The Paradox of (Re)Inventing the West in the Nigerian Diasporic Fiction of Helon Habila, Chika Unigwe and Okey Ndibe

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ABSTRACT

Since its advent with the publication of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart in 1958, the modern Nigerian novel has engaged itself in the essentialist paradigm of protest. With the turn of the new millennium, however, there has emerged a transnational model in which scores of novels and short stories are written by younger writers on diasporic characters in Europe and America, away from the dogma of combating colonialism and neocolonialism. In what appears to be a manifesto statement of the new direction, Charles Nnolim writes in the influential journal, New Directions in African Literature, defining the new agenda to be the task of "re-inventing Europe and developing International themes in our Literature" just in the same way, he says, "Europe invaded Africa and the world with literature civilization, religion and technology". The literature arising from the new voluntary diaspora is therefore expected to be more purposefully equipped to retaliate the aggression of colonialism, than to romanticize "the strong-bronzed men or regal black/women" conceptualized by Conte Cullen in writings of the first black diaspora. This study is a cultural materialist interrogation of three Nigerian novels written in the second decade of the 21st century focusing on the quest for intellectual, economic and spiritual survival of Nigerian immigrants in the West. Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019) tells the story of a Nigerian intellectual along with other African immigrants caught in the complex debilitating web of multiculturalism and identify crisis. Chika Unigwe's on Black Sisters Street (2011) is a tale of four well-endowed Nigerian ladies fleeing poverty at home into sex-slavery in Belgium where they live in the shadow of fear and death. And Okey Ndibe's Foreign God's Inc (2017) is an account of an unemployed Nigerian immigrant with divine ancestral connection who chooses to steal his community's god and sell at a loss to a New York businessman. These three novels illustrate failed attempts by Nigerian immigrants to meaningfully integrate into Western Society, much less, re-inventing a commanding superior vision of a narrative at the expense of their host communities. They rather surrender their intellect, beauty and spirituality to the oppressive homogenizing influence of the divergent globalized culture in a more humiliating manner than those displaced characters in the literature of the first diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, neocolonialism, multiculturalism, globalization, Transnationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Of recent, there have been anxieties regarding the narrow canvas of African Literature which hitherto only oscillated between the postcolonial and the nationalist paradigm. While scholars like MukomaWa Thiongo (9) Al Bishak (35) and Thomas Hale (13) seek to expand its scope by reviving the precolonial literatures of Africa, a few others like Charles Nnolim (217), Dominic Thomas (228) and Ojaide (43) are excited about the expanding frontiers of African diasporic literature in the West. The new diaspora has arrived quite timely, not only as replacement for the old diaspora of the slave era which writings have been appropriated by the West, but as works of writers with a more concrete knowledge of Africa either because they were born on the continent or they spent their formative years there.

The postcolonial model readily avails itself to writers and critics as a logical process of decolonizing the mind of Africans and resisting the European encroachment on African socio-cultural fabric. From the Negritude

Movement among the French speaking West African writers in the 1930s to the English-speaking Archetypal anticolonial narrative initiated by Chinua Achebe in the late 1950s, modern African literature was united on the common ideological objective of postcoloniality. The need to defend the dignity and unity of the African people was paramount. Furthermore, with the attainment of independence for most African countries, the attention of writers changed slightly to focus on socio-political conditions of the new nations that were almost immediately plunged into the abyss of corruption, poverty, disillusionment and misery. Both the postcolonial and the nationalist literary traditions have been the dominant models of the writing and study of African literature before the turn of the new millennium.

This paper is concerned with Nigerian fiction written after the year 2000 to date, described variously as, "postcolony" "postnational," "transnational" "transcontinental", "Afropolitan" and "diasporic." This era encompasses a broad range of works written or set across nations, territories and continents. The European and American setting of most of these Nigerian novels may be of significance because of the history of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism that links these two continents with the African continent. But the twenty-first century also has its unique challenges and issues that more universal in nature. It is a century of terrorism. It began with a symbolic terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in September, 2011 popularly referred to as 9/11. Consequently, various wars were fought in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria against religious fundamentalism and perceived dictators. Then the Arab spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings, engulfed at least six nations of North Africa and the Middle East between 2009 and 2011.

While most of the countries South of the Sudan, had experienced relative peace, it was really, peace of the graveyard as they were run by governments that were corrupt and their people deprived of the basic's things of life. All these occurrences and conditions had caused both voluntary and involuntary migration of Africans to the West at an alarming rate, thus constituting a new wave of literature. Nigeria alone can boast of dozens of diasporic writers which canonical figures include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, Teju Cole, Helon Habila, Buchi Emecheta, Okey Ndibe, Chinelo Okparanta, Helen Oyeyemi, Taiye Selasi, Chris Abani, Ike Oguine and so on. So intense is their writing that Rebecca Fasselt expresses the fear of a possible "African exodus" to the West, an idea which she says exemplifies "the Migratory Movements from the Global South to the North and inter-continental return narratives to Africa" (75).

Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu's introductory study of the new Nigerian novel in the 21st century is impressed with its artistic sophistication. They along with other critics are bothered by what they regard as the depth of seriousness in handling big issues of society. Kachana Ugbabe, however looks at the Nigerian novel in the 21st century as a transnational model with a large turnover of books and authors, but without a clearly defined national or continental identity. The realization of this apparent loss of identity and the frustration of the agenda to expand the corpus of Nigerian literature may have motivated Nnolim to pronounce what is popularly regarded as the manifesto statement of Nigerian diasporic literature in the 21st century thus:

> Europe invaded Africa and the World with their civilization, religion and technology and all of us have since then been transfixed. What prevents the African writer in the 21st century from re-inventing Europe and from developing an international theme in our literature? the new African writer in this century is challenged to envision anew Africa, which has achieved parity (politically, technologically, economically and militarily) with Europe and America (8-9).

Technically, Nnolim urges African writers not to abandon the teaching responsibility of the nationalist writer, nor the burden to defend their postcolonial identity against the empire. Additionally, their new role is to invent a new order that could reverse the center-periphery arrangement at the globalized stage. This study will examine three Nigerian diasporic novels, namely: On Black Sisters Street [2009] by Chika Unigwe, Foreign Gods Inc. [2007] by Okey Ndibe and Traveler's [2019] by Helon Habila. The paradox of a formerly invaded culture reinforcing itself to reinvent the culture of its colonizer can best be looked at in the theoretical lens of cultural materialism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural materialism arises from the idea of Italian Philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, who as a former Marxist believes that it is the idea of hegemony, and not the economic base that determines the superstructure in society. He explains hegemony to be the intellectual and moral domination that the bourgeoisie have on society rather than economic base as understood by Karl Marx. As a result, Gramsci recognizes not just the dominant hegemony, but also the existence a counter-hegemonic narrative that could be formed to contradict political and cultural agents of any organisation or society. In his words, "hegemony is the exercise of thought, the acquisition of general ideas, the habit of connecting cause and effect, enlivened by the organisation" (Ramos 18). To him culture was an abstract intellectual product of the establishment developed to control society through educational indoctrination. Traditional intellectuals work to convince people of the virtues of capitalism and obtain their consent to capitalist rule.

In contradistinction to the dominant hegemony, other intellectuals work to help people develop an alternative narrative to the capitalist culture, by engaging in such populist cultural activities. The dominant hegemony and its counterforce operate through the instrumentality of discourse in the facouldian sense. Which means that discursive activities in society according to Michel Foucault, build up the driving force of society, and this can be explained in simple terms as such:

> A discourse is simply the language of society. It is the conglomeration of all kinds of writings-literary or non-literary, talks, thoughts, dramatic enactments, paintings, grafittis, movies, and indeed all cultural productions that convey the beliefs and the practices of society. An aggregation of a few or all of these representations give us a fair view of the thinking of any society, which means one form of discourse should not be privileged above the other. (Shija 300)

From the above, it would appear the idea of discourse is synonymous with ideology, but that is not exactly so. Ideology has a more totalizing mission and strategy as it scrumptiously mobilizes, even the downtrodden class, its victims to accept their socio-economic marginalization as just or God made. Discourse acts more like hegemony as it permits contrary views and practices. Whereas ideology means closure and unidirectional flow of power, hegemony emphasizes the inherent conflict involved in constructing networks of power through knowledge.

It is however Raymond Williams that formulated the theory of cultural materialism while studying the various theories of minority cultures like the women, the blacks and the LGBTQ in Britain in the 1950s. He further simplified Antonia Gramsci's idea of hegemony by developing new formations of thoughts which he calls the "structures of feelings." In particular he categorizes them into three, namely, "Dominant feelings", "Emergent feelings" and "Residual feelings." These structures of feelings refer to the different ways of thinking vying for attention at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the response to official discourse and its appropriation in literature or other forms of cultural productions. William uses the term "feelings" rather than thought to indicate that what is at stake in a literary text may not really be a final interpretation, but can be negotiated by either of groups reading between the lines.

