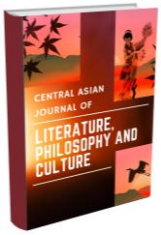

CENTRAL ASIAN JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, AND CULTURE

https://cajlpc.casjournal.org/index.php/CAJLPC
Volume: 07 Issue: 03 | July 2026 ISSN: 2660-6828

Article

Commodified Hope: Migration, Gender, and the Moral Economy of Trafficking in Contemporary African Fiction

Julius Nsirim AKANI*[1], Innocent Loveday Adindu[2]

1,2. Department of English Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt
*Correspondance: julius.akani@uniport.edu.ng

Citation: AKANI, J. N., Adindu, I. L. Commodified Hope: Migration, Gender, and the Moral Economy of Trafficking in Contemporary African Fiction. Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture 2026, 7(3), 63-75.

Received: 20th Mar 2026
Revised: 05th Apr 2026
Accepted: 20th Apr 2026
Published: 12th May 2026

Abstract: Trafficking persists not only because people are forced to move, but because they are made to believe that movement is the only viable path to survival. It thrives in the charged space where aspiration meets constraint, and where hope itself becomes a tradable resource. This article examines the dynamics of human trafficking in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Kwei Quartey's *Last Seen in Lapaz*, arguing that trafficking operates as a moral economy in which gendered precarity, migration desire, and economic vulnerability converge. Moving beyond dominant frameworks that cast trafficked women solely as passive victims, the study foregrounds the complex interplay of agency, coercion, and aspiration that structures their experiences. Drawing on recent interdisciplinary scholarship on migration, labour, and trafficking, the article introduces the concept of "commodified hope" to explain how imagined futures are mobilised, priced, and exploited within transnational and intra-African trafficking networks. It demonstrates how both novels refract trafficking not merely as an act of violence, but as a system sustained by debt, surveillance, and the circulation of power between victims and intermediaries. By analysing narrative patterns of recruitment, bodily commodification, and structural control, the study reveals how trafficking is embedded in broader socio-economic conditions rather than isolated criminal acts. The article concludes that contemporary African fiction offers a critical lens for rethinking trafficking as a relational and systemic phenomenon, one that implicates not only traffickers but also the socio-economic structures and aspirations that make exploitation possible. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates by reframing trafficking as an economy of desire as much as an economy of coercion.

Keywords: Commodified Hope, Human Trafficking, Migration Imaginaries, Gendered Precarity, African Fiction, Moral Economy, Coerced Mobility

1. Introduction

Trafficking persists not only because people are forced to move, but because they are made to believe that movement is the only viable grammar of survival. It unfolds within a tense convergence of desire and deprivation, where imagined futures are rendered more persuasive than present realities, and where hope itself becomes an economic instrument. Contemporary debates have often stabilised trafficking within the language of criminality, victimhood, and rescue, yet such framings, while necessary, remain insufficient to grasp the deeper logics that sustain the phenomenon. What if trafficking is not merely a rupture in social order but a predictable outcome of it? What if the very structures that promise mobility and prosperity are the same ones that quietly manufacture vulnerability? These

questions push the discussion beyond surface description and demand a more deliberate engagement with trafficking as a patterned feature of contemporary inequality.

Within African contexts, these tensions take on a particular urgency, shaped by uneven development, fragile labour markets, and persistent narratives of departure. Migration here is rarely a neutral act; it is imagined, rehearsed, and desired long before it is attempted. Recent studies show that mobility is often pursued with awareness of risk, suggesting that vulnerability does not cancel agency but complicates it [1][2]. Yet this introduces a difficult question: how do we speak of choice when the range of available options is already narrowed by economic pressure and social expectation? Trafficking feeds on this narrowing, drawing strength from the gap between aspiration and access. It is in this space that promises become persuasive, and persuasion becomes a form of control. Any account that ignores this pre-migratory landscape risks mistaking effect for cause.

In *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Last Seen in Lapaz*, trafficking does not appear as an isolated criminal act but as part of a broader social process that draws individuals into its orbit. The women in these narratives are neither passive victims nor fully autonomous actors; they operate within constrained fields of possibility, making decisions that are at once calculated and compelled. Their trajectories are shaped by need, but also by imagination—by what they believe life elsewhere might offer. These novels resist the temptation to simplify, instead presenting trafficking as a layered experience where coercion and consent intersect in uneasy ways. Such portrayals complicate dominant frameworks and align with emerging scholarship that questions rigid distinctions between victimhood and agency [3]. The result is a narrative field that invites interpretation rather than closure.

At the centre of this article is a deliberate shift in emphasis: from trafficking as the sale of bodies to trafficking as the circulation of hope. The argument here is not that material exploitation is secondary, but that it is sustained by something less visible yet equally powerful—the management of expectation. Earlier feminist analyses have shown how capitalist systems commodify women's bodies and labour [4], and that insight remains crucial. Yet it does not fully explain why individuals enter exploitative systems in the first place, or why such systems continue to regenerate themselves. More recent work suggests that exploitation is often entangled with aspiration, especially within migration economies where the promise of transformation carries real weight [5]. What emerges, then, is a more unsettling picture: one in which hope is not simply a response to hardship but a mechanism through which hardship is organised and extended.

