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Living Under Cover: Homophobia in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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Abstract

Homosexuality in Nigeria today has taken on many negative assumptions; viewed as an anomaly and has become synonymous to a western aberration that represents one of the vestiges of colonization. However, a critical historiography of homosexuality in Africa proves quite the contrary. This paper strives to explore the dilemma, discrimination, physical and psychological persecution and torment faced by homosexuals in Nigeria, comprehend the challenges they encounter in a society that polices and punishes their sexual orientations thus forcing them to live "under cover;"[1] or be killed. It also seeks to evaluate the future of gay men and women in Nigeria. It organizes its fundamental argument around Bernard Matolino's logic of "harm" (2017) while relying on queer theory as a scaffold. The study further investigates how gay men and women create and sustain homoerotic relationships, form homosocial alliances to deliberate the general problem surrounding their sexualities, the punishments they face when caught. This is because as Appiah Kwame and Mutua Makau state in their separate studies, sexual orientation is immutable since people are not blamable for their tendency to be attracted to people of the same sex. Thus, the study invokes Bernard Matolino's logic of "harm" by observing that severe harm is not done to the soul of the society by tolerating the presence of its gay populace thus the urgent need to stop the persecution of homosexuals which seems to be the missive of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees.*

Keywords: *Homosexuality, Homophobia, Discrimination, Persecution, Society, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Steven Pierce in his study on Nigeria and Sexual perverting notes that "Wide-scale repression of same-sex sexual expression and ambiguous gender is a relatively recent phenomenon in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa" (3). These are statements of fact as historical antecedents have demonstrated that homosexuality is neither un-African nor new to the African culture. However, with the exception of South Africa, the tunes of most African leaders have been monotonously that of homo-negativity. From Gambia to Malawi, Uganda to Nigeria, laws and bills are being promulgated against same sex relationship. Although such laws according to Kapya Kaoma are passed on the ground of shielding African culture from corruption and adulteration since it is believed the colonialisation and Christianisation mission changed pre-colonial Africa's liberal attitudes toward sexuality. "Pre-colonial Africa did not attach shame to sexuality as was the case in Europe" (Epprecht 4). Kaoma added that "Indeed, the association of sex with shame and the criminalisation of homosexuality are of colonial and Christian origin" (33). Thus, homophobia in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, is largely a product of colonialism via the teaching of Christian missionaries. Chinelo

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Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is one novel that clearly illustrates homophobia in Nigeria and its attendant consequences.

The novel opens with a description of where Ijeoma lives in Ojoto: "MIDWAY BETWEEN Old Oba-Nnewi Road and New Oba-Nnewi Road, in that general area bound by the village church and the primary school, and where Mmiri John Road drops off only to begin again..." (11) The setting is an ultimate metaphor for different order and period that Ijeoma passes through, the new expression of her sexuality which is relatively new because the society is yet to embrace it and the old order of things which the community clings.

Set during the Nigerian Civil War, which took place from 1967-1970, *Under the Udala Trees* tells the story of Ijeoma who enjoys a period of calm and a bit of affluence with her parents before the war. The narrator, Ijeoma, tells the readers that she and her family "had been an upper-middle class before Papa's death." (54) Ijeoma goes on to describe how things were before the war: "As for us, we moved in that unhurried way of the butterflies, as if the breeze was sweet, as if the sun on our skins was a caress. As if slow paces allowed for the savoring of both. This was the way things were before the war: our lives, tamely moving forward." (12) Okparanta carefully selects tender metaphors and diction here to describe a beautiful order, and because after the war, nothing returned to normal, one never sees this sort of poetic language in the text anymore.

As the war worsens the situation in Ojoto and the entire Republic of Biafra, Mama sends Ijeoma to Nnewi to live with the grammar school teacher and his wife. It is at Nnewi that Ijeoma meets Amina. The meeting between Ijeoma and Amina soon metamorphosed into a sexual relationship:

> 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. (99)

Before an exposition of the sex scene, the narrator foregrounds the event, which partly draws from society's frown at lesbians.