The three novels under review here, Helon Habila's Travellers, Chika Unigwe's on Black Sisters' *Street* and Okey Ndike's *Foreign Gods, Inc* are novels written on Nigerian characters in diaspora in the West. They are cast in the Anglo-American novelistic traditions, but engage themes that eloquently convey both the "dominant" structure of feelings of the Western culture and the "Emergent feelings" of Nigerian immigrants living abroad. These are new cultural ideas and practices that are created constantly in society by minority groups and individuals, which can either be dominant in themselves or serve alternative or opposing feelings to the status quo. Of course the novels are also imbued with themes of "Residual" culture which are ideas considered as archaic but which are still useful in shaping society. In this regard cultural practices like organized religion, traditional idols worship, monarchy, and primordial kinship hold sway.

As we discuss the activities of African characters in the novel in the diaspora, we get access to their intentions and abilities or otherwise to "reinvent" the Western world as instructed by the Nnolim. In a recent coinage, those who navigate the West effectively by obtaining economic privilege of the upper middle class and reasserting a sense of self-worth are referred to as the Afropolitans. This phenomenon is explained by Bwesigye Bwa Nwesigire as thus:

> From the foregoing, five hallmarks of the postnational as Afropolitan school emerge. These are the acceptance of the use of English and the inheritance of Anglo-American aesthetics, the exploration of upper and middle-class lives that cross between the Anglo-American sphere and Africa, the transnational and the continental geographical setting, production and acclaim by the Western publishing industrial complex, and the apolitical nature of the themes explored in the National sphere. Afropolitan post nationalism is thus defined by thematic, geographical, aesthetic, class and material markers. (107)

Accordingly, the above definition rules out certain novels from the Afropolitan category, particularly those that focus on lower-class migrants, directly or indirectly engaging in political themes of the migrants' home countries. Such are described simply as transnational novels, and mostly interested in exploring the themes of the effects of colonialism, decolonialism, migration, economic and cultural globalization. The postcolonial aesthetic allure is too strong for most Nigerian diasporic writers to bear, hence most of them shun Afropolitanism and prefer to engage in the transnational option which enables them to provide a counter hegemonic argument. This paper shall consequently discuss three concepts that exemplify hegemonic views-migration, sex-slavery and religion-as well as the emergent structures of feelings put up by Nigerian migrant characters in the novels under review to counter them.

MIGRATION AND THE PARADOX OF GLOBALIZATION IN HELON HABILA'S TRAVELLERS

The idea of globalization has been perceived by many scholars as a historical event that began with the Industrial Revolution of the Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The new technologies of the time, particularly the steam boat engine gave rise to increased expedition of European travellers across the globe for trade and colonial activities. With technology and other aspects of modernity effectively encouraging worldwide adventures, trade relations and colonialization, it was possible also to instil a universal culture and consciousness through education, religious evangelism political ideologies and technology transfer across many territories.

Modernity with its enlightenment programme fostered a civilized lifestyle of freedom, universal morality, fundamental human rights and a free-market capitalist economy. As ignoble as colonialism and slave trade were, however, they encouraged trade relations, culture flows and religious evangelism. Nations became more and more interdependent on one another, while their citizens moved across borders to provide goods and services, undermining cultural, linguistic religions and political ideological diversities as the world became increasingly advanced in technology.

The latest wave of globalization experienced particularly at the turn of the new millennium has witnessed a stunning efficiency in global communication through digital telecommunication channels like the cable television, GSM, the internet air transportation, express trains and space exploration. Under this atmosphere, the apostles of globalization declare our world as a "global village" in which our diverse world is now more connected and independent place. So, while the capitalist West breaks all barriers of movement of finance capital to whatever destination it wants in the world and Africa is being told to adopt democracy and the free market economy in which their resources in oil and gas, solid minerals and agriculture are appropriated in the global economy, there is a veneer of global cooperation and understanding.

But as our discussion of Helon Habila's novel would prove, migration is not as mutually permissible for all world citizens as contemplated. The West controls the capital, dominates global markets and communication

technology, as well as directs the flows and influence of culture on other nations. Africa, on the other hand enmeshed in various states of political and economic instabilities, occasioned by poverty, famine, droughts, terrorism religious fundamentalism and wide spread wars over mining rights since the beginning of the 21st century. Africans are forced to migrate in droves to Europe and America in quest for survival. This trajectory is often hazardous and akin to the first wave of mobility of Africans to the West through slave trade. Some other immigrants, without compulsion, wilfully move to the West in search of education and gainful employment.

Helon Habila's novel, Travellers captures these two categories of immigrants. The unnamed protagonist of the novel exemplifies the group of immigrants who move to America as an Afropolitan. He is armed with a good education in his country Nigeria before moving to the US to pursue his postgraduate studies. He easily settles in America and becomes part of it. To prove his globalized psyche, he marries a caucasian American lady Gina, and is quite prepared to reinvent a new world in which any African could be an equal participant. His movement with his wife to Berlin in Europe where she has won a prestigious Zimmer fellowship for the Arts further enhances his pedigree as bonafide citizen of the world with prospects to conquer more territories. Similarly, the parents of Julius Maier, Mark's lawyer in the novel, are not of the same race. His father is from Burkina Faso in Africa while his mother is a German. The product of this marriage, just like the narrator is a confident resident of Berlin, a lawyer who renders legal services to Africans seeking asylum in Germany.

