Subverting Heteronormativity: Queer Intimacies and Disidentification in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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Abstract

Prevailing narratives of African queer identities often overlook nation-specific historical and cultural complexities. This perspective fails to acknowledge the diverse pre-colonial African gender expressions and sexuality, as well as their subsequent suppression through colonial legislation and contemporary prejudice. Chinelo Okparanta's novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) presents a nuanced exploration of queer experiences in Nigeria by challenging the simplistic narratives of queer identities across African literature. Through textual analysis of this novel, with theoretical foundations from José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, this article traces the strategies employed by queer individuals to navigate oppressive socio-political structures. This study examines the subversion of traditional symbolism as a metaphor for the fluidity of gender and sexuality. It also examines the emergence and vulnerability of queer counterpublics within the Nigerian context and highlights the constant threat of violence faced by those who disrupt heteronormative norms. This study critiques the imposition of Western-centric queer paradigms in African contexts and highlights their inability to account for the diverse cultural, historical, and socio-political specificities of African countries. By integrating African literary analysis with queer theoretical frameworks, this study proposes a more nuanced approach to understanding Nigerian queer experiences by balancing historical influences with contemporary dynamics.

Keywords: Africa, Homosexuality, Queer, Nigeria, Colonialism.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the 33 African nations that has criminalized same-sex sexual activity.[1] This legal framework reflects the challenging socio-political landscape faced by queer individuals within the Nigerian context. Nigeria's laws prohibiting homosexuality are rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced, in some cases, by cultural and religious norms, thereby contributing to the marginalization of the queer community. Moreover, deeply entrenched societal attitudes, binary conceptualizations of sexuality and heteronormative paradigms perpetuate

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[1] *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2020: Global Legislation Overview Update* (2020). At: https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report/.

[2] Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa", *Africa Today*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2011), pp. 55-77.

[3] John Reed, "Zuma apologises for comments against gays", 28 September (2006). At: https://www.ft.com/content/fc630030-4e44-11db-bcbc-0000779e2340.

[4] Sibusiso Tshabalala, "Nigerian president was asked about gay marriage in the US. His reply: "sodomy" is "abhorrent"", 22 July (2015). At: https://qz.com/460923/nigerias-president-was-asked-about-gay-marriage-in-the-us-his-reply-sodomy-is-abhorrent.

discrimination and impede the safety and acceptance of queer individuals in Nigeria. This complex situation underscores the ongoing struggle for recognition, inclusivity, and the upholding of human rights of the queer community within the diverse socio-cultural tapestry of the African continent.

Intrinsic, Not Imported

In recent decades, a prevalent discourse has emerged that portrays homosexuality as antithetical to African culture. This stance which has often been echoed by prominent African leaders. Robert Mugabe, the former president of Zimbabwe (1987-2017), infamously described homosexuals as "worse than pigs and dogs" and as "a scourge planted by the white man on a pure continent."[2] Jacob Zuma, the former South African president (2009-2018), shared a similar stance, stating, "When I was growing up an *ungqingili* [a gay] would not have stood in front of me … I would have knocked him out."[3] Likewise, Muhammadu Buhari, the former Nigerian president (2015-2023), staunchly believed that "[s]odomy is against the law in Nigeria, and abhorrent to [their] culture."[4] This discourse overlooks the complex historical and cultural realities of diverse African societies. Through a critical analysis of historical accounts, literary works and anthropological studies, it can be argued that same-sex relationships and gender fluidity have long been intrinsic to African cultures. Crucially, various African thinkers and writers, as well as those of African origin, have challenged the notion that homosexuality is entirely alien to African cultures. Bernardine Evaristo (b. 1959), the 2019 joint Booker Prize winner, states in her novel *Mr Loverman* (2013) that "*homophobia*, not homosexuality, [...] was imported to Africa, because European missionaries regarded it as a sin."[5] Intersectional feminist Audre Lorde (1934-1992) acknowledged same-sex relationships in the Black community, noting their longstanding existence in female compounds across Africa.[6] Additionally, in *Boy Wives, Female Husbands* (1998), editors Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe cite European explorers' accounts of indigenous men engaging in same-sex relationships with boys "just because they like them."[7]

The colonial legacies of Africa have had a lasting impact on the perceptions of sexuality and gender. Despite the existence of accounts documenting the diverse sexual and gender practices in the African region, colonizers often fail to comprehend this intricate cultural landscape.[8] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (b. 1977), the Nigerian-American author, deconstructs the prevalent stereotype that homosexuality is alien to African cultures in her short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2006). The narrative unfolds at a writer's workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, where writers from across the continent convene to share short stories. Tensions arise due to the imposing ideas of the workshop's organizer, Edward Campbell, an "Oxford-trained Africanist" who claims to be "keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues." He dismisses a participant's story featuring queer characters,

[5] Bernardine Evaristo, *Mr Loverman* (New York: Akashic Books, 2013), p. 207.
[6] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), p. 39.
[7] Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 2.
[8] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 17.
[9] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), pp. 102-8.

asserting that "homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really." Even a black South African expressed alarm upon hearing the term "lesbian."[9] Both the anecdotal observations from the short story highlight the pervasive nature of heteronormative attitudes and the stigmatization of non-heterosexual orientations within African society. The notion of monolithic African culture oversimplifies the rich diversity of beliefs, practices and norms across the continent.

