

# Distance as “A Field of Tension”: Exilic and Existentialist Dilemmas in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*

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**Abstract** - Migration and exile constitute recurrent leitmotifs in recent postcolonial narratives. Existing studies on migrant fiction focused on the stealthy and risk-laden movement of migrants in search of greener pastures, with little attention paid to the concrete experiences of migrants in their host lands. This is the thrust of this study, which examines the dialectics of exile and existentialist concerns in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. The study adopts Existentialism as its analytical framework. The text was purposively selected for its apt inscription of exile and existentialist motifs. The research is a qualitative one and adopts the interpretive design. The tropes deployed are the diaspora, identity negotiation, nostalgia, and return migration. Findings reveal that in spite of the dogged resolve by Third-World migrants to leave their traditional homelands for a foreign one, they soon come to grasp with the ambivalences of exile occasioned by the fact of disillusionment, displacement, deprivation, and pain. Existentialist realities such as dread, despair, absurdity, and pessimism typify their experience in the host land. Rather than offering the much-anticipated reprieve, exile is a disillusioning and disgusting experience characterised by rancour, despondency, and regret. It is an experience in hardship, angst, and loss. Unigwe’s work is a quintessence of existentialist art, which projects the absurdity, nihilism, crime, and death that characterise humanity’s experience in the contemporary world. The work depicts Third-World subjects’ experience in foreign lands as a stream of sorrow punctuated by cataracts of momentary joy.

**Keywords** - Exile, Existentialism, Despair, Nostalgia, Absurdity.

## 1. Introduction

As one of the core disciplines in the arts, literature holds the mirror that enables society to unimpededly behold its own true self, projecting its values and attacking its imperfections. Harping on the invaluable role of literature in serving and saving society, Terry Eagleton quotes George Gordon, British Professor of English, as charging his countrymen and women in his Inaugural Lecture thus: “England is sick, and... English literature must save it. The churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the state” (cited in Ushie, 2024). This position is corroborated by Jean-Pierre Durix when he notes that “literature is anchored in a particular moment of time and the writer is often conditioned by his environment” (Cited in Kehinde, 2009). This sociological value of literature emphasised here is antithetical to the formalist school of literature, in which literature only projects its aesthetic content and value. In Nigeria, Africa, and indeed the entire Third World, literature has been consistently deployed to examine the denigrating experiences and pitiable condition of the

postcolonial Third-World subjects decades after political liberation. Since literature captures the milieu and the moment, literary writers in these climes have continued to unswervingly deploy the art to reflect the multifarious aspects of the “intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in the society” (Thiong’o, 1997). In recent times, key among the predominant leitmotifs or issues of these “struggles” among Third-World creative writers is migration, and of course, its aftermaths – exile, disillusionment, displacement, and sometimes, death.

Though one of the earliest realities of human history, migration, which has assumed an unprecedented dimension in recent times, remains a cardinal feature of modern life as people the world over continue to move from one geographical space to another for various and varied reasons. It is basically given impetus by the increasing globalisation in the world and the attendant transnationality and transterritoriality. Robert Cohen identifies the different categories of migrants or diasporas the world over to include labour, victim, imperial, and cultural diasporas (cited in Kehinde, 2008). Of all these categories, however, the most recurrently examined or appraised by contemporary creative writers are the labour diasporas - a class of migrants who leave their traditional homelands for foreign ones in a bid to work and eke out a living somewhere far away from their native homelands. They are basically from the developing Third-World countries whose societies hardly provide the enabling environment for their sustenance and/or survival. Suffice it to note that migration, especially among the “labour diasporas”, is given impetus by the apparent inequality in the world in which very many countries continue to look up to a few others for survival - a condition, which is part of the postcolonial impulse in contemporary Third-World literature, and which reflects, in part, “the experience of Third-World peoples in the face of increasing globalisation, transculturality and transvaluation of diasporic consciousness” (Kehinde, 2008). Quite perplexing is the fact that these labour diasporas soon become victims of migration occasioned by the disillusionment, displacement, alienation, solitude, and trauma, which ultimately become their experience. Literary works by Third-World migrant writers abound, which exemplify these experiences.

In *Temporary People*, Deepak Unnikrishnan chronicles the rather bizarre and delusionary experience of Third-World migrants of Indian, Pakistani, Nepali, Sri Lankan, and Bangladeshi origin who find themselves in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, all bubbling cities that constitute parts of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), popularly called the Emirates. They are there as migrant workers and found in the construction industry and indeed many other sectors of the Emirates’ economy. The migrants, the majority of whom are Indians, are in legions and constitute over seventy per cent of the workforce of the entire Gulf region. They are the nurses, drivers, gardeners, artisans, masons, nannies, mechanics, storekeepers, interior decorators, electricians, barbers, and security guards, to mention just a few. However, in spite of their intimidating number, which makes it appear as if the entire Gulf region would not thrive economically without them, they are regarded or treated as aliens, exiles, and, as the title of Unnikrishnan’s text suggests, temporary people. They are those who can be dispensed with anytime the authorities so deem fit without batting an eyelid. They are socially, ontologically, and structurally displaced even as trauma occasioned by these displacements remains their lot (Unnikrishnan, 2017).