Although the narrator divorces with his wife, Gina, and finds himself in trouble arising from the complication of mistaking Karim's bag for his, he soon retraces his way to Nigeria through Tunisia. The narrator consequently goes back to the US to complete his PhD research and from there he goes to London to meet Portia his girlfriend. He comes home to his apartment one day and discovers it is under siege by protesters who are agitating against a Nigerian illegal immigrant Juma. The organisation hiding him contacts the narrator to help them hide Juma in his house in the wake of growing protest. The narrator accepts and Juma comes to stay with him. Another Afropolitan character in the novel is James Kariku, a revolutionary African writer who is confronted with the challenge of hostility, rejection, job loss and insecurity in his home country of Zambia. He is offered several fellowships and visiting lectureship positions in England and America. He moves on with his whole family to England but becomes unbearably homesick after ten years and he departs back to Zambia.

Conversely, there is a host of other characters who are forced into exile from African countries and are living in fear in Europe. Manu a medical doctor is a migrant from Libya who escapes death in a bitter war at his home. Security challenges in Libya lead to the closure of schools as parents withdraw their children, while teachers also flea for their dear lives. Manu's clinic is no longer patronized because people have deserted the city for fear of violence. Manu initially feels reluctant to migrate, asking, "but if I go, who will take care of the sick and the wounded?" to which his wife replies, "let the politicians take care of them" (65).

The account of the life of the Somali exile, Karim and family is even more pathetic. They are forced on exile from their war-torn country as a result of the indiscriminate killings around them. Karim laments bitterly that, "the country has changed. People shooting guns everyday on the streets. People go about in fear. Women are punished for very small reasons, like not covering their heads, or not marrying the person the mullahs say they must marry" (121). Karim's ten-year-old daughter, Aisha, is threatened to be forcefully taken into marriage by one of the militia commanders. Another exile, Juma is a Nigerian school teacher whose school is attacked by Bokoharam terrorists and the entire village where he lives burnt down. The principal of the school, along with his wife and three children are gruesomely murdered. Juma escapes from Nigeria, passes through the tortuous Libyan routes, suffers a shipwreck but miraculously survives to arrive in London.

From Habila's account of the lives of refugees and asylum seekers coming all over Africa into Europe, we observe that the concept of globalization is illusionary. The dominant structure of feeling in Western hegemony does not conceptualize globalization as an open sesame. The minority structure of feeling in the counter African hegemony however, still harbours the humanist ideas about the sanctity of life and the universal brotherhood of man. The African migrants fleeing from real danger at home who expect to be received with some degree of empathy and understanding are treated with humiliation. They react defiantly to

their inhuman treatment by authorities of these European nations. Characters like Mark, Eric, Stan and Uta occupy an abandoned church building as their residence, from where they go out regularly to protest and engage in sacrilegious activities. Mark desecrates the church with alcohol as he reads sacred passages from the Bible. These deliberate acts of desecration of the church demonstrate an affront on the deceptive Western hegemony which advocates a globalized human brotherhood but turns its back on vulnerable people in need. They organize rallies and protests as well as print handbills and grafittis on walls depicting: "No to Borders! No to Illegal Detention! Asylum is a Right! (43) Hence the point these transnational characters are making is that the excessive restrictions on European borders were an aberration of the very principles of globalization they preach.

At another level, Afropolitan characters like the unnamed narrator, the parents of Julius Maier as well as Manu and Hannah, respond to these acts of deglobalization by embarking on inter-racial marriages. These have embraced the people of the 'West and are living in peace with them. It is instructive that the narrator enrols to study the German language to imbibe the culture of the people as a way of consolidating his stay. He also steadily continues work on his PhD thesis to fulfil the legitimate cause that brings him to Europe.

SLAVERY AND THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET

Chika Unigwe's novel, On Black Sisters Street is basically an account of the cruel sex slavery in Europe, which effectively parodies the narrative of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in all ramifications. Both businesses commodified or are codifying human beings. They were (are) also conducted as a partnership between Western businessmen and their counterparts in Africa. The only difference, perhaps is that while the trans-Atlantic slavery was enforced by brute force, the 21st century sex-slaves willingly submit themselves to bondage with the mistaken belief that they were in quest for freedom in the globalized space.