This raises a set of contestations that cannot be ignored. Can trafficking still be read primarily through the lens of coercion, or does that framing obscure the role of desire in shaping migratory decisions? Do rescue narratives clarify the problem, or do they risk reproducing simplified distinctions that leave underlying structures intact? And how might African fiction, with its attention to lived experience and narrative nuance, offer a different vocabulary for thinking about exploitation? These questions are not posed for rhetorical effect alone; they signal the limits of existing approaches and point toward the need for a more layered analysis. To stay with them is to acknowledge that trafficking is not a singular problem with a singular cause, but a field of tensions that demands careful navigation.

The discussion that follows stays close to the textures of the selected novels while placing them in conversation with current debates on migration, labour, and gender. Rather than treating the texts as illustrations of pre-existing theories, they are read as sites where ideas are tested, strained, and sometimes reworked. Attention is given to recurring patterns—how migration is imagined, how bodies are valued, how control is exercised, and how roles shift within trafficking networks. Through this, the article develops the idea of "commodified hope" as a way of naming the process by which imagined futures are

drawn into circuits of exchange. This concept allows for a more integrated account of trafficking, one that keeps structure, agency, and desire in view at the same time.

The aim is not to resolve the tensions identified earlier, but to hold them long enough to see what they reveal. Trafficking, in this reading, is not only about domination but about the organisation of possibility—who gets to imagine a different life, and at what cost. By returning to *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Last Seen in Lapaz* with this in mind, the article opens a space for thinking about exploitation in ways that are less settled but more attentive to the conditions that make it endure.

2. Materials and Methods

Using a qualitative interpretive approach that draws on interdisciplinary literary and socio-cultural analysis, this chapter explores how On Black Sisters Street and Last Seen in Lapaz portray trafficking, migration, and gendered precarity. Based on migration studies, feminist political economy, and critical social theory, the methodology seeks to explain how trafficking is not simply criminal activity but a system of related and ongoing aspiration, structural inequality, and mobility constrainment. Employing close textual analysis of characterization, narrative voice, spatial mobility, dialogue, and symbolism of labour, debt, surveillance, and bodily commodification, the research examines how the selected literary texts address topics including global capitalism, neoliberalism, and socio-political injustices. The tool of "commodified hope" is also especially crucial, outlining the particular concept of "future" together with the desires of migration and how it becomes a particular commodity that is inserted into the devices of governmentality for purposes of economic exploitation. It goes on to apply interpretive discourse analysis to explore the novel's language of migration aspiration, vulnerability, coercion and survival, showing how hope, agency and exploitation intersect. The texts selected are intentionally selected for their complex representations of trafficking networks, migratory imaginaries and gendering experiences in contemporary African contexts. The methodology also activates recent interdisciplinary work on migration, labour precarity, and trafficking in order to ground the close reading in wider socio-economic and political discussions. The paper investigates how trafficking is discursively and socially produced as a moral and economic system where mobility, desire, labour and structure of inequality intersect, generating the conditions for exploitation and levels of governed precarity that produce the need for movement and migration itself.

3. Results and Conclusion

Conceptual Clarifications: Commodification, Mobility, and the Grey Grammar of Trafficking

To begin with, "trafficking" in this study is not approached as a self-evident legal or moral category but as a contested analytical field in which law, political economy, and migration practice continually intersect and destabilise one another. What, then, distinguishes coerced movement from economically pressured mobility in contexts where survival itself is structured by precarity? Can the language of "crime" fully capture a phenomenon that is also embedded in labour markets, gendered inequalities, and transnational aspiration systems? These questions are not rhetorical embellishments; they expose the inadequacy of overly stable binaries in contemporary trafficking discourse. Recent scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that victim/perpetrator frameworks often flatten the complexity of migrant trajectories, especially where agency is exercised under constraint rather than in conditions of freedom [6][7]. In this study, therefore, trafficking is conceptualised as a continuum of mobility relations rather than a discrete event. The analytical implication is that exploitation does not cancel agency; it reorganises it under asymmetrical conditions of global inequality. What appears as deviation may, in fact, be structurally normal within contemporary migration economies.

Building from this instability, the concept of "commodified hope" becomes central not as rhetorical ornamentation but as an explanatory framework for understanding how aspiration itself becomes economically and socially organised. Hope, in this sense, is not a passive emotional state but an active migratory force shaped by uneven development, digital imaginaries of success, and transnational comparisons of life chances. But how does hope become something that can be priced, brokered, and ultimately exploited? Who benefits when aspirations are channelled into risky mobility circuits that often exceed migrants' control? Migration scholarship has increasingly shown that aspiration is not simply individually generated but structurally produced through global inequality regimes and neoliberal narratives of mobility [8][9]. Within this framing, trafficking ceases to be an external distortion of migration and instead becomes one of its embedded outcomes. Hope is not eliminated in this process; it is reorganised into an economic resource that can be leveraged by intermediaries, recruiters, and informal labour networks. The critical shift here is subtle but significant: the object of analysis is no longer only movement, but the production of desire that makes movement meaningful in the first place.