Similarly, in *The Year of the Runaways*, Sunjeev Sahota, a British writer of Indian origin, appositely captures the experiences of four young Indians, who, frustrated by the socio-economic and political upheavals in their homeland, decide to run away to England, which they consider a somewhat stable, peaceful, life-supporting, economically viable and prospects-building clime. However, no sooner had the foursome of Randeep, Avtar, Tochi, and Gurpreet arrived in England than the reality of exile dawn on them – joblessness, homelessness, hopelessness, rootlessness, restlessness, displacement, nostalgia, trauma, and general disillusionment (Sahota, 2015). In the same vein, Dinaw Mengestu’s *Children of the Revolution* gives a succinct account of the trio of Stephanos, Kenneth, and Joseph, all young Africans, who migrate from Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, respectively, to the United States of America, in a bid to have their dreams and aspirations in life fulfilled. They are, however, disillusioned to find that their status as aliens, exiles or foreigners would pose enormous limitations on their life’s ambitions even as they all return to their respective homelands a few years after unfulfilled (Mengestu, 2008). Thus,

for Third-World subjects, migration is a definitive form of escape from a society whose values are no longer tolerable or acceptable to the individual self, to a place where one henceforth wishes to belong. It is a form of “voting with one’s feet, of demanding a seat at the table where the feasting is going on. It happens because development is uneven and benefits of growth are so unevenly spread” (Harrison, 1993). This constitutes the basis for the proclivity or the ineluctable tendency on the part of Third-World subjects to migrate or seek to migrate to foreign lands.

However, quite perplexing is the fact that in spite of the dyspepsia and the overall disillusioning realities that characterise their migration experience, Third-World subjects appear unruffled, unpersuaded, bent, and unperturbed as far as their determination to leave their traditional homelands for a foreign one is concerned. Their poise is, however, emboldened by the fact that their traditional society tends to pay little or no heed to the fundamental yearnings of citizenry – survival opportunities and all-around security. Thiers therefore becomes an existential decision aimed at escaping from economically, socially and politically impotent conditions or climes to distant or faraway foreign places that they feel have the capacity to fill the gap in terms of their basic expectations as humans. However, it is only when the chips are down, and the realities fully unfold, that they discover the futility that is inherent in the fanciful, the fantastic or the phantasmagoric. This is the thrust of this paper, which examines the futility of distance as the much-envisioned El Dorado – a corroboration of Theodore Adorno’s famous proposition that “Distance is not a safety zone but a field of tension” (cited in Savin, 2013). The study seeks to establish distance not merely as physical separation, but as a psychological, cultural, social, and existential condition that exacerbates dislocation, alienation, solitude, and depression. Very specifically, the paper examines exilic displacement, disenchantment, as well as existentialist dilemmas in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* (henceforth, *OBSS*).

This study establishes its relevance on the premise that while a lot has been accomplished by previous researchers on Unigwe’s work with predominant attention paid to the leitmotifs of migration, gender, realism, trauma, identity, prostitution, sex commodification and trafficking vis-à-vis African women’s experiences in the diaspora, comparatively little attention has been paid to exilic and existentialist motifs in the text. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining distance, not merely as a geographical separation, but as a multidimensional condition that encompasses psychological, emotional, and existential estrangement. It investigates how physical distance from the homeland generates complex experiences of alienation, cultural and psychological dislocation, constrained freedom, identity crisis, and the search for meaning. The research investigates how the distance created by exile becomes the very field in which their existential tensions are produced and intensified, and ultimately, how characters negotiate the conflicting demands of exile, identity, and freedom. It is, perhaps, apposite to add that the characters’ experiences in the narrative cannot be adequately explained by viewing them simply as victims of migration, prostitution, patriarchy, or economic hardship. Their situations are better appraised from the prism of existential dilemmas, especially so because, as would be found out presently, they make choices, confront the consequences, experience isolation, and attempt to construct identities within circumstances that frequently restrict their freedom. Basically, the critical problem this study addresses is the need to understand how exilic and existential uncertainty intersect in the novel. The fundamental question the study seeks to provide an answer to is: what happens to the individual when physical distance from home develops into psychological and existential distance from the self, from others, and from any stable sense of belonging? The study argues that distance is not merely the physical space between Nigeria and Europe, but a dynamic condition through which the characters negotiate home and elsewhere, self and other, freedom and constraint.

## 2. Literature Review

Published in 2010, Chika Unigwe’s migrant fiction has enjoyed enormous critical reactions and responses. Her text examines the appalling experiences Nigerians and, indeed, Third-World countries’ subjects go through in their bid to negotiate survival in foreign lands. It is a courageous and bold fictional canvas on which are painted despicable contemporary societal realities. It is a confluence where fiction, philosophy, ideology and wit meet and

interact in a bid to awaken society from its seeming slumber and purge it of most of its socio-political ills and shortcomings. Very categorically, the work recreates the pains, agonies, and miseries that engulf society, especially when those saddled with the responsibility of its redemption treat or do so with kid gloves. It is an apt portrayal of what a system or society should anticipate in the event of deliberately and systematically neglecting its core responsibilities or mandates. Presented in fascinating, distinct but related chapters, the text examines the disgusting experiences African migrants undergo in their bid to negotiate survival in foreign lands. The work constitutes a lament on our collective socio-political woes caused by a leadership deficit. Scholarship on Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* has increasingly established the novel as an important literary representation of African migration, transnational displacement, gendered vulnerability, sex trafficking, identity formation, and the difficult realities of life in the diaspora.