As brutal as the idea of slavery is, it stems from the Western hegemony which incredibly combines well with humanitarianism and Christianity. The dominant structure of feeling enunciated by this narrative is that of inequality. There is no such thing as universal equality. Africans are continuously looked upon as belonging to the inferior race. All through history, powerful nations had always dominated weaker ones. The powerful undermine the political systems of weaker groups, disrespect their gods, annex their territories and establish a gross trade imbalance against them. European colonial powers sitting at the infamous Berlin conference in 1885-86, arbitrarily carved out new nations from hitherto existing kingdoms and ethnic empires in Africa without consulting citizens of those territories and took custody of their territories. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in whatever form is inevitably that of inequality, the master versus the slave and the civilized versus the primitive. Unigwe's novel aptly exemplifies this slave hegemony that is seemingly supported by even the victims of the trade in the twenty-first century. This consciousness can be noticed in both the Belgium community and among members of the Nigerian syndicate fostering it.

The novel, On Black Sister's Street is basically the story of Sisi, more than the other three female characters. She is the only character amongst her colleagues that courageously stands out and takes steps to escape from slavery. Sisi, whose real name is Chisom looks unlikely to be a slave in the twenty-first century having been well educated with a degree in Business Administration and whose father is a low-income civil servant. She is unable to secure a job two years after graduation. She traverses many government and public sector offices in Lagos looking for employment to no avail. Desperation sets in when it becomes obvious that it was her responsibility to help her parents escape from poverty and to sponsor her siblings in school. It is at this moment that she meets the human trafficker, Senghor Dele, by chance on the streets of Lagos and she succumbs to the bait of getting her employment in Antwerp, Belgium.

> "I fit get you inside Belgium Antwerp. I get plenty connections there. Plenty, plenty…..But I no dey do charity o. So, it go cost you. Taty thousand euro it go cost you o…..when you go there, begin work, you go begin day pay. International payment we dey call am! (33-34). (Shija 300)

As the modern-day equivalent of African native kings who sold their subjects or captives into slavery during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Dele along with Segun and Madam, runs a well coordinated sex-slavery syndicate for many years. The heavy charge of thirty thousand euros placed on their sex-slaves to pay before securing their independence could take them several years of active youthful age until very well into their middle age. The idea of slavery only dawns on their victims upon arrival in Belgium when Madam pronounces "Ah hand over your passport. From now until your debt is paid, I am in charge of it" (119). As a true slave in a vulnerable state, their passports are confiscated, they lose their identities as they are given other names. They become sex commodities put on display in a glass pavilion in the red-light district of Antwerp.

Writing on the first wave of slavery, Katherine Mckittrick says that slavery was predicated "…right from the slave ship and beyond, and on various practices of spatialized violence that targeted black bodies and profited from erasing the black sense of place" (948). We observe such conditions of deprivation against these sex slaves assembled from Africa and transported to Europe. Equally striking is the prototypical scenario the author describes the display of sex slaves for auction in Antwerp, being so analogous to Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Unigwe writes:

> 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 are not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off their tongues. Nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with the odd combinations of consonants that make African names difficult for fragile tongues. (278)

And Stowe writes:

> A slave house in New Orleans is a house externally not much unlike many others, kept with neatness; and where every day you may see arranged, under a sort of shed along the outside, sign of property sold within. Then you shall be courteously entreated to call and examine, and shall find an abundance of husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and young children, to be sold separately, or in lots, to suit the convenience of the purchaser. (353-4)

Apart from their loss of identity, slaves are treated as interchangeable or disposable commodities. The other three female slave characters in the novel go through the same conditions of servitude and are even more frightened to think about their freedom than Sisi. Madam tells them emphatically that "all you need to know is that you're personal non grata in this country. Yu do not exist. Not here" (230). It is significant to note that none of them is captured into slavery. They wilfully opt for it, when their conditions of living in Nigeria became unbearable for them. Efe is a daughter of a drunker, lowly paid labourer. Her mother dies when she is young. She is unable to go to school nor learn a skill. She assumes the responsibility of looking for money through any means to take care of her younger siblings. At the age of sixteen, she is lured by the middle-aged Titus into bed and she becomes pregnant. Titus denies responsibility of the pregnancy and runs away. Efe gives birth to a baby boy who becomes an additional burden to her poor family. Her father pays no attention to her, but she vows to work hard to take care of her baby. It is while working as a cleaner at an office in Lagos that she meets the trafficker, Dele who offers to give her a job in Belgium.

The story of the third sex-slave, Ama, is also that of parental neglect and child abuse. She is sexually abused by her step father right from her eighth birthday. Her mother does not believe her when she complains; she would rather stick to the false story of her pretentiously religious husband, Brother Cyril. She longs to go to school, but is unable to pass her school certificate examination. She is taunted and frustrated by her stepfather as a good for nothing girl until she leaves Enugu to be a house help for her aunt, Mama Eko in Lagos. Here again the ubiquitous Dele discovers her and finds her a willing candidate for job placement in Belgium.