Closely connected to this is the need to unsettle the rigid distinction between "forced" and "voluntary" migration, a distinction that continues to shape both policy discourse and legal classification despite its analytical limitations. What does voluntariness mean when economic survival is contingent on leaving? Can consent be meaningfully isolated from structural compulsion in contexts where opportunity is unevenly distributed across space and class? These questions point toward a conceptual impasse in which legal categories struggle to capture lived realities. Contemporary feminist and migration scholars have therefore argued for a continuum-based understanding of mobility in which agency is neither denied nor romanticised but situated within relational structures of constraint [10][11]. In this study, that position is extended further to argue that agency itself becomes a resource within trafficking systems—mobilised, negotiated, and sometimes strategically deployed under conditions of limited choice. The migrant subject is thus neither reducible to victimhood nor fully autonomous; rather, they inhabit shifting positions of negotiation within unequal power relations. It is precisely this instability that makes trafficking analytically difficult to isolate and politically difficult to resolve.

At a further conceptual level, this study foregrounds the institutional dimension of trafficking, particularly the paradox that systems designed to prevent exploitation may simultaneously participate in its reproduction. Anti-trafficking frameworks, border enforcement regimes, and humanitarian interventions do not merely respond to trafficking; they actively shape the categories through which trafficking becomes visible, legible, and governable. This raises a difficult question: to what extent do institutional responses to trafficking produce new forms of vulnerability by redefining who counts as deserving of protection? Critical institutional analyses suggest that legal and humanitarian systems often generate forms of dependency and conditional recognition even as they seek to offer rescue [12][13]. In this sense, trafficking cannot be separated from the governance structures that define it. The moral economy of intervention becomes part of the phenomenon itself, shaping outcomes in ways that are not always intended but are nevertheless structurally significant. This complicates any simplistic opposition between harm and remedy, exposing instead a field of overlapping intentions, effects, and institutional logics.

Finally, these conceptual clarifications converge on a broader theoretical claim: trafficking must be understood as a system of organised inequality in which aspiration, labour, mobility, and governance are continuously entangled. If one insists on clarity, it must be a clarity that recognises contradiction rather than eliminating it. What does it mean, for instance, to speak of "exploitation" in a world where survival itself often requires participation in precarious and informal economies? How do we theorise suffering

without erasing the strategic decisions embedded within it? These tensions are not peripheral; they are constitutive of the phenomenon under study. By refusing overly simplified binaries, this study positions trafficking within a broader political economy of mobility in which hope, constraint, and institutional regulation operate simultaneously. The conceptual outcome is not resolution but analytical precision: trafficking is best understood as a dynamic field of commodified aspiration, constrained agency, and institutionalised governance.

Migration Imaginaries: Desire, Mobility, and the Architecture of Anticipated Life

At the heart of contemporary trafficking debates lies a conceptual oversight that is rarely acknowledged with sufficient seriousness: migration does not begin with making movement, it begins with imagination. What does it mean to leave a place one has not yet physically departed from, but has already emotionally and economically reconfigured in one's mind? How do individuals come to recognise "elsewhere" as preferable, achievable, or even necessary for survival? These questions matter because they shift attention away from border crossings and enforcement regimes toward the deeper social production of desire. Recent scholarship increasingly shows that migration is not merely a response to deprivation but a structured orientation toward imagined futures shaped by inequality, media circulation, and everyday narratives of success [14][15]. Within this framing, trafficking cannot be properly understood without first examining how mobility becomes thinkable as a life project. The problem is not only that individuals move under conditions of risk, but that risk itself becomes normalised within aspirational economies of survival.

This immediately raises a more unsettling question: who produces the imagination of "elsewhere" that sustains migratory desire across different social spaces? Is aspiration simply an individual psychological drive, or is it shaped by transnational storytelling, remittance economies, returnee performances of success, and digital infrastructures of comparison? In many West African contexts, migration is not an isolated decision but a socially embedded expectation tied to family obligations, gendered responsibility, and community evaluations of worth. Acién González demonstrates that migration projects are often constructed collectively long before physical departure, with peers, relatives, and intermediaries shaping what counts as a "viable life trajectory." Yet this collective construction is not neutral. It reflects uneven distributions of opportunity in which certain futures appear more accessible than others, even when they are structurally precarious. The implication is that aspiration should not be treated as private fantasy but as socially organised expectation produced within unequal worlds of possibility.