The bulk of the work's critical attention generally focused on the social, economic, political, and gendered circumstances that compel or shape their migration. Specifically, the work is about four young African women who migrate to Belgium in search of greener pastures, only to be trapped in unending prostitution and other denigrating activities. A number of scholars have given their critical perspectives on the work. Bastida-Rodriguez (2014), for instance, examines the protagonists as sex workers who negotiate European urban space, and argues that the novel offers more than a representation of social tragedy, and that it also explores movement, urban space, and subjectivity (journals.sagepub.com). Her study is significant to the present study because it establishes geographical space (which this study terms "distance") as an important dimension of the women's experience. However, its principal concern is the relationship between migrant women, the European city, and urban subjectivity rather than the broader existential consequences of their physical separation from home. In "A Realist Interpretation of Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", Haruna-Banke and L. Gogo examine the text from the perspectives of "the popular, the modern and social issues that define realist works" in literature, noting that Unigwe's work is a quintessence of a contemporary narrative which captures concrete and contemporary societal realities (<https://www.researchgate.net>). Similarly, Umeh (2023) examines migration and diasporic experience in the text through a realist framework, emphasising poverty, unemployment, social injustice, inequality and harassment as factors that shape the migrants' experience in their traditional homelands. The critics' preoccupation is with the fact that Unigwe's work is a realist piece of art that captures the socio-economic experiences of Third-World postcolonial subjects in foreign lands (<https://www.nigerianjournals.com>).

On his part, Sanni Barkat focuses on the contemporary social and popular concerns that characterise "psychoanalytic literature" in the text, paying specific attention to the mind's function in decision-making and the interaction of the conscious and unconscious elements that influence people's choices, including the decision to migrate from their traditional homelands to foreign ones (<https://www.academia.edu>). These diasporic and migratory dimensions of the novel have received further attention from scholars concerned with the causes and consequences of migration. Igwedibia and Ezeonu (2023), for instance, apply Everett Lee's Push-Pull Theory to the novel and demonstrate that the women's migration is shaped by different combinations of conditions that push them away from Nigeria and attractions that pull them toward Europe (<https://www.researchgate.net>). Their study is particularly useful because it projects the idea advanced in this study that migration, among Third-World subjects, is a consequence of socio-economic and political failure on the part of leadership in the migrants' native homelands. A particularly important strand of criticism of the text concerns sex work, trafficking, and the ambiguous agency of the women. In "Unsettled Subjects: Sex Work in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", Okolo (2019) argues that the novel must be read through the tension between constraint and possibility, violence, and agency. Her study places a premium on the ambivalence of Unigwe's representation of African female migrants in Belgium and warns against reducing them to a single story of victimhood (<https://www.tandfonline.com>). Thus, for Okolo, the protagonists are simultaneously vulnerable and capable of asserting a sense of worth and agency. Ligaga (2019) similarly investigates the "vulnerable trafficked body" and emphasises the unstable condition of the protagonists, who exist in Europe in a state of continuous vulnerability. Her argument is important because it

identifies Europe as a site of promise and failure simultaneously, thereby revealing the tensions between the imagined destination and the actual migrant experience. Certainly, the concept of tension emerging from these studies is particularly relevant to the present research. While the critic's preoccupation with tensions is between agency and vulnerability, this study shifts the emphasis to the larger concept of distance as the field within which these tensions are generated and sustained.

In a more recent scholarship on Unigwe's work, Mavengano (2026) examines trauma, fractured intimacy, and the limits of female solidarity. Drawing on trauma theory, precarity, and African feminist perspectives, the study argues that the women's relationships constitute fragile forms of solidarity within spaces marked by violence, racial abjection, sexism, exploitation, and restrictive migration regimes. The study also identifies migration, self-naming, self-mourning, and memory as important dimensions of the women's struggle for dignity and resistance (<https://www.tandfonline.com>). Mavengano's critique demonstrates that the experience the migrants undergo is not merely an economic or geographical phenomenon but one deeply connected to memory, trauma, identity, precarity, and the desire for dignity. The present study, therefore, takes the discussion further by asking how the conditions Mavengano identifies – trauma, memory, fractured relationship, and the struggle for dignity – can be understood as manifestations of existential tensions produced through distance.

From the foregoing, the reviewed works demonstrate that Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* has been examined from a variety of productive perspectives: migration studies, postcolonial studies, diaspora studies, realism, urban studies, trauma theory, trafficking studies, and the politics of identity. These reviewed works have established that the novel represents migration as a complicated experience involving economic aspiration, cultural displacement, gendered exploitation, trauma, identity crisis, displacement, disillusionment, and the struggle for dignity and agency. However, the review indicates a conceptual gap that remains insufficiently explored. Existing studies generally examine what causes displacement, what migrants experience in their host lands, or how particular structures, such as gender, trafficking, or migration regimes, shape their lives.

There is comparatively less attention paid to distance itself as a multidimensional field of tension, and more specifically, to the way geographical distance develops into psychological, cultural, emotional, and existential distance. Furthermore, although existing criticism identifies alienation, vulnerability, identity crisis, disillusionment and the struggle for agency, these conditions have rarely been brought together systematically under an explicitly exilic-existentialist framework in the interpretation of the novel. The present study seeks to fill this gap by reading the text through the complementary concepts of exile and existentialism. The preoccupation of the present study is its proposition that distance is not merely the physical space between Nigeria and Belgium, but a dynamic condition through which Unigwe's characters negotiate home and elsewhere, self and other, freedom and constraint. In this regard, this study contributes a new conceptual emphasis to existing scholarship by treating distance as the field in which exilic and existential tensions intersect. Distance is presented, not as a safety zone as anticipated by the characters, but as "a field of tension" and a condition that exacerbates the plight of the migrants emotionally, economically, structurally, and psychologically.