The last of the quartet is perhaps the only lady that is not Nigerian. Alek, who is rechristened Joyce is a Sudanese Orphan who loses her parents in a terrorist attack by the janjaweed militia during the Sudanese civil

war. She is gang-raped by members of the militia and is left half dead. A Nigerian peacekeeper serving at the United Nations camp in Sudan, Polycarp, rescues her and takes her to Lagos with the intention of marrying her. The marriage plan is however rejected by Polycarp's parents who would not want their first son getting married to a foreigner. Polycarp consequently consults Dele and offers Alek to him for prostitution in Belgium.

These three transnational characters, Efe, Ama and Alek, unlike the Afropolitan Sisi, are genuinely compliant to the slave mentality inspired by Western claim to racist superiority. They are made to share one apartment at Zwartezustertradt under the panoptic watch of Segun from where they constantly face humiliation, violence and cruelty with stoic equanimity. They are given out to different kinds of people every night for sexual intercourse, while the money is paid to someone else. Efe confirms that: "We're not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals." (289)

Under this difficult situation, however, Sisi stands out as the character with a counter hegemony as she demonstrates her passive resistance to the dominant structure of feeling. Her initial interrogation of Dele at the point of her recruitment in Lagos prepares the reader for her defiant approach. On arrival at Antwerp, Sisi is assigned to wait around a pub to be attracted to who customers. She soon dislikes that schedule, but because she is still enslaved to Dele and must pay five hundred euros monthly to offset her indebtedness to Dele, she complies with further directives to be displayed as a prostitute at the red-light district. However, her interest in prostitution continues to wane by each passing day until she finally gets a very understanding boyfriend Luc with whose helps she opts out of prostitution and gets married. She pays dearly with her life for this audacity to challenge the entrenched hegemony that validates slavery. Segun is sent to murder her and he does that successfully. Sisi dies for daring to interrogate the system. The other three ladies learn their lessons about the danger of resisting the system and are rewarded modestly at the end of their many years of sex-slavery.

RELIGION AND THE PARADOX OF CAPITALISM IN OKEY NDIBE'S FOREIGN GODS INC.

The main bone of contention in Okey Ndibe's Foreign gods inc is religion. Both the Christian religion and the African Traditional Religions (ATR) are examined as they shift from the precolonial and colonial stages to the postcolonial global stage. But first, it must be understood that Africans are by nature, intrinsically religious. Many scholars in the field's anthropology, sociology and theology find it difficult to separate secular activities from spiritual practices in traditional African society. Schuurman states that "religion constitutes the main fabric of African societies and it is intertwined with their general existence." (373) Apart from the large organised religions like Christianity and Islam practiced in Africa today. Africans originally were engaged in African Traditional Religion which was constituted around a pantheon of esoteric gods found among various tribes and ethnic groups. These are communal spiritual activities without known individual founders and no written scriptures.

Christianity on the other hand, was brought to Africa by missionaries from Europe as an organized religion founded on the principles of enlightenment. It came along with modernity, colonialism and capitalism, all of which were motivated by the industrial revolution in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dominant religions hegemony at the time of colonialism was to depict Christianity as a superior religion in Africa. Christianity was organised as a religion of the universal God whose dealing with the humans permitted them to engage in secular economic activities based of money and market forces. The Europeans viewed African religions as primitive, superstitious and fetish.

In reaction to this standoff, the first generation of African novelists presented a counter hegemonic view of Christianity being hypocritical and dishonest to the ideals humanity. Works of Novelists like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah and Sembane Ousman as described by Halima Shehu highlight mainly the adverse impact of colonialism and Christianity on the people and the Africa society.

> For most of these writers, the tendency has been to represent the presence of Christianity primarily in terms of its contribution to the crisis of identity and its effects on the cohesion of society.

> Ironically, the themes, imagery and structures of their texts which influenced by Euro-Christian Literary traditions. This influence has similarly seeped into critical discussions which in turn have resulted in the canonization of certain texts which reflect the aesthetic practices and values of the West. (107)

In his twenty-first century, novel however, Okey Ndibe presents a shift in the perception of the two religions from a standoff position to that of a binary pair held together by capitalist values. There is also an intriguing swap of roles played by supporters of the two faiths. The Euro-American businessmen are assiduously mopping up gods from foreign territories and exporting them to the West and selling them for huge financial gains. On the other side, the African Pentecostal preachers are importing and entrenching in the poverty-stricken people of Africa, the American brand of prosperity gospel which is creating enormous wealth for preachers.