Within this context, trafficking emerges less as an external disruption of migration systems and more as one of their internal possibilities, embedded within the architecture of aspirational mobility itself. If migration is already structured by inequality, informal brokerage, and uneven access to safe pathways, then the boundary between "voluntary" and "exploited" movement becomes increasingly unstable. At what point does aspiration become vulnerability, and at what point does vulnerability become exploitation? Can we meaningfully separate the moment of desire from the structural conditions that shape its expression? Williamson argues that neoliberal migration regimes actively produce aspirational subjects who are encouraged to interpret mobility as self-realisation, even when the material conditions of such mobility are deeply precarious. From this perspective, trafficking does not interrupt migration; it extends its internal logic under intensified conditions of inequality. The analytical shift is therefore decisive: exploitation is not an external contamination of migration systems but one of their recurring outcomes.

At another level, migration imaginaries are shaped not only by economic deprivation but also by symbolic hierarchies that define what counts as a "good life." Which lives are rendered visible as desirable, and which are rendered stagnant, disposable, or unworthy of investment? These symbolic distinctions matter because they shape decision-making long before physical movement occurs. Media representations, diasporic success

narratives, and digitally circulated images of prosperity function as evidence of alternative life possibilities, even when those possibilities are statistically limited or structurally constrained. Acién González emphasises that these imaginaries should not be reduced to illusion; rather, they are socially validated expectations reinforced through repetition, communal affirmation, and institutional silence regarding structural risk. This complicates simplistic interpretations of migration as either irrational desperation or fully informed rational choice. Instead, aspiration must be understood as a structured response to uneven distributions of life chances.

The conceptual difficulty, then, is not whether aspiration exists, but how it is organised, circulated, and monetised across transnational networks. If hope is shaped through inequality, it cannot be treated as an innocent motivational force detached from political economy. Instead, it functions as part of an anticipatory system in which individuals are encouraged to invest emotionally, socially, and financially in mobility projects whose risks are unevenly distributed and often obscured at the point of decision. Within this system, trafficking becomes intelligible not only as deception after departure but as the exploitation of already structured expectations before movement occurs. This is where the concept of "commodified hope" becomes analytically productive: hope is not merely manipulated in transit but is pre-structured as a resource that can be brokered, packaged, and sold within migration circuits. It circulates as value long before bodies are moved across borders.

In this sense, migration imaginaries function as a pre-migration infrastructure of meaning that shapes not only who moves, but how movement itself is understood, valued, and pursued. This requires a shift in analytical attention away from border control and toward the social production of mobility desire. Any attempt to understand trafficking without this dimension risks treating the phenomenon as an isolated aberration rather than as part of a broader system of structured aspiration. The central insight, therefore, is that trafficking does not emerge from ignorance or irrationality, but from carefully organised expectations formed within unequal social worlds. It is at the intersection of desire, constraint, and opportunity disparity that vulnerability becomes operational. In tracing this intersection, the study reframes migration imaginaries not as background context but as the very terrain on which trafficking possibilities are produced, negotiated, and sustained.

Bodies as Currency: Exploitation, Debt, and the Financialisation of Human Mobility

If migration begins in imagination, it is sustained and often constrained through the body—its labour, its endurance, and its capacity to absorb economic risk. The body, in contemporary trafficking systems, is not merely a biological site of harm but an economic unit through which value is extracted, circulated, and repaid. What does it mean, then, when human movement is structured around debt, repayment expectations, and informal labour obligations? At what point does work become extraction, and when does survival itself become indebtedness? These questions shift the analysis away from moral descriptions of "abuse" toward the political economy of embodied labour. Recent scholarship increasingly argues that trafficking must be understood within broader global labour systems rather than as an exceptional deviation from them. Within this frame, the body is not simply violated; it is mobilised as a site of economic return under conditions of severe asymmetry. The central issue is not only harm, but the transformation of human presence into a financial instrument.

Debt operates as one of the most significant mechanisms through which this financialisation of the body is organised. Migrants frequently enter mobility circuits already encumbered by obligations incurred through brokers, family arrangements, or travel facilitators. These debts are not merely financial; they are moralised, gendered, and socially enforced. How does one refuse repayment when the obligation is tied not only to money but to familial survival or community expectation? In such contexts, debt becomes

a form of social governance that extends beyond formal contracts into the regulation of behaviour, movement, and compliance. Macaveiu et al. demonstrate that these debt structures often blur the boundary between voluntary migration and coercive labour arrangements, particularly where repayment is extracted through extended working conditions or restricted mobility. The implication is that trafficking is frequently embedded within debt relations that precede exploitation itself. The body, in this configuration, becomes both collateral and currency, simultaneously owing and generating value under constrained conditions.

This economic logic is intensified in contexts where labour is gendered and spatially segmented, particularly within informal economies of care, domestic work, and commercialised intimacy. Is it still analytically sufficient to describe such labour as simply "exploited," or does this terminology obscure the structural embedding of gendered work within global economic hierarchies? Simanti Dasgupta argues that sex work and related forms of intimate labour must be understood within global labour economies rather than outside them as exceptional moral categories. This does not negate harm; rather, it situates harm within broader systems of labour stratification and economic necessity. The trafficked body, in this sense, is not only subjected to violence but integrated into transnational circuits of labour demand where value is extracted through time, endurance, and bodily availability. Exploitation, therefore, becomes less an aberration and more a structurally enabled outcome of unequal bargaining power within global labour markets.