### 3. Methodology

This research was designed to examine exilic displacement and existentialist dilemmas in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual and interpretive analysis. The choice of this design is informed by the nature of the study, which investigates the representation of distance, exile, alienation, freedom, choice, identity, and existential identity in Unigwe's text. The research is literary rather than sociological or demographic. Consequently, statistical patterns of Nigerian or Third-World migration and the full range of legal and policy questions surrounding migration fall outside its immediate scope. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the research engages closely with the primary text to identify, interpret, and analyse passages, events, characters, and narrative situations that illuminate the exilic and existential dimensions of the

novel. The primary text, *On Black Sisters' Street*, was purposively selected because of its apt representation of exile and existentialist motifs. The passages were systematically selected, categorised, and interpreted according to exilic and existentialist concepts. Secondary sources of data for the research include textbooks, journal articles, published and unpublished dissertations and theses, as well as internet sources.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the existentialist theory for its analysis. A philosophical movement that emphasises individual freedom, choice and responsibility, Existentialism sprang from the thoughts and writings of European thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, who were remarkably dissatisfied with traditional philosophy perceived as “superficial, academic and remote from reality” (Olusegun Oladipo, 90). As a philosophical viewpoint, Existentialism is frequently contrasted with classical or traditional philosophy, which Gabriel Marcel, for instance, describes as “a disease that divorced thought from life...highly abstract, lifeless and artificial, emptied of real content to such a degree that human beings no longer knew what it meant to exist” (Oladipo, 90). As a variance of traditional philosophy, Existentialism became, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, “another humanism” (cited in Henry Nordmeyer, 589). This implies that existentialist philosophy is best characterised as a call to concrete human existence and experience.

As earlier noted, among the important precursors of Existentialism is Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian who focused predominantly on the individual's subjective relationship with existence, faith, choice, anxiety, and despair. He argued that genuine existence requires the individual to make personal and often difficult choices rather than simply conforming to society (Oladipo, 2016). Another important contributor to the existentialist philosophy is Friedrich Nietzsche. Although he did not call himself an existentialist, he exerted enormous influence on the movement. His critique of conventional morality and his declaration of “the death of God” raised profound questions about the source of values and meaning in a world where traditional religious certainties could no longer be taken for granted. Nietzsche's ideas concerning self-creation, individual freedom, and the overcoming of inherited values became important foundations for later existentialist philosophy (Jaspers, 1970).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Existentialism was developed by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. While Heidegger examined the nature of human existence, which emphasises concepts such as anxiety, authenticity, being-in-the-world and being-toward-death, Sartre developed an explicitly atheistic existentialism, arguing that existence precedes essence. The implication is that human beings are not born with a predetermined purpose but must create meaning through their choices and actions. Thus, for Sartre, this radical action is inseparable from responsibility because individuals are responsible for the choices through which they define themselves. On her part, Simone de Beauvoir extended the existentialist ideas into questions of gender, freedom, oppression, and human relationships. Her argument that women are socially constructed as the “Other” became particularly influential in feminist philosophy and criticism (Beauvoir, 2011).

Another major figure whose writings are closely related to Existentialism is Albert Camus, though he rejected being so labelled. Camus is particularly important for his concept of the absurd, which arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and a universe that does not provide an obvious or predetermined meaning - the purposelessness and meaninglessness of life in spite of man's effort at finding the same. For Camus, the absurd in Existentialism denotes a sense of the radical contingency of all things that exist: the sense that everything might be otherwise than it is because there is no ultimate plan or purpose according to which things might be justified. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explores how individuals can confront this condition without escaping into false certainty. Thus, for Camus, the absurd refers to the purposelessness and meaninglessness of life in spite of man's effort at finding meaning. (Camus, 1991). Other important existentialist thinkers include Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, whose approaches incorporated religious dimensions. It is apt to reiterate the fact that collectively, these thinkers demonstrate that Existentialism is not just a single, uniform doctrine, but a broad philosophical tradition

concerned with the individual's confrontation with freedom, choice, responsibility, ambiguity, anxiety, and alienation. Other cardinal tenets or concerns of the theory include meaninglessness, fear and anguish, cynicism, nihilism, despair, and death. This study deploys these concepts in the analysis of Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* with a view to establishing the text's existentialist persuasion.

## 5. Result and Discussion

Exile is an experience of ambivalence. It is characterised by unforeseen, unanticipated and profound uncertainties. Paul White conceptualises it as an outcome of tensions between the individual's desires and perceived, anticipated or hoped-for opportunities (1995). In *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming submits that to be colonial is to be in a state of exile and that the exile is always colonial by circumstances (cited in Claire Alexander, 1995). It is, thus, this state of exile – of dislocation or displacement and alienation – which forms the central theme of many migrant writers. Chika Unigwe is one of the migrant writers who succinctly project these unpleasant experiences. Unigwe's text relates appositely the ugly experiences the foursome of Sisi (Chisom), Efe, Ama, and Joyce (Alek) undergo in Antwerp, Belgium, in a bid to eke out a living. Of the four women, three are Nigerians (Sisi, Efe, and Ama) while one (Joyce) is from Sudan. Circumstances that bring them to Belgium are similar – they have heard of humongous wealth and job opportunities in Europe, hence their interest to travel down and work, make good money and later return to Nigeria and start up big businesses. Out of volition, and in their desire to end poverty in their private and family lives, they leave for Europe through Segun Dele, a migration middleman/tycoon whom they would later discover to be a cruel and heartless pimp.