Okey Ndibe's Foreign gods inc puts both religions on display and we are able to see their metamorphosis from their colonial status of militancy to their present state of liberal submission to capitalism. The harbinger of the Christian Church in Utonki is the white English priest, Reverend Walter Stanton whose arrival in the village is described ominously by the author "as the day the sun had cast its evil eye on the world" (99). He came for evangelism with a troop of soldiers armed with guns. Although he had announced that he had a message of salvation to a people in darkness, his menacing appearance alone sets the people of Utonki ready to resist him. Rev. Stanton leads these men deep into the sacred mangrove reserved for Ngene, the Utonki God of war, to cut down trees to build the Church for his God. The people interrogate several aspects of the gospel he preaches, particularly his message about the virgin birth of Jesus. The Utonki people believe that the priest does not even "know how to tell a good lie." They cherish the overwhelming presence of their god, Ngene, whom they could see and appreciate his qualities as a fire breathing god of war. But they cannot understand the eerie silence of Reverend Stanton's God who "likes to be invisible" like someone who takes to hiding because he is unable to pay a debt. (103)

The villagers further satirize the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary, wondering why the Christian could be so un-father-like to deliver his son to go through such a punishment. "So why did your God hand over His son to be made a jest of? Why allow efulefu to shred his son's clothes and kill him on a tree? Why do I call them efulefu? Because no sensible man will kill a god's son, even if the god asked him." (105) All these display of rationality by questioning magical Biblical stories sent Reverend Stanton into a rage and regular fights with his few converts.

> Stanton seemed to fly through the air before landing on Jacob. So ferocious was the rush that the Bible loosened from his grip, flow in the air, somersaulted, and then landed bang, on a female's convert's head. His knuckles, knees and chest smocked into Jacob's bent body. The interpreter reeled backward and then collapsed onto the floor. Unable to check his own fall, Stanton pitched forward and landed top the space-bodied interpreter. The converts let out a collective gasp and then looked on in hushed shock. Stanton gathered up himself and sat astride his splayed interpreter…..Three dribbles of blood dropped in quick succession from Jacob's nose into his shirt. He stanched the flow from his left cuff. (107-8)

Of course, Ngene, being a god of war, could not leave any challenge lying low. He is the god that "belched thunder….and flashed lightening." (360) He fights back and drowns the white man, Reverend Stanton in this miserable melancholic scene at River Utonki in captured by the author committing suicide:

> He was still throwing water on his body and over his shoulder when some women and children arrived to fetch water. They were astounded to find him naked. They were shocked to find his penis even smaller than they had imagined. The children directed shy glances at him until the woman hushed them away. With the children gone, the woman began to make heckling sounds. They sneered and leered. They groaned and moaned. They grunted and gasped in mock-amorous hunger.

> Stanton appeared oblivious. At any rate, he ignored them.…He shut his eyes readied, and plunged…Stanton never surfaced. (126-7)

If the two faiths were at daggers drawn with each other when they first got in touch in the colonial era on account of their mutual righteous indignation, they became equally subservient to the force of money capitalism in the twenty-first century. The novel is therefore woven around a dominant hegemony of religiosity which is determined and promoted with money and modernity. Increasingly, the Christian religion shifts from its conservative ways of preparing souls for the life hereafter, to the ephemeral and populist ways of postmodern living.

The traditional religion here represented by the Ngene totem is no longer seen as repulsive and worthy of destruction, but as one of the figurine that could be displayed in shops in New York and be sold at high cost. Both Africans and the people of the West actively complement each other in commodifying various objects and practices of the two religions. Pastor Uka, who is evidently semi-literate, puts up a bill board advertising the activities of his ministry as "MAITY DEEDS WORLD INTERNATIONAL REDEEMERS CHURCH. THEN IN SMALLER PRINTS: COME TO BE PROSPARED, RELEACED FROM YOKES AND STANIC ATTACKS, WOMBS OPENED MIRACULOUS DELIVERANCE, DEVINE WANDERS!!! IN JESUS MAITY NAME!!!!" (144) Pastor Uka successfully recruits Ike's mother and sister as his ardent disciples. He also turns their hearts against Ike's grandmother, Nne, and Uncle, Osuakwu who are followers of the Ngene. "Your uncle and grandmother are grandmothers in the demonic world. Your uncle is like Ahab, your grandmother like Jezebel. Both of them are worshippers of Baal." (163) Speaking confidently and condescendingly like someone advertising a product to a doubting customer, the pastor declares:

> Look, when God called me to serve, he promised to use me in mighty ways. He has used me to release thousands from bondage. He has used me to heal thousands from bondage. He has used me to heal hundreds of sick people. When I hold crusades, the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb talk. Barren women have children, cancer disappears. Diabetes is cancelled. In his mighty name, I've raised people from the death. And he's used me to prosper a lot of people. (165)

It is at this point that Pastor Uka directs Ike, the poor cab driver from New York to donate the sum of fifty thousand dollars to his ministry if he wanted to be a millionaire. "God is asking you to sow fifty thousand dollars to build him a church here. If you obey, you'll become a millionaire. As simple as that." (164)

Pastor Uka's parallel in the propagation of the other religion is Mark Gruels of New York. He runs a gallery at 19 Vance Street in New York where caved images of foreign gods are curated and sold to art collectors. Gruels boasts of acquiring deities from all over the world, particularly from third world countries. He presents his message with the sense of a condensing businessman and with scant reverence to the sanctity of religion. His words to Ike over the deal to move the Ngene from Nigeria to the US is analogous to the human trafficking narrative rendered in Chika Uniqwe's novel, On Black Sisters' Street. He says:

> In a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund. Deep down, Ike felt it was a lot of mumbo jumbo, fanciful but meaningless. No, he was not himself convinced of its soundness. Still, he made it serve. (64)

It is significant to note that Ike participates in the theft and sale of his people's deity, nonetheless, because of deprivation and the demands of capitalism. His action is like the subservient transitional role played by earlier African kings who facilitated the sale of Africans into slavery. As expected, Ike fulfils his side of the bargain, but he is cheated, as his god is undervalued and fails to recover his expenses of the trip to Africa.

Gruel's shop where foreign gods are sold in New York is symbolic of the global capitalist World Trade Center that controls commerce throughout the World. The unimaginable act of commodifying here assumes a normative aura, just like the denunciation of the sanctity of human beings in Unigwe's novel. Religion is

placed on commercial scale and sold to willing buyers with scant reference to the life hereafter. There is a clear loss of faith in both religions, as they are now sites of economic activities and survival.

This dominant hegemony is brilliantly summarized in the following confessions by Ike:

> We are supposed to be living in this new global setting – a village, as many call it. In college, I took classes where buzzwords were "synergy", "hybridity", "affinities", "multivalency", "border lessness", "transculturality", what's not. My sister lives in Onitsha, near my village, but she has internet access. A gallery somewhere in this city buys and sells deities from Africa and other parts of the world. Many American companies are selling stuff to people in my village. They are certainly selling stuff to me, to lots of people who speak the way I do. (55)

Against this dominant capitalist mindset, however, there is a counter hegemony held by some characters in the novel who still believe in the sanctity of religion. Ike returns to Nigeria with the thought that Ngene "is now a retired god, a slumberous deity in limbo" (169), but he discovers there were still some avid wealthy adherents frolicking in the Ngene shrine:

Freshly polished, the shrine's earthen wall glowed and two cars parked outside the grounds…. gleaned in their white interior and ash interior. One was a Mercedes-Benz, and the other a Toyota 4 Runner. In the front seats of both cars sat a driver and a police officer, their seats reclined…. There were several men in the shrine-their voices and silences touched him. (173)

While the group of Ngene believers led by Osuakwu, Agbusi, Akwuniko, Iji and Jideofo constitute a counter-force to the new Christian materialist ideology, another group of Pastor Ike's followers are planning to invade the Ngene shrine and burn it down with fire. These are however, feeble thoughts that are nurtured by minority elements that cannot distract the profit-motive Christianity or the thoroughly diminished gods of the people.

CONCLUSION

There are two common denominators that can be drawn from the three themes of migrancy, sex-slavery and commodification of religion drawn respectively from the novels of Helon Habila, Chika Unigwe and Okey Ndibe examined in this paper. First of all,, there is a false assumption that globalization is a free for all superhighway trodden by all and sundry across the nations. Then secondly, there is a discovery that slavery, colonialism and domination were synonymous and had not ended even as the world continues to talk about freedom and democracy.

In Helon Habila's novel, the hundreds of thousands of immigrants fleeing wars, dictatorship and economic hardships from Africa are denied asylum or comfortable living in the West. There are however those who deftly break the barriers by getting married to their American or European partners or learning to become like them, who get assimilated into the middleclass life of the West. Chika Unigwe's account of the prostitution career of her four female characters from Africa is indeed a classic account of modern-day slavery, parodying the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is actively sanctioned and sustained by the dominant Western hegemony.

On the theme of religion treated in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign gods inc,* there is a recreation of the fragmented and commercialized world view of postmodernism in which the practices of both the Christian and African traditional Religion are commodified. Both the colonizer and the colonized have swapped roles and are using each others religion and their tropes to make money for themselves.

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