up in Nigeria where ethnicity, class and nationality are more salient identity markers, Ifemelu discovers that American society subsumes her into a homogeneous category of "black." Through her blog, Adichie exposes the contradictions of U.S. racial politics, distinguishing between African immigrants ("non-American Blacks") and African Americans while simultaneously critiquing the institutional structures that produce racial hierarchies. Rather than accepting a monolithic conception of blackness, the novel presents black identity as intersectional, shaped by nationality, migration status, gender, class and culture. Scholars argue that Adichie therefore destabilises essentialist understandings of race by repositioning blackness within a transnational feminist framework that acknowledges both shared racial experiences and internal differences.

Similarly, Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* explores how blackness in the United States is experienced through racialisation, exclusion and cultural displacement. Darling's migration from Zimbabwe to America exposes her to a society where her African identity is collapsed into an undifferentiated category of blackness. Unlike Ifemelu, who critically interrogates racial discourse through intellectual reflection, Darling initially experiences blackness through everyday encounters with prejudice, alienation and the emotional burden of being perceived as racially "other." The novel demonstrates that migration involves not only geographical movement but also entry into a racial system that imposes identities irrespective of one's previous self-understanding. As Suárez Rodríguez (2019) argues, both novels portray Afrodiasporic subjectivity through emotional responses such as discomfort, disgust and unbelonging, illustrating how racialised spaces shape migrants' identities.

Taken together, the novels challenge the assumption that blackness is universal or culturally homogeneous. Instead, they demonstrate that U.S. constructions of race reshape African 'identities by compelling them to negotiate historical forms of anti-blackness that differ significantly from their experiences in Africa. Their protagonists therefore occupy a liminal position: they are black within American racial discourse but remain culturally distinct from African Americans, producing a form of transnational blackness characterised by negotiation, hybridity and continual identity reconstruction.

And as argued from the foregoing, blackness is an important part of the challenges Ifemelu and Darling experience, and they continuously strive to find ways to overcome this.

Aside from trying to adopt new ways of doing things, such as dressing and socialising with whites, language, as discussed above, is an integral part of self-identity negotiation for female African migrants like Ifemelu and Darling, serving as a coping mechanism to escape racism in America. It is also a crucial aspect of any literature, particularly African literature.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN *WE NEED NEW NAMES* AND *AMERICANAH*

Language comprises elements such as tone, mood, voice, and sometimes character. The language used by female African writers exploring migration like Adichie and Bulawayo helps to project the identity of not just the female protagonists specifically, but also the various currents or issues their novels deal with. The daily realities of their characters as migrant African women living in a foreign country (America) are represented by their language. The language of a particular piece of literature is as important as what the work seeks to achieve. Adichie's and Bulawayo's language reflects the aforementioned features of language. Their language is not just a medium of communication, but also a tool to reveal their characters' present realities and sensibilities, particularly how their self-identities are renegotiated as a result of migration.

Bulawayo in *We Need New Names* employs evocative, inventive, and layered language to portray the complexity of migration, dislocation, and identity. Even though this section examines Darling's migration experiences, parallels will be drawn between her experiences in her country (which made her decide to leave) and her experience as an "illegal" migrant in America. Through her child narrator, Darling, Bulawayo manipulates language to reflect broader postcolonial, diasporic, and transnational feminist concerns. From her early childhood, Darling, the central female character in *We Need New Names*, introduces us to her childhood shantytown – Paradise, which reeks of poverty and instability. From the language used by the ten-year-old Darling, we get to know that Paradise is nothing like the name suggests. The neighbouring community called Budapest is also introduced to us, as well as the flora and fauna that make up the world of Darling and her poor young friends. About Budapest, Darling tells us, "[t]he place is not like Paradise, it's like being in a different country altogether. A nice country where people who are not *poor* like us live" (4). Even though Budapest is a place for the rich with "satellite dishes", "neat, graveled lawns" and "big trees heavy with food", it still lacks the warmth of the slum called Paradise, because "you don't see anything to show they are real people living here, even the air itself is empty; no delicious food cooking, no odours,

no sounds, just nothing” (4). Bulawayo employs language effectively to project to the reader a vivid picture of Paradise as different from Budapest, for while Paradise may look dirty, it still feels like home, liveable for Darling and her friends.

As language carries the weight of a people’s culture and time, Darling and her friends’ conversations expose the political and cultural upheavals of the time. There is political instability, which leads Darling’s family and other families to relocate to Paradise after their “real houses” were demolished by the repressive government of the day. There is also a new atmosphere of change promised that affects everyone, including out-of-school children and women. This time, “the men look like real people again”, not men beaten by poverty who resort to drunkenness, and the women transform themselves at the prospect of change; they adopt new hairstyles and paint their lips. Darling says, “they are trying to be beautiful [...] We haven’t seen the women look like this in a while and their beauty makes us want to love them” (58-59). Darling’s voice here, as well as in other instances, though seemingly simple and naïve, allows for a sharp, often ironic critique of her country’s political and cultural atmospheres. Through her unfiltered observations and playful language, the reader visualises the absurdities of the adult world, especially political corruption in Zimbabwe, which has affected young children like Darling and her friends (their education comes to a halt as a result). This is also one of the reasons Darling wants to move to America, where she can be guaranteed of uninterrupted education. As stated above, one element of language is voice, and Darling is very expressive for a ten-year-old, as Bulawayo gives her a distinctive voice that not only expresses her feelings but also the yearnings of her community in Paradise. Bulawayo equips and empowers Darling’s friends, likewise, to express themselves. The children in Paradise — Darling, Bastard, Godknows, Chipso (the 11-year-old impregnated by her grandfather), Sbho, and Stina — are not just passive observers of the events in their environment. They are also affected by them, and through their language, the readers can feel these political and economic undercurrents. Godknows who is 11 asks a sensible question in light of the anticipated change: “What happens when the adults go and vote” (59). The 9-year-old Sbho replies, “There will be change” (60). However, the change does not come, and the children would either have to continue their daily experiences of deprivation by stealing guavas from Budapest, become political mercenaries to corrupt politicians, as happens with Bastard, or dream of leaving Paradise, like Darling who hopes her Aunt Fostalina will take her away to America, or even Sbho, who dreams of owning a beautiful house and marrying a man from Budapest who will “take me away from Paradise, away from the shacks and Heavensway and Fambeki and everything else” (12). Through the children’s simple language, Bulawayo exposes the political upheavals that the populace

experiences daily, which even the children are not spared, and, as a result, they consider migration as one way to escape these realities.

The power of language cannot be overemphasised in *We Need New Names*. Bulawayo uses children to express lofty ideas. Even though they might otherwise be considered inexperienced, she makes them not only aware of their immediate environment but also capable of doing what the adults around them cannot do: speaking out, having a voice, and dreaming big dreams, especially of leaving the “Kaka” Paradise. One way the children express themselves is by playing games or enacting scenarios of escaping their present predicaments, and they use language to convey their thoughts and feelings creatively. Darling and her friends are always playing games of (re)naming themselves, and this exercise paints pictures of the children’s desire to change what actually exists or their present reality, even if it is for a short while. During their games, the children have to assume new names and identities, as in the scene when Darling and some of her friends attempt to abort Chipso’s pregnancy. To successfully carry out the “operation”, Darling, Sbhoo, and a new girl called Forgiveness decide to act out a show Sbhoo had watched on television called *ER*, a medical drama set in America, and “In order to do this right”, as Sbhoo says, “we need new names” (82). Sbhoo calls herself Dr. Bullet, a beautiful medical doctor, and calls Darling Dr. Roz, a tall male doctor, but Darling objects because Dr. Roz is a “he,” and she does not want to be a man. Sbhoo replies that she has to accept that or nothing. Forgiveness becomes Dr. Cutter, while the pregnant Chipso is called “Patient”, because “Patients are just called patients” (82-83). The children are aware of their situation and its limitations but think using “new names” may bring different results, and in this case, the termination of Chipso’s pregnancy. Thus, the title of the novel is symbolic; it signals a crisis of identity, history, and belonging, invoking language as both a constraint and a possibility. Bulawayo’s use of children’s voices signals a power shift – the children can aspire to change what the adults have spoiled, even if it means assuming new names, this time American names, because, in the children’s imagination, America is a land of possibilities. As the story progresses, Darling eventually moves to the America of her dreams.

Another game of renaming the children engage in is the Country-Game. Darling explains the subtle struggle among them to be attributed to the names of advanced countries and not underdeveloped ones like their own. Through this Country-Game, Bulawayo exposes the power relations as seen from the children’s lens and their playful language:

But first we have to fight over the names because everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece

and them. These are country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (49)

Here, Bulawayo deliberately employs run-on language to imitate the thought processes of kids, especially how they speak and compete with one another. The use of long, breathless sentences, minimal punctuation, quick shifts between voices, and piling of names, places, and fights, all at once, reflects child-consciousness. It also creates room for the children's imagination to escape their current realities; the way the list countries frantically reflect how they try to claim power and belonging from geopolitical locations they barely understand. This style also establishes a communal thought process more than an individual one; all the children want to escape Paradise. They wish to migrate to developed countries.

As argued above, Bulawayo equips Darling and her friends with the power to dream and to do what the adults have failed to do: better their own lives. Through their games of renaming, the children actually begin to take steps of "becoming" the "countries-countries" or even the lesser ones, by moving to those places, instead of remaining where things have started to fall apart. Bastard, the vocal 11-year-old boy who dreams of leaving Budapest to go to Johannesburg in South Africa, states: "I'm blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I'll make lots of money, come back and buy a house in this very Budapest" (13); and he actually leaves Paradise. Shbo also dreams of leaving Paradise for Budapest; she declares to her friends, "I'm going to marry a rich man from Budapest. He'll take me away from Paradise" (12). Darling, who seems to be the most intelligent of her friends, also dreams of leaving Paradise. Her hope depends on her Aunt Fostalina, who promises to take her to America. It is clear that the children, even in their innocence, are aware of the economic realities of their society; however, instead of remaining quiet, as would be expected of children, they speak out and hope to escape the hell their country has turned into.

As stated above, Bulawayo gives voice to children rather than adults, because she had experienced the same hardship that she depicts in *We Need New Names* as a child growing up in the dysfunctional Zimbabwe of her time. Like Darling, she also left Zimbabwe for America, where she completed her education and rose to fame. The use of language, especially in the form of naming and re-naming, is therefore very important to Bulawayo. The naming or titling of the chapters in *We Need New Names* captures the disillusionment that precipitates migration. Chapters such as "How They Appeared" (Chapter 5), "How They Left" (Chapter 10), and "How

They Lived” (Chapter 16), all paint pictures of dislocation, displacement, and re-integration into a new locale. Bulawayo employs names and naming to negotiate her identity, as well as that of her characters. The naming, whether of the novel’s chapters or the assumed names the children bear during their games, reflects both personal and collective histories. To Bulawayo, names are important, as she says in an interview: “I can explain the names because I wrote the book when things were pretty difficult back home. It is my own way of saying we need new leadership, new ways of thinking, and so forth” (Obioha, 2014).

As the novel unfolds, the children continue to dream and question the corrupt leadership of their country, and they grow in their level of understanding. Darling’s dream of leaving the “kaka” country comes true. Her Aunt comes for her, and we find her grow from a child into a teenager who has to learn to adapt to her new environment, especially in mastering the American language. However, before Darling gains mastery of American English or accent, she can only express herself by code-switching or code-mixing between English and Shona (her native language). She was accustomed to English back home; in fact, among her friends in Paradise, she had a better command of the language, but her migration to America undermined the proficiency she had developed in her home country. Once in a while, her Aunt Fostalina speaks in their native tongue, and that gives Darling a sense of home in America. Even though she faces ridicule from her mates because of the way she speaks, Darling still enjoys moments when she can be free to speak like “herself”. Essentially, Bulawayo employs language as a symbol of identity, especially Darling’s indigenous African language. As Darling says:

The onliest time that it’s almost interesting here is when Uncle Themba and Uncle Charley and Aunt Welcome and Aunt Chenai and others all come to visit Aunt Fostalina. I call them uncles and aunts but we are not related by blood, like me and Aunt Fostalina are; [...] Whenever they come [...] everybody will be speaking our real language, laughing and talking loudly about back home, how it was like when they were growing up before things turned bad, then ugly. [...] The uncles and aunts bring goat insides and cook azangaphakathi and sadza and mbhida and occasionally they will bring amacimbi, which is my number one favourite relish, umfushwa, and other foods from home, and people descend on the food like they haven’t eaten all their lives. [...] When they cook home food, even Aunt Fostalina will forget she is on a fruit diet. (160-161)

Bulawayo employs code-switching, mixing, and linguistic hybridity to reflect Darling’s evolving identity and cultural dissonance, in the form of diasporic tension, as Darling adapts to American life while retaining her Zimbabwean roots, through food and familial gatherings at Aunt Fostalina’s house. The choice of words such as “onliest”, reflects Darling wanting to domesticate the English language to emphasise the importance of these gatherings, likewise

the use of the local names of food without translating them, shows their cultural significance, and the power of memory for a people who are far away from their home country, but choose to make “home” in America, even if it is just within the walls of Aunt Fostalina’s house. Bulawayo’s linguistic hybridity mirrors Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) ¹⁰ “borderlands” sensibility. A character like Darling is caught between Zimbabwe and America, tradition and modernity, her mother tongue, and the dominant American tongue. Her shifting language embodies a diasporic or transnational consciousness – fragmented but resilient, hybrid yet coherent on its own terms; hence, sometimes, there is no need for translation.

When migrants move from their countries of origin, it is not only they that move, their language also migrates with them (Moji, 2015). In America, Darling grows physically, her language use also metamorphoses from her native language and code-mixing and switching to gradually becoming and sounding like an American. It is not easy for Darling, who grew up in a slum and had not attended school for a while before coming to America, to speak and understand American English clearly. She faces ridicule in school because of this and other things she cannot change. Thus, Darling begins to think of how to salvage her situation. She starts by learning how to speak the American way. She tells the reader:

The problem with English is this: You can’t open your mouth and it comes out just like that – first you have to think what you want to say, then you find the words. Then you have to carefully arrange the words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them sound right. (193)

This is what Darling has to do daily. To overcome this stress, she decides to consciously learn to sound American:

I have decided that the best way to deal with it all is to sound American, and the TV has taught me just how to do it [...] all you have to do is watch *Dora the Explorer*, *The Simpsons*, *SpongeBob*, *Scooby-Doo*, and then move on to *That’s So Raven*, *Glee*, *Friends*, *Golden Girls*, and so on, just listening and imitating the accents. If you do it well, then before you know it, nobody will ask you to repeat what you said. I also have

¹⁰ Anzaldua’s “borderland” sensibility refers to a consciousness shaped by living in-between cultures, languages and identities. She explores the concept of borderland both literally and metaphorically. For instance, the U.S.-Mexico border is described as an open wound where cultures bleed into each other. Metaphorically, there are psychological, sexual, spiritual and linguistic spaces where individuals live between worlds – neither fully accepted by one nor the other.

my list of American words that I keep under the tongue like talismans, ready to use [...].
(194)

Darling matures not only physically but in her mastery of American English, to the extent that among her friends, she is the only one who speaks “proper” American English, unlike Kristal, who says “naamean”, “naamsayin” and “I’m finna go” when she means “you know what I mean”, “You know what I’m saying”, and “I am going to go” (221). Bulawayo equips Darling with the mastery of American English, enabling her to become proficient, which in turn helps her navigate the various unpleasant experiences she faces in America. She is also able to articulate her thoughts and express herself clearly for the reader to understand her. However, the novel also explores how language shapes and limits migrant identity. In America, Darling becomes increasingly aware of how American English, unlike the type of English she spoke in Paradise, operates as a gatekeeper, enabling access while also enforcing conformity. Her voice, rendered in childlike English interspersed with Zimbabwean idioms, reveals a fragmented linguistic identity. Her struggle to communicate and be understood reflects the broader disjunction between her past and present. Over time, her language becomes increasingly Americanised, mirroring her shifting sense of self. Her Zimbabwean expressions and accent begin to give way, and she becomes cautious about how she speaks. This linguistic displacement echoes her cultural alienation, marking language as a site of loss and negotiation.

Adichie’s use of language in *Americanah* is also very distinctive, just like Bulawayo’s. The socio-political realities in Nigeria are vividly represented, and these inform the decisions of Ifemelu and others to migrate. After she migrates to America, Ifemelu, who is expecting a perfect America of boundless possibilities is shocked to find that the America she has dreamed and read about is nothing like the America of her present reality. Like Darling in *We Need New Names*, Ifemelu first has to struggle to understand how things are done and said, and how people are profiled, especially based on the colour of their skin. Her vocabulary and accent change over time so that she can fit into her new setting. When Ifemelu meets Cristine Tomas for the first time during registration, she feels Cristine has some sort of illness that makes her speak so slowly. Ifemelu is shocked, however, after returning with a letter from the international students’ office to which Cristine had directed her: “And she realised that Cristine Tomas was speaking like that because of her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child lazy limbed and drooling” (133). Ifemelu feels belittled because Cristine had assumed she could not speak or understand English as a foreigner.

To overcome this inferiority complex, Ifemelu decides, like Darling, to begin practicing the American accent. As her self-identity has been bruised, she has to find a way to belong and fit into her new environment: “[...] she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent” (134). Trying to speak like an American becomes a new way for Ifemelu to feel accepted into American society. She then begins to learn how to say things the American way, for example, not saying “I don’t know”, but instead “I’m not sure”; “Are you okay” becomes appropriate instead of her Nigerian English “sorry”, and her adventure of learning new things and new ways of being American begins:

[S]he hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away: to support a team at the Super Bowl, understand what a Twinkie was and what sports “lockout” meant, measured in ounces and square feet, order a “muffin” without thinking it really was a cake, and say “I ‘scored’ a deal without feeling silly. (135)

Ifemelu begins to do things she would not have even imagined doing in her home country. She learns how certain words are used in America, which differs from their usage back home. For instance, she learns from Ginika that “fat” is an offensive word in America, and that instead, “big” is more appropriate. “Thin”, which is used to describe someone slim, and which has an unpleasant connotation in Nigeria, is considered good in America. Ginika’s explanation of how America works clearly shows how language is a carrier of culture and sensibilities:

If you see how they laughed at me in high school when I said that somebody was boning for me. Because boning here means to have sex! So I had to keep explaining that in Nigeria it means carrying face. And can you imagine ‘half caste’ is a bad word here? [...] I was telling them about back home and how all the boys were chasing me because I was a half-caste, and they said I was dissing myself. So now, I say biracial and I’m supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste. (123-124)

Ifemelu learns different words and codes that she ought not to use in America, in order to blend in. Unlike her Auntie Uju who seems rigid in holding onto her Nigerian cultural identity, her friend Ginika has so mastered American ways of life that she becomes an “Americanah”, because:

There were codes Ginika knew, ways of being that she had mastered. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about, and found double-dipping gross. (125)

Ifemelu, too, grows into the level of proficiency that Ginika exhibits, because she begins later to “fancy” things she would never have imagined she would, had she been in her home country. She also makes great efforts to not just learn about America, but to learn how to speak like an American.

When Ifemelu visits Mariama’s hairdressing salon to have her hair braided for her return to Nigeria, she meets other African women who share their experiences of living in America, particularly the challenges of not having an American accent, and how this has negatively affected them. As was mentioned above, most of the women are illiterate and also illegal migrants. It is worth reiterating that the story begins in Mariama’s shop, and there that Ifemelu recollects and narrates her experiences. It also marks the beginning of the end of Ifemelu’s journey in America, even though she can still return whenever she wishes because of her American passport. The salon, therefore, provides a space for African women like Ifemelu and the less fortunate women who cannot easily leave America to share their experiences of how America has changed them, especially how they have to learn the language in order to survive. Halima, one of Mariama’s apprentices narrates how her son was beaten when they moved to America newly, because of his African accent, and how they overcame that: “When I came here with my son they beat him in school because of his African accent [...] if you see my son face. Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat him [...] Now accent go and no problems” (187).

Like Darling in Bulawayo’s novel, the women in Adichie’s novel begin to consciously learn American English and act “American” to ameliorate the racism and discrimination they experience daily. Adichie also equips Ifemelu with proficiency in the host country’s language, to the point that she becomes a “cultural critic”, criticising the double standards of the American system through her blog, which serves as a social commentary. As a result of her proficiency in American English, accent, and her intellect, Ifemelu gains a fellowship in Princeton, enters into a relationship with a white man, and rises to fame through her blog; thus, her identity changes or metamorphoses into something “new” to fit into her new environment. Adichie, therefore, employs language as a tool that provides access to opportunities in America, as in the case of Ifemelu and Ginika. At the same time, it can also be a constraint or barrier for less

fortunate and illiterate women like those in Mariama's salon. Significantly, it impacts how they negotiate new identities as migrant African women in a racialised America.