Joyce's basis for migrating to Europe is different; there is political upheaval in her traditional homeland (Sudan), which results in the death of many citizens, including her parents. Coming to Nigeria, Lagos, to be specific, through Polycarp, a young Igbo officer who was on a peacekeeping mission in Sudan, her hope of settling down with Polycarp through marriage quickly gets shattered as the latter prefers someone from his ethnic origin. As a way of settling her, Polycarp facilitates her journey to Belgium through Segun with the assurance that she was going to work and get paid as a nanny. Perhaps, there is a need to appraise the specific circumstances of the other three Nigerian exiles in Belgium, beginning with Sisi.

Named Chisom by her parents, Sisi is a young, brilliant Nigerian lady who graduated from the university in Nigeria, but could not find an employment opportunity anywhere five years later. The only child of the parents, Sisi, had thought that she would change the fortune of the family by securing a good job after her university education. The father is a civil servant in the employ of the Lagos State Government who has put in well over two decades in the job, yet would not afford any tangible thing, let alone a house of his own. Displeased with the economic situation in the house, Chisom is poised to change the narrative of the family; she hopes to buy a good house for the parents, amidst other lofty dreams. Unfortunately, however, Chisom combs the nooks and crannies of Lagos city without a job opportunity.

To make matters worse, her boyfriend, Peter, who promises to marry her in the future, is not doing any better either. Peter, who teaches Mathematics in a local school in Lagos, lives in a one-bedroom apartment with other siblings of his siblings. Chisom sees no prospects in the relationship nor any hope for a better future in sight; hence, her resolve to leave Nigeria, which, for her, is a hope-bereft nation, and travel to another clime that can offer some life-enhancing prospects and opportunities. Thus, when she meets Dele and the latter promises to facilitate her journey to Europe to go and "work" there, Chisom does not hesitate. The only initial setback for her is the sum of Thirty Thousand Euros Dele requests as the travel sum, but when Dele offers to pay the money, which money would later be paid by instalments by Chisom upon reaching and working in Belgium, she readily accepts. After cooking up lies to convince her parents, Chisom leaves for Europe (OBSS, 24-35).

Next in Unigwe's line of story is Efe, a young Yoruba lady who is from a very poor background. She had dropped out of school as a result of poverty and soon had to work to help make ends meet for the family, especially when the mother died, leaving her siblings - Faith, Nicholas, Rita - in her care and in the care of her father, who is always drunk as a result of emotional incoordination and outright frustration. Apart from her siblings, Efe also has a child named Lucky, whom she had when she had regular, illicit sex with Titus, a well-to-do married man in Lagos, because of financial support from the latter. Her problem becomes compounded when she takes the child to the father, only for the man's wife to walk her out of the compound with the child fiercely. It is in the course of doing one menial job or the other to help fend for herself, her child, and her siblings that she encounters Dele, whom she works for as an office cleaner. When Dele notices that Efe has cultivated an interest in having a sexual relationship with him, which relationship would involve taking care of her and her child, he sells the idea of going abroad to her, albeit to evade these responsibilities. Efe is elated to go abroad, but when she enquires about the kind of work she would do there, Dele mentions "sales". However, the way the latter "sized her up, his eyes going from her face to her breasts to her calves under her knee-length skirt, that told her what kind of sales she was going to be involved in" (OBSS, 82). In spite of being sure about what she would be required to do abroad, Efe accepts the terms given by Dele and leaves for Belgium, leaving her child in the care of her sister, Rita (OBSS, 49-88).

Ama, a young Igbo lady, is the next in Unigwe's story. Born and bred in Enugu, South-Eastern Nigeria, Ama had a terrible experience as a child in the hands of her stepfather, whom she initially thought was her biological father. Ama was first defiled by her pseudo-religious bigot father at the age of eight. She was not allowed to keep friends by her hypocritical father, so she made the walls her friends. Thus, each time she was raped by the man, she confided in the walls since her own mother, Rose, in a bid to save her marriage, would not believe or take her reports seriously. This is how Ama remains constantly abused, almost on a quotidian basis, by her dowry father. Reprieve, however, comes her way when her mother throws her out of the house to go and live with Mama Eko, Rose's cousin in Lagos. In Lagos, Ama works in Mama Eko's restaurant, gets busy virtually every day except on Sundays. Though more highly comfortable with Lagos than Enugu, Ama does not really find the desired fulfilment in the routine life that revolves around leaving the small flat of Mama Eko in the morning for the small "Empire" (Mama Eko's shop) and returning to sleep in the evening. So, when Dele, one of the customers in Mama Eko's restaurant, invites her to his office and mutes the idea of going abroad for prostitution to her, she first went wild with anger, but after some days, she went back to him and accepted to leave for Europe (OBSS, 122-171).

From the foregoing, it is safe to deduce that Sisi, Efe, Ama, and even Joyce (Alex) all found themselves in an existential situation, a terminology invented by Soren Kierkegaard and described by Henry Nordmeyer as "a situation in which the individual is really forced to take account of the ultimate reality of his own self" (590). Apart from Joyce, whose situation, which results in her travelling to Belgium, is different and somewhat pathetic, the three Nigerian women may be said to have taken the decision to leave for Europe out of their own volition, having taken "account of the ultimate reality" of their individual selves. It could therefore be deduced that going to Belgium, irrespective of what later becomes the aftermath, as will be found out presently, is indeed their volition, their choice. Of course, freedom of choice is fundamental to existentialism, for, by existence, Jean-Paul Sartre unambiguously states that man "chooses himself", that is, "he affirms his self in freedom, but only in such a way as he would, in *good faith*, choose' all humanity" (Nordmeyer, 586).