A further dimension of this financialisation lies in the way vulnerability itself becomes economically productive. Vulnerability is not only experienced; it is operationalised. Migrants with limited legal protection, restricted mobility, or undocumented status often become embedded in labour arrangements where their precarity increases their economic utility to employers or intermediaries. How does one negotiate labour rights when exit is not a viable option? What does "choice" mean when refusal carries the risk of deportation, homelessness, or debt escalation? Kiss et al. show that exploitation is strongly correlated with pre-existing socio-economic vulnerability, particularly where migration pathways are informal or irregular. In such contexts, vulnerability is not incidental but structurally functional. It enables forms of labour extraction that rely on constrained agency rather than overt coercion. The body becomes productive precisely because it is exposed.

At this point, it becomes necessary to reconsider the language of "exploitation" itself. While analytically indispensable, it risks flattening the complex interplay of coercion, negotiation, endurance, and survival that characterises many trafficking-related labour arrangements. Is exploitation always externally imposed, or can it also be internally negotiated within constrained options? Dasgupta suggests that migrant labour must be read through the lens of limited bargaining power rather than absolute victimhood. This does not dilute the reality of harm; instead, it situates harm within a continuum of constrained economic action. The trafficked body, therefore, is not a passive object but an active site of labour negotiation under structural constraint. It endures, adapts, and sometimes strategically navigates systems that are not of its own making. Yet this agency is never fully free; it is always conditioned by the economic and social structures that render alternatives inaccessible.

In pulling these strands together, a clearer picture begins to emerge of how bodies are positioned within contemporary trafficking-related labour systems. They are not simply passive sites upon which harm is inflicted, nor are they fully autonomous agents navigating open labour markets. Rather, they occupy an unstable middle space where survival, obligation, and constrained choice overlap. What appears externally as "labour exploitation" is often internally experienced as a set of negotiated trade-offs shaped by debt, family responsibility, and limited mobility options. In such conditions, the body becomes the medium through which economic pressure is absorbed and redistributed,

rather than merely a victim of external force. This is why it becomes difficult to separate labour from coercion in any clean analytical sense.

At the same time, this does not mean that harm is diluted or that structural violence becomes less real. Instead, it suggests that harm operates through arrangements that are already economically and socially embedded before any visible act of exploitation occurs. The trafficked body, in this sense, is drawn into circuits of value production where its labour, time, and endurance are continuously converted into economic return under unequal terms. Debt obligations, informal recruitment structures, and precarious legal status all converge to limit the range of possible actions available. What looks like participation from the outside often masks a narrowing field of options from within. To understand these dynamics properly is to recognise that exploitation does not always arrive as an external interruption; it is frequently woven into the very conditions that make mobility and survival possible in the first place.

Violence, Surveillance, and Structural Control: The Quiet Architecture of Governance

Violence in trafficking systems is often imagined in dramatic, visible terms—abduction, physical coercion, overt brutality. Yet such representations, while not false, are analytically insufficient. What happens when violence is no longer spectacular but embedded in routines, documentation regimes, and institutional procedures? Can harm persist even when no single actor appears to be "actively" inflicting it? These questions matter because they redirect attention from isolated acts of abuse to the broader infrastructures that sustain vulnerability over time. Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that trafficking-related violence is not only interpersonal but also systemic, operating through governance frameworks that regulate movement, labour, and legal recognition. In this sense, violence is not an event but a condition—distributed, sustained, and often normalised within institutional practice.

Surveillance plays a central role in this transformation of violence into structure. Border systems, immigration databases, biometric registration, and identity verification regimes do not simply monitor movement; they actively shape the conditions under which movement becomes possible or restricted. But a critical question arises: who becomes visible within these systems, and who remains partially or completely unrecorded? Visibility here is not neutral; it is stratified. Those deemed "irregular," "unregistered," or "suspect" are often subjected to intensified scrutiny, while others move with relative ease. Semprebon shows that such surveillance regimes, while framed as protective mechanisms, frequently generate hierarchies of recognition that determine access to safety, documentation, and institutional support. The paradox is clear: systems designed to secure mobility can also deepen immobility through selective visibility. Control, therefore, does not operate only through restriction but through differential exposure to institutional gaze.

This logic of surveillance extends into humanitarian and anti-trafficking interventions, where categorisation becomes a decisive mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. Who qualifies as a "victim," and under what evidentiary conditions is such a designation granted? What happens to those whose experiences do not fit neatly into institutional templates of suffering? Simmons argues that legal and ethical frameworks often depend on simplified narratives of victimhood that fail to capture the complexity of lived migration experiences. As a result, individuals may be rendered invisible not because their suffering is absent, but because it does not conform to recognisable administrative categories. This creates a form of epistemic violence in which certain forms of exploitation remain unacknowledged or insufficiently addressed. Recognition, in this context, becomes a gatekeeping mechanism that determines whose suffering counts and whose does not.