Assumptions of a static, homogeneous African culture that uniformly rejects homosexuality are unfounded.[10] On the contrary, historical evidence reveals the existence of indigenous African traditions that embraced gender fluidity and same-sex relations.[11] Accounts from the late 1640s describe the Ndonga (present-day Angola) royal court under Nzinga. Nzinga was *ngola*, a king and not a queen. She adopted masculine attire and was surrounded by a harem of 'wives' – young men dressed as women.[12] Her governance transcended traditional gender roles and it reflects on gender being situational and symbolic, rather than an innate, personal characteristic. Pre-colonial African societies often exhibited nuanced and fluid conceptions of gender. Msibi (2011) illuminates how Igbo and Yoruba cultures allowed for significant flexibility in gender roles, with women occupying positions of authority and sometimes assuming traditionally masculine social functions.[13] For instance, the institution of female husbands allowed economically independent women to marry other women which challenges the modern understanding of gender and marriage. Similar practices were observed among the Nuers in Sudan, the Nandis in Kenya and the Fons in Dahomey.[14] Scholarly investigations into same-sex desire in Africa have undermined Eurocentric binary conceptions of sexuality and gender. Professor Marc Epprecht, in his book *Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (2008), argues that many African countries have distinct worldviews on homosexuality:

> The language by which same-sex relationships are described [...] is often Eurocentric—the word homosexuality, notably, suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific enquiry, social relations, and political struggle that did not historically exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women in Africa.[15]

African conceptualizations of gender often defy the rigid Western gender dichotomy between male and female. Anthropologists Joseph M. Carrier and Stephen O. Murray highlight how factors such as age and lineage play a crucial role in shaping gender identity and expression in African marriages. Contrary to the Western assumption that marriage is between biological men and women, the anthropologists note that "African marriages are between individuals in male and female roles, not necessarily between biological males and females."[16] This indicates

[10] Sylvia Tamale, "Confronting the Politics of Nonconforming Sexualities in Africa", *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2013), pp. 31-45.
[11] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 279-82.
[12] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 2.
[13] Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa", pp. 54-77.
[14] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 255-66.
[15] Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, (Athens: Ohio University Press), 2008, p. 8.
[16] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 259.

a more fluid understanding of gender wherein an individual's social position and familial status can determine the gender role they assume within a marriage regardless of their biological sex.

While cross-cultural influences cannot be discounted, Azodo and Eke argue that "same-sex activities appear indigenous and natural to Africa, despite the lack of subcultures, public identities, roles, and social acceptance that could compare to Western gay and lesbian lives."[17] Additionally, the impact of Christianity on African attitudes towards homosexuality cannot be overstated. As Msibi points out, while many African opponents of homosexuality cite the Bible as justification, the Bible itself is "a foreign document in much of Africa."[18] Chitando and Mateveke elaborate on this, noting that many African Christians have adopted a literalist interpretation of biblical passages perceived to condemn homosexuality. This religious perspective has led to the framing of homosexuality as a "contagious phenomenon" and has provided a "powerful religious language" through which people respond to the perceived threat of homosexuality. For example, in Zimbabwe, several studies have highlighted Christian aversion to homosexuality, often framed in apocalyptic terms of "the devil, the antichrist and the end of time."[19] While perspectives on this issue remain diverse, a growing body of scholarly work contests the characterization of homosexuality as a Western import to Africa. These studies, drawing from historical accounts, anthropological research, and cultural analyses, position same-sex relationships and gender fluidity as integral components of many African cultural traditions.

The Nigerian (Igbo) Experience

The complex tapestry of Nigerian cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality is exemplified by the experiences of various ethnic groups, particularly Igbos, who are the focal point of this paper. The Igbos constitute approximately 15.2% of Nigeria's population and coexist with more than 250 other ethnic groups, the prominent ones being the Hausa (30%) and Yoruba (15.5%).[20] The institution of *igba ohu* or woman-to-woman marriage in the Igbo society illustrates the complexity of Igbo gender constructs. In this arrangement, influential women could assume the role of female husbands and facilitate marriages between their 'wives' and other men to bear children in their name. While some scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (b. 1947), refute the notion of lesbianism in these relationships, others argue that such dismissals may reflect contemporary homophobic attitudes rather than historical realities.[21, 22] Similar fluidity in gender expression has been observed in other Nigerian ethnic groups. For instance, the Hausa-speaking communities of northern Nigeria recognize the *yan daudu*, individuals who

[17] Ada Uzomaka Azoko and Maureen Ngozi Eke, *Gender and Sexuality in African Literature and Film* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2007), p. 12.
[18] Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told", p. 69.
[19] Ezra Chitando and Pauline Mateveke, "Africanizing the Discourse on Homosexuality: Challenges and Prospects", *Critical African Studies*, vol. 9 (2017), pp. 128-129.
[20] 'Nigeria', *The World Factbook*. At: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nigeria/. Accessed 5/07/2024.
[21] Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p. 28.
[22] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 307.
[23] Niels Teunis, "Same-Sex Sexuality in Africa: A Case Study from Senegal", *AIDS and Behaviour*, vol. 5 (2001), p. 178.