When Peter, Chisom's boyfriend and even her parents tried to dissuade her from the decision to travel to Europe because of the uncertainty that characterises such an adventure, Chisom would not listen; she had made up her mind, and there is no two ways about it. In the same vein, when Ama mentions the idea of going to Europe for greener pastures to Mama Eko, the woman, very fiercely kicks against the idea, the way a typical mother, who senses danger ahead of her own child, would, but Ama, who is an adult and who possesses the freedom to take her destiny in her own hands, would not listen. Thus, in defiance of all entreaties by Mama Eko, Ama leaves for Belgium in spite of the fact that she knows the kind of job she is going to be involved in. For Saetre, freedom is an obligation,

“the most stringent obligation there is, because we live in a world, not of contemplation or speculation, not of the past or of the trivial, idle present, but in the world of the future into which we unceasingly have to project ourselves with our entire being: a world of action” (cited in Nordmeyer, 587).

Certainly, the trio of Sisi, Efe, and Ama believe in action as a way of conquering the unpredictable and/or the ambivalent – a cardinal tenet of the existentialist ideology. Thus, for the trio, “Man is born to act. To act is to affirm the worth of an end, and to affirm the worth of an end is to create an ideal” (Oliver Holmes, cited in Nordmeyer, 585). By acting and accepting responsibility for their action, the trio may be said to have warded off existentialist fear, a state of subconscious tension characterised by dread, anxiety and unease. Very fundamentally, their action also wards off *angst*, described by Nordmeyer as “a religious and ethical force, experienced in the depth of the subconscious” (586). In the words of Saetre, existentialism requires that as individuals, we should all “take up our burden, each one of us his own” (591). Certainly, this typifies the courage of Chisom, Efe, and Ama, who remain poised to change their lives’ narratives in a foreign land even amidst ambivalences.

However, in spite of the resilience to act or courageously take up one’s “burden” as projected by existentialism, there is also the flip side to the philosophy which may be considered the core of its theorising – the fact that “Nothingness precedes, envelopes, and conditions all Being”, and that “our true condition is one of *exposure*: in reality, we are defenceless, naked to the winds of chance and blind accident” (Gray, 117). This is what Albert Camus refers to as the absurd, the inherent contradiction between humanity’s desire for meaning and the apparent meaninglessness of the world. Absurdity also places emphasis on the individual’s experience of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Unigwe’s chief character, Sisi, by her defiant actions exposes self to “the winds of chance and blind accident” on two occasions, first, in Nigeria, when she undermines all entreaties to jettison her resolve to travel to an unfamiliar destination, and secondly, by walking away from the business of prostitution to enable her to settle down for a more meaningful and fulfilling life with Luc, her new found lover in Antwerp. By her decision to fall in love and move in with Luc, Sisi craves protection and security in the hands of the former. However, though the desire for protection, safety or security is a characteristic and primary impulse of human creatures, existentialists believe, it is nothing but “a profound illusion” (Gray, 118). Gray further expatriates on the delusional nature of this belief, thus: “Spiritually, we are exposed to the yawning abyss, the primal night which originates all and to which we all return. Only a small fraction of humanity ever recognises this to be their real estate, but it is no less true of because of that” (118). For existentialists, death may be likened to an inevitable shipwreck, which Martin Heidegger describes as “the most personal, the most detached, unrelated, and unsurpassable potentiality” (Gray, 119). Though death is certain, existentialists believe that “the hour of its coming is indefinite and indeterminable”, and therefore, the need to “live always in the face of death” (119).

The four Third-World migrants/exiles in Belgium may be seen to be living “in the face of death”, for any attempt by any of them to live outside the terms of the contract that brought them from Lagos to Belgium, death remains their lot. This is the situation with Sisi, whose attempt to reposition the compass of her life results in instant death in the hands of Segun, Madam Kate’s hatchet man, who smashes a hammer on her head, thereby ending all that would have been the new lease or chapter of life between her and Luc (OBSS, 293). Her untimely demise sends fear down the spines of the remaining three women (Efe, Ama, and Joyce) in Madam Kate’s enclave. More highly worrisome to the trio is Madam Kate’s mechanical, perfunctory or dismissive treatment of the news of the demise of Sisi. This is when they come to the realisation that they are nothing but commodities in the hands of their madam and that what bothers her most is the money they rake in her business through sleeping with men every day. As commodities, they are replaceable and therefore no point contemplating or musing over the death of any of them. Madam Kate defiantly instructs the other three women a few days after Sisi’s death: “Tomorrow I want all of you back at work. I have to find a replacement for Sisi” (OBSS, 289). Disenchanted by Madam Kate’s dismissive attitude

towards the death of Sisi, Joyce, in a conversation with Efe and Ama, loudly exclaims in protest: “Madam does not even care...We are human beings! Why should we take it? Sisi is dead, and all Madam can think of is business. Doesn’t Sisi deserve respect from her? (OBSS, 289). Madam Kate’s defiant attitude is reflective of the fact that she is an entrepreneur whose sole motive is to maximise profit at all costs and by all means. The death of Sisi is only a warning to others that a similar fate awaits them should they attempt to renege on the terms of the agreement that brought them to Belgium.