NEGOTIATING NEW IDENTITIES IN MIGRATION

African migrants like Ifemelu and Darling are expected to consciously learn how to speak in the American way, with the accent and affectation, before they can be accepted, and maybe some of the prejudices they endure will be reduced. However, such acceptance is not always guaranteed, because their skin already profiles them as the *other* in American society. Hence, they need to adopt "a new knowing skin" (135), as Ifemelu says, by loving and appreciating everything American, even while retaining part of themselves as Africans. The experiences of Ifemelu and Darling illustrate that migration necessitates the negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations rather than the replacement of one identity with another. Both protagonists participate in American social life while preserving significant aspects of their African identities through language, food, communal networks, and memories of home. Their identities are therefore best understood as fluid and relational, reflecting an Afropolitan consciousness that embraces cultural multiplicity without relinquishing African belonging. In other words, migrants must remain open to adaptation rather than clinging to rigid self-identifications – a stance that Bhabha (1994) critiques as "the fixity and fetishism of identities" (136), which perpetuates a static view of identity that resists transformation. To Bhabha, therefore, identity should be dynamic, allowing room for negotiations. It is therefore necessary for the migrant to negotiate between their culture and that of the host country. Daniela Ricci stresses this point when she says:

Migrants can stay in a nostalgic, separate universe, try to assimilate into the new environment, or be open to cultural exchange. If migrants accept the challenge of complexity, they are compelled to continually "negotiate" their identity within the new sociocultural framework [...] producing "multidimensional thinking". (qtd in Brobbey, 2023, 71)

As migrants navigate their identities within the new socio-cultural environment, they must strike a balance that prevents them from clinging too rigidly to aspects of their past identities while accommodating the new. African writers and critics have explored the question of identity in various ways; some have focused on identity in terms of language, as discussed above, as well as culture, dress code, and even beyond the physical looks of an individual. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2007) argues that maintaining the use of one's African language

is a symbol of an African's identity, whether at home or abroad. Others, like Chielozona Eze (2016), suggest that identity goes beyond simply holding onto African language, culture, or way of life, because identity has become fluid, especially in migration. African migration literature, particularly works written by female authors like Adichie and Bulawayo, therefore, examines how migrant subjects negotiate their identities across and beyond geographical borders. It is essential to consider ideas that explore the self-identities of African women who migrate. For this chapter, which examines the experiences of female African migrant characters, such as Ifemelu and Darling, concepts from transnational and postcolonial black feminisms are employed. *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* reveal how the female protagonists' identities shift as they struggle to maintain aspects of their African identities while also adapting to their new American identities. Afropolitanism and hybridity, two concepts from postcolonialism and transnational black feminism, are key to understanding how Ifemelu and Darling negotiate their new self-identities as they migrate from Africa to America.

The concept of "Afropolitanism" was first proposed by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi, to account for the experiences of Africans who migrate from Africa to become transnational subjects or "Afropolitans" in the West for reasons such as "personal ambition, political strife, the dynamics of transnational capital and corporate culture, as well as the quest for a better life away from an 'unpromising' continent" (Selasi, 2005, 15). However, the above are not just the reasons why Africans migrate to become "Afropolitans" or why Afropolitanism is considered important for the analysis of both novels. Rather, the concept has been deployed to discuss the various interactions between the existing culture of African migrants and the dominant culture of the host countries, with the aim of celebrating the "new" identity of the African migrant.

Achille Mbembe's definition of the concept allows for a full appreciation of the experiences of both female protagonists and other characters in both novels under review. He states that Afropolitanism is the:

awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and membership and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognise one's space in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seems to be opposites. (28)

This definition resonates with Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, particularly in the scene where Darling discusses the gatherings at Aunt Fostalina's house. She describes the people who

regularly come to celebrate their communal relationship, as “Uncles and Aunts”, even though they are not related by blood, but because, as she narrates, “I think the reason they are my relatives now is they are from my country too – it’s like the country has become a real family since we are in America, which is not our country” (161). Thus, employing the concept of Afropolitanism in this example, I am arguing that Darling and her “relatives” create a familiar space in a foreign land like America, where they can be themselves – Africans, and can speak their language, eat their native food, listen to their own music, without outside interference. They can also “domesticate” the unfamiliar, like Darling, who consciously learns American English to the point of excellent proficiency, more than some native American speakers in her class.

Bulawayo’s depiction of the Zimbabwean gatherings in America illustrates Afropolitanism not simply as mobility across borders but as the active reconstruction of cultural belonging within diasporic space. Darling refers to the adults who gather for social occasions as “Uncles” and “Aunts”, despite acknowledging that they share no biological ties. This reconfiguration of kinship demonstrates that migration does not dissolve communal identities; rather, it compels migrants to recreate them in new forms. Biological family is replaced by an imagined national family, suggesting that shared histories of displacement become the basis for new social relationships. In this sense, kinship becomes performative rather than genealogical, constituted through shared cultural practices and collective memory.

Viewed through the lens of Afropolitanism, these gatherings represent more than nostalgic reunions. They exemplify what Achille Mbembe describes as the multiplicity of African identities that remain rooted in Africa while simultaneously engaging with global spaces. Rather than abandoning their Zimbabwean identity in favour of American assimilation, Darling and her compatriots cultivate what may be understood as a “portable homeland”. Within these communal spaces, America is temporarily reconfigured through African cultural practices: they speak their indigenous languages, prepare traditional food, play Zimbabwean music, recount stories of home, and reproduce familiar systems of respect, kinship, and social interaction. The unfamiliar American environment is thus symbolically domesticated through everyday cultural performances that transform foreign space into an extension of home. Importantly, Bulawayo avoids romanticising this communal reconstruction. The gatherings reveal both the resilience and the precarity of diasporic identity. Their insistence on calling one another “Uncle” and “Aunt”, “Sister” and “Brother”, reflects not only cultural continuity but also the emotional necessity of replacing the familial and communal structures fractured by migration. The community therefore emerges as a compensatory network that mitigates the

isolation and cultural dislocation of diasporic life. Afropolitanism here is not portrayed as effortless cosmopolitan mobility but as the labour of continually negotiating belonging across multiple locations.

Bulawayo's narrative techniques reinforce this process of cultural negotiation. The novel's first-person narration ensures that readers experience America through Darling's Zimbabwean consciousness rather than through an assimilated immigrant perspective. Even after migration, her descriptions remain linguistically and culturally anchored in Zimbabwe, demonstrating that geographical movement does not erase inherited ways of seeing the world. Her language frequently retains Zimbabwean idioms, rhythms, and culturally specific expressions, subtly resisting complete linguistic assimilation into American English. This linguistic continuity reflects what Taiye Selasi conceptualises as Afropolitanism's capacity to inhabit multiple cultural worlds without relinquishing African identity. Furthermore, Bulawayo's characteristic use of humour and irony complicates the diasporic experience. Darling often narrates painful realities with childlike wit and understated observation, exposing the contradictions of immigrant life without overt authorial judgement. The contrast between the warmth of these communal gatherings and the racial exclusion experienced outside them highlights the duality of Afropolitan existence: migrants participate in global modernity while simultaneously remaining marked as outsiders within Western societies. Consequently, the recreated Zimbabwean community functions as both a refuge from exclusion and a site where cultural identity is continually reaffirmed.

Bulawayo also employs collective narration at strategic moments, shifting from the singular "I" to the communal "we". This narrative movement mirrors the Afropolitan understanding of identity as relational rather than exclusively individual. Darling's experiences become inseparable from those of the wider Zimbabwean diaspora, emphasising that migration produces shared rather than purely personal histories. The collective voice reinforces the idea that belonging is constructed through networks of solidarity, shared memory, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, these narrative strategies demonstrate that *We Need New Names* conceptualises Afropolitanism not as the celebration of unrestricted global mobility but as the creative negotiation of home within displacement. By reconstructing kinship, preserving language, sustaining cultural rituals, and employing a narrative voice deeply rooted in Zimbabwean consciousness, Bulawayo illustrates how migrants domesticate unfamiliar spaces while simultaneously redefining what it means to belong. The America that Darling inhabits is therefore never simply America; it becomes a transnational social space where Zimbabwe is continually remembered, performed, and reimagined. This reinforces the novel's broader

argument that diasporic identity is neither wholly African nor wholly American, but a dynamic process of inhabiting both worlds simultaneously.

Simon Gikandi (2011) draws on Mbembe's arguments when he defines Afropolitanism as:

[...] a significant attempt to rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis [...] Afropolitanism can be read as the description of a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being African in the world [...] it has been prompted by the desire to think of African identities as both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them [...] To live between cultures or languages is one important way of coping with the disorientation of moral geographies at the end of modernity. [...] Afropolitanism reflects a new attitude toward Africa and the wider world of which it is a part. Instead of concerning the massive migration of Africans to other continents as a loss, the idiom of Afropolitanism embraces movement across time and space as the possibility of an African way of being. (9-10)

Afropolitanism, then, does not view African migration as an unnecessary evil, but rather as a phenomenon that shapes the identity of African migrants wherever they find themselves. This is why Gikandi further describes an "Afropolitan" as an individual who is "connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions; but [...] also lives a life divided across cultures, language, and states". To be "Afropolitan" then is "to celebrate a state of cultural hybridity — to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time" (9). Afropolitanism, to the critics mentioned above, is not just an ideology, but a movement and a marker of identity for African migrants in places like America, the UK, and Europe generally. As a concept, then, it attempts to define the identity of Africans who fall into a different group to the descendants of slaves; these are Africans whose parents migrated to the West in the 1960s and 1970s, and were born in the West, or who migrated from Africa to the West for higher education and better life opportunities in the 20th and 21st centuries. Selasi argues that the African migrant's identity is constructed around three axes. She also calls the African migrant an "Afropolitan" because their identity is informed by the "national, racial, cultural — with subtle tensions in between" (Selasi, 2005). Going beyond these three axes, Jack Taylor (2018) introduces a fourth dimension to the African migrant's identity dilemma, which is language; he argues that identity is "constructed at the level of nation, race, language and culture" (71). Caroline Lyle (2018) also includes another dimension, especially when considering the experiences of female African migrants: "I suggest that Selasi's conceptualisation [...] should be broadened. It is crucial for Afropolitans, especially females to form a racialised sexual identity as well" (103). Lyle links gender identity or sexuality as an important aspect of the identity of female African

migrants, like the women in both novels; to her, this intersects with race, class, ethnicity, age, and most importantly, their voice. This intersection impacts who the protagonists in both novels “become”.

Americanah and *We Need New Names* are set in both post-independence African societies and contemporary American society; they narrate the experiences of female African migrants, Ifemelu and Darling, who migrate from Africa to the United States of America for education and to live there for a long time. This movement from Africa to the U.S influences who they become. As established above, social, political, economic, as well as personal factors contribute to affect an individual’s perception of themselves or their self-identities. For female African migrants like Ifemelu and Darling, their experience of relocation to America affects their perception of themselves and, by implication, their self-identities. William Safari (1991) argues that the movement to a new country is capable of changing a migrant’s identity, to the extent that they develop a feeling of alienation in their new geographical space. Examining how migration affects the self-identity of female African migrants, Mwai Catherine Nyawira (2020), affirms that:

Diaspora subjects such as African women, undergo a vivid and progressive alteration of the way they see themselves in relation to the society (self-identity) once they transgress borders into new spaces, such as the United States which is pervaded by individualism [...]. They are no longer caged in a single identity. The literary works of such African diasporic subjects depict flexibility, integration and hybridity, which are as a result of other interactions with different diasporic spaces. (4)

There is, therefore, no single way to define the self-identities of female African migrants, as they have become hybrid subjects who constantly negotiate their self-identities. As Anne Unterrenier (2017) argues, these hybrid subjects sometimes occupy different identity poles. The term “hybridity” thus helps capture the struggle of female African migrants as they find themselves in an “in-between” situation, trying to hold on to their past culture while assimilating into the new, dominant culture. In the end, they are not fully African, nor fully American. They become *hybridised* subjects.

Adichie captures this in *Americanah*, during a conversation between Ifemelu and her friends about what America does to immigrants:

“Ginika, just make sure you can still talk to us when you come back”, Priye said.

“She will come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi”, Ranyinudo said.

They roared with laughter, at the word “Americanah”, wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America, with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke. (65)

Female African migrants, such as Bisi, Ifemelu, and Darling, who struggle to find themselves, become “Americanahs” or hybridised versions of themselves. As a concept in postcolonial theory, hybridity refers to “a third space that gives birth to new signs of identity through a negotiation of differences” (Bhabha, 1994, 25). Homi Bhabha lists three key concepts that constitute hybridity, as discussed in the theoretical chapter: ambivalence, mimicry, and unhomeliness. In *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, the female protagonists struggle to imitate the Americans in their way of speaking, dress, and mannerisms so that they can look like, and be accepted by, the Americans. However, these characters are frustrated as a result of this, because they are not fully recognised as American. They also feel guilty for abandoning their African ways of life, speaking, and mannerisms to be like the Americans, who do not accept them fully. This ultimately leads them to both like and detest the host country. According to Bhabha, this leads to feelings of ambivalence towards the host country because they are in “constant fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It refers to a simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from a subject, person or nation” (80).

Darling and Ifemelu consistently find themselves in that state of loving their new American environment, having escaped from the troubles in their home countries, but also resenting the parts of America that conflict with who they were before migrating. However, there is little they can do but strive to gain acceptance in their new environment. From the foregoing, both Ifemelu and Darling, can be considered “hybrids”, and “Afropolitans” or “Americanahs”, according to literary scholars like Taiye Selasi, Chieloza Eze, Caroline Lyle, Homi Bhabha, Jennifer Wawrzinak and J.S Makokla, among others, because their full identities are achieved by their conscious retention of part of their Africanness and their accommodation of their Americanness, that is, their negotiation of new self-identities. In transnational literature, the negotiation of new identities is paramount at various levels, including the individual, the communal, the national, and the transnational. It is important to say that this negotiation of new identities is not an easy feat, as the female protagonists in both novels are in a constant struggle to find their voice and reclaim their selfhood, which has been bruised and abused, in a racialised American society. Sometimes, the only option left for these characters, or African migrants in reality, is to return home, where they feel they will be welcome, appreciated, and may be celebrated as “Americanahs.”

RETURN-MIGRATION IN AFRICAN FEMINIST FICTION

African migrants in America and other parts of the world often face disillusionment — a situation where their hopes and dreams for a better future are dashed. When they get to this particular point of hopelessness, they are left with the choice of accepting their “fate” as “unwelcomed” or “illegal” immigrants or returning “home”, since the host country has not become a “home” for them. In his thesis titled, “Disillusionment and Survival in Migration Literature”, Gideon Brobbey (2020) argues that “disillusionment among African migrants abroad usually puts them in two straits: return to the home country or find ways of coping with the situation in which they find themselves. The former is always considered to be the last resort” (53). It is usually when the African migrant has exhausted all options of survival, or even when they seem to have achieved everything they ever wanted when they decided to migrate to the host country, but still feel a sense of emptiness, that the desire (like Ifemelu in *Americanah*), or rather the need (like Obinze to escape prison), to return to the home country becomes inevitable. Thus, return migration is a significant feature of most African migrant literature.

Dustman and Weiss (2007) define return migration as “a situation where migrants return to their country of origin by their own choice, after a significant period abroad” (23). This is the case of Ifemelu in *Americanah*. After a successful career in America, which comes after years of disillusionment, Ifemelu decides to quit her job as a famous blogger, to return home to Nigeria. One would have thought that living a stable life, with an American passport, a doting boyfriend, and almost all she ever dreamed of in America, Ifemelu would feel contented, but the reverse becomes the case. The narrator presents this *after-success-disillusionment*, succinctly:

And she had ignored, too, the cement in her soul. Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she has a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine [...] and yet there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. [...] Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. [...] [I]t was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her... (6-7)

Ifemelu had a reason for coming to the US, which was to escape the recurring university strikes and the poor economic situation in Nigeria. However, as the narrator informs the reader, “there

was no cause” (7) for wanting to leave the U.S. for Nigeria, other than the “cement in her soul” (6), that brought about “that layer after layer of discontent” (7), and a strong feeling of nostalgia for life in Nigeria.

Ifemelu’s decision to return home is voluntary, but not all return migration is voluntary; sometimes it is forced. Gideon Brobbey sheds light on this fact:

Most return migrations are embarked upon voluntarily. However, in many cases, the governments of host countries have had cause to forcibly remove people from their countries for immigration violation such as visa overstay, engaging in profit-making when their visa does not permit them to do so. In some other cases, migrants who have had brushes with the laws of the host countries are compulsorily made to return to their countries of origin after serving a jail term after their cases are brought to a logical conclusion in a court of competent jurisdiction. (54)

This is what happens to Obinze in *Americanah*. Although this thesis is concerned with the migration of female migrant characters in both novels, it is sometimes necessary to draw out similarities or differences along gender lines. For instance, Emenike’s marriage to an English woman, Georgina, and Obinze’s fake marriage to an Angolan-Portuguese, Cleotilde, with European papers, help foreground differences in the experiences of African migrants along gendered and location-specific angles. Thus, in *Americanah*, while Ifemelu’s decision to return home is voluntary, Obinze, the male protagonist, is forced to return home as a deportee. After his failed fake marriage to Cleotilde, when his visitor’s visa expires, Obinze is arrested by UK immigration officers, detained, and is set to be “removed” from the UK. In a bid to reduce his jail term before his final deportation, Obinze decides to return to Nigeria “willingly” to avoid imprisonment:

“I’m willing to go back to Nigeria”, Obinze said.

The last strand of his dignity was like a wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to tie.

The lawyer looked surprised. “Okay then” he said, and got up a little too hastily, as though grateful that his job had been made easy. Obinze watched him leave. He was going to tick on a form that his client was willing to be removed. “Removed”, that word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing. (279)

Obinze’s return migration is thus not borne out of choice like Ifemelu’s; rather, the UK government forces him to leave because he has violated immigration laws or risk going to jail.

In *We Need New Names*, voluntary return migration is impossible for Darling. Even though she misses Zimbabwe and her friends and family, she cannot leave America. This is due

to the fact that she does not have “papers”. She is an illegal migrant; she came to America on a visitor’s visa, and she is not entitled to work. But she has to work illegally because she has to survive and possibly send money home. She returns home in her imagination. It is noteworthy that return migration is not only voluntary or forced. It can also be *imagined-return-migration* or what I will call a form of *mind-travel*, a journey back home, usually to what one has missed since arrival in a host country. As with voluntary return, the immigrant in imagined-return-migration also feels that burden or “cement” to return home, when faced with hostility and disillusionment in the host country.

This aspect of return migration is explored in *We Need New Names*, as is demonstrated in the following instances, the first being when Darling is eating some guavas brought by a relative from Paradise: “I just keep chewing; how can she understand that each time I take a bite, I leave the house, Kalamazoo, and Michigan, leave the country altogether and find myself back in my Paradise, in Budapest?” (186). Darling finds her way back to her beloved Paradise again when she remembers a song she and her classmates used to sing while in school. This nostalgic moment makes her so happy that she forgets she is inside Kristal’s mother’s car, and she begins to sing aloud:

Because I am no longer in a stolen car with Kristal and Marina, because I’m no longer in America on my way to the mall, I lift and lift and lift my voice better than Rihanna. I am home — home now with my friends at school [...] Because this is where I am now, and because it is a place where you sing like something is burning inside you, I sing until Marina is yelling my name and Kristal has turned off the radio and is saying The fuck? You need to calm down damn! (220)

Darling can only return to Paradise in her imagination because her present reality does not allow her to return voluntarily to her country of origin. The narrator also makes the reader see reasons why Darling and other “illegal” African migrants like her in America cannot return to Africa, even on a visit:

We did not go back home to visit because we did not have the papers for our return, and so we just stayed, knowing that if we went, we would not be able to re-enter America. We stayed like prisoners, only we chose to be prisoners and we loved our prisons; it was not a bad prison. And when things only got worse in our country, we pulled our shackles even tighter and said, We are not leaving America, no, we are not leaving. [...] And when our parents reminded us over the phone that it had been long, long time, and that they were getting old and needed to see us, needed to meet their grandchildren, we said, We are coming... We did not want to tell them we still had no papers. (246-247)

Darling and others in *We Need New Names* can't return home physically because of their illegal status. This situation of not being able to return is also explored in *Americanah*. Some of the African women Ifemelu meets in Mariama's salon at the beginning of the novel cannot go back to Africa, and they are surprised to hear that Ifemelu wants to return home after fifteen years (it is actually thirteen years she spends in America but always tells people she's been in America for fifteen years, to gain credibility). The women in Mariama's salon resort to watching African movies as a means of reconnecting with their homeland, as return is almost impossible for them without their "papers". Adichie and Bulawayo explore the challenges faced by their female protagonists, and by implication, African women migrants in America, which can lead them to wish to return home; however, they also represent the various possibilities of return migration – voluntary, forced, and imagined.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that the movement of female African migrants such as Ifemelu, Darling, Ginika, and others from Africa to America is occasioned by disillusionment, material poverty, economic and political instability in their home countries, and the desire for better life opportunities. Rather than fully integrate into the American system as these female characters envisaged, they are faced with various challenges, such as racism and the need to be seen and acknowledged as individuals and not profiled based on their skin colour. To survive then in an unfamiliar and unfriendly American society, they have to re-construct and re-negotiate their identities to fit into their new environment. For some of them, this negotiation does not come easily. Sometimes, after trying to "belong" like Darling, or even "belonging", and achieving fame and wealth, like Ifemelu, these women have no choice but to return or desire to return home. This chapter concludes that return migration or rather the possibility or impossibility of return is an important feature of African feminist migration literature (Uwakweh, 2023), as major characters in the novels under review, return to their home countries in Africa, voluntarily as in the case of Ifemelu, forcefully in the case of Obinze or imaginatively in the case of Darling, for various reasons such as personal gratification, to escape prison and to revisit lost childhood. And this return to their home countries, in whatever ways, impacts their identities, as they become "Americanahs", "Afropolitans", or "hybrids".

However, as will be argued in the next chapter, return-migration goes beyond being voluntary, forced, or imagined. It can be a series of movements by female African migrants

across Africa and the West, with the aim of finding a sense of “home” or “belonging” in both their home country and/or the host country.