adopt feminine gender expressions while often maintaining masculine social roles such as marriage to women: "These cross-dressers have sex with men and frequently engage in activities specifically associated with women, yet are nevertheless often married to women and have children. For them this is no contradiction. Their gender status as '*yan daudu*' does not contradict their masculine roles as married men, but complements them."[23] The *yan daudu* phenomenon illustrates the intricate interplay between gender expression, social roles and sexuality in traditional Nigerian societies. This complex identity challenges simplistic Western categorizations of gender and sexuality and highlights a more fluid understanding of gender performance and sexual behaviour.

It is crucial to note that prior to colonial influence, discussions of sexuality in many African communities were not framed within the Judeo-Christian moral framework that later came to dominate discourse: "homosexuality, incest, bestiality, and other sexual acts were all viewed as transgressions [by the Europeans] that occurred when individuals no longer recognized distinctions of gender, kinship, age, race, and species — an "undifferentiated" state of consciousness that Europeans also attributed to people they considered "primitive"."[24] The taboo surrounding homosexuality in contemporary Nigerian society bears the imprint of European morality rather than indigenous perspectives. Rather than introducing homosexuality, colonial regimes fostered intolerance and instituted systems to suppress existing diverse sexual and gender expressions in Africa.[25] The imposition of Victorian-era morals[26] and the introduction of Christianity[27] during the colonial period led to the stigmatization of many traditional practices in Nigeria. This cultural shift, rooted in colonial influence, persisted beyond independence in 1960 and was further codified in law with the Nigerian Penal Code of 1967. This post-colonial legislation criminalized same-sex relationships, imposing harsh penalties: "any person who has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature or permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature is guilty of a felony and liable to imprisonment for 14 years."[28]

Despite Nigeria's independence, the legacy of colonial attitudes continues to shape legal and social norms, as evidenced by this law and its enduring impact on contemporary Nigerian society. The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013 further entrenched legal discrimination against queer individuals. The churches claim that homosexual sex is inherently immoral, a stance they assert is clearly depicted in the Bible. Homosexual practices are therefore evil: "[t]he Church affirms our commitment to the total rejection of the evil of homosexuality which is a perversion of human dignity and encourages the National Assembly to ratify the Bill prohibiting the legality of homosexuality since it is incongruent with the teachings of the Bible, Quran and the basic African traditional values."[29] The legislation,

[24] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 10.
[25] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. xvi.
[26] Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, p. 61.
[27] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, p. 270.
[28] 'Criminal Code Act', *Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre*. At: https://lawsofnigeria.placng.org/laws/C38.pdf.
[29] E. Radner and A. Goddard, "Human rights, homosexuality and the Anglican communion: Reflections in light of Nigeria", *African Study Monographs*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2014), p. 6.
[30] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria", *U.S. Department of State*, At: https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nigeria/.

coupled with widespread societal condemnation of homosexuality, has led to numerous human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity. According to the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022 by the U.S. Department of State, 520 instances of human rights violations were recorded "based on real or perceived sexual orientation, gender expression, and sex characteristics."[30] The transformation of Nigerian society from one that accommodated diverse gender expressions and same-sex relationships to one characterized by strict heteronormativity and homophobia illustrates the profound impact of colonial and post-colonial influences.

Writers such as Chinelo Okparanta have begun to address this shift and highlight the ongoing persecution of queer individuals in contemporary Nigeria. Her works confront social prejudices and champions the experiences of marginalized individuals by offering fresh perspectives on Nigeria's evolving cultural landscape. *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) follows the journey of Ijeoma, a young girl who grapples with conflicting forces of love, religion and societal expectations amidst the backdrop of a war-torn Nigeria. As Ijeoma navigates the fractured socio-political landscape of her country, she discovers her developing attraction towards a Hausa girl named Amina. Her attraction is a transgression of cultural norms as Ijeoma's burgeoning same-sex desire exists in tension with the prevailing heteronormative social structures. Through her journey, the author sheds light on the challenges faced by queer individuals in Nigeria and the ongoing struggle for acceptance and understanding.

Symbolic Significance of *Udala* Trees

In *Under the Udala Trees*, the *udala* trees hold a significant position. According to Igbo legends, these trees are associated with fertility and the spirit of children.[31] It is believed to enhance women's fertility.[32] Okechukwu C. Agukoronye delved into the significance of *udala* trees writing:

> A popular fruit tree in the [Igbo] community square is the *udala* or *udara* (*Chrysophyllum albidum*), a kind of native apple tree, which for the Igbo symbolizes fertility and the spirit of children. The *udala* is therefore a public fruit tree, especially for children who visit it early in the morning when it is in season to pick the fallen ripe fruits. [...] If several children go to an *udala* stand and only one of them picks up a fruit, it is never eaten alone, but is shared between friends. This is the spirit of sharing, camaraderie and the innocence of children, which the *udala* symbolizes.[33]