Unigwe’s narrative succinctly presents migration as a deeply ambivalent experience in which hope and despair, freedom and constraint, and aspiration and disillusionment coexist. The physical distance separating the women from their African homes does not necessarily guarantee or translate into freedom or fulfilment; rather, it generates new forms of alienation and vulnerability. Their displacement places them within a liminal space between two worlds where memories of hope coexist with the pressures of the European environment. Their experiences also resonate with existentialist ideas because they are repeatedly confronted with situations that force them to make difficult choices within circumstances they do not entirely control. The distance experienced by the four African women is multidimensional: it is geographical in their separation from their African homelands, cultural in their encounter with an unfamiliar environment, emotional in their fractured relationships and memories, and existential in their struggle to establish meaning and a sense of self.

The concepts of freedom and responsibility, which are among the cardinal existentialist ideas, are equally complicated by the women’s exilic circumstances. Existentialism emphasises the individual’s capacity to choose and the responsibility that accompanies choice. However, Unigwe’s characters make choices within severe economic, social, gendered, and migratory constraints. Their decision to leave Nigeria may be understood as an exercise of agency, yet the conditions into which they enter severely restrict subsequent choices. They are compelled to negotiate between survival and moral preference, dependence and independence, and submission and resistance. Their circumstances, therefore, complicate the simple opposition between freedom and bondage, for, while they possess some capacity for choice, these choices are conditioned and marred by poverty, exploitation, and social exclusion. Responsibility consequently becomes a troubling existential burden because the characters must live with the consequences of decisions made under circumstances they did not entirely create. Unigwe thus presents freedom as precarious and conditional, rather than absolute, while responsibility becomes inseparable from the difficult circumstances of the migrants’ existence.

Moreover, absurdity and despair – core existentialist concepts – emerge from the contradiction between the migrants’ expectations of Europe and the realities they encounter there. The women leave Nigeria with different though similar hopes, which range from economic security to escape from difficult circumstances, personal fulfilment, and a better future. Conversely, however, their experience in their host society frequently turns those hopes into exploitation, loneliness, uncertainty, and despair. This contradiction gives their existence an absurd dimension: the promised destination of freedom and prosperity becomes a site of confinement, dehumanisation, and endless suffering. As their conversations, especially about the death of Sisi, indicate, their despair is not simply sadness, but a crisis of meaning produced by the realisation that the future they imagined and tried to work towards may not materialise after all (OBSS, 293-295). Sisi’s death is particularly significant in this regard as it demonstrates the devastating consequences of a life in which aspiration, exploitation, and hopelessness collide. The women’s repeated attempts to survive despite some odd circumstances that appear indifferent to their aspirations, therefore, reflect an existential struggle to find meaning in an apparently meaningless, absurd, and hostile world.

Among the cardinal notions of existentialism are alienation and death (Gray, 118). Alienation and death constitute, perhaps, the deepest expressions of the novel’s existential dimension. The four African women’s geographical separation from their traditional homelands develops into psychological and cultural alienation. They are separated from their familiar homes, relationships, communities, and structures of belonging, while their status

in Belgium as aliens or exiles prevents them from achieving complete integration into their new environment. A typical example is Sisi's futile effort at having asylum from the Belgian foreign embassy despite cooking up enormous lies to have her way (OBSS, 182). They consequently occupy an unstable space between home and elsewhere, producing a profound sense of unbelonging. This alienation also affects their relationships with themselves and with one another, as each woman carries private memories, wounds, fears, and desires that cannot be completely shared. Death, most drastically represented through Sisi's murder at the hands of Segun (OBSS, 293), gives this alienation its ultimate existential significance. Sisi's death reveals the vulnerability of a migrant existence in which the individual can become reduced to a disposable body within structures of economic and sexual exploitation. Death, thus, becomes a literal end and a reminder of human finitude, vulnerability, and the precariousness of existence. Through absurdity, despair, freedom, responsibility, alienation, and death, Unigwe transforms the experience of migration into an existential drama in which distance becomes a profound distance from certainty, belonging, security, and meaning.

Unigwe's work aptly exemplifies the existential realities of the contemporary world, characterised by pain, poverty, crime, uncertainty, cruelty, nihilism, alienation, despair, betrayal, and all forms of anomie. The text, like many other postmodernist works, depicts man's life as a stream of sorrow punctuated by cataracts of momentary joy. Taking stock of their lives in Madam Kate's house vis-à-vis the death of Sisi and the dismissive attitude of their boss, the trio of Efe, Ama, and Joyce contemplatively admit that they are indeed in danger, though they do not know exactly how Sisi died and how they can guard against a similar fate. Accordingly, their conversation is laced with fear, sorrow, regret, and pessimism about the future. More disturbing about their condition is the fact that they are not sure how long they would continue to 'work' to pay up Dele's money and Madam Kate's regular remittances (OBSS, 239-244). This is where they get plunged into an existentialist despair with absolutely no hope of redemption in sight. Perhaps, the only option available to them is to continue to *work hard* and, by so doing, gradually negotiate their way out of the entrapment, out of personal and collective despair. The next few paragraphs examine the other side of their lives as migrants in Antwerp - exile.