At a deeper level, institutional responses to trafficking often produce unintended forms of dependency that complicate the very idea of protection. Is it possible that systems designed to offer rescue also generate new forms of control over those they aim to assist? Anti-trafficking frameworks, while morally justified in intent, frequently require

individuals to pass through bureaucratic processes that regulate their movement, testimony, and eligibility for support. These processes can extend uncertainty rather than resolve it. Macaveiu et al. note that such governance structures often blur the boundary between care and regulation, producing conditions in which protection is conditional upon compliance with institutional expectations. In this way, assistance is not simply offered; it is administered through systems that also define the terms of deservingness. The result is a subtle but persistent form of structural control that operates through documentation, categorisation, and procedural requirement rather than overt force.

What emerges from this analysis is a reconceptualization of violence itself. Rather than being confined to identifiable acts of harm, violence in trafficking systems must be understood as an ongoing configuration of institutional practices, surveillance regimes, and regulatory categories that shape the possibilities of life for mobile populations. It is sustained not only by those who directly exploit labour but also by the infrastructures that determine who is seen, who is believed, and who is eligible for protection. This broader framing does not replace the reality of direct abuse; rather, it situates it within a wider ecology of control. Violence, in this sense, is ambient rather than episodic, operating through systems that appear administrative on the surface but produce deeply unequal outcomes beneath it. To understand trafficking adequately, one must therefore attend not only to acts of coercion but to the quieter architectures of governance that make certain forms of vulnerability persist while others are rendered visible, legible, and actionable.

Intersectionality and Complicity: Reproducing Trafficking Through Everyday Social Worlds

The discussion so far has moved from imagination to embodiment and then to institutional control, but a further layer remains insufficiently examined: the social relations through which trafficking is reproduced in everyday life. What happens when vulnerability is not simply imposed from above but also circulated through family expectations, peer networks, and community survival strategies? Can exploitation still be understood as purely external when some of its enabling conditions are embedded within familiar social structures? These questions unsettle the comfort of locating trafficking solely in the domain of criminal networks or distant institutions. Recent feminist and migration scholarship increasingly insists that trafficking must be read through intersectional lenses that account for how gender, class, migration status, and social expectation intersect to produce layered forms of vulnerability. In this sense, trafficking is not only imposed upon individuals; it is also reproduced through the uneven textures of everyday social life.

Within this framework, intersectionality is not simply an analytical addition but a necessary corrective to overly linear accounts of exploitation. How does one isolate “the moment” of trafficking when the conditions that enable it are distributed across multiple social layers? A young woman’s decision to migrate, for instance, may be shaped simultaneously by gendered expectations of economic contribution, class-based pressure to achieve upward mobility, and community narratives that equate migration with success. Islam and Fay demonstrate that these overlapping structures do not operate independently but reinforce one another in ways that narrow perceived life options. The result is a form of constrained agency that is socially produced rather than individually chosen in isolation. What appears as a personal decision is often the outcome of cumulative pressures that are difficult to disentangle analytically.

At the same time, complicity becomes a necessary but uncomfortable concept within this discussion. By complicity, however, one does not imply moral equivalence between traffickers and migrants or between exploiters and those embedded within survival networks. Rather, the term is used to describe how trafficking systems are sustained through ordinary social relations that are not always immediately recognisable as part of exploitation circuits. Is it possible that the same networks that offer care, information, or

financial assistance can also inadvertently facilitate vulnerability? Acién González highlights that migration pathways are often socially mediated, with relatives, acquaintances, and informal brokers playing key roles in shaping decisions and arranging movement. These relational ties are not inherently exploitative, yet they can become channels through which risk is normalised and transmitted. The conceptual challenge lies in holding together care and risk without collapsing one into the other.

This tension becomes even more pronounced when considering survival strategies within precarious economies. In many contexts, individuals and households engage in what might be described as "distributed coping mechanisms," where migration, informal labour, and informal recruitment are collectively mobilised as responses to structural hardship. But can survival strategies be neatly separated from the systems that later produce exploitation? Or does survival itself sometimes generate pathways into vulnerability? Islam and Fay argue that intersectional oppression produces not only vulnerability but also adaptive strategies that may inadvertently expose individuals to exploitative networks. This does not imply blame; rather, it reveals how constrained environments generate decisions that are rational within immediate contexts but risky within broader structural arrangements. Complicity, in this sense, is not about intention but about embeddedness within uneven systems of survival.

A further dimension of intersectionality concerns the way trafficking is differently experienced and interpreted depending on gender, class, and migration status. Why are certain forms of exploitation more visible than others? Why do some experiences of labour abuse attract institutional attention while others remain socially normalised? These questions expose the uneven moral and political valuation of suffering. Gendered expectations, in particular, shape both vulnerability and recognition, often determining which bodies are considered protectable and which are rendered invisible. Within this framework, trafficking is not a uniform experience but a differentiated field of harm structured by intersecting inequalities. Acién González suggests that these intersections do not merely add layers of complexity; they actively shape the pathways through which individuals move, the risks they encounter, and the forms of recognition they receive or are denied.