The *udala* tree typically permeates an optimistic undertone in cultural symbolism. However, within the narrative of Okparanta's novel, it does not conform to these conventional symbolic meanings. Rather than confining the interpretation to a singular viewpoint, the author presents a range of possibilities for comprehending the tree's symbolic significance. Through an analysis of the diverse interpretations woven throughout the text, the novel reveals that the symbolism of *udala* trees transcends their customary connotations. Similar to the distinctions

[31] Okechukwu C Agukoronye, "Landscape Practices in Traditional Igbo Society, Nigeria", *Landscape Research*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2001), p. 95.
[32] Chinelo Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees* (London: Granta Books, 2017), p. 309.
[33] Agukoronye, "Landscape Practices in Traditional Igbo Society, Nigeria", p. 95.

surrounding gender and sexuality, this symbolism embraces the inherent complexity and fluidity of human existence.

Leaving Her Childhood: The Protagonist's Coming-of-Age

Scholarly discourse has characterized Nigeria's post-independent political structure as a "constitutional monstrosity."[34] Historical analysis by the author and journalist Walter Schwarz elaborates on this tumultuous period. He observes that "Nigeria became independent with a federal structure which, within two years, was shaken by an emergency and, within five, had broken down in disorder, to be finally overthrown by two military coups and a civil war."[35] The opening scene of *Under the Udala Trees* is set in 1967, the first year of the devastating Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The queer narrator, Ijeoma, is initially shielded from the conflict-ridden environment by her gated family compound and parents. However, in 1968, her father, Uzo, died and Ijeoma's sheltered existence was dramatically altered. Uzo died in the second year of the war because of bombing raids. The protracted civil war appears to have been an intentional effort to separate Ijeoma from the affection she may have received from the opposite sex. In his final act of intimacy, Uzo releases Ijeoma's hand and compells her to continue without him. Ijeoma's father's name, which translates to "door" or "the way", leads her to feel as if she could hold his name "like a torchlight" that would guide her forward.[36] The warmth of her father's embrace is suggestive and could imply the depth of his love for her. Perhaps Ijeoma's father would have expressed sentiments akin to those of Nnenna's father in Okparanta's short story *America*, "Love is love", he says, a suggestive hope that Ijeoma lost with her father's tragic death.[37]

In the war-torn context, the death of Ijeoma's father burdens his wife with a strain of existence, with even their daughter appearing to weigh her down. As a result, Adaora, her mother, sends Ijeoma to stay with her father's former colleague, an unnamed grammar school teacher in Nnewi. The teacher's voice evokes the warmth of Uzo, though he vastly differs in physical appearance and demeanour. It leads Ijeoma to question the authenticity of his kindness, "There was a warmth to his voice that reminded me of Papa's voice. But then he was not Papa. He was fat and awkwardly moved where Papa was thin and lithe. Would he really be warm like Papa, or was this warmth in his voice just a trick?" Prior to Ijeoma's departure for Nnewi, Chibundu's parents, the Ejiofors, whom Ijeoma knewe from their shared church, visited their family compound. Ijeoma senses Chibundu harbouring romantic feelings towards her, a closeness that repulses her and evokes a desire to flee. It is likened to the necessity of taking chloroquine for malaria.[38] Despite her aversion, Ijeoma acquiesces to Chibundu's sought-after kiss, suggesting the subliminal influence of compulsory heterosexuality on her young psyche. Even before her mother's formal instruction, Ijeoma internalized cultural beliefs about male

[34] Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), p. 9.
[35] Walter Schwarz, *Nigeria* (London: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 86.
[36] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 21.
[37] Chinelo Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water: Stories*, (New York: Mariner Books, 2013), p. 123.
[38] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 46-53.
[39] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2003), pp. 24-25.

sexual dominance. She accepts the idea of men's overwhelming sex drive and women's expected submission. [39]

Ijeoma's Sexual Awakening

At the grammar school teacher's house, Ijeoma works as a domestic worker. As she returns from purchasing kerosene, she encounters a young girl named Amina near an *udala* tree. This chance meeting under a fruit tree mirrors a similar encounter in a short story by Uganda author, Monica Arac de Nyeko. "Jambula Trees" parallels the initial sexual contact between Anyango and Sanyu to the meeting of Ijeoma and Amina, ." . . like that day I first touched you. Like the day you first touched me. Mine was a cold unsure hand placed over your right breast. Yours was a cold scared hand, which held my waist and pressed it closer to you, under the jambula tree in front of [Mama Atim's] house." The lives of all four characters appeared to be intertwined with these fruit trees. The *udala* tree's symbolism of fertility, traditionally associated with heterosexual relationships, foreshadows societal pressure on Ijeoma and Amina. This pressure ultimately forces them into compulsory heterosexuality and compels them to bear children to find fulfilment society dictates should come from conforming to heteronormative expectations. The *jambula* tree holds a similar meaning to Anyango and Sanyu; their partnership was not destined to flourish because of societal pressures. Anyango compares Sanyu's breasts to "two jambulas", but Sanyu remains for Anyango like "[t]he tree had been there for ages with its unreachable fruit."[40] This symbolism of forbidden fruit and unfulfilled desire is further emphasized in the contrasting experiences of intimacy. In contrast to Ijeoma's "clumsy kiss"[41] with Chibundu, her intimacy with Amina is magical:

> In the near darkness, our hands moved across our bodies. We took in with our fingers the curves of our flesh, the grooves. Our hands, rather than our voices, seemed to do the speaking. Our breaths mingled with the night sounds. Eventually our lips met. This was the beginning, our bodies being touched by the fire that was each other's flesh.[42]

An Oxford professor Elleke Boehmer, discussing works by Nigerian author, Flora Nwapa, argues that women's casual conversations are more than social interactions; they are a platform for sharing experiences and concerns. Boehmer notes that "village women share their woes and confirm female bonds, they also translate their lives into a medium which they control." [43] Similarly, Ijeoma and Amina's leisure activities like "chatting, or plaiting hair" [44] can be seen as a form of self-expression and identity formation within a heteronormative society. Their conversations and everyday mundane activities can be "interpreted not only as a way of life but as a mode of self-making" within a heteronormative society.[45]

[40] Monica Arac de Nyeko, "Jambula Tree" (2023). At: https://www.rug.nl/alumni/about-alumni/alumnus-of-the-year/monica-arac-de-nyeko-jambula-tree.pdf.
[41] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 233.
[42] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 117.
[43] Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 98.
[44] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 124.
[45] Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in Postcolonial Nation*, p. 98.

Condemnation and Persecution

Ijeoma and Amina's happiness is ultimately fleeting and unsustainable given the homophobic nature of society. The narrative recounts a pivotal incident where Ijeoma and Amina's intimate encounter is discovered by the grammar school teacher. He intrudes upon their private space and finds Ijeoma's "head hovering in the space above [Amina's] legs." The teacher then brandishes the Bible while condemning their actions as "an abomination"; he further informs Amina that "the Koran and the Bible see eye to eye on this matter."[46] The derogatory remarks directed at the young women result in Ijeoma feeling exposed and likening the experience to Adam and Eve's original sin as described in the biblical passage, "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves girdles."[47] When later confronted by her mother, Ijeoma's only defense is the assertion that "Amina and I, we didn't think anything of it."[48] It suggests her body's instinctive reaction to the intimate proximity shared with Amina. This accidental, unpremeditated expression of their queer desire disrupts the normative ideological narratives imposed by the religious dogma espoused by the grammar school teacher and Ijeoma's mother. As the Cuban-American scholar José Esteban Muñoz (1967-2013) explains, disidentification refers to the strategies employed by individuals whose identities fall outside the majority to navigate their position within prevailing ideologies, resisting and confounding "socially prescriptive patterns of identification."[49] In their pure intimacy, Ijeoma and Amina's spontaneous act of queer intimacy can be seen as a form of disidentification. It challenges heteronormative scripts that deem their love an abomination. The sentiment expressed by Oscar Wilde in *An Ideal Husband* (1889) - "[being natural] is such a very difficult pose to keep up" - may encapsulate the challenge faced by Ijeoma and Amina in navigating their genuine, natural feelings within a homophobic social context.[50]

Following the incident, Ijeoma and Amina are forced to separate. Ijeoma's mother declares that she will "do her part in straightening" her daughter, while the grammar school teacher and his wife pledge to "do their part in straightening [Amina] out."[51] Adaora's unyielding stance towards her daughter's sexuality is emblematic of a fundamentalist hermeneutical approach that privileges a decontextualized, ahistorical reading of Biblical verses. This is exemplified by her adherence to the literalist interpretation of the injunction,

> Whoever spares the rod hates his son,
> but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.[52]

[46] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 124-5.
[47] *Genesis*, Chapter 3. At: https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0103.htm#7.
[48] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 128.
[49] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 28.
[50] Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (London: Methuen & Co., 1910), p. 15.
[51] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 129.
[52] Proverbs 13:24. At: https://www.esv.org/Proverbs+13/. Accessed 6/07/2024.
[53] Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water*, pp. 122-5.

In contrast, Okparanta's short story "America" presents a markedly different parental response. When the narrator converses with her father about her love for a woman named Gloria, he offers an unexpected analogy: "When a goat and yam are kept together, either the goat takes a bite of the yam, bit by bit, or salivates for it. That is why when two adults are always seen together, it is no surprise when the seed is planted." The father's remark elicits laughter from the narrator who reminds him that no such "seed" can be planted between them. Notably, the father's response has a degree of predictability, and even the narrator's mother's sole concern is the lack of grandchildren rather than outright condemnation. This differentiation underscores that the "rare sort of Nigerian Christian" parents "had a faint, shadowy respect for the Bible, the kind of faith that required no works."[53] The divergent reactions suggest that a strict, literalist interpretation of biblical teachings may be incompatible with the acceptance of diverse forms of love. The author's narrative seems to imply that, to fully accept and embrace queer love, one must be willing to transcend rigid social implications often ascribed to religious faith.