CHAPTER 4: HOME, BELONGING, AND RETURN IN *THE TRANSLATOR* AND *OCTOBER*

INTRODUCTION

“She was going away in February to Egypt, part of the anti-terrorist programme. [...]. At the back of her mind, the motivation, I will see home again. [...]. After the three weeks were over, she would fly the two hours home, to Khartoum, and she would bring Amir back with her. [...]. She had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her in the same way Tarig had. To see home again. [...]. To go to where everything happened.” (*The Translator*, 2008, 32)

“Nevertheless, she may have to heed his request and go home, or rather, visit. Maybe that is the place where she might stop crying – at home, a place where the heart could heal.

The thought of the Cape as home brings an ambiguous shiver – the small town in Klein Namaqualand, Kliprand. [...]. In Glasgow Mercia insists on the distinction between living and staying; she is only there temporarily; it cannot be her home. She visits Kliprand often, but knows at the same time that to stay there would allow the soul to die rather than to live.” (*October*, 2014, 14-15)

This final chapter examines the experiences of female African migrants in the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, focusing on the novels by two female African writers: Leila Aboulela (born 1964) and the late Zoe Wicomb (1948 - 2025). Like the other writers previously examined, they have direct experiences of migration, as they reside in the West and maintain regular contact with their home countries in Africa. Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and Wicomb’s *October* (2014) are analysed as narratives that address the challenges of belonging and the making of “home” for two African women from Sudan and South Africa. Both novels centre on female protagonists – Mercia and Sammar – whose migration experiences provide divergent perspectives on essential notions of home, identity, belonging, and return migration.

This chapter examines how Wicomb and Aboulela, in their fictional narratives, open conversations around what it means to “belong” in the United Kingdom, which has historical connections to the African continent and its people; both Sudan and South Africa were colonised by the British. However, both writers explore these issues differently, as shown in the excerpts from their novels. Wicomb’s experience of being “coloured” in South Africa shapes her representation of how the trauma and pain of the past can affect her protagonist’s sense of belonging in either South Africa or Scotland. Aboulela’s firm Islamic feminist stance influences her representation of belonging for a Muslim woman living in Scotland. Both authors represent migration as an ongoing process of multiple journeys and returns across

Africa and Scotland – a feature that distinguishes their novels from the others examined in this thesis, in which return to some of the characters, is neither physically possible nor legally realistic, as is the case of Darling in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and the women in Mariama's salon in Adichie's *Americanah*, who have no "papers". Being migrant women themselves and middle-class professionals, Wicomb and Aboulela represent the experiences of middle-class African women (a professor and a translator), who have the financial and legal means to move back and forth between their home countries and Scotland. This chapter thus interrogates the representation of the subjectivities and lived experiences of female African migrants across geographical and cultural borders, specifically between Africa and Scotland. My thesis interrogates location as an important element in the representation of female African migrants' experiences; thus, Scotland is the desired destination for the protagonists of both novels, due to its connections to the home countries of Mercia and Sammar – a colonial past.

The critical reception of *October* and *The Translator* reveals a sustained scholarly interest in questions of migration, identity, memory, and belonging. Whereas the preceding chapters examined migration through the lenses of vulnerability and exploitation in *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, and identity negotiation and diasporic self-fashioning in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, this chapter focuses on the later stages of migration: the negotiation of home, return, faith, and belonging within Scotland. In doing so, it demonstrates that African women's migration is not a linear movement from departure to settlement, but an ongoing process of identity reconstruction shaped by memory, race, gender, religion, and place.

Studies of Zoë Wicomb's *October* has largely centred on its exploration of exile, return, post-apartheid identity, and the elusive nature of home. Scholars like Jonan Jacobs (2016), Dorathy Driver (2017), Kai Easton and Derek Attridge (2017), among others, consistently identify Wicomb's fiction as interrogating the instability of belonging, particularly for subjects who inhabit multiple geographical and cultural worlds. Much of the scholarship also foregrounds Wicomb's treatment of racial ambiguity, memory, and post-apartheid reconciliation, reading Mercia Murray's return to Namaqualand as an exploration of unresolved histories and fractured identities. While these studies provide valuable insights into the novel's postcolonial concerns, they rarely examine *October* within the wider corpus of African women's migration narratives or consider how Scotland functions as a distinctly gendered diasporic space. Consequently, the novel's contribution to understanding how African migrant women continually negotiate belonging across multiple locations remains insufficiently theorised. Reading *October* alongside the novels discussed in the previous chapters reveals that Wicomb extends, rather than departs from, the concerns of African feminist migration

literature. The vulnerability experienced by Mara and Sisi in Europe and the hybrid identities negotiated by Ifemelu and Darling in America evolve in *October* into subtler negotiations of return, memory, and emotional belonging, suggesting that migration's challenges persist long after physical settlement.

The critical reception of Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* has followed a somewhat different trajectory. The novel has been interrogated through the frameworks of religion, Islamic identity, intercultural dialogue, and postcolonial ethics. Al-Adwan et al. (2013) contend that Aboulela presents Islam not merely as a religious affiliation but as a framework through which migrants negotiate identity, cultural translation, and belonging across national boundaries. Likewise, Zannoun (2019) argues that the novel destabilises binary oppositions such as East and West or Self and Other by presenting identity as relational, fluid, and emotionally constituted rather than territorially fixed. Alaa Alghamdi (2014) further suggests that Aboulela resists Orientalist representations by constructing what he terms a "hybrid vocabulary of experience and meaning" (23), through which Sammar's faith, widowhood, migration, and cultural encounters produce a nuanced understanding of diasporic subjectivity. Chambers (2011) similarly observes that Aboulela challenges dominant Western representations of Muslim women by foregrounding female agency and spiritual autonomy rather than victimhood.

Although these readings have significantly advanced scholarship on *The Translator*, they also reveal a noticeable critical tendency to privilege religion over migration itself. Sammar's experiences are frequently interpreted through the lens of Islamic identity, often at the expense of examining how gender, race, grief, displacement, and diasporic belonging intersect within the Scottish context. Consequently, relatively little attention has been paid either to the novel as an African migration narrative or to Scotland as a significant site where African women negotiate competing attachments to home, family, nation, and faith. This omission becomes particularly striking when *The Translator* is read alongside the novels analysed in Chapters Two and Three. Just as Ifemelu negotiates racial consciousness in the United States and Darling reconstructs identity through diasporic hybridity, Sammar's negotiations are mediated through faith, widowhood, and emotional displacement. Her experience demonstrates that belonging is not secured solely through geographical relocation but requires continual negotiation across intersecting social, cultural, and spiritual identities.

In *October*, Scotland, specifically Glasgow, is not represented as a harmonious space, but a site fraught with ambivalence for Mercia Murray. Although she has lived in Glasgow for years, Mercia experiences it as emotionally cold and spatially distancing. With descriptions

that emphasise grey light, rain, silence, and geographical isolation, Wicomb mirrors Mercia's internal disorientation and cultural estrangement. Significantly, Wicomb uses Scotland as a foil or counterpoint to South Africa, rather than as a replacement homeland. While South Africa is represented as chaotic, painful, and racially and ethnically charged, Scotland is orderly but emotionally barren; it is anything but home. This comparison heightens Mercia's identity crisis, demonstrating the impossibility of a clean break from Mercia's postcolonial past. The excerpt above shows this ambivalence and ambiguity between making either South Africa or Scotland home for Mercia. Mercia also faces gendered alienation in Scotland. Her experience as a migrant woman is marked by the double dislocation of gender and race. Instead of being a liberating terrain, Scotland amplifies her sense of in-betweenness, reinforcing her as a woman who belongs "neither here nor there."

In contrast, Scotland, especially Aberdeen, functions differently in Aboulela's *The Translator*. It is a site of cross-cultural encounters that enables the relationship between Sammar, an Islamic widow, and Rae, a Scottish academic. Aboulela represents Scotland as a place of spiritual transformation. For Sammar, Scotland is initially associated with loss, loneliness, snow, cold and grief, but as the novel progresses, it becomes the setting for renewed faith, emotional healing, and love. Aboulela represents Scotland as not coldly alienating, but a space where Islamic identity is reaffirmed, not erased. Unlike Mercia in *October*, Sammar negotiates social differences through religious identity rather than race. Scotland is a place where she is visibly marked as a Muslim woman through her hijab. It is where she is socially marginal, but also where she is able to maintain a stable sense of self. Aboulela portrays Scotland as capable of accommodating alternative moral and spiritual worldviews, even if imperfectly, like the Islamic knowledge Rae has through academic scholarship. Significantly, Aboulela represents Scotland not as home but as a potential home. Sammar does not fully assimilate into Scottish culture, yet Scotland becomes a place where she can imagine the possibility of belonging, especially through her relationship with Rae. Thus, Scotland becomes a space of emotional re-awakening rather than displacement.

Through the intersecting lenses of postcolonial, feminist, and transnational theories, this chapter argues that these texts resist linear narratives of African migration and return, providing a gendered perspective on these issues. Both novels resist the conventional arc of migration as a journey from origin to destination, followed by return. Instead, they foreground disjuncture, ambivalence, and multiplicity. They also challenge dominant migration narratives by foregrounding gendered, non-linear experiences shaped by postcolonial displacement, feminist agency, and transnational belonging. They represent fragmented subjectivities shaped

by memory, history, cultural hybridity, and affective ties. Wicomb and Aboulela construct transnational African women's lives that are not merely about geographical displacement but involve epistemological and emotional negotiations of selfhood. As Stuart Hall (1990) suggests, identities are not fixed but rather "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices" (394). In both novels, identity is shaped through diaspora, race, gender, and faith, and mediated through the affective terrain of love, loss, and longing.

This chapter addresses a critical gap by bringing Wicomb and Aboulela into dialogue with the novels examined in the preceding chapters. Rather than treating migration as a singular event, it argues that African women's migratory experiences unfold across multiple stages – from vulnerability and exploitation to identity negotiation and ultimately to the ongoing search for home, belonging, and selfhood. Through their Scottish settings, *October* and *The Translator* extend this "continuum" by revealing Scotland not simply as a destination of migration but as a complex diasporic space in which race, gender, memory, religion, and belonging are continually renegotiated. In this way, the chapter contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that the African female migrant experience cannot be understood solely through narratives of arrival or integration, but must also account for the enduring emotional, cultural, and ethical negotiations that shape diasporic life. This chapter also examines the different ways Aboulela and Wicomb represent home in their fictional narratives. While both writers explore the experiences of African women in Scotland, they have different ideological and sociological perspectives, which inadvertently influence how they tell their stories. Aboulela proposes a re-imagination of home and belonging that allows Sammar to finally "see" Scotland (Aberdeen) as a place she can live in, regardless of the weather. For Wicomb, that possibility is not strongly evidenced. Home and belonging, both in Africa and in Scotland (Glasgow), seem elusive, making return an ongoing circle. This chapter, therefore, explores how both novels realise their literary commitments as narratives about migrant African women in Scotland who navigate "belonging", find "home", and constantly return across and between Africa and Scotland.

Beyond their thematic engagement with migration and diasporic belonging, *October* and *The Translator* employ distinctive narrative strategies that shape how readers experience the protagonists' journeys. As established above, Wicomb and Aboulela resist conventional migration narratives that privilege movement from one geographical location to another, instead constructing stories in which migration unfolds through memory, emotional attachment, religious consciousness, and everyday encounters. Their narrative choices reinforce one of this chapter's central arguments: that migration is not a completed event but

an ongoing process of negotiating identity, home, and belonging across multiple spaces. Unlike the novels discussed in Chapter Two, where physical vulnerability and exploitation dominate narrative progression, or Chapter Three, where identity is largely negotiated through encounters with race, language, and cultural hybridity, *October* and *The Translator* privilege interiority. Both writers shift the emphasis from external movement to psychological, emotional, and spiritual movements. Consequently, narrative itself becomes a means of representing the complexities of diasporic existence, allowing readers to experience migration as a condition of continual becoming rather than geographical relocation.

Wicomb's *October* is characterised by a fragmented, non-linear narrative structure that mirrors the instability of memory and the unsettled nature of diasporic identity. Rather than following a chronological sequence, the novel moves fluidly between Scotland and South Africa, the present and the past, memory and lived experience. These temporal shifts resist the expectation that return resolves displacement. Instead, they demonstrate that the past continually interrupts the present, making identity an ongoing negotiation between multiple histories and locations. The fragmented structure demonstrates Mercia's inability to make either Scotland or South Africa her home. This narrative fragmentation also reflects the discontinuities that characterise postcolonial memory. Mercia's recollections emerge gradually through reflection, silence, and interrupted conversations rather than through straightforward exposition. Wicomb avoids narrative certainty, compelling readers to reconstruct relationships and histories alongside the protagonist. Such narrative withholding reflects the emotional ambiguities of return migration, where memories remain partial, contested, and mediated by time. The result is a narrative that privileges uncertainty over resolution, reinforcing the novel's interrogation of belonging as a fluid and unfinished process. Equally significant is Wicomb's restrained narrative voice. Rather than relying upon dramatic plot developments, she privileges quiet observation, introspection, and everyday interactions. This stylistic restraint allows emotional complexity to emerge gradually, inviting readers to attend to the subtle negotiations through which belonging is constructed. Silence, hesitation, and omission become meaningful narrative devices, suggesting that certain experiences of migration resist complete articulation. In doing so, Wicomb departs from spectacular representations of migration to foreground its slower, cumulative psychological consequences.

Aboulela employs a markedly different but complementary narrative strategy. *The Translator* unfolds through a predominantly linear narrative that closely follows Sammar's emotional and spiritual journey. However, although the chronology is comparatively straightforward, the novel's focalisation remains intensely intimate. Much of the narrative is

filtered through Sammar's consciousness, allowing readers direct access to her grief, uncertainty, religious reflections, and emotional negotiations. This close internal focalisation transforms migration from an external social phenomenon into a deeply personal experience, emphasising that displacement is lived through affect as much as through physical movement. Religion constitutes one of Aboulela's most distinctive narrative features. Rather than functioning as thematic background, Islamic faith structures the narrative itself. Prayer, Qur'anic reflection, remembrance, and spiritual contemplation punctuate the novel's progression, shaping both Sammar's understanding of herself and her interpretation of those around her. Consequently, the narrative refuses secular assumptions that migration is solely determined by economic, political, or cultural factors. Instead, Aboulela demonstrates that spiritual identity forms an integral component of diasporic belonging, influencing decisions about love, home, family, and community.

Another important narrative strategy is Aboulela's use of translation as both narrative motif and structural principle. Translation, which will be discussed extensively in a later section of this chapter, extends beyond linguistic exchange to encompass emotional, cultural, and religious interpretation. Throughout the novel, characters continually negotiate meanings across different cultural frameworks, illustrating that migration requires constant acts of interpretation rather than simple assimilation. Sammar herself occupies the position of translator in multiple senses: she translates language, mediates between cultures, and continually translates her own identity as she moves between Sudanese and Scottish social worlds. The narrative thereby positions translation as an ongoing process of relational understanding rather than the achievement of cultural equivalence.

Despite their stylistic differences, Wicomb and Aboulela share important narrative commitments. Both privilege female interiority over external spectacle, allowing migration to emerge through everyday emotional experience rather than dramatic events. Both employ memory as a narrative organising principle, although Wicomb constructs memory through fragmentation while Aboulela integrates it into reflective interior monologue. Likewise, both resist definitive narrative closure. Neither Mercia nor Sammar arrives at a fixed sense of belonging by the conclusion of their respective novels. Instead, identity remains provisional, relational, and continually negotiated. These narrative choices are particularly significant for the aims of this chapter. The preceding chapters demonstrated that African women's migration involves successive negotiations of vulnerability, exploitation, race, and identity. This chapter extends that argument by showing that these negotiations continue beyond settlement through memory, return, faith, and emotional attachment. Wicomb's fragmented temporal structure

reveals how histories of displacement continue to shape present identities, while Aboulela's intimate psychological narration demonstrates that belonging is negotiated as much through spirituality and affect as through geography. In both novels, narrative form becomes inseparable from thematic meaning; the structure of the stories enacts the instability, fluidity, and incompleteness that define diasporic life. Ultimately, the narrative techniques employed by Wicomb and Aboulela challenge linear models of migration that conclude with successful integration or permanent return. Instead, they construct migration as a continuous process of becoming in which home is repeatedly imagined, remembered, contested, and reconstructed. By foregrounding interior consciousness, fragmented memory, silence, translation, and spiritual reflection, both novelists illuminate dimensions of African women's migratory experiences that remain underexplored within existing scholarship. Their narrative innovations therefore complement this chapter's broader objective of demonstrating that Scotland functions not merely as a destination of migration but as a dynamic diasporic space in which African women continually negotiate the intertwined questions of home, belonging, identity, and selfhood.

SCOTLAND AS A SITE OF DIASPORIC BELONGING: *OCTOBER* AND *THE TRANSLATOR*

Having examined vulnerability, exploitation, identity negotiation, and racial self-fashioning in the preceding chapters, this chapter turns to Scotland as a distinctive site through which African migrant women negotiate belonging. Unlike Germany, Belgium, and the United States, which in the previous chapters function primarily as spaces of survival or identity reconstruction, Scotland emerges in *October* and *The Translator* as a more complex diasporic landscape where belonging is continuously negotiated rather than fully achieved. From the foregoing, I argue that Scotland functions not as a passive backdrop but as a liminal space where migrant and diasporic identities are reconfigured. As established earlier in this chapter, Wicomb and Aboulela move beyond representing migration as mere physical relocation to interrogate the emotional, ethical, cultural, and spiritual struggle involved in making a home within an unfamiliar national and geographical space. Consequently, Scotland is represented neither as an unequivocal site of exclusion nor as a multicultural utopia, but as a relational space in which identities are continually produced through memory, mobility, faith, race, and everyday social encounters. The literary trajectories of both Wicomb and Aboulela are connected to Scotland, and their novels use Scottish spaces such as Glasgow and Aberdeen to interrogate ideas of home, displacement, return and personal issues such as love, loss, religion, and minority status.

Scotland occupies an ambivalent position within postcolonial studies: it is both implicated in British imperial history and imagined as marginal to dominant English narrative.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises Scotland as a distinctive site of migration and diasporic formation. Although historically associated with emigration, Scotland has evolved into a multicultural society shaped by diverse migrant communities and transnational connections. Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises Scotland as a civic and literary space through which questions of migration, race, and belonging can be reimagined. Hunter and Meer (2018) argue that contemporary debates on “Scottishness” have shifted towards civic inclusion, while Sassi (2019), drawing on Lionnet and Shih’s (2005) notion of “minor transnationalism”, demonstrates that Scottish literature provides alternative narratives of mobility and belonging beyond metropolitan frameworks. Extending this perspective, Gardiner (2006) contends that Scottish literature should be understood through postcolonial and transnational paradigms that challenge essentialist notions of national identity. These critical perspectives are particularly useful for understanding how Wicomb foregrounds race, memory, and post-apartheid displacement, while Aboulela emphasises religion, faith, and cultural translation. Together, the novels present Scotland not merely as a destination for migrants but as a contested space in which belonging is continually negotiated, as well as a dynamic contact zone where African migrants especially African women, negotiate multiple and overlapping identities.

In *The Translator*, Scotland emerges as a space of cultural and emotional negotiation. Following her husband’s death, Sammar experiences profound loneliness and displacement living in Aberdeen. Her longing for Sudan initially positions Scotland as a place of estrangement, marked by emotional distance and cultural unfamiliarity. Yet Scotland simultaneously becomes the space in which she reconstructs her sense of self through faith, memory, and interpersonal relationships, especially with Rae. Aboulela’s representation of Aberdeen challenges simplistic oppositions between homeland and hostland by demonstrating how belonging can be mediated within diasporic spaces without erasing attachments to the place of origin. Claire Chambers (2011) argues that Aboulela fundamentally reconfigures representations of Muslim women by locating agency within religious commitment rather than secular liberation. Scotland consequently becomes a place where Islamic identity is not abandoned but rearticulated within a multicultural environment. Geoffrey Nash (2012) likewise argues that Aboulela’s fiction foregrounds Islam as a dynamic ethical and cultural framework through which Muslim identities are negotiated, thereby challenging dominant Western assumptions about faith and cultural difference.

Importantly, Aboulela refuses assimilationist narratives in which successful migration requires the abandonment of religious or cultural identity. Amer Al-Adwan and Yousef Awad (2013) argue that *The Translator* constructs translation as an ethical process of intercultural understanding rather than cultural absorption. Sammar's relationship with Rae illustrates this dynamic. Their relationship is sustained not through the erasure of difference but through the difficult work of negotiating linguistic, religious, and emotional boundaries. Consequently, Scotland becomes a space where belonging emerges through dialogue rather than conformity.

Ghada Zannoun (2019) further argues that Aboulela destabilises conventional binaries such as East and West, Self and Other, by presenting identity as relational and spatially fluid rather than territorially fixed. Sammar occupies multiple social worlds simultaneously: she is Sudanese, Muslim, African, widowed, a mother, and a migrant living in Aberdeen. None of these identities supersedes the others; instead, they intersect to produce a distinctly diasporic subjectivity. Scotland therefore functions not simply as a host nation but as an active participant in the continual reconstruction of selfhood.