In drawing these threads together, intersectionality reveals that trafficking is not sustained solely by external coercion but also by the overlapping social structures through which life itself is organised. Family obligations, gender norms, economic expectations, and informal networks all participate—unevenly and often unintentionally—in producing the conditions under which exploitation becomes possible. This does not reduce trafficking to everyday life, nor does it dilute responsibility. Instead, it complicates the moral geography of the phenomenon, showing that vulnerability is not confined to isolated spaces but distributed across social relations. The analytical task, therefore, is not to assign blame but to understand how systems of inequality reproduce themselves through both constraint and care, often in ways that are difficult to disentangle in practice. Trafficking, in this sense, is sustained not only by force but also by the ordinary social worlds that make survival both possible and precarious.

Comparative Literary Synthesis: Fiction as Migratory Evidence and Ethical Refracted Memory

Literature, within this study, is not treated as decorative illustration but as a parallel epistemic space where migration, exploitation, and aspiration are rendered visible in ways that formal datasets often cannot capture. What does fiction reveal about trafficking that policy reports or statistical frameworks tend to flatten? Can narrative form disclose emotional, ethical, and temporal dimensions of migration that remain structurally absent in institutional accounts? These questions matter because they reposition literary texts as interpretive sites rather than secondary reflections of "real-world" phenomena. In particular, African migrant fiction often operates as a form of ethnographic imagination,

where lived experiences are refracted through symbolic narrative structures that expose the tensions between hope and exploitation. Within this study, On *Black Sisters' Street* and *Last Seen in Lapaz* are read not as fictional representations alone but as analytical archives of migratory consciousness and structural vulnerability.

In *On Black Sisters' Street,* the narrative of migration is not linear but fractured, revealing how aspiration is gradually reconfigured into survival under constrained conditions. What begins as a vision of economic mobility becomes entangled with debt, coercion, and the slow erosion of autonomy. Yet the novel resists reducing its characters to passive victims; instead, it presents them as subjects navigating unstable moral and economic terrains. This complicates any straightforward reading of trafficking as a simple imposition of force. Rather, it exposes how expectation, obligation, and economic necessity intersect in ways that are difficult to disentangle. The text thus becomes a site where "commodified hope" is not theorised abstractly but lived experientially through narrative form. Hope, in this sense, is not extinguished but continuously renegotiated under conditions of constraint.

Similarly, *Last Seen in Lapaz* extends this narrative complexity by situating migration within dense networks of urban precarity, gendered labour, and fragmented social protection systems. The text does not offer closure or moral resolution; instead, it presents mobility as an ongoing negotiation with risk, uncertainty, and partial knowledge. What does it mean to move when the destination is itself unstable or only partially imagined? Quartey's narrative structure resists simplification, refusing to stabilise characters into fixed categories of victimhood or agency. Instead, it foregrounds the instability of migratory subjectivity itself. In doing so, the novel aligns closely with contemporary scholarship that critiques binary distinctions between forced and voluntary migration, showing instead how these categories collapse under lived experience. Fiction here becomes a methodological resource for exposing what institutional language often obscures: the ambiguity of lived survival.

When read alongside recent migration scholarship, these literary texts function as interpretive laboratories for examining how aspiration, vulnerability, and structural inequality intersect. They do not simply "represent" trafficking; they stage the conditions under which trafficking becomes thinkable, narratable, and survivable. This is where the analytical value of literature becomes particularly significant. Migration imaginaries, as discussed earlier, are not purely abstract formations; they are culturally embedded narratives that shape decision-making before physical movement occurs. Fiction, in this sense, mirrors and complicates these imaginaries by showing how hope is continuously reworked under pressure. Acién González emphasises that migration is socially narrated long before it is physically enacted, and literary texts offer a condensed form of this narrative construction. They make visible the emotional economies that underlie migration decisions—economies that are often absent in policy discourse.

At the same time, these narratives also expose the limits of representation itself. Can suffering ever be fully captured within narrative form, or does fiction inevitably transform structural violence into aesthetic experience? This tension is not a weakness of literature but part of its analytical significance. By refusing closure, both novels resist moral simplification and instead foreground ambiguity as a defining feature of migratory life. This ambiguity is precisely what much trafficking discourse struggles to accommodate. Institutional frameworks tend to demand clarity—victim or agent, coercion or consent, legality or illegality—yet lived experience often refuses such neat categorisation. In this gap between institutional clarity and narrative complexity, literature performs a critical function: it preserves ambiguity as analytically meaningful rather than as noise to be eliminated.

In drawing this comparative synthesis together, it becomes clear that literary texts are not peripheral to trafficking analysis but central to its conceptual deepening. They

provide access to the affective, ethical, and temporal dimensions of migration that formal frameworks often struggle to articulate. More importantly, they reveal how commodified hope operates not only as an economic structure but as an emotional and narrative condition embedded in lived experience. The characters in these texts do not merely move through systems of exploitation; they inhabit worlds where aspiration, constraint, and survival are continuously entangled. To read these narratives alongside contemporary scholarship is therefore to recognise that trafficking is not only a socio-economic phenomenon but also a deeply narrativised experience of constrained becoming.