After the event involving Amina, Adaora commences the process of "working on cleansing [Ijeoma's] soul." Ijeoma grapples with a multitude of emotions, including an inclination to pray and nostalgic recollections of her time with Amina. Her recollection was coupled with an ache for Amina's touch. Here, her disidentification is apparent. While her mother's Bible teachings compel conformity with heteronormative scripts, Ijeoma cannot fully repress her longings for Amina's intimacy. Ijeoma's guilt hints at the psychological toll of disavowing her queer desire to adhere to her mother's doctrine. Yet, her inability to pray away these feelings suggests the limits of heteronormative scripts to fully contain her disidentificatory impulses:

> Suddenly I felt an urge to pray. I wanted to ask for forgiveness for the things I had done in Nnewi. Not a day had passed when I did not remember those things. Not a day had passed when I did not crave those things, when I did not find myself wanting to repeat them. But now, I sat in church and for the first time I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. ... I opened my mouth to pray, but somehow the words of prayer would not come. It was as if they had become stuck in my throat. I tried over and over again. Still no luck.

The melancholy Ijeoma appears to yield to her mother's biblical teachings, and, in conjunction with the illusory truth effect, she neglects her analytical reflections. Adaora's explanation of biblical messages is based on their inconsistency. In response to Ijeoma's enquiry, her prompt and straightforward answer is "[t]he fact that the Bible says it's bad is all the reason you need."[54] The custom of utilising religious convictions to reject and condemn various sexual orientations is deeply ingrained in social dynamics and has persisted across cultures and generations. In *Walking with Shadows*, Nigerian novelist Jude Dibia exemplifies prevalent social attitudes towards homosexuality as sinful: "[e]ven God forbids the act [of homosexuality]."[55] However, as Ijeoma's understanding evolves, she begins to question these

[54] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 65-75.
[55] Jude Dibia, *Walking With Shadows* (Lagos: Blacksand Books, 2011), p. 108.
[56] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 82-3.

rigid interpretations. She perceives the potential for alternative readings of biblical narratives and envisions them as allegories rather than literal truths:

> Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. Just because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? Infinite possibilities, and each one of them perfectly viable.[56]

In her short story "Grace", through a professor of the Old Testament, Okparanta emphasizes the cultural context in which the Bible was written. She argues that "the Bible [...] is inspired by God in many ways, but it was still written by humans, with human biases, all based on the existing cultural norms of the time."[57]

In the aftermath of the "incident" with Amina, Ijeoma's trajectory is shaped by the interventions of patriarchal authority figures. The grammar school teacher, complicit in policing non-normative sexualities, arranges for her enrolment at Obodoañuli Girls' Academy or, the Land of Joy Girls' Academy, which Okparanta sardonically describes as having "nothing joyful about it." The institution has become a site of transformation for both Ijeoma and Amina. Their once intimate relationship disintegrates, with Amina becoming "stiff in [Ijeoma's] embrace." This physical distancing foreshadows Amina's subsequent disavowal of queer desire. Her nightmarish vision of "hailstones [...] and fire, pouring down and forming craters where they landed" invokes the rhetoric of divine retribution, leading her to internalize their identity as "the fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness."[58] This internalized homophobia and struggle with queer desire is a recurring theme in queer Nigerian literature. In Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), the character Elvis initially rejects same-sex experimentation and echoes Amina's fears by seeing it as "taboo, forbidden."[59] However, Elvis' subsequent actions reveal the tension between societal expectations and personal desires as he and his friends engage in sexual exploration despite his verbal disavowal. The violent rupture of Elvis' tentative exploration of sexuality by his uncle's abuse parallels the societal forces driving Amina to renounce her love for Ijeoma. Amina's decision to marry "a Hausa boy" resonates with similar capitulations to social pressures in other works.[60] For instance, in Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing* (2010), Mohit's resigned declaration to his Indo-Chinese beloved reads: "*Forgive me*, he said. *I love you, but I can't fight a whole country.*"[61] These narratives collectively illustrate the coercive force by which societal norms are imposed on those perceived as deviant. It also highlights the personal and emotional tolls of such societal pressures on queer individuals.

[57] Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water*, p. 166.
[58] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 133-55.
[59] Chris Abani, *Graceland* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 284.
[60] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 170.
[61] Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *One Amazing Thing* (New York: Hyperion, 2010), p. 76.

Resilience and Solace

Heteronormative pressures intensify as Ijeoma transitions into adulthood. Her mother voices the patriarchal imperative that "[a] woman without a man is hardly a woman at all." However, Ijeoma's subsequent encounter with Ndidi, a schoolteacher, rekindles her queer desires. This new relationship is tempered by the persistent apprehension of disloyalty which haunted her relationship with Amina. Ijeoma fears that she might "go through all that emotional investment just for Ndidi to end up betraying [her] the way that Amina had done." Ndidi initiates Ijeoma into clandestine queer spaces. She takes her to "a small, dimly lit church-like structure" whose mere existence is shrouded in mortal danger as its discovery "can cost some of [them], if not all of [them], [their] lives." Ndidi reveals that the space is not an isolated refuge, "[t]his one is not even the first," which points to a broader network of queer counterpublics in Nigeria. However, the precarity of such spaces is underscored by Ndidi's account of one being destroyed by fire because the camouflage of heterosexuality is removed. This echoes the pervasive threat of violence that accompanies any disruption to the heteronormative propriety.