In "The Dialectics of Identity", Marcus Bullock notes that at some points in one's life, the need to escape from one place and strike out for another becomes the last resort of some individuals given the "inescapable immediacy" of situations or conditions that may present themselves (223). The implication is that migrants' decision to leave their ancestral homelands for a foreign one is most times deliberate because there appears to be no better choice or option available at the point in time. However, in spite of the dogged resolve to abandon the traditional, biological home for a new, foreign one, migrants soon come to grips with the ambivalences of life occasioned by the fact of alienation, displacement, isolation, nostalgia, and hostility. They soon realise the fact that they do not belong there, and that they are aliens, the *Other*, or exiles, in the new homelands. In Antwerp, the four African women are exiles who do not *belong*, hence their inability to approach the law enforcement agents, such as the police, when things go wrong in their lives. Their life of nervousness and fear of being either deported or incarcerated, given their status as illegal migrants. This is probably the reason why they cannot summon the courage to report their ordeals at the hands of their madam to the police. To them, Madam knows all the officers in Antwerp and can have her way through any situation. However, the reality is that they are exiles, and so their status would not grant them the much-needed nerves to approach law enforcement agencies the way Belgian citizens would. This aligns with Edward Said's conceptualisation of exile as "a mind of winter in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable" (2000).

Exile is an experience of utter frustration and psychological torture. It does not guarantee placidity, safety or security. On Madam Kate's instruction, Sisi goes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Antwerp to obtain papers that would guarantee her stay (asylum) and freedom in Belgium. In spite of all the lies she tells to the embassy officials about how she is a Liberian and how she narrowly escaped being killed in the country's war, Sisi is denied asylum as the officials find that she is lying. Accordingly, she is given three days to pack her things and travel back to her

home country (OBSS, 182). Thus, as Said (cited earlier) posits, exile is a debilitating solitude, a loneliness, and a discontinuous state of being. It is an experience that engenders all-round displacement - physical, structural, ontological, and psychological (163).

Svetlana Boym aptly distinguishes two cardinal ways of giving shape and meaning to nostalgic feelings, which she calls restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. For her, restorative nostalgia places emphasis on “*nostos* and proposes to build the lost home and patch up the memory gaps, while reflective nostalgia thrives, essentially, on what she terms “*algia*”, which is the longing itself, and which, she believes, delays the homecoming “wistfully, ironically, desperately” (cited in Ada Savin, 2013). Boym further notes that while restorative nostalgia projects the absolute truth, reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. Going by this typology, it would be apt to deduce that exiles are preoccupied with restorative nostalgia only during the early days or period of their stay in the host land, when the thoughts and plans to return to the homeland still remain fresh and somewhat implementable, but as time progresses, the reality of reflective nostalgia soon dawns on them. At this point, the longing for homeland suffers constant deferment even as exiles come to realise the sheer impossibility of doing so. This is the situation with the foursome of Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce, whose plans to return to Lagos suffer perpetual deferment and remain a phantom, a mere wish in their persistently agitated minds. Their daily lamentations and agitations notwithstanding, Antwerp remains their home, especially so because the prospect of returning to Nigeria to have their dreams fulfilled remains largely contemplative and uncertain (OBSS, 240-245). Generally, however, the feeling of nostalgia and the possibility of return to the homeland are necessarily a function of positive changes and developments in the lives of the exile. Accordingly, as there are no positive or remarkable changes in the lives or fortune of these African migrants, their nostalgia remains reflective - eternally contemplated but constantly deferred.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined distance as a field of tension in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, with particular attention to the intersection of exilic and existentialist motifs. The novel presents migration not merely as a geographical movement from one location to another but as a complex experience of distance that produces profound psychological, cultural, social, and existential tensions. The research conceptualises exile as an existential condition in which the displaced individual must continually negotiate the difficult relationship between home and elsewhere, self and other, freedom and restraint, and the desire for meaning in an unpredictable and uncertain universe. The study reveals, through the experiences of the four African migrants, how separation from home can generate alienation, despair, identity crisis, and a precarious sense of belonging, while the harsh realities of displacement complicate the possibilities of freedom and individual choice. The existentialist motifs of absurdity, despair, freedom, responsibility, alienation, and death consequently illuminate the women’s struggle to create meaning within circumstances characterised by exploitation, uncertainty, and vulnerability. The study, therefore, argues that distance functions as a field of tension in which the exilic and existential dimensions of the characters’ experiences converge, and that the farther the novel’s protagonists become removed from the familiarity of home, the more intensely they confront questions of identity, agency, belonging, and existence. Unigwe’s novel aptly demonstrates that exile is not just a condition of finding oneself far away from one’s traditional homeland, but a profound existential condition in which the displaced individual must continually negotiate the difficult boundaries between home and elsewhere, freedom and constraint, hope and despair, and the desire for belonging.

### 6.1. Recommendations

The study recommends that Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* should be given greater critical attention for its exploration of the psychological and existential consequences of exile, particularly the ways in which physical, emotional, cultural, and psychological distance create tensions in the lives of displaced individuals. Moreover, scholars should employ interdisciplinary approaches that bring together existentialism, migration, exile, and diaspora studies in examining contemporary African literature; such approaches can further illuminate the

complex experiences of alienation, identity, despair, and the search for belonging. In addition, contemporary African scholars should continue to foreground the experiences of migrants, especially African women whose voices and struggles are often marginalised in discussions of migration and displacement. Finally, there is a need for greater attention to be paid to the relationship between geographical distance and inner existential displacement by subsequent researchers, since the two are shown to be mutually reinforcing dimensions of the migrant experience.

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