Similarly, Wicomb's *October* situates Scotland at the centre of a transnational exploration of identity and return. Critics have observed that Wicomb's fiction consistently explores the interconnectedness of Scotland and South Africa, foregrounding translocal identities that transcend national boundaries. Johan Jacobs (2016) argues that Wicomb offers perhaps "the most searching revision of the notion of home" in contemporary South African fiction by demonstrating that home is simultaneously a site of belonging and unbelonging. Mercia's years in Glasgow neither erase her South African identity nor produce complete Scottish belonging. Instead, Scotland becomes another location through which displacement is experienced and interpreted. Her eventual return to Namaqualand therefore fails to produce the anticipated recovery of origins because migration has fundamentally transformed both the migrant and the meaning of home itself. Jacobs consequently argues that *October* interrogates not only exile but also the impossibility of recovering an uncontaminated home after migration.

This representation resonates strongly with Avtar Brah's (1996) influential distinction between the "homing desire" and the desire for homeland. For Brah, diaspora should not be understood simply as nostalgia for national return but as an ongoing process of constructing belonging across multiple social locations. Home becomes less a geographical destination than an affective and relational practice. Mercia embodies precisely this condition. Her attachments extend simultaneously towards Scotland and South Africa without allowing complete identification with either location. Scotland therefore becomes part of her diasporic identity rather than merely a temporary place of residence. Wicomb further complicates Scotland's

significance by refusing to privilege either South Africa or Scotland as Mercia's authentic home. Kai Easton (2017) also argues that Wicomb's work is characterised by a sustained engagement with the cultural and historical connections between Scotland and South Africa, producing what may be understood as a "translocal" rather than purely national literary imagination. Meg Samuelson (2007) argues that Wicomb's later fiction adopts a "provincial cosmopolitanism" that unsettles binary distinctions between centre and periphery, nation and diaspora, home and exile. Rather than positioning mobility against rootedness, Wicomb demonstrates that identities emerge through continual movement between places and histories. Likewise, Abdulrazak Gurnah (2014) observes that Wicomb's fiction produces a productive tension between rootedness and mobility, refusing to resolve the competing desires for permanence and movement. The significance of Scotland therefore lies not in replacing South Africa but in exposing the inadequacy of singular notions of belonging. Rather than functioning as a substitute homeland, Scotland becomes a space where Mercia continually negotiates multiple histories, languages, and emotional attachments.

The representations of Scotland by both writers correspond closely with Sara Ahmed's (2000) understanding of migration as an embodied process through which both people and places are mutually constituted. Ahmed argues that migrants do not merely occupy space but transform its meanings through everyday encounters, emotions, and social relationships. Likewise, Anne-Marie Fortier (1999; 2000) conceptualises migrant belonging as a continual practice of "home-making" enacted through memory, routine, and affective attachment rather than legal citizenship alone. Read through these perspectives, both Mercia and Sammar actively produce Scotland as lived space. Their daily interactions, emotional investments, professional lives, and interpersonal relationships transform Scotland from a destination into a place of diasporic habitation.

Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller's (2004) conception of transnational social fields further illuminates this process. They argue that migrants simultaneously inhabit multiple social worlds that transcend national boundaries, producing identities constituted through ongoing connections across geographical locations. Both protagonists exemplify this condition. Mercia's emotional and intellectual life continually oscillates between Glasgow and Namaqualand, while Sammar remains deeply connected to Sudan through language, family, religion, and memory despite residing in Aberdeen. Their identities are therefore neither exclusively Scottish nor exclusively African but emerge through sustained participation in overlapping transnational spaces.

What distinguishes *October* and *The Translator* from the novels discussed in the previous chapters is their movement beyond questions of arrival and adaptation towards more complex negotiations of dwelling. In *Beyond the Horizon* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, Europe largely appears as a site of exploitation where migrant women struggle for survival. In *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, the United States functions as a racialised space that compels continual identity negotiation. Wicomb and Aboulela extend this trajectory by demonstrating that even after relative stability has been achieved, the work of belonging remains unfinished. Scotland neither resolves displacement nor reproduces the violence associated with earlier migratory experiences. Instead, it becomes a dynamic diasporic space where memory, faith, race, gender, and transnational attachments continually intersect.

This reading also addresses an important gap in existing scholarship. Critics have predominantly interpreted *October* through post-apartheid memory, return, and cosmopolitanism, while *The Translator* has been examined principally through religion, translation, and Islamic identity. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the shared Scottish setting or to the ways in which both novels imagine Scotland as a specifically African diasporic space. Reading the novels together demonstrates that Scotland is neither peripheral to African migration narratives nor merely an alternative European location. Rather, it occupies a distinctive position in contemporary African literature as a site where African women reconstruct belonging through everyday negotiations of memory, mobility, spirituality, and interpersonal relationships. In foregrounding Scotland as a site of diasporic belonging, this chapter therefore contributes to expanding understandings of African migration beyond narratives of departure, arrival, or return towards a more relational conception of home as something continually produced across intersecting geographical, cultural, and emotional landscapes. This intervention also responds to recent scholarship calling for greater attention to the translocal connections between Scotland and Africa, and to the ways writers such as Wicomb and Aboulela use Scottish settings to reimagine diasporic belonging beyond conventional postcolonial centres.

Diasporic belonging does not imply complete assimilation into the host society nor the abandonment of ties to the homeland. Rather, it describes a condition in which migrants develop multiple and overlapping attachments that connect them simultaneously to different places, cultures, and histories. Scotland becomes the space through which Sammar and Mercia negotiate these overlapping affiliations. In both narratives, belonging emerges not from rootedness in a single nation but from the ability to inhabit multiple cultural locations. By positioning Scotland as a site of diasporic belonging, *The Translator* and *October* challenge

essentialist understandings of home as a fixed territorial destination. Instead, the novels reveal how migration produces complex forms of attachment that transcend national boundaries. Scotland functions as a transformative space where identities are reconfigured, memories are reinterpreted, and notions of return are complicated. The Scottish context is therefore central to understanding how both Aboulela and Wicomb conceptualise home and belonging as fluid, contested, and inherently transnational experiences. This context also informs their representations of their protagonists as women whose lives and experiences are impacted by both postcolonial (African) and transnational (Scottish) currents.

A POSTCOLONIAL-TRANSNATIONAL INTERROGATION OF *OCTOBER* AND *THE TRANSLATOR*

The experiences of Mercia and Sammar in both novels take them through different stages of belonging, depending on their respective circumstances. They are constantly moving between Africa and Scotland as they try to make a “home” or feel “at home” in either their countries of origin or in Aberdeen or Glasgow. Thus, I argue that an intersection of postcolonial and transnational feminist frameworks will account for their experiences because they are African women occupying spaces between “here” and “there,” and they challenge colonial legacies that still try to relegate them to the periphery (such as race, tradition, and Western culture). Applying transnational and postcolonial feminist principles helps us appreciate the challenges a coloured South African woman and a Muslim Sudanese woman face living in Scotland while maintaining contact with their home countries. Postcolonial feminism questions how the effects of colonialism and imperialism affect non-white and non-Western women all around the world. On the other hand, transnational feminism challenges the way globalisation and capitalism affect women across transnational spaces, especially women who are non-white or non-Western. Bo Wang (2013) argues that postcolonial theorists challenge us to think about time as a key element in shaping and understanding the past and present (234). They also view the “beyond” or “in-between” space as the site where culture is located (235). Postcolonial theorists like Bhabha, Spivak, and Appiah critically examine what it means to live in-between or beyond spaces, especially for migrant subjects in contested spaces. It is in the connection between time and space that postcolonial African feminist critics situate African women's experiences. Thus, the “transnational”, which entails living across borders and cultures, when explored using a feminist lens, accounts for the experiences of female African migrants like Mercia and Sammar in both novels, as liminal subjects, who find themselves at the crossroads between here and there.

According to Horne and Arora (2013), transnational discourse encompasses the experiences of immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, individuals who have undergone forced migration or identify as third world, and those seeking to develop multicultural identities. It also encompasses the experiences of women who live in cultural borderlands and spaces between cultures (Enns et al, 2020). At the heart of transnational feminism is intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. These features of transnational feminism draw on postcolonial feminist theory to examine the lived experiences of women continually affected by colonialism, both within their national boundaries and when they migrate elsewhere. Mercia in *October* is continually affected by colonialism in South Africa, as her “coloured” status makes her feel out of place, and even in Scotland, which is supposed to be the “home” of her ancestors, being of a “civilised Scottish stock” (9), she still feels out of place. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) see a relationship between transnational and postcolonial feminisms because both theories highlight social and structural factors that continue to ensure power differences, including colonialism, racism, gender, sexual, and economic exploitations.

Chandra Mohanty (2003) recommends a transnational solidarity approach that does not presume the existence of identical priorities or common identity but focuses on concrete interconnectedness and interrelated issues that can lend themselves to producing activism and alliance-building across borders. Thus, a postcolonial-transnational lens provides a comparative global perspective, which, according to Gayatri Spivak (1990), “can gradually help us understand how our multiple identities function in different situations” (12). This links to my earlier argument that the protagonists' experiences in both novels take them through various stages of belonging, depending on where they find themselves, and open them up to multiple identities in different circumstances. In Aberdeen, after the death of her husband, Sammar works as a translator, still struggling with grief, but when she returns to Khartoum, she resumes her responsibilities as a mother to her son. Mercia, in *October*, struggles to accept her identity not just as Jake's sister but also as a guardian and aunt to her nephew Nicky, and as moral support for her sister-in-law Sylvie. Hence, a “transnational solidarity” will help women like Mercia and Sammar understand their multiple identities and experiences of “belonging” in both Africa and Scotland.

A comparative intersectional perspective draws on elements of postcolonial and transnational feminisms. Bo Wang suggests that this perspective has “just begun to pay attention to the recovering of neglected texts, marginalised voices and women’s rhetorical practices” (2013: 235). Hence, this perspective is interested in the stories of African migrant women living in-between cultures, and who occupy “marginalised” spaces because of their

race (coloured for Mercia) or their religion (Muslim for Sammar). It is interested in “recovering” the neglected voices of women who occupy marginalised spaces, especially when they migrate and become “othered” in foreign spaces. Ashcroft et al. (1995) state that:

In many different societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘others’, ‘colonised’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in postcolonial theory. Feminist and postcolonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist postcolonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance a female tradition or traditions for a male dominated canon. (249)

Now, the stories of writers like Wicomb and Aboulela, among other female African writers explored in earlier chapters, are important because they combine features of both postcolonial and transnational feminist theories to challenge the cultural, racial, religious, and national domination faced by African women migrants. Together, their literary strategies highlight the various ways in which African women writers navigate postcolonial and transnational spaces, using their literary works as sites of interrogation and transformation. As established above, both writers challenge the question of home and belonging for their female protagonists as they navigate their lives across Africa and Scotland.

WRITING “HOME” IN THE NOVELS OF ABOULELA AND WICOMB

Home is a recurring theme in migration fiction. In literary and cultural criticism, “home” has come to mean both a physical place and space and an abstract idea or feeling (Desperes, 1991; Bennett et al., 2013; Meers, 2023). In more contemporary terms, home can have different connotations for individuals, as one may or may not feel at home in their own body or skin. This chapter explores the concept of home, particularly the ways in which transnational female African migrant writers, such as Aboulela, and Wicomb, nuance it in their fiction.

African writers in the wake of the nationalist movements wrote about home with nostalgia, as the place they had always wanted to be, especially when they found themselves outside their “home.” They also explored home as a place they wanted to “reclaim” from external controlling forces. Thus, in early African migration literature written by male writers, such as Tayeb Salih (*Season of Migration to the North*, 1969) and, more recently, Dinaw Mengestu (*The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, 2007), Africa is represented as home. These writers employ endearing imagery to describe Africa as prosperous, flourishing, and

beautiful before the advent of colonialism, and to express their wish that Africa be free from any form of neocolonialism, so they could “return home” from a life of exile or uncertainty abroad. The second generation of African writers, including women such as Buchi Emecheta (*Second-Class Citizen*, 1974), Amma Ata Aidoo (*Our Sister Killjoy*, 1977), Mariama Bâ (*So Long a Letter*, 1979), depicted African women’s migration to Western countries like Britain, France, and America, as a quest for liberation that was denied them in Africa. However, the third generation of African writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Chika Unigwe, and the Afrofuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor, explore home as a complex concept, difficult to define, especially in relation to migration.

Home is a profoundly significant and multifaceted theme in the works of postcolonial female African migrant writers explored in this chapter and my entire thesis. These writers frequently examine the emotional, political, cultural, and gendered dimensions of home, particularly within the contexts of displacement, migration, diaspora, colonial history, and patriarchal structures. As critics such as Stuart Hall (1990; 1996), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Chielozona Eze (2016) argue, home is not a fixed entity; instead, it is represented as a fluid, contested, and fragmented space, shaped by memory, identity, and notions of belonging. Wicomb and Aboulela represent home as a hybrid, transnational construct shaped by migration and cultural negotiation. *October* explores the concept of “homecoming” to South Africa, but this return home is complicated by disconnection, alienation, and post-apartheid transformations. Home becomes something that cannot be reclaimed in its original form, but rather requires constant, dynamic negotiations, especially the relationship between Mercia and Sylvia, her late brother’s widow.

Home is also reconstructed through memory, faith, and familial longings, especially for female African migrants in the diaspora. For instance, in *The Translator*, Sudan, home to Sammar, is often spiritualised – a space of faith, community, family, and cultural authenticity. The six postcolonial female African writers studied in my corpus challenge fixed notions of home by portraying it as a shifting, gendered, and emotionally layered space. Home is thus a source of identity and displacement, a site of both comfort and control, and can be lost and found in memory, language, culture, and community. This is quite different from the earlier generation of African female writers, such as Emecheta, who examined home as a place they wanted to escape from due to patriarchal constraints. Chahal and Nagpal (2025) argue that Emecheta’s work represents home as a site of coercion rather than comfort. Also, Farida and Dass (2024) highlight that Emecheta portrayed home as a place where women’s self-identities are constrained by tradition and colonial legacies. However, Wicomb and Aboulela, as active

participants in the migration waves, moving regularly between Africa and the West, use their works to reflect the constant struggles of their characters and, by extension, of female African migrants, to make a home for themselves.

Aboulela moved from Sudan to Aberdeen, Scotland, at the age of 26, with a four-year-old daughter and a two-month-old baby, with her husband regularly absent due to the nature of his work. She acknowledges that moving from Sudan to Scotland was a defining event in her life. She was filled with homesickness as she struggled to make sense of her new “home”, as she narrates in a blog post in January 2024. When she moved to Scotland, Aboulela began writing. She wrote about her life in Sudan, comparing it with her new life in Scotland. Her debut novel, *The Translator*, was the result of her effort at writing. In this novel, Aboulela compares two cultures and their impact on her protagonist, Sammar, who relocates from Sudan to Scotland, as the author herself did.

The Translator revolves around Sammar, a widowed Muslim African woman. It explores Sammar’s experience of grief and loss after the death of her husband, Tarig, who died in an accident in Aberdeen. The narrative follows Sammar’s return to Sudan with her husband’s corpse and their young son, and her subsequent return to Aberdeen, where she gets emotionally tangled with Rae, a professor of Islamic Studies. Sammar would return to Sudan once again, following Rae’s refusal to convert to Islam. Much of the story explores the movement from one place to another, from one culture to another, and the struggle to navigate the many challenges one faces in creating a “home” where one hopes to feel whole and welcomed.

Zoe Wicomb¹¹ migrated from South Africa to the United Kingdom in 1970 at an early age to continue her studies. After living in Nottingham and Glasgow for a while, she returned home to South Africa in 1990, following the end of apartheid and the release of Nelson Mandela; it was like a “homecoming” after many years of being away. She moved back to Glasgow in 1994 and continued her career as a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde, retiring in 2009. She was also Professor Extraordinaire at Stellenbosch University from 2005 to 2011. In South Africa’s racial lexicon, Wicomb was considered “coloured”, as her ancestry can be traced to Scotland; her forefathers were Scottish explorers who arrived in South Africa many decades ago. Much of her writing explores the lives of “coloured” South Africans, whose experiences revolve around being both “white” and “black” and trying to belong or not being able to belong to either side of the divide.

¹¹ Wicomb died at the age of 76, on October 13, 2025, from a pulmonary embolism at a Glasgow hospital.

Wicomb was best known for her short story collection *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* – a semi-autobiographical collection of connected stories featuring mixed-race South Africans called “coloured” by the apartheid government, and their lives and experiences somewhere between white and black society. *October* (2014), which this chapter examines, also explores similar themes of belonging or unbelonging as “coloured” in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel chronicles the life and experiences of the protagonist, Mercia Murray, who moves to Scotland from South Africa and, after almost twenty-six years, returns to Namaqualand, her childhood home, after being abandoned by Craig, her lover over twenty-five years. In South Africa, Mercia struggles to belong. Still, the nightmare that has become her home – watching her brother Jake destroyed by alcoholism and discovering her family’s secret of shame – leaves Mercia with no choice but to find her way back to Glasgow, to pick up the pieces of her life, and to find ways to make a “home” out of the city, something she has not been able to do for a very long time. She later returns to South Africa, this time to bury her brother Jake, and to decide what to do with Nicky, Jake’s son. The novel ends with Mercia planning to return to Glasgow yet again. *October* reflects on the different meanings of home, and how Mercia struggles to find “home” both in Scotland and then in South Africa, where her brother reminds her that Namaqualand can never be her home after she left it for a very long time: “Why don’t you go back home and leave me alone, he says, I want nothing to do with any of you” (173).

The experiences of African migrant women like Sammar and Mercia living in Scotland away from Africa are worthy of interrogation. They are “minorities” within the minority African ethnic group; Sammar is a Muslim African woman, and Mercia is a coloured African woman. These markers set them apart and open them up to various forms of religious and racial attack. Hence, the concepts of “home” or feeling at “home” and “belonging” are critically interrogated in Aboulela’s and Wicomb’s novels. Both writers explore, in different ways, how their female protagonists struggle daily to make a home and to belong, either in Scotland or in their respective African countries.

HOMELINESS AND UNHOMELINESS IN MIGRATION: *OCTOBER* AND *THE TRANSLATOR*

Rosemary Marangoly George (1993) argues that “[t]he search for the location in which the self is ‘at home’ is one of the primary projects of twentieth century fiction in English” (3). She further argues that the subject is to a large extent determined by the place they call “home”, just as they are by gender, sexuality, race, or class. Her overall conclusion is that twentieth-

century literature in English, is significantly concerned with “the search for viable homes for viable selves” (5):

Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological, and mental levels. They are places of violence and nurturing. A place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms, and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic patterns of inclusions/exclusions. Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. (9)

This assertion aligns with Mercia’s experience in *October*. Her “home” in South Africa, which she returns to at the request of her brother Jake, holds many traumatic memories. Yet, it is where she has to escape to after she realises that Glasgow, where she had built her life (with Craig), could not be home to her. However, in Kliprand, she cannot wait to escape from home when confronted with the dark side of her family history. This demonstrates the ambivalence and ambiguity of home for a coloured South African woman like Mercia, who feels out of “place” in the land of her childhood. Postcolonial theories of place and space are therefore essential to the discourse on home in African migration literature. These theories relate to the interdependence of place and subjectivity, specifically how a particular place affects an individual at a given time. According to Ashcroft et al (1995):

Place, therefore, the ‘place’ of the ‘subject’ throws light upon subjectivity itself, because whereas we might conceive subjectivity as a process, as Lacan has done, the discourse of place is a process of continual dialect between subject and object. Thus a major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. (92)

A significant relationship exists between the place called “home” and a migrant subject, especially an African migrant woman who has migrated from Africa to the West and who constantly experiences dislocation, isolation, and a need to belong. This is why Ashcroft et al. further argue that there is a relationship between place and displacement, as this affects the possibility of a particular place becoming “home” for a migrant – by place here, I mean both the home country or the host country: “Place and displacement are crucial features of postcolonial discourse. By ‘place’ we do not simply mean ‘landscape’ [...] ‘Place’ in postcolonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment” (1995: 391). The place called “home” therefore goes beyond the flora and the fauna or the landscape, and is a culmination of factors such as the historical, linguistic, religious and cultural relationships between a migrant subject and the host country or their home country. The tension

between these factors, to a great extent, determines if one feels homely (a sense of belonging) or unhomely (a sense of estrangement).

Homi Bhabha considers “unhomely” as “the estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world” (1) or as a place where “the borders between home and the world become confused” and the fusion of the private and the public leads to “a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (1994: 9). Thus, migrant subjects like the female African protagonists in Wicomb’s and Aboulela’s novels feel unhomely when they cannot connect who they are to where they find themselves. In Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* (1994) and his essay titled “The World and The Home” (1992), he examines the connection between “home” and the “world” or “home” and “elsewhere”. With regard to migration, this could be understood as the relationship between the subject and the place they find themselves in. According to Bhabha, the borderline between these two can be blurred or confusing, such that they can “become part of each other” if belonging is to happen. Thus, the “private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social” become blurred to form what Bhabha calls “an interstitial intimacy”, one that “questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experiences are often spatially opposed” (148). This connection between home and elsewhere, or the private and the public, brings about either the feeling of “being at home” or “not at home”, even when these migrant subjects find themselves in their homeland, when they return.