The ever-present fear of being discovered paralyzes Ijeoma's ability to express her affection for Ndidi openly. The ease with which she had previously given Chibundu "a clumsy kiss" serves as a stark contrast. This highlights the chasm between the relative comfort of heteronormative performance and the perils of acknowledging her queer desires. As they stand "awkwardly staring into each other's eyes," the fantasized possibilities of intimacy - "leaning in and kissing each other on the lips," "holding each other tightly the way that lovers do" - remain foreclosed. It is overshadowed by the ever-present threat of her mother's surveillance and the phantasmatic specter of "all hell breaking loose" should their transgressions be discovered. In this context, the invocation of Jesus' words, "*He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,*" serves as a potential counter-narrative.[62] This biblical reference suggests a more compassionate interpretation of scripture, one that resists the rigid moral absolutes espoused by her mother's fundamentalist teachings. The complexity and authenticity of Ijeoma and Ndidi's relationship becomes even more apparent when contrasted with Okparanta's depiction of heterosexual unions in *On Ohaeto Street*. In this short story, the marriage between Chinwe and Eze is predicated on the requirement that the wife "would have to be a [Jehovah's] Witness."[63] This stipulation for their union underscores how heterosexual marriages often come with societal or religious prerequisites that must be fulfilled. In stark contrast, Ijeoma and Ndidi's love is portrayed as unconditional and pure in essence. Their relationship is not bound by external mandates or societal expectations but is rooted solely in their genuine affection and connection with each other. This serves to emphasize the disparity between the idealized, yet often constrained, vision of heterosexual marriage in society and the more organic, unrestricted nature of Ijeoma and Ndidi's same-sex relationship.

Ijeoma's gradual emancipation from the inhibiting self-consciousness of visiting an "underground place" as a "respectable young woman" marks her increasing integration into the clandestine queer counterpublic fostered within the confines of the 'church'.[64] Alongside the other girls, she and Ndidi engaged in intimate acts of physical affection and subverts the heteronormative restrictions of the public sphere. The 'church' can be interpreted through the

[62] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 189-233.

lens of political scientist James C. Scott's (b. 1936) concept of "infrapolitics," a form of "resistance that avoids any open declaration of its intentions."[65] Such a nuanced, subterfuge-based modes of opposition allow people like Ijeoma and Ndidi to subvert the dominant heteronormative ideologies and power structures that seek to marginalize their queer identities and relationships. However, their temporary refuge is shattered by the ominous intrusion of "a loud banging sound" at the church's entrance. Prepared for such an eventuality, the congregants retreat to a fortified bunker, "packed [in] tightly like stacked-up tubers of yam." As they anxiously await the departure of the vigilantes, "the smell of burning tires" intimates the violent possibilities that loom over. Tragically, their worst fears are realized when the girls emerge to find that the vigilantes have executed Ndidi's colleague, Adanna, leaving her body to "bur[n] and bur[n] and tur[n] to ashes." This act of extrajudicial murder is subsequently framed as a "necessary" manifestation of divine will, a horrific "example" intended to "cleanse Aba of such sinful ways."[66] It underscores the collusion between religious fundamentalism and at times, state-sanctioned violence in policing non-normative sexuality.

A Compromise

The traumatic image of Adanna's burnt corpse haunts Ijeoma as a premonition of the fate she or Ndidi could have faced. The survivor's guilt extends to a broader fear of persecution shared by queer individuals. Okparanta further explores this fear in *America*, "[m]obile policemen were always looking for that sort of thing—men with men or women with women. And the penalties were harsh … What kind of life was I expecting to have, always having to turn around to check if anyone was watching?."[67] Both narratives depict characters grappling with the psychological burden of potential violence, legal persecution, and social ostracism. It is within this atmosphere of paralyzing trepidation that Ijeoma encounters Chibundu; the "unwanted attention" he gives her serves as a counternarrative to the intimacies she had cultivated with Ndidi. Ijeoma's subsequent acceptance of Chibundu's marriage proposal, cast in the narrative as Ijeoma becoming "a victim of a terrible conspiracy," speaks about the coercive power of heteronormative mandates wherein the option of a 'normal' life proves alluring even in the face of her own reservations. Ndidi's recommendation that Ijeoma go out with Chibundu and "try things out with a boy" made in the aftermath of traumatic events underscores the extent to which the threat of violence has severed the bonds of their love.[68]

Ijeoma's wedding is shrouded in uncertainty, as she voices her lingering doubts to her mother, who attempts to persuade her of the societal imperative that marriage is important for women. This collision of Ijeoma's personal misgivings with her mother's unyielding adherence to patriarchal norms foreshadows the traumatic nature of the consummation that follows. The

[63] Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water*, p. 97.
[64] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 192.
[65] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 220.
[66] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 206-10.
[67] Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water*, p. 122.
[68] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 211-15.
[69] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees,* pp. 232-38.
[70] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, pp. 283-5.