4. Conclusion

Reframing Trafficking as Structured Inequality, Engineered Desire, and Governed Precarity

This study has steadily moved away from treating trafficking as an isolated moral or legal anomaly and toward understanding it as a structurally produced condition within contemporary regimes of mobility. The central claim that emerges across the preceding sections is not merely that trafficking exists, but that it is sustained through overlapping systems of aspiration, economic constraint, and institutional governance. What does it mean, then, to continue describing trafficking primarily as "crime" when its conditions are so deeply embedded in ordinary social, economic, and migratory life? And what becomes of policy interventions that fail to account for the fact that vulnerability is not an exception but a recurring feature of global mobility systems? These questions expose a deeper limitation in dominant frameworks: they tend to isolate trafficking from the very structures that make it possible.

Across the analysis, three conceptual shifts have been established. First, migration is not a neutral movement across space but a socially produced imaginary structured by inequality and aspiration. Second, exploitation is not external to mobility systems but embedded within them through debt, labour precarity, and constrained agency. Third, institutional responses to trafficking do not simply mitigate harm; they also participate in the production, classification, and management of vulnerability. Taken together, these shifts unsettle the conventional grammar of trafficking studies, which often depends on rigid separations between victimhood and agency, coercion and choice, legality and illegality. Recent scholarship has reinforced this instability by demonstrating that trafficking operates within grey zones of labour and migration that resist binary classification. The implication is clear: analytical clarity cannot be achieved through simplification, but through engagement with complexity.

What becomes evident, therefore, is that trafficking is best understood not as a singular event but as a continuum of structured inequality. It is an outcome of global systems in which hope is economically organised, mobility is socially stratified, and survival is often conditional upon exposure to risk. In this sense, "commodified hope" is not a metaphor but a structural mechanism through which aspiration is converted into migratory action under unequal conditions. Hope circulates as a resource, but not all who invest in it receive equal protection from its risks. The result is a system in which desire itself becomes a site of governance and extraction.

This reframing then, at a deeper level, challenges the moral architecture that underpins much anti-trafficking discourse. If trafficking is embedded within everyday systems of labour, migration, and institutional classification, then the question is no longer simply how to eliminate it, but how to understand the conditions that continuously reproduce it. This does not imply resignation; rather, it demands a shift in analytical and policy imagination. It requires moving beyond reactive frameworks toward structural thinking that recognises how inequality is organised across time, space, and institutional practice. The persistence of trafficking, in this light, is not an anomaly to be corrected but

a symptom of broader global arrangements of uneven development and restricted mobility.

In closing, this study returns to a more unsettling proposition: trafficking is not only what happens when systems fail, but also what emerges from how those systems are currently structured. It is produced at the intersection of engineered aspiration, constrained agency, and institutionalised governance. To confront it meaningfully, then, is not only to strengthen enforcement mechanisms, but to interrogate the social and economic conditions that make exploitation a predictable outcome of contemporary mobility regimes. The challenge is not simply to stop trafficking, but to rethink the worlds that render it possible in the first place. Anything less risks treating the symptom while leaving the structure intact.

REFERENCES

[1] E. Acién González, "Migration, agency, and trafficking dynamics in West Africa," *Social Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 207–222, 2024.
[2] E. Acién González, "Migration, aspiration, and mobility systems," pp. 117–122, 2024.
[3] S. Dasgupta, "Gender, labour, and migration economies," pp. 88–94, 2024.
[4] S. Dasgupta, "Labour, migration, and the blurred lines of exploitation," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 53, pp. 45–63, 2024.
[5] M. Islam and D. Fay, "Intersectionality and migration vulnerability," pp. 71–75, 2024.
[6] L. Kiss *et al*., "Migration vulnerability and trafficking pathways," pp. 33–37, 2022.
[7] M. Macaveiu *et al*., "Migration governance and exploitation structures," pp. 102–106, 2024.
[8] J. O'Connell Davidson, "Rethinking trafficking: Agency, exploitation, and mobility," *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 101–120, 2024.
[9] Kwei Quartey, *Last Seen in Lapaz*. New York, NY, USA: Soho Press, 2023.
[10] M. Semprebon, "Institutional governance of migration and protection regimes," pp. 54–58, 2024.
[11] W. P. Simmons, "Ethics, labour, and trafficking frameworks," pp. 18–22, 2024.
[12] R. Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder, CO, USA: Westview Press, 1992.
[13] Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters' Street*. New York, NY, USA: Random House, 2009.
[14] S. H. Williamson, "Neoliberal migration imaginaries and aspiration," pp. 62–66, 2022.
[15] A. B. Bhabha, "Trafficking, smuggling, and human rights: Exploiting the margins," *Migration Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 145–161, 2023.