These are the experiences of Mercia and Sammar in both novels. Even when they find themselves in their home countries, they sometimes question themselves if they are truly “at home” – a situation which Bhabha refers to as “a bonding that is at once inside and outside, the insider’s outsideness” (149). In both *October* and *The Translator*, the protagonists experience a sense of “unhomeliness” upon entering a space (Scotland) that is at once alien and familiar. For Mercia, who has Scottish ancestry, coming to Scotland ought to be like a “homecoming” – a “back-to-the-roots” adventure, but Mercia constantly feels like a stranger in Scotland, even after having lived there for more than twenty-five years. Mercia’s experience of unhomeliness is similar to that of the writer of the novel herself. In an interview with Eva Hunter, Wicomb acknowledged that she still felt like an “outsider” even though she had long lived in Glasgow: “It is a problem to not have lived in South Africa for so long and not being able to write about anything else. [...] In some ways I have acculturated in Britain – I’m middle class, educated and in a sense grew up there – but in another sense, I will always be an outsider” (“Interview with Eva Hunter”, 1993: 87). Wicomb expresses the difficulty of belonging to a place and calling that place your home, even though you have lived there for so long. This is not the case with Aboulela, who projects the possibility of “elsewhere” (Scotland) becoming home to an

African woman, although not immediately, but only when “certain” conditions are met. One such condition is her acceptance as a Muslim African woman. Both Wicomb and Aboulela thus explore what it means to belong both in Africa and elsewhere (Scotland), and they present two African women, one a Muslim and the other a coloured South African, who constantly struggle to feel and be at home. They explore the alienation, dislocation, and strong need to belong experienced by their female protagonists. However, they tell their protagonists’ stories differently and with different intentions, as discussed above.

THE AMBIGUITY OF HOME AND ELSEWHERE IN *THE TRANSLATOR*

The experiences of Sammar in *The Translator* are similar to those of Mercia in Wicomb’s novel. Like Mercia, she also has a connection with Britain, even before coming to live in Aberdeen. In fact, she tells Rae, “I was born here as you know and my parents and I did not go back home until I was seven” (4); this establishes her connection with the UK before relocating “home” to the Sudan when she was seven. Sammar’s sense of place foregrounds this “process of cultural dialectic between subject and object” (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 392), as reflected in her social interactions with others, the weather, and even the language used to convey her emotions. At the beginning of the novel, Sammar dreams about rain falling that prevents her from meeting Rae, and this dream reveals Sammar’s anxiety over the weather in Aberdeen, a condition that also reflects her dislocation from her environment, despite being born in the UK. Her feeling of dislocation is evident throughout the novel: Scotland and the UK, more widely, are not “home” to her, and she cannot lay any claim to belong to “this country”. Sammar’s experience reinforces Bhabha’s argument that the concept of “place” is closely connected to the subject that inhabits it. As Sammar feels out of place in Aberdeen, she does not feel any sense of home there. However, in Sudan, she feels “at home” and in sync with the weather, the environment, and the people, which gives her that sense of belonging integral to the idea of home. This is why the thought of going “home” to Sudan from her proposed official assignment in Egypt already brings longing and joy to Sammar: “At the back of her mind, the motivation, I will see home again” because “[s]he had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her the same way Tarig had. To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights” (32); and it is emphasised again, “[b]ut in February she was going home” (33); in these instances, Sudan is presented as “home”, even though it is not where she was born.

Whenever Sammar chooses to recount her life story, she starts from the time she moved to Sudan, as if those first seven years of her life in the UK were inconsequential. In fact, Sammar tries to pretend she was born in Sudan and not in the UK: “In better times, she used to

reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity hospital [...] Perhaps she would have been given a different name had she been born in Khartoum, a more common name" (5). Her name, "Sammar," sounded like "Summer", and "Sammar was the only Sammar at school and college" (5). This made her feel like an "outsider" in Khartoum. She wished she had a common name that reflected her people's culture. From the foregoing, it is clear that a sense of homeliness envelops Sammar in Sudan. However, after her husband dies and she returns to Aberdeen following his burial, she faces severe loneliness and alienation, as reflected in her room, which is bare of anything that makes a given space a home – "nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room" (15). This feeling changes later in the novel.

Aboulela proposes that "elsewhere" can become "home" and that the feeling of "unhomeliness" can become a "homely" feeling when the connection between the subject and the place where they find themselves becomes positive. When Sammar develops her relationship with Rae, she is able to build trust once again and allows herself to feel at "home". This happens after a conversation with Rae in his house, and the latter shares stories about his childhood, some of which resonate with Sammar's. After this conversation, Sammar begins to feel at home around Rae and in Aberdeen: "Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, like sky and the feel of home had come and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors" (20). Significantly, after this experience, Sammar has a positive dream about Aberdeen for the first time, as previously she had only had positive dreams of Sudan, and nothing good about Scotland. This marks the beginning of the connection between subject (Sammar) and place (Aberdeen). It is "her first dream of the present, first time its gory landscape had found a place in her sleeping mind. Four years and her soul had dived into the past, nothing in the present could touch it" (29). Unlike the first dream that filled Sammar with anxiety, this new dream offers positive possibilities: first, the possibility of accepting a new relationship with another man after Tarig, and second, a fresh appreciation of the weather and the environment in Aberdeen.

The new feeling of homeliness blurs the spatial, temporal, and psychological distance between Sudan and Scotland. Following her budding relationship with Rae, which becomes stronger during the Christmas break, Sammar is so engulfed by the feeling of being at home, that she wonders: "Where was she now, which country? What year? She climbed the stairs into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home and past had come here and balanced just for her" (40). The emphasis on "balance" mentioned above is significant. Sammar

can only feel that sense of balance or stability because, in her subconscious, she has experienced a shift and has become one with the place where she finds herself. According to Bhabha, “the fact that places in the West can be reminiscent of home to the diaspora undermines the claims about the essential differences between the East and the West and blurs the binary opposition” (1994: 6). Thus, in postcolonial African migration fiction like *The Translator*, sometimes the difference between Africa and the West, can be blurred once migrants develop a positive connection with the place and the people, and the “elsewhere” they find themselves can become “home” to them.

THE ILLUSION AND AMBIVALENCE OF HOME AND BELONGING IN *OCTOBER*

Mercia’s experience in *October* is different from Sammar’s. There is a pessimistic undertone in Wicomb’s novel regarding the concept of home, both in the host country and in the home country, which is a result of the historical background of the coloured people in South Africa, which makes them neither fully white nor fully black, so they struggle to belong or feel at home even when they are at “home”. This is Mercia’s experience from her childhood. Their father, Nicholas Murray, made matters worse for his growing children, Mercia and Jake. Both children were born in Kliprand in Namaqualand; however, their father told them that the place could never be their home. He had moved to Namaqualand to escape poverty in his homeland, Overberg, when he was much younger. And even though the people of Namaqualand respected him well enough as a one-time Principal, he never felt a sense of home there and wanted his children to feel the same:

If Kliprand is not home to Nicholas, it cannot be home to his children. They were born there, raised in Namaqualand, but no, they should not think of it as home. [...] Thus, his children should not think of this place of their birth, burdened as it is with the arcane complexities of belonging, as their home. (144)

Hence, Mercia and her brother Jake struggle to belong, such that even when Mercia returns after many years in Scotland, she still finds it difficult to relate to the people around her, especially with Sylvie, Jake’s wife, whom she considers a local village girl. But Mercia does not feel at home in Glasgow either, despite seeing familiar plants and the names of places, which remind her of her home country. Unlike Aboulela, who subtly suggests the possibility of Sammar, as a subject, connecting intimately with Aberdeen after a period of unhomeliness, Wicomb does not suggest this; she does not present Glasgow, or even Scotland, as “home”

enough for Mercia to claim. In an interview with Thomas Oliver, Wicomb stated that, “It is not possible for me to belong in Scotland; one couldn’t in a place where one’s difference is so salient” (2007: 182).

This feeling of not belonging pervades *October*. The novel begins with the information that a relationship between Mercia and her lover of many years has just ended abruptly for no apparent reasons: “Mercia Murray is a woman of fifty-two years who has been left [...]. She has been left, and that is the banal truth” (1). This information raises many questions for the reader, especially when we learn that she has lived in Glasgow for more than 25 years and has been in a serious relationship with Craig for most of that time. It is interesting to note that the connection between Mercia and Craig is unlike that between the lovers in *The Translator*. Craig is not entirely honest about his relationship with Mercia. After many years together, Craig informs her that he is leaving one Friday morning. Mercia finds out that he has got a younger woman pregnant. This experience leaves Mercia emotionally broken, considering how long they have been together. And when Jake’s letter arrives, asking her to return urgently, Mercia does not hesitate to leave for South Africa, which is “home” to her. However, when she arrives in Kliprand, everything and everybody including her sick and bedridden brother makes her question her decision to return, as she feels disconnected from them: “Not even a full day has Mercia been here in Kliprand, and already she would like to wash her hands of these people who are her own, would like to pack her bag right away and leave” (25). She struggles to relate to Sylvie, Jake’s wife, and even Nicky her nephew, however, she cautions herself constantly that these are her people: “[O]ne does not walk away from family. Patience and kindness, that is what family lays claim to. Which may mean that one should not come to see them in the first place” (25). And it is with patience and kindness that Mercia endures her stay before she returns to Glasgow. She softens her heart towards Jake’s son, Nicky, and when she discovers the secret about what their father did to Sylvie when she was younger, she begins to relate much better to the young woman, who is already burdened by a sick husband and a young child. The only time Mercia feels a sense of home is when she asks Sylvie for forgiveness for all the atrocities the Murrays, including Mercia herself, had inflicted on her, and Sylvie does, by agreeing that Nicky can come visit her in Glasgow in the future. In a sense, the possibility of a blurred line between Mercia and the people and place around her, which can lead to something positive, lies in the future, and not the present. The novel ends with Mercia promising to send money for Nicky’s education and upkeep and to visit regularly, thereby taking on familial responsibilities.

From the foregoing, I argue that both authors examine home differently. As mentioned above, Aboulela proposes a positive approach to feeling at “home” in a place that seems “unhomely”, whereas Wicomb does not do this strongly. However, the feeling of home may be possible in the future when Nicky, Mercia’s nephew, visits her in Scotland. Derek Attridge (2017) argues that Wicomb “explores the experience of a home that no longer feels like a home after time spent abroad” (51), as Mercia feels out of place on her return to Namaqualand after more than twenty-five years in Scotland. Pamela Scully (2019) also argues that Wicomb’s works, especially *October*, “disrupts the idea of home as comfort. Rather, home becomes the place of both disjuncture and belonging, and is experienced in a number of locales” (121). This relates to my earlier argument that Wicomb does not consider home to be a positive idea, either in South Africa or in Scotland, places that hold so many historical and emotional connections for her. To Scully, the way Wicomb writes about home in *October* does not promise closure or a feeling of security; instead, the novel “renders home sour, strange and dark [...]. Home is a place to be abandoned even as an idea” (130). This is why, towards the end of *October*, Mercia banishes the idea of home, even in her novel in progress; she “finds the file, Home, still on her desktop, and without opening it, drags it into the trash bin” (237). Home is therefore not a pleasant idea or experience for a coloured woman like Mercia, or even for the writer herself, Wicomb. It is a site of trauma and pain, either in South Africa or in Scotland.

As stated above, Aboulela makes both Africa and later Scotland become “home” to a Muslim woman like Sammar, just as Aboulela herself tried to make sense of her new environment when she newly arrived in Scotland. It is thus important to further explore African migrant women’s experiences in Scotland, particularly by considering their ongoing relationship with Africa, their efforts to be part of both “here” and “there”, and their status as subjects in transnational spaces.

SCOTLAND AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN *THE TRANSLATOR* AND *OCTOBER*

Both novels explore how the female protagonists negotiate their identities, whether in their home countries or in the host land, Scotland, and they demonstrate the writers’ commitments as postcolonial and transnational female African migrant writers representing the realities of a Muslim Sudanese woman and a South African coloured woman living in Scotland. Scotland as a location is thus important in the representation of Sammar’s and Mercia’s experiences. As established earlier in this chapter, both women have connections to Scotland, and this informs

their decision to migrate there and to return intermittently as they navigate various aspects of their selfhood.

Wicomb and Aboulela explore the intricacies of selfhood, belonging, memory, familial connections, and returns through their female protagonist. Both writers interrogate the instability of issues such as race, gender, and migration, and they reveal their literary commitments to the postcolonial project of unsettling transnational female narratives – their narratives privilege the experiences of African women in migration, especially Scotland (UK more generally), that has historical connections with Sudan and South Africa. They demonstrate their commitment through the way they tell their stories about their female protagonists, who live in-between cultures and spaces, and with different historical and religious backgrounds.

Wicomb says about her writing, “I have a political commitment to writing about coloured identity – not as an essentialist category, but to explore its historical construction and ambiguities” (2003: 119). Thus, by writing about her coloured identity in *October* and other works, Wicomb investigates the aftermath of apartheid history, especially its categorisation of people as whites, blacks, and coloured, and she explores memory as a site of both trauma and revelation. In another interview, she tells Dorothy Driver (2005) that “[w]riting is not about telling the truth of the past, but about exploring how the past persists in the present” (93). This interplay between the past and present, to a large extent, affects the migrant subject, as is reflected in the character of Mercia. Being a coloured woman makes it difficult for her to belong in South Africa fully, hence she decides to leave. And when she moves to Scotland, she also faces difficulty with belonging, as she is still considered an “outsider”, a situation that makes Glasgow “unhomely” to her.

Wicomb employs a limited third-person focalisation centred on the protagonist, Mercia Murray. This allows the reader to “see” through her emotions, consciousness, and memories. However, the narration maintains a critical distance, often exploring Mercia’s unreliable interpretations and inner contradictions. This fragmented interiority mirrors the novel’s exploration of identity as fractured and unstable. Mercia is caught between South Africa and Scotland, between past and present, and between belonging and estrangement. *October* frequently slips into free-indirect discourse (explored in earlier chapters), allowing Mercia’s internal voice to merge with the narrator’s, blurring the boundaries between narrator and thought: “Whilst living with Craig, she refused to think of Glasgow as home. Now, rehabilitating, did that not demand that she take a stand? Was there not the risk of being irretrievably lost? between cities? between continents?” (110-111). Through a nonlinear

narration, *October* oscillates between present-day events, Mercia's recollections of her past, and her recent failed relationship with Craig. This dislocated temporality reflects Mercia's fragmented memory and her emotional dislocation.

On the other hand, Aboulela's literary commitment lies in interrogating the lives of migrant Muslim women, particularly how they challenge notions of belonging, race, gender, and love while maintaining their Islamic faith. To Aboulela, faith is constant; everything else can change. Speaking about her themes and literary commitment, Aboulela reveals:

When I write, I experience relief and satisfaction, that what occupies my mind, what fascinates and disturbs me, is made legitimate by the shape and tension of a story. I want to show the psychology, the state of mind of a person who has faith. I am interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity, but something close to the centre, something that transcends but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class and race. I write fiction that reflects Islamic logic; fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rationale. (Chambers, 2011: 103)

Thus, her novel, *The Translator*, is a transnational novel that interrogates significant challenges and shifts in issues such as love, migration, belonging, and Islamic female identity. The novel is a third-person narrative, written in the past tense. This perspective shows a close relationship between the narration and the intimate aspects of Sammar's life. Sometimes, the narrative is told from Sammar's perspective, allowing the reader to follow Sammar's experiences, including how her decisions and interactions with other characters, especially Rae, are shaped by her faith. This relationship between the narrator and Sammar is clear in the novel's beginning:

She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned. [...] And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it an urgency that was astringent to grief. [...]

But Sammar's dream was wrong. It wasn't raining when she woke that morning, a grey October sky, Scottish grey [...]. And she did go out to meet Rae Isles as planned. (3)

Here, the line between the narrator and Sammar is almost blurred, as the reader feels Sammar's anxiety over meeting Rae for the first time privately. A critical feature of this third-person narrative is its use of free indirect discourse. In *The Translator*, free indirect discourse plays a significant role in shaping the narrative and providing insight into Sammar's and the other characters' inner thoughts and emotions. Aboulela skilfully employs this technique to immerse the reader in Sammar's consciousness as she navigates cultural encounters, subtly weaving her

inner emotions and reflections into the narrative. The reader is immediately drawn into Sammar's world to understand her plight, conflicts, and sense of alienation. For example, the narrator describes Sammar's grief over her husband's death, and how this grief has become a significant part of her, forming an invisible mark she carries with her everywhere:

Her invisible mark shifted, breathed its existence. It was hidden from Rae, like her hair and the skin on her arms, it could only be imagined. Four years ago this mark had crystalised. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled on her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach. She knew it was translucent, she knew that it held a mercurial liquid which flowed up and down slowly when she moved. The diamond shape of grief made sense to her; her forehead – that was where it hurt when she cried, that space behind her eyes; her shoulders – because they curled to carry her heart. And the angle at the top of her stomach – that was where the pain was. (4)

The reader can almost “see” or “feel” the invisible mark, as if Sammar is showing them, rather than the narrator describing it. By employing this narrative technique, Aboulela invites the reader to empathise with Sammar's complex identity and the challenges she faces as a Muslim woman in Scotland, who is just trying to connect personally with another man from a different cultural and religious background, four years after the death of her husband. This technique serves as a significant tool for character development, allowing readers to connect deeply with Sammar's experiences and emotions.

As stated above, Aboulela emphasises the significance of Islamic faith in her novel. Sammar's life and experiences revolve around her faith as a Muslim woman. Aboulela employs repetition emphatically to show the reader how important issues of faith are. For instance, Yasmin, Sammar's friend and colleague, asks her the same question repeatedly at different intervals: “Are you expecting him to become a Muslim so he could marry you?” (72); “Are you going to marry someone who's not a Muslim?” (89); “Is he going to say the *shahadah* without meaning it, just to marry you?” (90); “Are you hoping he would become a Muslim so you get married? [...]. Are you sure he is going to become a Muslim?” (113). Through Yasmin's questioning, the reader can feel Sammar's anxiety over her feelings for Rae, who is not Muslim; she truly wants him to convert if she is to marry him. This is why she repeatedly pleads with him to become a Muslim: “I want to ask you to become a Muslim so we could...” (119); “If you say the *shahadah* it would be enough. We could get married. If you just say the words...” (124). Sammar's anxiety is clear, as she does not want to take any action, like falling in love and marrying another man, outside the injunctions of her Islamic faith, hence her repetition of the same question. Her faith is a defining aspect of her life and one of the novel's numerous

themes. It is through her faith and religion that Sammar can make sense of her belonging, even when Scotland “refuses” to be “home” to her, “the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality” (16). She does not wish to compromise her faith, even when she feels emotionally connected with Rae; hence her repeated plea for him to convert to Islam. According to Dora Sales (2013), “In this transcultural narrative, in contrast to any sort of exoticisation on Islam, Aboulela offers an intimate and personal viewpoint on her religion, translating it in the daily life of a Muslim woman in a contemporary Western context” (80). Apart from faith and religion, *The Translator* has significant themes that make the novel the account of the experiences of a Muslim African woman living in Scotland. As stated earlier in this chapter, it also explores the challenges she faces as a “minority within a minority”, which opens her to various forms of discrimination. Sammar has been called “Saddam Hussein” by a random man in “King Street” (96) because of the way she dresses, which her former boss, Jennifer, does not like. Trying not to sound racist, Jennifer tells Sammar one day, “My boyfriend is Nigerian [...]. For example, I have no problem at all with the way you dress” (96-97). In fact, Jennifer and the others Sammar meets in Scotland, except Rae, try to show her, covertly or overtly, that she does not belong there and that Scotland cannot be her “home”.

Both Aboulela and Wicomb, therefore, tell the stories of their protagonists, especially how they navigate home and belonging in Scotland, through various narrative and literary elements, which render their experiences worthy of interrogation. Sometimes they incorporate the stories of other postcolonial and transnational writers into their own narratives to establish commonalities among women of African descent across transnational contexts, i.e., African women affected by migration. They employ allusion and intertextuality as important narrative and thematic devices, weaving literary, religious, historical, and cultural references into their stories to enrich their exploration of migration, identity, gender, and postcolonial subjectivity. However, both writers engage with these literary elements in different ways, reflecting their respective concerns and commitment. Aboulela engages with Islamic and Arabic textual traditions to emphasise faith and spiritual dislocation. At the same time, Wicomb’s intertextuality is grounded in European literary, postcolonial, and autobiographical texts that interrogate memory, trauma, and belonging in South Africa and Scotland.

Aboulela’s use of religious allusion creates a counter-discourse to Eurocentric narratives of migrant experience, especially that of a Muslim Sudanese woman in Scotland. Sammar often reflects on Quranic verses and Islamic teachings, using them to interpret and navigate her life in Scotland, in contrast to Rae’s secular, rationalist perspectives. Even in

Aberdeen, where Sammar's religious engagements are "stifled", she still finds time to keep her religious injunctions. She maintains the Islamic stipulated number of daily prayers, as they are what keep her "sane" and "the only stability in her life" (36). Sammar's spirituality is not just a religious affair, but an important aspect of her identity. Thus, Aboulela emphasises the relevance of the Islamic faith in writing. In an interview with Claire Chambers (2009), Aboulela alludes to the influence of other British Muslim writers from Pakistan and Egypt. However, she differentiates her focus from theirs, because as she says, "[b]ut for me, instead of having Islam as part of the culture, I am consciously presenting it as faith. There are lots of Muslim writers, and they're writing different sorts of Muslim novels, but maybe in my case, this religious element is heightened" (94). Aboulela emphasises the supremacy of Islam in Sammar's life; her life revolves around it.