description of Ijeoma's first night of marriage is suffused with a palpable sense of dread as she watches her husband "tugging at the front of his trousers" and hears "that dreaded sound: just the sound of a man undoing his zipper." The auditory intrusion is described in stark, physical terms, likened to "a sharp object [which has] somehow been jabbed into [her] ears." It evokes piercing discomfort that extends beyond the purely auditory realm. The language employed, with its emphasis on the physicality of the act and the subjective experience of Ijeoma, underscores the profound disconnection between her desires and the coercive sexual encounter that awaits her. The discomfort she experiences in the face of her husband's advances speaks of the violence inherent in the imposition of heteronormative scripts wherein the female body becomes the battleground upon which competing ideological forces are combated. Ijeoma grapples with the futility of its resistance. In a bid to "make one person miserable rather than two", she ultimately concedes. Her desires remain focused on Ndidi and Amina and despite "a year of marriage and a baby on the way," she continues to be plagued by doubts.[69]

The marriage between Ijeoma and Chibundu proves to be a hollow construct; it fails to bring fulfilment to either of them. Over time, their shared discontent increased. Both cling to the illusory hope that a child might bridge the chasm in their relationship and view parenthood as a potential salve for marital wounds. However, the birth of their daughter, Chidinma, only exacerbates the underlying tensions. Chibundu's increasing agitation stems from a deep-seated desire for a son—a mirror of himself—rather than a daughter, who serves as a constant reminder of Ijeoma's true nature. This fragile equilibrium is ultimately shattered when Chibundu discovers the cache of the unsent letters Ijeoma has penned Ndidi. His interception of Ndidi's letters exposes the depths of his insecurity and the fragility of their marriage. Rather than confronting the inherent falsehood of their union, he resorts to threats and coercion, declaring, "[y]ou are my wife. Whatever you do, don't provoke me, or I will see to it that you pay the price." His demand that Ijeoma redirect her love from Ndidi to him reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of love and desire. When challenged on this logic, Chibundu falls back on societal expectations: "[m]arriage is a promise, not just to marry, but also to love," invoking a patriarchal view of marriage as a contract of affection rather than a genuine emotional bond.[70] Chibundu's desperation manifests in his forceful attempts to conceive a son, a goal that becomes symbolic of his desire to assert control over Ijeoma and their marriage. Ijeoma's subsequent miscarriage is met with a perfunctory consolation from Chibundu, quickly followed by the pressure to try again. This highlights the prioritization of his desires over Ijeoma's well-being. This dynamic echoes the theme explored in Okparanta's short story "Wahala!," where Chibuzo's increasing impatience with his wife Nneka's inability to conceive threatens their marriage.[71] Both narratives illustrate the intense societal pressure on women to fulfil traditional roles of motherhood, often at the expense of their own autonomy and happiness. Ijeoma's decision to leave her husband following the loss of her second child marks a turning point in her journey towards self-actualization. The narrative concludes on a note of cautious optimism, with Chidinma's acceptance of her mother's sexual orientation and Adaora's eventual recognition that "[the] God, who created [Ijeoma], must have known what He did."[72] This resolution suggests Ijeoma's successful navigation of what bell hooks terms

[71] Okparanta, *Happiness, Like Water*, p. 21-34.

the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[73] It ultimately empowers her to live on her own terms.

Conclusion

In the homophobic societal context depicted, the fact that Ijeoma deviates from normative sexuality and lives a life fraught with terror underscores that one's sexuality, akin to one's birthplace or skin colour, is not a voluntary choice. This heteronormative society could not extinguish Ijeoma's love for both Amina and Ndidi. While Chidinma accepts Ijeoma as she is, Adaora and Chibundu require more time to understand her. The imposition of a heteronormative sexual orientation serves not only to perpetuate societal norms, but also to reinforce sexism and uphold male dominance within the social fabric. An intriguing paradox of homosexuality in a heteronormative society is that despite being marginalized and ostracized by the state and society, the heteronormative majority often assumes the role of the victim. This is particularly evident when the mere expression of one's sexual orientation as a gay individual is misconstrued as a perceived threat to children's well-being. When a lesbian openly advocates for her rights, society often fears that she will influence other women to adopt her sexuality, as if her advocacy could 'convert' others. As Ijeoma poignantly articulated, the tendency to position oneself as an aggrieved party in someone else's tragedy seems to be an innate characteristic of humanity.

There is a propensity to find solace and comfort in casting oneself as a victim and conveniently shifting the spotlight away from the genuine struggles of those who challenge societal norms and embrace their true selves: "I suppose it's the way we are, humans that we are. Always finding it easier to make ourselves the victim in someone else's tragedy."[74] This introspective observation prompts one to question the veracity of such self-imposed victimhood. By recognizing the inherent power dynamics and desire to preserve existing social structures, one can begin to unravel the intricate threads of bias and discrimination that entangle their perceptions. Through empathy, one can transcend the limits of personal narratives and open oneself to others' experiences. By embracing diversity and understanding that the acceptance of someone else's truth does not diminish one's own, a paradigm of inclusivity can be cultivated. As Okparanta observes in the novel, "[i]f you set off on a witch-hunt, you will find a witch … No matter how unlike a witch she is, there she will be, a witch, before your eyes."[75]

[72] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 323.
[73] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), p. 17.
[74] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 253.
[75] Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*, p. 196.