Aboulela also attests to being influenced by the male Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih, whose novel *Season of Migration to the North* depicts the experiences of a Sudanese man in Britain. She draws on the thematic and formal legacies of Salih, especially his interest in North-South encounters, displacement, and Sudanese cultural influences. However, she reworks these concerns by adopting a distinctly gendered, diasporic, and faith-inflected lens in *The Translator*. Both texts examine colonial, postcolonial, and transnational encounters. While Salih's work focuses on the traumatic and ambivalent relationship between Sudan and Europe, especially the moral, sexual, and cultural aftermaths of colonial encounters, Aboulela examines the same movement but shifts the compass. Where Salih often examines masculinist subjectivity and postcolonial violence, Aboulela interrogates faith, cultural dislocation, and women's interior lives in diaspora. Aboulela attempts to perform a corrective to Salih's model of literary representation. Where Salih's work opens questions about power, desire, and nation, Aboulela interrogates how faith, belonging, and "translation" of self, operate within those same structures that are evident in Salih's fiction; thus, she produces a complementary but distinct literary project, one that centres a Muslim woman's life around her faith. Aboulela is also heavily influenced by the Islamic law – the sharia, which holds a firm grip on her protagonist Sammar. Aboulela tells Chambers that:

In fact, for a Muslim, sharia is something personal as well, something you would follow yourself. [...] So I wanted to show that from the point of view of Sammar, a devout and practicing Muslim, following the sharia for the period of mourning – which is four months and ten days, a very specific period laid down by the sharia? – she would see it as a very positive thing. It's not something that society is forcing on her; it's something that she herself believes in. This point is very important in all of my writing. Islam isn't just part of the culture in my fiction, it's not a social norm or something like that, it's to

do with the individual and their faith and their own belief and what they want to do. I think that this has been central to my writing, and maybe this is what makes my writing different from that of other writers, who see the sharia solely as part of society and part of culture, rather than belonging to the individual herself. (97)

In essence, Sammar's faith shapes every aspect of her life, including her relationship with Rae. She does not compromise her faith for love or personal gratification. Thus, the reader can see Aboulela allude to her Islamic faith through Sammar's experiences throughout the novel. On the other hand, *October* employs intertextuality self-consciously and metafictionally to interrogate questions of return, memory, and the unreliable narration of identity.

Like the writer herself, her protagonist, Mercia, a South African academic in Glasgow, is a literary scholar whose reading and writing practices deeply inform the narrative structure and content. In *October* Wicomb references the works of writers such as Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, and Dylan Thomas. Wicomb skillfully employs this tool to weave a rich tapestry of connections between different texts, contexts, and worlds. Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012), Marilynne Robinson's *Home* (2008), and Dylan Thomas' "Poem in October" (1945) all act as touchstones, from the beginning, to set the tone for what the reader is about to discover, which is a tale of returning "home" and belonging, especially in the month of October. Throughout the novel, Mercia reads or frequently alludes to Morrison's *Home*, whose protagonist Frank Money bears some semblance to Mercia. In Morrison's work, Frank has just received a mysterious letter from a woman named Sarah, stating that he needs to come home to save his sister Cee. This letter explores the experience of unhomeliness that Frank faces, particularly his traumatic experience in the Korean War. Mercia, too, receives a letter from her brother Jake, urging her to come home immediately. The urgency in Jake's letter troubles Mercia, who has also been going through an unfavourable experience of being abandoned by her lover of twenty-five years. Wicomb draws on intertextuality not only to reference other writers' works but also to connect her protagonist to characters in other novels, such that, even when Mercia attempts to write her memoir, which she coincidentally saves on her computer in a file labelled "Home", there is a thin line between her actual thoughts, emotions and experiences and those of the characters in the books she is reading, and to a large extent, Wicomb relates the experiences of Mercia and Jake to those of Morrison's Frank and Cee.

Like Morrison's work about siblings' love and relationship with their pasts, Robinson's *Home* is also a story about siblings, a brother and sister, like Mercia and her brother Jake. Robinson's protagonist, Glory Boughton, returns home after a long period away to take care of her sick father, and also to connect with her brother Jack. On her return, she discovers her

family's past secret of shame. This is also like Mercia's story. Like Jack in the novel she is reading, her brother Jake had been rebellious from his childhood, attracting severe punishment from their father. Jake grows up to loathe their father, even more so after he discovers that he had sexually abused Sylvie (a girl he later marries) when she was barely thirteen years old. The blurred lines between Mercia's experience and the novel she is reading are made clear here:

As it turns out, Mercia is consumed by the novel [...]. Mercia may not be as good as the glorious sister in the novel, but the correspondences are there, including the ironic depiction of home. Strangely familiar, this story of siblings, brother and sister, that turns out also to be one of father and son. But theirs – Mercia and Jake's story – is from a different continent, a different hemisphere, a different kind of people, a kind of lacking in what is known as western gentility. Theirs is a harsh land that makes its own demand on civility. Their father too, a good man, even if he does not know how to show his love for an errant son. By the time she gets to the end of the novel she has doubts about her own memoir. Is hers not redundant for the telling. (12-13)

Here, the connections between Mercia, Jake, and their father, as well as the characters in the novel Mercia is reading, are evident. In this way, Wicomb nuances intertextuality to bridge continents, cultures, and personal histories, showing how migration and return affect individual and family identities. Dorothy Driver (2017) argues that Wicomb has a reason for employing intertextuality in her novel, relating her characters to those of other writers:

The overall effect is not simply to draw attention to textuality for its own sake – that is, to the textuality of reality or the fictionality of subjectivities – but rather to show that literary texts, like any work of art, may provide a crucial environment for the redefinition of self – especially since the environment is translocal, incorporating otherness. (26)

Intertextuality in *October* is therefore employed to negotiate the self in relation to others, including historical connections across spaces and contexts. Wicomb uses literary echoes from other writers and a layered narrative pattern to invite the reader to explore the intricate fabric of memory, loss, trauma, and familial longing experienced by migrant subjects like Mercia. As argued above, both authors employ allusion and intertextuality in different ways, in line with their respective commitments as writers from distinct historical and religious backgrounds.

While Aboulela employs allusion to the Quran to reaffirm a spiritual and cultural identity in the diaspora, Wicomb deploys intertextuality to deconstruct the myth of return and critique identity formation in a fragmented postcolonial landscape, such as the post-apartheid South Africa to which Mercia returns. Both authors use these literary elements not merely as

embellishments but as modes of epistemological resistance and identity construction. Aboulela challenges secular and orientalist readings of Muslim women's migration by embodying sacred Islamic texts and traditions, offering an alternative feminist subjectivity rooted in Islamic faith. In contrast, Wicomb uses intertextuality to question both personal memory and national narratives, critiquing the gendered politics of return and the instability of belonging. Both writers also explore the relationships between Western and African thoughts, between what is considered "civilised" and "local".

PROVINCIAL-COSMOPOLITANISM IN WICOMB'S AND ABOULELA'S FICTION

Related to the earlier postcolonial-transnational interrogation of African women's experiences in Scotland discussed in this chapter, this section examines how both writers represent their protagonists' identities in relation to their connections to Africa and Scotland. In *October*, Wicomb nuances what Meg Samuelson (2017) calls "the provincial-cosmopolitan" narrative perspective in a distinctive way, enriching the exploration of identity, displacement, and the complexities of home. This perspective, according to Samuelson, articulates a "translocal voice", bridging the gap between Mercia's life in Scotland and her native South Africa:

This voice issues a conjoined perspective that is located, simultaneously here and there, and which recognises both the limits of the local as well as the ways in which the provincial point of view also challenges the orthodoxies of the cosmopolitan. It emerges across Wicomb's oeuvre [...] in which chronotopic disruption is produced out of vertiginous movements between both temporal zones and the spatial settings of Glasgow and the Cape village of Kliprand. (1-2)

Through the provincial-cosmopolitan point of view, there is a constant shift between the cosmopolitan (Glasgow) and the provincial (Kliprand). Sometimes the cosmopolitan tends to impose superiority over the provincial; this is evident in instances when Mercia sees Sylvie as uncivilised because Sylvie had lived in the village, while Mercia had lived abroad for over twenty-five years. However, Wicomb does not privilege one voice over the other; instead, she uses focalisation (the perspective from which the story is told) to present different experiences of the two worlds, and, as stated earlier in this chapter, she employs free indirect discourse to establish this connection. It is essential to note that although the novel is centred on Mercia, who represents the cosmopolitan, Wicomb's novel also adopts the perspective of another woman, Sylvie, who represents the provincial, whom Mercia considers a "country girl" or "this Kliprand girl". By focalising Sylvie's voice and her experience, Wicomb urges readers to look

beyond the physical presentation of Sylvie as a docile wife to Jake, to see her as a complex character – one who had once been “civilised” and “worldly”.

When Mercia encounters some photographs of Sylvie in an envelope, she is surprised to find a Sylvie “so radically different from the woman she knows, or rather the current Sylvie. She is barely recognisable [...]. The girl in the photographs is not only youthful and slender, but seems also unbelievably vain” (157). From the pictures, it is evident that Sylvie had a boisterous childhood and teenage years, even though she does not look that way now; Nicholas Murray had stolen her innocence before she became a teenager. Mercia cannot reconcile the image she has of Sylvie with the many “versions” of Sylvie in the photographs taken over a few years:

Mercia has thought her to be a simple, uneducated country girl, who talks too much, prone to whining, but modest all the same. Here, however, gathered in the envelope, is evidence of a confident, bold young woman brimming with self-awareness and striking various extravagant poses, a Sylvie transformed by the eye of the camera. (157-158)

Wicomb challenges Mercia’s view of Sylvie through the photographs, which provide further pictorial evidence of who the girl was before Mercia encountered her. From Sylvie’s point of view, the reader gets to know more about her backstory, especially how Nicholas Murray abused her sexually from a young age, and how that experience shaped the woman she becomes. I mentioned above that Wicomb’s use of the provincial-cosmopolitan narrative perspective does not privilege one voice over the other, and that even though the story revolves around Mercia Murray, Sylvie’s point of view is as important as Mercia’s. After learning more about Sylvie’s past, especially the injustice she suffered at the hands of Nicholas Murray in her prime, Mercia begins to feel empathy for Sylvie. She had initially declared that she would never accept Sylvie because of her uncouth and uncivilised behaviour: “For all her belief in female solidarity, she simply cannot take to this girl” (61). However, when she hears from her brother Jake about the atrocities their father committed against Sylvie and himself (he has doubts about whether his son Nicky is his), Mercia begins to feel sympathy for Sylvie. The photographs and the family secrets that have been exposed change Mercia’s view, and she questions her feelings of superiority over Sylvie and her lack of solidarity towards a young woman who has had a traumatic childhood, and then a difficult marriage where she has to manage a drunken husband and a child all by herself. Mercia asks herself, “What kind of person am I? What kind of a woman am I? [...] The kind of woman who does not forgive another woman for being a victim. And should self-knowledge not bring release from such self-absorption?” (215). This is the

turning point in the story, the acknowledgment of another woman's struggle, and also the privileging of Sylvie's voice.

Wicomb presents Sylvie as someone capable of making important decisions. When Mercia suggests that Nicky should come with her after Jake's funeral, Sylvie disagrees:

Sylvie leaps to her feet. Her eyes flash. What do you mean? How can you take him? Where to? She barks [...] Nicky is a Murray but he is also my child, my own child. He's all I have. I'm a nobody, so you think you have to take my child away [...] I won't let anyone take him away. (238)

This time, Sylvie is not presented as a docile woman, as she had been previously. By imbuing Sylvie with agency, Wicomb makes a case that her choices matter, as does Mercia's familial responsibility towards the son of her late brother. In the end, both women come to a compromise – Mercia will not take Nicky, but she will send money for his education. Sylvie also agrees that “one day he [Nicky] will visit Auntie Mercy in England” (239). Mercia begs for Sylvie's forgiveness as she plans to return to Glasgow. At the end of the story, it is not only Mercia's experiences in Glasgow and in South Africa that are given prominence; Sylvie's perspective is also given a place. The interconnection between the cosmopolitan and the provincial at the end of the story opens the possibility for Mercia to feel at home anytime she comes to Kliprand, henceforth, knowing that Sylvie has forgiven her and her entire family for the wrong they had done her, and that her brother's son is well taken care of. Virginia Richter (2011) explores Wicomb's cosmopolitan and provincial concerns:

I consider Wicomb as a cosmopolitan author in a more precise sense: as an author who embodies locally specific stories in a complex intertextual, historical and transnational web of cross-references, thus, creating a resonating cavity that encloses, and reverberates with South African and European cultural memory. (373)

Through the interconnectedness of cosmopolitan and provincial perspectives, Wicomb connects South Africa and Scotland culturally. Just like Samuelson Meg (2017) mentioned above, Dorothy Driver also considers the point where the cosmopolitan and the provincial meet as the “translocal” as it takes account of Wicomb's interest in regional social practices that cross national borders [...], as well as her astute attention to spatial juxtaposition and interactions” (Driver, 2017: 7). Driver further argues that:

In the translocal, focus is on spatial interactions within and across spaces that reveal, generate, confirm, and disturb relations between character and place, saturating spaces with meanings brought into being by different perspectives, discourses, events, and behaviours. Wicomb's space is 'lived' by more than one person at once, often simultaneously in the present and past, and informed by history as well. The translocal is continuously intersected by varieties of differences which are themselves in process – differently regarded, differently experienced, differently recalled. Translocal spaces, individuals and objects are by definition relational; they exist in a continual state of interaction stemming inter alia, from the multiplicity of the ways they are experienced or inhabited, a multiplicity dependent on the complex histories and/ or different discursive embeddings. (9)

By relating not only Mercia's perspective, but also Sylvie's, and even her bedridden brother Jake's painful experiences (from childhood to his death), Wicomb establishes the connections between past and present, between "home" (Kliprand), and "elsewhere" (Scotland), without making one inconsequential. Through a series of journeys and returns, past traumas and the family history of shame are revisited, and reconciliation becomes possible. This reconciliation is necessary for Mercia to feel a sense of belonging and homeliness whenever she comes back to Kliprand, and even in Glasgow, because Sylvie has forgiven her, and Nicky will come soon to visit her. This is captured when Mercia returns to Glasgow after Jake's funeral, having made peace with Sylvie who forgave the entire Murray family: "Home at last. [...]. Her grand nineteenth century apartment. [...]. This is her home with the marble fireplace and mantelpiece at the far end. The cold hearth smells of Sylvie's outside grate" (222-223). This is the first time that Mercia calls her apartment in Glasgow her home, and it now has the familiar smell of Sylvie's grate.

In *The Translator*, the tension between the provincial and the cosmopolitan perspectives is a central narrative and thematic axis. Aboulela carefully constructs these contrasting worldviews through her characters, setting, and ideological discourses, using them to interrogate questions of identity, belonging, cultural hierarchy, and religious faith in a globalised postcolonial context. Essentially, *The Translator* stages a dialogue between cosmopolitanism – often aligned with Western secular rationalism – and provincialism, linked with rooted spirituality and tradition, particularly from an Islamic and Sudanese perspective. Rather than positioning one as superior to the other, Aboulela critiques liberal cosmopolitanism while offering a reimagined provincialism. Rae Isles embodies the cosmopolitan. He is learned, liberal, and politically informed, but he is spiritually detached or disengaged. He symbolises the Western rational cosmopolitan who seeks understanding across cultures, especially with Islamic culture, but from a position of detachment and epistemic privilege: "Rae knew the

Sahara [...]. He was a Middle-East historian and a lecturer in Third World Politics. He had recently written a book called *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*. When he appeared on TV or was quoted in a newspaper he was referred to as an Islamic expert” (5). The reader knows that Rae is a well-respected Islamic scholar, despite not believing in Islamic doctrine. To justify his stance, Rae tells Sammar, “It’s not in me to be religious [...]. I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for something spiritual” (123).

On the other hand, the provincial in the novel is not backward or narrow, but ethically and spiritually grounded. Sammar represents the provincial, rooted in religious tradition, modesty, and emotional sincerity. Through Sammar, Aboulela reclaims provincialism as a site of moral clarity and epistemological resistance. To Sammar, faith is not something acquired through reason. It is like love, an attraction, something beyond explanation, and it is something that revolves around Sammar’s life and is the basis for her decisions and actions. Aboulela critiques Western cosmopolitanism as often shallow and dismissive of deeply held spiritual convictions, especially those of a Muslim woman.

The novel’s spatial geography also emphasises the cosmopolitan/provincial divide. Aberdeen is often portrayed as cold, grey, and emotionally distant, signifying Western secular modernity – a cosmopolitan working-class space that offers freedom but also fosters alienation. Even though Sammar leaves Sudan after Tariq’s burial to escape her mother-in-law Mahasen’s control, in Aberdeen, she feels unseen and spiritually suffocated; she cannot pray the way she wants or practice her faith as required by the Quran: “It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people pray on pavements and on grass. She was used to praying in the middle of parties, in places where others chatted, slept or read” (73). In contrast, Khartoum is represented as a place of memory, faith, and emotional richness; here, Sammar can “have all the colours that she had missed in Aberdeen; yellow and brown, and everything else vivid [...] On the other side of the road, the night-watchman of the cooperative was serving his friends tea. They sat on the pavement on a large palm-fibre mat; prayer beads and laughter. [...] Her homesickness was cured, her eyes cooled by what she saw, the colours and how the sky was so bigger than the world below, transparent” (140).

However, Aboulela does not present Sudan as a utopia; instead, it is a space where spiritual and emotional connections feel possible. This duality mirrors what Rebecca Walkowitz (2007) calls “critical cosmopolitanism” – a cosmopolitanism that is self-reflexive and grounded in ethical relation, not universal detachment. This is why, with her budding

relationship with Rae, Aberdeen begins to feel “homely” to Sammar. *The Translator* suggests that rootedness in a provincial ethical framework, such as Sammar’s Islamic faith, can provide a moral compass in a disoriented world. Aboulela engages with what Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) calls “rooted cosmopolitanism,” which allows for openness without detachment. Sammar’s perspective ultimately compels Rae to consider his own detachment; he tells Sammar when he comes to see her in Sudan: “I found out at the end, that it didn’t have anything to do with how much I’ve read or how many facts I’ve learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes from Allah” (199). Here, Aboulela reconfigures the provincial, not as regressive, but as transformative, capable of enriching cosmopolitan liberalism with spiritual substance.

Significantly, Aboulela challenges liberal secular cosmopolitanism for its assumption of neutrality and superiority. Rae’s inability to fully enter Sammar’s world until he is willing to understand her faith, and maybe believe the same, rather than merely observe, exposes the limits of multicultural cosmopolitanism, which tolerates diversity without fully engaging with its foundations. Lindsey Moore (2008) observes that “Aboulela’s fiction disrupts secular cosmopolitan ideals, by presenting Islam not as a cultural identity, but a spiritual ethic that resists containment by liberal frameworks” (60).

Thus, *The Translator* critiques a cosmopolitanism that fails to make space for faith-based or culturally sensitive epistemologies. Rather than presenting both perspectives as binary opposites, *The Translator* proposes a reconciliation through mutual transformation. Thus, Sammar does not abandon her Islamic faith to become cosmopolitan; instead, Rae must journey inward to embrace the ethical and emotional dimensions of her provincial roots. Aboulela, therefore, proposes a post-secular, culturally sensitive cosmopolitanism – one that honours rooted traditions and spiritual interiority. Both Aboulela and Wicomb engage in a comparative exploration of the cosmopolitan and the provincial, between Africa and Scotland, and as established above, these affect the identities of their protagonists.

Provincial-cosmopolitanism also relates to Afropolitanism explored in the previous chapter on female African migrant experiences in the United States. However, this chapter turns to provincial-cosmopolitanism as a framework for understanding the negotiation of home and belonging in *October* and *The Translator*. Both theoretical paradigms conceptualise identity as mobile, relational, and transnational. Neither framework considers belonging as rooted exclusively in one nation or culture.

In *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, mobility is central – characters move through Lagos, Philadelphia, Zimbabwe, Princeton, Detroit, London, and other global spaces.

Afropolitanism emerges from Africa's historical connection with the wider world and reflects an ability to inhabit several worlds simultaneously. Ifemelu and Darling become "Afropolitan" subjects by negotiating multiple cultural systems without fully abandoning their African identities, thereby becoming what Achille Mbembe (2007) considers "Africans in the world". However, in *October* and *The Translator*, mobility is less important than emplacement. Mercia is primarily based in Glasgow and regularly travels to South Africa. Sammar is located primarily in Aberdeen and also moves to Khartoum at intervals. The focus is not global circulation but the negotiation of belonging within particular contexts. Therefore, while Afropolitanism emphasises global mobility, cultural hybridity, and participation in transnational networks, provincial-cosmopolitanism reveals how transnational identities are produced not only through movements across global cities but also through sustained engagement with provincial and peripheral spaces such as Kliprand and Sudan.

Consequently, Scotland becomes an ideal site for provincial-cosmopolitanism because it combines local specificity with global connections – historically, it has been a site of diasporic encounters, translocal connections, and cultural negotiation, as in the one established between Sammar and Rae in *The Translator*. Thus, provincial-cosmopolitanism may be read as a grounded or localised counterpart to Afropolitanism, sharing its commitment to plurality and mobility while foregrounding the continuing significance of place in the construction of migrant identities. Through various themes, both novels demonstrate their commitment to privileging both African and Scottish contexts as equals.

Both novels employ various literary and thematic tropes that render them as works that interrogate African women's experiences of belonging in Africa and Scotland. Some of these elements have been explored in this chapter. In *The Translator*, weather is employed as a powerful trope that reflects the characters' emotional and spiritual states, as well as their feelings of belonging or (un)belonging and sense of identity. For instance, throughout the novel, the weather significantly influences Sammar, from the way she views the world around her and its people, and even her place in that world: "She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn't do" (3). The cold in Aberdeen makes Sammar feel like an "outsider" who cannot do what other people in Aberdeen can do. However, when she gets to Sudan, where the weather is warm. Children can play outside, she feels she is amongst her own people: "she wanted to pick up life here again. People smile when I come into a room and this tree is for me, this scrawny garden, this sun" (132). In Sudan, Sammar can claim the sun as her own, something she cannot do in Aberdeen,

which is always cold with minimal sunlight. In Aberdeen, Sammar feels cold, alienated, and lonely, but in Sudan, she feels the warmth of home, with children and everyone happy to have her around. Aboulela uses weather to discuss cross-cultural encounters. Even though Sammar was born in the UK, the weather in Aberdeen still makes her feel like an outsider. Aboulela presents the cold and windy weather as part of what hinders Sammar from feeling that sense of home or belonging in Scotland, and she juxtaposes the Scottish weather with the warm and familiar African weather in Sammar's home country, which helps cure Sammar of the homesickness that had plagued her in Aberdeen:

She could have all the colours that she missed in Aberdeen; yellow and brown, and everything else vivid. Flat land and a peaceful emptiness, space, no grey, no wind, no lines of granite. [...] Her homesickness was cured, her eyes cooled by what she saw, the colours and how the sky was so much bigger than the world below, transparent [...] and everything without the wind had a smell; sand and jasmine bushes, torn eucalyptus leaves. (140)

Apart from weather, place is another important element in the novel. Sammar experiences many culture shocks in Aberdeen and cannot help but compare Scotland to her home country, Sudan. When Rae tells her that he is in Edinburgh spending the holiday with his ex-wife's family because his daughter always loves to spend holidays with her grandparents, Sammar is shocked that could happen because "[w]here she comes from, the divorced spouse was one who 'turned out to be a son of a dog' or 'she turned out to be mad' and was treated as such. No one 'stayed friends'. No one stayed on talking terms" (37). There is nothing like "an amicable divorce" in Sammar's culture.

This is not the only form of culture shock that distinguishes one place from another. Sammar is shocked again to find that in Aberdeen, people do not profess their faith by praying openly; they can only do that privately. At her university, for instance, there is a small mosque, a room available to Muslim students for prayer. Sammar does not like that she cannot pray the way she likes, as she does at home in Sudan; she has to learn how to pray privately:

On days when Diane was not in, Sammar prayed in the room [...] It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all the privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people pray on pavements and on grass. She was used to praying in the middle of parties, in places where others chatted, slept or read. But she was aware now, after having lived in this city for many years she could understand, how surprised people would be were they to turn the corner of a building and find someone with their forehead, nose and palms touching the ground. She wondered how Rae would feel if he ever saw her praying. Would he feel alienated from her, the difference between them

accentuated, underlined, or would it seem to him something that was within reach, something that he himself would want to do? (73)

This exposes the different attitudes towards religion in Sudan and Scotland, and the reader feels empathy towards Sammar, who cannot practice her Islamic faith when and how she wants. In Sudan, the feeling is different:

Over the hum of the air cooler [...], she heard from a distance the sunset azan. She had missed it in Aberdeen, felt its absence, sometimes fancied she heard it in the rumble of the central-heating pipes [...] It now came as a relief, the reminder that there was something bigger than all this, above everything. Allah akbar. Allah akbar. (139)

Calls to prayer are publicly made in Sudan, and Sammar is happy to practice her faith openly again, without the inhibition that pervades her life in Scotland. Place is thus a significant element in the novel; Sudan is represented as a place where Sammar can experience freedom of worship, which is absent in Aberdeen. In my discussion above of the connection between place and the migrant subject in the making of “home,” I examined Sammar’s dreams, especially the one she has at the beginning of the novel about rain, which prevents her from seeing Rae. Aboulela does not employ dreams in isolation; instead, they hold cultural significance, serving as markers of Sammar’s subconscious and turbulent emotions, especially as they expose her professional responsibilities towards Rae, and her personal longing to connect intimately with him after Tarig’s death. Sammar’s dreams also reflect her feelings of isolation and fear; her fear of the weather – rain, fog, and cold – reveals her vulnerability and sense of isolation in Scotland. They reflect Sammar’s struggle to assimilate into a foreign culture where the weather conditions pose challenges, as well as the anxiety of getting into a new relationship with a Scottish man. As an important metaphor, Sammar’s dreams reflect the struggle between two cultures (Muslim Sudanese culture and secular Scottish culture), which her job as a translator tries to bridge.

Translation is the central theme of the novel, and it is used to establish the success of Sammar’s migration experience. It represents the process of cultural and religious communication and understanding between the protagonist Sammar and Rae Isle. The act of translating by Sammar, is presented as a difficult task because, sometimes, she struggles to understand poorly handwritten documents, full of spelling mistakes, and sometimes “stained with tea and what she guessed to be beans mashed with oil” (5-6) and can only translate based on her understanding of Arabic, in which most of the documents are written. The Qur’an, believed to be a translation of Allah’s word and delivered by Muhammed, is presented as not

“complete” in meaning due to translation. As an Islamic scholar, Rae tells Sammar, “Translations don’t do it justice. Much is lost” (121). Rae is aware that much of the true meaning of Allah’s words is lost during translation, and Aboulela uses this to show that translation is not an easy task. Sammar’s role as translator goes beyond language; it symbolises the translation of faith, emotion, and cultural nuances. This is why Sammar takes so much time to translate the manifesto of *Al-Nidaa*, an extremist group in the south of Egypt, close to Sammar’s home country Sudan because she has some cultural connections with the group, who claim to be followers of Islam, even though their demands and doctrines are extreme.

Aboulela also explores translation beyond the literal meaning of its connection to written documents; she presents Rae’s journey of conversion to Islam as a translation. She uses translation as a metaphor to achieve cross-cultural understanding, love, and a personal relationship with God. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999) argue that “[t]ranslation does not happen in a vacuum but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer” (2). This is evident in Sammar’s rigorous efforts in translating documents, as well as in the process leading to Rae’s conversion. Also, instead of presenting Sammar’s experiences of alienation in Scotland or Rae’s inability to understand Sammar’s intimate yearnings for him to convert, Ileana Dimitriu (2014) argues that Aboulela allows her characters to experience the process of being “translated” into “rootedness” through “unexpected interpretation” of themselves (71). At the end of the novel, both Sammar and Rae become “translated” versions of themselves, appreciating their cultural and ideological differences, with Rae having a more profound, “rooted” meaning of Islam than the basic academic knowledge he previously had.

Translation is therefore not a “one-off” process but a “continuum” necessary for understanding between two cultures. This is why Dora Sales (2013) argues that “[b]elonging to a contemporary cross-cultural society means that translation, understood as negotiation and mediation between the asymmetrical relations among languages and cultures, is a daily communication need” (70). She further implies that translation involves “communication and negotiation, in the complex meeting point of cultures, ideology and power” (75). This is true of the relationship between Sammar and Rae, which involves a lot of communication and negotiation before understanding or “translation” can happen, because as Sales declares, “to translate, means to intervene, to act, to understand that categorisations are not universal but socially constructed narratives” (77).

As stated above, through translation, both Sammar and Rae undergo transformation and self-discovery. Through their interactions and relationship marked by a clash of cultures and

religious beliefs, both Sammar and Rae reach a point of understanding – a kind of “translation” marked by mutual understanding and acceptance. This is why patience and determination are emphasised as virtues that Sammar has to possess for Rae’s “translation” and conversion to become effective. Aboulela herself says that translation is the most important theme in the novel, because as she tells Claire Chambers (2009), Sammar:

[i]s not only translating Islam for Rae. She is the agent for his change. She shows him that Islam is relevant to him, too, and points out that he needs it. She makes Islam attractive by presenting herself as the prize or reward for this conversion. Her insistence (which is immature and egoistic) that if Rae loves her, he will love Islam has a strong impact on him. (95)

It is interesting to note that the only successful translation is Rae’s conversion to Islam, which is the only way for he and Sammar to reach a compromise and be together. His conversion becomes a metaphor for metamorphosis from unbelief to faith. Thus, Aboulela employs translation as an important feature in her representation of the experiences of migrant African women in Scotland. For there to be mutual understanding, love, and trust between Sammar (Sudan) and Rae (Scotland), they need to translate from preconceived notions of selfhood and nationhood. Sammar’s Islamic faith is no longer a barrier, and her life as a Muslim woman is reconstructed into something to be desired by a Scottish academic after his translation.

Similarly, Wicomb employs significant literary and thematic elements to deepen *October*’s exploration of identity, memory, dislocation, and return. As explored earlier in the chapter, “place” is also a significant feature of her novel. She juxtaposes place as a way of representing racial, ethical, and affective dislocations, rather than offering it as a resolution. In *October*, space is relational and uneasy. South Africa and Scotland are not oppositional homes to Mercia, but unsettling sites where she feels like the “other”; they expose the limits of post-apartheid belonging and diasporic return. Like Aboulela, who explores the relationship between North and South, Sudan and Scotland, Wicomb also examines this same relationship, but do not propose a mutual relationship between South Africa and Scotland. She places Scotland as a space of emotional restraint and racialised marginality. In Scotland, exile is marked by coldness, both climatic and affective, silence, and social distance. In contrast, South Africa is not rendered as a restorative space to return to. Instead, it is represented as fragmented, haunted by racial histories and family secrets. This juxtaposition dismantles the myth of “return” as healing. Mercia does not experience healing or wholeness when she returns home, and this makes her return to Scotland, where she experiences the same feeling of unbelonging.

Thus, neither South Africa nor Scotland offers Mercia any form of closure. Significantly, Wicomb resists the romanticisation of cosmopolitan mobility. The oscillation between South Africa and Scotland produces ambivalence, trauma, and disappointment, not hybridity, nor mutual understanding that births liberation, as evidenced in Aboulela's representation of spaces and places. In October, place is a site of endurance rather than possibility; Mercia endures her homecoming, where she confronts her sick brother Jake, and his wife Sylvie, and she only has to be patient and look forward to leaving home. Wicomb does not contrast "home" and "abroad" in her juxtaposition of place, instead, she reveals how both locations reproduce exclusion in different contexts. Both locales mirror each other as spaces where historical violence lingers, belonging is conditional, and movements fail to resolve identity issues.

Wicomb also employs metaphors; her metaphors are often subtle, embedded in the landscape, domestic life, bodily imagery, and the changing seasons, reflecting her commitment to writing that is emotionally resonant, politically engaged, and formally complex. Wicomb's novel title extends beyond being just a month in the year. The time "October" serves as a rich metaphor for in-betweenness, change, and emotional reckoning. October, as a month, is significant in both cultures, as it marks seasonal transitions. In South Africa, October signifies spring and a new beginning, while in Scotland, it is Autumn and represents the onset of the year's closing down into the darkness of winter; it is associated with decline, melancholy, and loss, mirroring Mercia's sense of alienation and emotional descent. Mercia is affected by October, depending on where she finds herself. In Scotland, the month is heralded by chilly and windy breeze, and less activities, because it signifies the winding down of the year, which makes her wish to visit home in October whenever she has the opportunity, as she reminisces:

That is when she ought to be away, in the month of October, when the sadness of retreating light strikes [...]. At home, in the Southern Hemisphere, with the sun well on its way to the equator it will be warm, at least during the day. How effortlessly the word comes: home, the place she has not lived in for more than twenty-six years. (18)

The warmth in October in her home country, South Africa, makes the place "home" for Mercia, even though she has been away for a long time. She never considers Scotland home, even when she lives with Craig. Just as the weather in Aberdeen makes Sammar in Aboulela's novel find it difficult to truly "belong" in Aberdeen, the weather in Glasgow makes Mercia feel out of place, especially in October, to such an extent that she even considers moving back with Craig to live where she "could stretch out, boots and all, for a while at least, open her heart, let in the heat and light" (127). The narrator's description of Mercia's mood in October explains how

dreadful she considers the month, even with Craig by her side, before he finally leaves: “Mercia woke to the clatter of Craig opening the wooden shutters. Sad October light flooded in, licking the corners of the room. [...] Glasgow was by no means the deep north, but it would be the death of her all the same” (120). The weather in October makes Mercia sad to the point of thinking of dying, as it lacks warmth, and she declares to Craig, “I want to kill myself. [...] If you won’t come and live in Cape Town, I’ll kill myself [...] Let’s live in proper sunshine, in Cape Town” (120-121). The reader empathises with Mercia, as she does not feel that sense of belonging in Glasgow even after living there for over twenty-six years, because “[w]hilst living with Craig, she refused to think of Glasgow as home” (110). However, when she returns to Kliprand in October at the request of Jake, she is welcomed by that feeling of “being at home”, even despite the unpleasant circumstances in which she finds Jake:

In the meantime, the moderate October heat is comforting, and she does love the familiar view of gray-green scrub with flat-topped mountains looming blue in the distance. She loves that hot, red sand where ancient tortoises sit for days resting in the same scrap of shade as if earth had not moved, or night had not fallen, [...]. So despite Jake, and Sylvie’s horrible chatter, Mercia knows that this is home. (127)

October in Kliprand brings the familiarity of “home” and “belonging”, which the cold winter of Glasgow cannot replace. This feeling envelopes Mercia in Cape Town, and makes her soften her heart towards her brother who had sunken in drunkenness, and towards his wife, Sylvie and her nephew Nicky, as they were her “people”, and she “belonged” there, and “One does not walk away from family” (25). This is why Mercia will yet return to Cape Town when she hears of Jake’s passing, as she is the only family left who can take care of Nicky, and possibly Sylvie. Thus, Wicomb proposes multiple movements between Scotland and South Africa, beginning in October, and which could be continued, for Mercia can feel at “home”, especially after being away for more than 25 years.

POSTCOLONIAL-TRANSNATIONAL JOURNEYS AND RETURNS AS CONTINUUM IN *THE TRANSLATOR* AND *OCTOBER*

The journey motif, discussed in earlier chapters, is also a significant feature in both novels. *The Translator* chronicles different types of journeys that Sammar, the protagonist, and other characters undergo – physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual – journeys that change their perceptions of themselves and others and help them understand others. Sammar’s first journey was to Sudan at a very young age, marking the beginning of several journeys for

Sammar, some of which were painful. Her second journey occurs when she moves to Scotland with her husband: “Tarig was a student here [...] We came here after we got married. He was a medical student and we lived near Foresterhill” (8). As we have seen, Sammar returns to Sudan following her husband’s death, and leaves for Scotland to escape Tarig’s mother’s control. And for the last time in a series of movements, Sammar returns to African soil yet again, after an argument with Rae over converting to Islam. She had already been booked to attend a conference in Egypt as a translator, but after Rae refuses to convert to Islam, she decides she would rather stay at “home”, this time to reconnect with her son, who has been separated from her for four years. These physical journeys have a profound impact on her. For instance, when she returns to Aberdeen after Tarig’s death, she still bears the demeanour of grief, such that her room reflects her psychological journey:

she lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room. She had given everything away, that week before taking Tarig home. She had stripped everything and given it away, never imagining she would come back, never imagining the quarrel with Mahasen. And when she did come back, she had neither the heart nor the means to buy things. Pay the rent for the room and that was all. [...] Four years ill in a hospital she had made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity. (15-16)

During these years, nothing makes sense to Sammar until she meets Rae. Then, when she thinks he would do anything to be with her, his indecisiveness about conversion to Islam throws her into yet another psychological journey of pain, and the only way to overcome this is to go back to Sudan. While in Sudan, Sammar undertakes a journey of understanding. She realises that she has been wrong in wanting to convert Rae for selfish reasons:

She had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone. If she could rise above that, if she would clean her intentions. He had been kind to her and she had given him nothing in return. She would do it now from far away without him knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more. (171)

This is Sammar’s realisation and acceptance that she is at fault, marking the beginning of her healing journey. The most significant journey in the novel is Rae’s spiritual journey of conversion. When Sammar leaves for Sudan, he finds himself listless and with “no balance”. He endures a series of misfortunes and a near-death experience due to an asthma attack, and it is at this moment of vulnerability that he converts to the Islamic faith. He tells Sammar when

he travels to Sudan to find her: “I found out at the end, that it didn’t have anything to do with how much I’ve read or how many facts I’ve learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah” (191). Rae’s journey of conversion and Sammar’s journey of deep understanding merge, opening a window of future possibilities related to Aboulela’s migrant vision of proposing a mutual understanding between North and South. In *The Translator*, Aboulela beautifully intertwines love, spirituality, and the human condition, inviting the reader to explore the intricate journey of faith, where emotional and psychological factors intersect with religious beliefs. Peggy Levitt (2004) argues that “[t]ransnational migrants also use religion to delineate an alternative cartography of belonging” (848). Thus, Sammar’s faith reflects her sense of selfhood and influences all the journeys she undertakes, especially her “journey” with Rae, which helps her consider Scotland as “home”, where she can “belong”, even with her son.

In *October*, Wicomb also explores journeys beyond the physical migration from Africa to the West and back; she weaves her personal story of migration with the stories of fictional characters in the works of other women migrant writers. There are numerous journeys in the novel, both physical and metaphorical. Mercia’s life is full of these journeys; historically, her ancestry is traced to Scotland, with Scottish missionaries coming to Cape Town and mingling with the natives, thereby giving rise to the “coloured” people of the Cape. Mercia leaves Kliprand for Scotland, where she has lived for twenty-six years. Wicomb presents journeys as a continuum, something that never ends or that must “end where they started” (127). This is why, like Wicomb, who never felt a sense of belonging in Glasgow, where she lived for much of her life, Mercia, the protagonist in *October*, never truly “belongs” or feels at home in Glasgow after many years. Wicomb also explores the challenges of belonging at home (Africa); being coloured in South Africa made belonging difficult for her, hence, she had to leave (journey out of) her hometown to Britain. Likewise, her protagonist, Mercia, who feels out of place in Kliprand, decides to move out. However, when she journeys back home, she still feels like a stranger among her people. This is why it is difficult to find a positive tone in Wicomb’s exploration of journeys in-between spaces (South Africa and Scotland). To Wicomb, journeys carry no promise of renewal; instead, they expose the unresolved tensions of a life lived “in-between” two worlds and two cultures.

I have explained earlier in this chapter that belonging is an important element in African migrant literature by women, and they explore it through the various types of journeys their protagonists undertake, including the journey of returning “home”, depending on where they consider home. Return migration was discussed briefly in the previous chapter. In this chapter,

return migration follows patterns different from those we saw in Adichie's and Bulawayo's novels. In the novels by Aboulela and Wicomb, there is a series of returns to and from Africa and Scotland; that is, the female protagonists engage in multiple returns across the two geographical locations. These journeys and returns have a significant impact on the protagonists' identities and on their relationships with their home countries and the host land. The possibility or impossibility of return is a significant feature of contemporary migration literature. Peggy Levitt (2001) argues that migration for transnational subjects is never a one-way traffic:

The social fields between which migration takes place are multilayered as well as multisited. [...]. The immigrant experience is not a linear irreversible journey from one membership to another. Rather, migrants pivot back and forth [...] at different stages of their lives. (41)

Thus, while return migration in the previous chapter was examined through three phases (voluntary, forced, and imagined or performative), this chapter explores return as a continuum, just as the protagonists' journeys are a continuous movement from one place to another (both physically and psychologically).

In *October*, Wicomb explores the complex dynamics of return migration, this time subverting expectations of homecoming as redemptive or filled with familial longing. When Mercia receives a letter to return to Kliprand after her brother Jack's death, she does not experience a nostalgic or restorative journey home. Rather, she is confronted with the ghosts of apartheid, familial alienation, and a racialised past. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" captures Mercia's experience of psychic dissonance. Although from South Africa, Mercia has become alienated from her social and emotional landscape, and living in Scotland for more than 20 years has not created a sense of home for her. This situation renders Mercia, in Bhabha's terms, a "liminal subject" – unsettled in both transnational and diasporic contexts; she feels out of place in either South Africa or Scotland.

The post-apartheid South Africa to which Mercia returns is also a space of racial ambiguity. The category "coloured" continues to carry historical trauma and marginality. Her coloured identity is a socially inscribed role, rather than an ontological truth. She has been conditioned to accept her place in society as a coloured woman, even though she does not like that profiling. Her returns, which should consolidate her relationship with her relatives, instead distance her from them and even make her question why she was excited to return home in the first place. Her discomfort with Jake's rural Afrikaaner partner, Sylvie, and her nephew Nicky,

further underscores her dislocation – not just culturally but emotionally, as she finds it difficult to reinsert herself into the rhythm of familial or national life. Thus, what is supposed to be a “homecoming” for Mercia leaves her regretting having undertaken the journey home, “[w]as there no choosing between the contradictions of longing for and longing to be away from home?” (208). Wicomb thus presents return as ambiguous and ambivalent. This is in line with Uwakwe’s argument that “[r]everse migrations to homelands, while it may fulfil the returnees’ ambitions for return, may not always be a welcoming experience, and oftentimes create a sense of ambivalence toward homeland” (2023: 188).^t This is Mercia’s experience of return, which, as stated above, ends up making her feel out of place at home and among her people, such that she wishes to leave that space to Glasgow.

On the other hand, *The Translator* explores the complex experiences of return migration through the protagonist, Sammar. The narrative is grounded in postcolonial and transnational feminist realities, as it interrogates identity, belonging, and faith in the context of diasporic dislocation and multiple homecomings or returns. Unlike the depiction of return migration as a triumphant or redemptive act, as in the case of Ifemelu in Adichie’s *Americanah*, Aboulela also presents it as a deeply ambivalent process. Sammar’s eventual return to Sudan, following her fallout with Rae over his refusal to convert to Islam, is not only a physical journey but also a spiritual and symbolic one. As established earlier in this chapter, it is at “home” in Sudan that her identity and religious values can fully align. Her return is motivated by both love (her relationship with Rae) and her Islamic faith, which she believes is better understood and practiced in Sudan. When Rae finally comes to find her in Sudan, after converting to Islam, Sammar finds fulfilment in her decision to return with him to Aberdeen, because it was “[c]lear to Sammar that she was going to leave Khartoum and go back with him to Aberdeen. [...] And she was going to leave the city, its dusty wind and smells” (190-191). Thus, Sammar’s decision to return again to Aberdeen is closely tied to her renewed sense of self and purpose. Her return becomes a vehicle for transformation rather than mere relocation.

Aboulela also emphasises a gendered dimension to return migration. From a feminist perspective, *The Translator* underscores how return migration intersects with gender roles and expectations. As a Muslim widow, Sammar navigates both patriarchal expectations in Sudanese society and racialised stereotypes in the West. Her return can be seen as an assertion of agency within a framework that respects her values, particularly her religious identity. However, Aboulela does not romanticise her home country, Sudan. She acknowledges the restrictions that come with it, especially for women, as seen in Sammar’s relationship with her aunt and mother-in-law. Sammar’s decision to return “finally” to Sudan after the conference in Egypt is

therefore an empowered yet complex choice, situated within her moral and emotional landscape. Lindsay Moore (2008) argues that “Aboulela’s fiction resists the secular-liberal assumptions of Western feminism by proposing a pious, spiritual Muslim woman as a figure of agency and reflection” (46). Moore’s observation foregrounds Aboulela’s strategic reconfiguration of feminist agency through Islamic spirituality. By centring a devout Muslim woman as reflective and empowered, Aboulela challenges dominant Western feminist paradigms that often equate liberation with secular autonomy. This reframing not only asserts faith as a legitimate epistemology but also complicates binary narratives of oppression and emancipation. Her fiction thus invites a more pluralistic understanding of agency – one that accommodates religious subjectivity without collapsing into cultural essentialism. Through Sammar, Aboulela emphasises the “purity” of faith amidst emotional constraints. In an interview, Aboulela clarifies that:

[...] my characters do not necessarily behave as “good Muslims; they are not ideals or role models. They are, as I see them to be, flawed characters trying to practice their faith or make sense of God’s will, in different circumstances. (np)

This is why Sammar decides to return to Sudan, following Rae’s indecisiveness about converting to Islam, even though she is obviously very much in love with him. Thus, in *The Translator*, return migration is a dynamic and layered process that defies simplistic binaries of home and abroad, tradition and modernity, or liberation and repression. Aboulela offers a narrative that centres on the inner life of a transnational Muslim woman, illuminating how return is not merely about geographical relocations but about moral, spiritual, and emotional resolution.

Both writers differ in the representation of return. Wicomb, as argued above, does not see positive possibilities in return, just as she does not propose the feeling of homeliness in the diaspora that Aboulala does. While Wicomb explores the trauma and pain that pervade belonging and returning, Aboulela proposes these can be positive, when grounded in Islamic faith. It is imperative at this point to examine a comparative and intersectional framework that explores what it means to belong “here” and “there”, or “neither here nor there”, or even to belong “partly” to each side of the divide, and/or “fully” to either side, which can make return or multiple returns become possible.

CONCLUSION

Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and Zoë Wicomb's *October* intricately unravel the complexities of home, belonging, and the postcolonial-transnational return, particularly as experienced by women whose identities are shaped by migration, memory, and cultural displacement. These novels do not present return as a straightforward homecoming, but as a process of critical negotiation that reveals the tensions between homeland and host land, tradition and modernity, and memory and reality. Through their female protagonists Sammar and Mercia, both Aboulela and Wicomb foreground the affective and ideological ambivalences that complicate the notion of return in postcolonial and transnational contexts.

In *The Translator*, Sammar's movement between Aberdeen and Khartoum encapsulates both a geographical and emotional return. Her longing for Sudan is not merely nostalgic but is deeply rooted in a spiritual and cultural identity that she feels is threatened in the secular West. Aboulela emphasises that Khartoum is a city of dust and dry heat, of cockroaches and old furniture. But it is also a city of sunshine, family, and Islam. It is the city where Sammar does not feel like a stranger. This contrast reflects Sammar's alienation in Scotland and her internal pull toward a space of faith, familiarity, and community. Yet, her return is not idealised. Instead, Aboulela portrays a nuanced reconciliation between spiritual identity and transnational belonging.

Significantly, Sammar's return is not an escape into a static past but a feminist act of self-determination. Her embrace of Islam is both deeply personal and politically significant in a Western context that often views Muslim women through orientalist and reductive lenses. As the novel asserts, faith is not a feeling. It is a commitment. It is action. It is a choice. Aboulela thus positions the female Muslim subject as active in shaping her destiny across cultures, rejecting both Western liberalism and patriarchal traditionalism. The narrative resists binary constructions of East versus West, instead illustrating how transnational identity can be rooted in belief, language, and love.

In contrast, Wicomb's *October* offers a far more fragmented and ambivalent portrayal of return. Mercia Murray's journey from Glasgow to Kliprand is fraught with disillusionment and estrangement. The South Africa she returns to is no longer the home of her memories but a space of unresolved trauma and post-apartheid fractures. Here, she is confronted with her family's dark secrets, and that feeling of warmth she had envisaged while returning home, is questioned: "[r]eturn has always been a tricky notion, teeming with thorns" (144). Elsewhere, she considers her longing for home, and the stark reality of wanting to leave the space

immediately: “[w]as there no choosing between the contradictions of longing for and longing to be away from home?” (208). This admission undermines any romantic notion of return, highlighting the dissonance between diasporic longing and the transformed postcolonial landscape; it also shows the ambiguity and ambivalence of return.

Wicomb employs a fragmented narrative structure and multiple temporalities to convey the instability of belonging and the impossibility of a unified self. The simultaneity of voices and timelines in *October* evokes the layered nature of home, which is not singular or essential but contingent and often contested. Mercia’s attempt to make sense of her family’s secrets, especially surrounding her brother Jake’s suicide and her own estrangement, reflects how the return journey can unravel the self rather than consolidate it.

Moreover, Wicomb’s text problematises the authority of the returning subject. Mercia’s position as a coloured woman who has lived abroad complicates her role as a moral or cultural mediator. Her internalised sense of superiority, drawn from Western liberal values, is repeatedly challenged by the realities of rural South African life. The novel thus critiques not only the romanticisation of return but also the epistemic privileges that often accompany diasporic subjectivity.

Together, *The Translator* and *October* reject simplistic narratives of return as redemptive closure. They foreground instead the affective complexities and ideological tensions of returning “home” after cultural displacement. For both Sammar and Mercia, home is not a fixed geographical location, but a contested space shaped by memory, faith, history, and gendered experience. Their journeys of return do not culminate in complete belonging but in ongoing negotiation and redefinition.

Aboulela and Wicomb, through their respective narrative strategies, articulate a feminist postcolonial critique of how home and belonging are constructed and deconstructed in transnational contexts. While Aboulela reclaims religious and emotional ties as valid foundations for transnational identity, Wicomb exposes the fragility and fragmentation that underlie nostalgic yearnings for return. In both cases, the female subject navigates a translocal terrain where identities are shaped not by static origins but by movements, ruptures, and re-imaginings.

Ultimately, these novels compel us to rethink return not as a return to origin, but as a form of critical engagement with the past, with home, and with the self. As Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us: “Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured [...] never singular but multiply constructed” (4). Sammar and Mercia embody this multiplicity, asserting that in a postcolonial and transnational world, belonging must be

continually reworked – across borders, across memories, and across the boundaries of self and society.

Aboulela and Wicomb weave the stories of their female protagonists to reflect not just the writers' personal experiences of migration from Africa to Scotland, but also the experiences of migrant African women more generally, who often find themselves searching for "home" in unfamiliar terrains like cold, wintry Scotland. As my corpus explores the experiences of African women in migration, the specific geographical locations they choose are significant and go a long way toward determining whether they make "home" in the host countries they migrate to.

Through the various narrative elements explored in both novels, Aboulela and Wicomb represent what it means for migrant African women to belong here and there, or neither here nor there. They do not seek to privilege the experiences of their female protagonists beyond the shores of Africa, but instead illustrate that their experiences are worthy of interrogation because of the influence of "home", that is, Africa, which is an integral part of their identities. This is why both writers emphasise the need for the constant "return" of their protagonists, maybe not permanently, as represented in Adichie's *Americanah*, whose protagonist, Ifemelu, can return to Lagos and find her way back to America at will. Like Adichie, both Wicomb and Aboulela represent working-class women with legal citizenship status in the host country who engage in a series of journeys and returns, and their works interrogate how these movements shape the identities of their female characters. They also project the possibility that "elsewhere" can be home to their protagonists through the reconciliation of past and present, of the provincial and the cosmopolitan.

CONCLUSION

This research has centred on the representation of the lived realities of African women migrants who navigate unfamiliar lands, cultures, and situations. Through a close reading of works by Adichie (*Americanah*), Bulawayo (*We Need New Names*), Unigwe (*On Black Sisters' Street*), Darko (*Beyond the Horizon*), Wicomb (*October*), and Aboulela (*The Translator*), this thesis explores how African feminist literature portrays the intersections of gender, migration, and the ongoing (re)negotiation of identity within transnational and postcolonial settings. Taken together, these six novels—authored by women from various African regions—highlight the emotional, historical, and political nuances of African women's migratory journeys. The narratives bring to light the tensions between home and elsewhere, tradition and modernity, silence and voice, as well as victimhood and agency, thus offering a multifaceted literary perspective on female African migrant subjectivity. From the Introduction, through the theoretical discussions in Chapter One, and across the close textual analyses in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, this thesis has consistently demonstrated that migration in these novels is not merely a thematic concern but an organising principle of literary representation. Read comparatively, the six novels reveal recurring formal, thematic, and affective patterns that collectively point towards a comparative framework that resists examining African women's migration through a single lens.

The protagonists of these novels encounter overlapping forms of oppression, including patriarchy, racism, gender-based exploitation, and economic instability, all of which influence and limit their identities and trajectories. Importantly, the writers refuse to portray these women as mere victims of circumstance or of their own choices. Echoing the principles of transnational black feminism, the protagonists demonstrate agency in ways that are often fragmented, adaptive, and paradoxical. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggests, transnational black feminist thought is rooted in “a legacy of struggle” (3), and this foundational struggle informs the tenacious, defiant, and sometimes subversive strategies these characters use to navigate different structures of domination, both in Africa and in the diaspora.

In *Americanah*, Adichie examines how migration to the United States disrupts and reshapes identity, emphasising the continual redefinition of self in response to shifting social and political landscapes. The novel underscores the gap between imagined and lived experiences of diaspora, with identity being constantly renegotiated. Similarly, in *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo traces the fractured consciousness of a child migrant, Darling, who must confront the trauma of leaving Zimbabwe for America. Through Darling's narrative voice, Bulawayo offers a critique of the “American dream” while illuminating the psychic and

linguistic violence that often accompanies migration. Aligning with transnational black feminist critiques of diasporic melancholia and cultural loss, the novel illuminates how gendered diasporic subjects like African women, are doubly estranged – from both host and home cultures.

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* exposes the racialised sexual economies shaping African women's migration to Europe. The brothel in Belgium, depicted as both a site of exploitation and a space for storytelling, complicity, and solidarity, is examined through postcolonial and transnational feminist frameworks. The novel critiques the commodification of black women's bodies within global capitalism while also presenting intimate narratives of survival and resistance. The sex workers' stories, when interpreted through the lens of postcolonial and transnational agency, disrupt simplistic depictions of victimhood, instead highlighting nuanced negotiations of power within restrictive spaces.

Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* provides one of the most harrowing depictions of gendered migration. Mara's journey from Ghana to Germany is marked by betrayal, patriarchal violence, and forced prostitution. Despite these brutal realities, Mara eventually reclaims her narrative, embodying the black feminist assertion that "the personal is political." Through its intimate portrayal of pain, the novel critiques systemic gendered violence on a global scale and reaffirms the significance of feminist solidarity and consciousness as tools of resistance and survival.

In *October*, Zoë Wicomb reimagines the postcolonial return as a space of ambiguity. Mercia's return to South Africa after years in Scotland complicates concepts of belonging and home, as her experience is characterised by racial alienation, gendered memory, and suppressed familial trauma. Drawing on Dorothy Driver's ideas of translocality and postcolonial black feminist spatial theory,¹² Wicomb uses the motif of return to destabilise, rather than resolve, identity. The fragmented narrative structure reflects Mercia's fractured selfhood and foregrounds the interplay of memory, space, and silence in forming postcolonial female subjectivity.

On the other hand, Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, also partly set in Scotland, provides a distinct counterpoint by centring Islamic feminism and spiritual interiority. Through the character of Sammar, the novel explores how faith, love, and language shape the migratory experience. Instead of focusing on trauma or rupture, the narrative highlights belonging through the continuity of culture and diasporic religious practice. This portrayal of diasporic

¹² Driver analyses spatial and symbolic critiques in South African post-apartheid literature, which informs the spatial and emotional geographies explored in Wicomb's *October*.

femininity, anchored in Sudanese-Muslim identity, offers an alternative to Western feminist paradigms, articulating a decolonial, faith-based system of knowledge.

In terms of form and structure, the selected novels reveal that the politics of form matters. Techniques such as non-linear storytelling (*October*), multiple narrative voices (*On Black Sisters' Street*), fragmented memories (*We Need New Names*), confessional homodiegetic narration (*Beyond the Horizon*), third-person-limited perspective (*The Translator*), and epistolary reflection (*Americanah*) enable more nuanced portrayals of fractured female African migrant subjectivities. These formal innovations align with postcolonial and transnational black feminist aesthetics, which, according to Barbara Christian (1987)¹³ are grounded in lived experiences rather than abstract theorising.

LIMITATIONS, CRITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the valuable interventions this dissertation offers in theorising gendered migration through selected Anglophone African novels, several critical limitations persist and warrant further scholarly attention. This thesis has focused exclusively on Anglophone literature and narratives situated primarily within Euro-American migratory trajectories. This linguistic and geographic narrowing inevitably forecloses engagement with the diverse spectrum of African migratory experiences. In future research, it would be productive to engage a more nuanced comparative framework to explore Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking African feminist literary productions, as well as to examine South-South migratory flows – such as those to the Middle East, China, or within intra-African contexts, as my research establishes that African women's migration experiences are not homogenous, but geographical, religious, racial and cultural contexts impact these.

This thesis's exclusive focus on prose fiction omits the rich discursive possibilities embedded in poetry, drama, autobiography, and oral traditions. Theorists such as Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) and Ato Quayson (2014)¹⁴ have argued that these alternative forms of cultural production articulate African feminist subjectivities and epistemologies that often exceed the novel's representational capacity. Attending to a broader array of genres could thus

¹³ Christian critiques the dominance of abstract theory in academia and champions theory rooted in Black women's lived experiences, supporting the method of reading literature through the lens of feminist theory.

¹⁴ Nnaemeka introduces "nego-feminism" – a pragmatic, negotiation-based African feminist model that emphasises community and context. This is helpful for framing agency in constrained migrant conditions; Quayson's work on spatiality, migration, and urban modernity in African cities informs the study of translocal identities and the changing urban geographies of return and exile in African migration fiction.

recalibrate critical understandings of narrative form and its role in constructing diasporic identities. Future research on non-novelistic forms by female African writers, such as Warsan Shire's poetry (*Teaching my Mother How to Give Birth*, 2011), Ladan Osman's poetry (*The Kitchen Dweller's Testimony*, 2015), Zainabu Jallo's play (*Onions Make us Cry*, 2009), Aminatta Forna's memoir (*The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Quest*, 2002), and Sisonke Msimang's memoir (*Always another Country: A Memoir of Exile and Home*, 2017), should be considered, as these literary productions by female African migrant writers also articulate female subjectivity, cultural memory, and transnational displacement.

This thesis's primary focus on heterosexual female protagonists further limits its intersectional reach. Subsequent research might foreground queer, non-binary, and trans voices within African migrant literature, building on the interventions of Stella Nyanzi (2013) and Zethu Matebeni (2014).¹⁵ Such an expansion would interrogate the heteronormative assumptions that continue to shape feminist and migration studies, facilitating a more nuanced, inclusive, and intersectional theorisation of African female subjectivity.

A methodological limitation of this study lies in its reliance on close literary analysis, to the exclusion of empirical or field-based approaches. Integrating ethnographic, sociolinguistic, or participatory research methods could illuminate how actual African migrant women negotiate identity, trauma, and agency in everyday contexts, thus bridging the gap between literary representation and lived experience.

In sum, these limitations are not simply methodological constraints but critical insights for the ongoing development of African migrant feminist literary scholarship. They signal the necessity of a more expansive, interdisciplinary, and intersectional approach, one attuned to the shifting contours of migration, identity, and resistance in the twenty-first century.

However, this study demonstrates the importance of engaging with African migrant women's stories through interdisciplinary, intersectional, and decolonial feminist approaches. While transnational black feminism provides the conceptual tools to examine how gender, race, class, and geography simultaneously affect migration, postcolonial feminism draws attention to how women's bodies and lives become contested sites of colonial residues, patriarchal and cultural performances, and the forces of global capital. Together, these frameworks challenge both the universalising tendencies of liberal feminism and the essentialist narratives of African

¹⁵ Nyanzi offers a powerful critique of the use of "African culture" to marginalise queer identities. Her work is foundational for expanding African feminist migration studies beyond heteronormativity. Matebeni centres queer African experiences and critiques heteronormative paradigms in African gender discourse. Her work opens space for exploring non-binary and queer migrant subjectivities.

patriarchy. They create a critical space for reimagining feminist politics beyond borders – attuned to contextual specificity, the multiplicity of voice, and the complexities of embodied difference.

TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE READING OF AFRICAN FEMINIST MIGRATION NARRATIVES

This thesis develops a comparative analytic framework for reading African feminist migration narratives by demonstrating how different African women novelists represent migration through intersecting experiences of gender, race, belonging, home, religion and identity across diverse transnational locations. This thesis has consistently engaged in a comparative analysis across three significant levels.

Firstly, instead of examining a single-novel or one-national literature, it brought together different African region or countries – Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, and Sudan, and read them comparatively. Secondly, it compares destinations. The experiences of African women in three Western geographically diverse locations – America, Europe, and Scotland, were compared as different racial and cultural spaces. And lastly, across the analysis chapters, this thesis compared dimensions of migration, such as identity, home, belonging, race, gender, religion, memory, and return, not separately, but comparatively.

Collectively, the comparative readings undertaken throughout this thesis demonstrate that African women's migration narratives cannot be adequately understood through single-text, single-nation or singular theoretical approaches. Rather, they require a comparative analytic framework capable of attending simultaneously to gender, race, migration, religion, home, belonging and transnational identity across multiple geographical locations. By placing six African novels in sustained dialogue, this thesis demonstrates how comparative reading reveals both shared patterns and significant divergences in the representation of African women's migrant experiences. Its principal contribution therefore lies not in advancing a universal theory of migration but in offering a comparative framework through which African feminist migration narratives may be read across diverse historical, cultural and geographical contexts.

This study conceptualises a comparative analytic framework for understanding how African women writers like those examined in this research, represent then gendered experiences of migration across diverse literary forms.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As these varied narratives reveal, the experiences of African migrant women are anything but uniform or marginal – they are essential to understanding the forces that shape global migration, gender roles, and identity transformations. Through the lens of the novels examined, we witness the remarkable strength and adaptability of African women who persist in loving, remembering, telling their stories, and resisting despite the weight of systemic challenges.

Significantly, this study demonstrates that African women’s migrant writing cannot be reduced to narratives of exile, suffering, or displacement alone. Rather, the six novels reveal migration as a complex literary and political space through which African women continually negotiate identity, memory, belonging, spirituality, race, language, gender, and agency. This study establishes that the selected fictional narratives are explorations of transformation and becoming. They remind us that the African woman on the move is not only a symbol of loss but also a beacon of hope – embodying what bell hooks describes as “the margin as a site of radical possibility” in her work, *Yearning* (1990: 149).¹⁶ It is within these margins and borderlands that new visions for African feminist futures are being powerfully reimagined and rewritten. Significantly, the selected writers undertake that reimagination of contemporary African women’s migration, which defies seeing African women as peripheral or the “other”, but as individuals capable of controlling their destinies.

Ultimately, the contribution of African feminist migrant aesthetics lies in its recognition that diversity itself constitutes an important aesthetic principle within African women’s migrant writing. The novels analysed throughout this thesis demonstrate that although African women writers employ different narrative strategies, genres, and literary devices, they share a sustained commitment to representing the complexities of migration as profoundly gendered experiences shaped by race, class, nation, memory, belonging, and resistance. African feminist migrant aesthetics therefore provides a conceptual framework capable of accommodating both the diversity of literary representation and the shared ethical concerns that unite these narratives. While this framework remains open to further refinement through engagement with additional

¹⁶ hooks theorises marginality as a space of resistance and transformation. Her concept of “the margin as a site of radical possibility” resonates with how these novels reframe African women's migrant experiences.

texts, genres, languages, and migratory contexts, it provides a foundation for future scholarship on African women's writing, migration studies, and postcolonial literary criticism. In doing so, the thesis not only advances understanding of the six selected novels but also contributes to broader conversations about the evolving aesthetics of African literature in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world.

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