Violence and Persecution of Queer Nigerians as Represented in the Novel

After the grammar school teacher espies the girls being intimate with each other, Okparanta reveals how society reacts against being queer. The grammar school teacher slams into the girls, and, this is the first act of violence, even though in minor form, against queers in the novel. "He walked over, pulled us off the mattress one at a time, slapped us on our cheeks. Over a year with him, sometimes the threat of a beating, but never an actual beating, until then." (105) Over a year, he never beats any of the girls, but seeing them in a sexual act induces violence. He then proceeds to tell them about how they treat Homosexuals; he tells them that, "He had heard of such cases, in which the accused were stoned all the way to the river. Stoned even as they drowned in the waters of the river. Of course, it was rare that such cases were spoken of. So taboo the whole thing was, anathema, unmentionable, not even deserving a name." (106) Note that the grammar school teacher does not allude to this homophobic violence of killing with any condemnation. Instead, he justifies it.

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A dastard expression of homophobia against queer is the killing of Adanna's friends from the university. Ndidi, Ijeoma's partner, reports it to Ijeoma thus:

> "There was a beating yesterday, Ndidi said very softly one evening. She appeared to be speaking to herself or into the air, rather than to me. "They were two men. I never knew them. They were friends of Adanna from the university. For days they seemed to have disappeared, fallen off the face of the earth. And then yesterday she heard something at the market, whispers about a pair of 'sissies' being beaten by a crowd of people. She went to the bushes behind the dirt road not far from where they lived, and she found the two of them there, naked and beaten to death. (Okparanta 169)

What is more troubling about this act is that the law enforcement agents, the Police are perceived to be a part of the homophobic acts in the country by their actions and inactions? After the mob murdered Adanna's friends, she and Ndidi call the police officers to, at least, take their bodies, but they refused. One of the Officers says, "'Let them rot like the faggots they are the other one said, 'If they were not dead already, we would beat them some more.(170) The Police are supposed to protect lives, but when it comes to murdering of queers, they do not care.

Another act of violence against Queers is the burning down of the church building where the lesbians have their secret meetings and the subsequent burning alive of Adanna, a known lesbian in the novel. The first church where they hide (undercover) and carry out their activities is razed down by fire, luckily all of them survived. The homophobes also unearth the new church where they meet. The girls quickly run to hide inside a bunker. Ijeoma narrates that the bunker is "harder to detect than those of our war days. As if one or more of the girls had known to plan ahead. As if they had known that a raid like this would be inevitable. (171) As some of the girls hide in the bunker, they hear "screams and cries and a man's thundering voice, as if reciting a prayer." (171) The homophobic mob catch one of the girls and when everything has relaxed, and the girls come out of their hiding place:

> We had hardly walked two yards when we saw, in the backyard of the church, a flame of orange and blue. A stack of burning logs. Ndidi began to cry, and then all of us were crying too, because we had all seen what remained of the face, and we had all recognized her: Adanna in the midst of the logs, burning and burning and turning to ashes right before our eyes. (172)

Ijeoma witnesses this horrific scene, and more painfully, it is someone that she knows that is the victim this time. It is so sad that being queer is perpetually living in the fear of being found out and killed in Nigeria. Even though the law prohibits the act and they are hiding in churches and odd places to go about their activities, it does not matter to the people, they still witch-hunt and kill them. It is so much; Ndidi resigns to Ijeoma being in their circle, she believes that Ijeoma needs a shield, which is to marry Chibundu, as she tells her, "People like us are getting killed. (176)

Mental and Psychological Violence and Demonisation of Queerness in the Text

The grammar school teacher sends for Ijeoma's mother to come and take her child to exorcise her through God's words while the grammar school teacher and his wife will do the same to Amina, Ijeoma's first partner. Mama tries to suppress Ijeoma's sexuality by alluding to the scriptures. She tells her that, Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. (65)

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While Mama uses scriptural verses to incite guilt in Ijeoma so that she can seek reparation, Ijeoma tries to use logic to counter Mama's point when she states that:

> The thought occurred to me: Yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But so what if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did that have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? 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. (72)

But this logic only queries in Ijeoma's mind. She does not engage Mama in the conversation. As she said, "I was excited by my thought" and could not present her theories to Mama because "she might decide that I was being insubordinate to her and to God…" (73)

As the Biblical lessons do not work, Mama decides to resort to prayers. She believes that Queerness is a devilish infliction on Ijeoma and that prayers have the capacity to deliver her from the demon. The exorcise session by her mother is narrated thus:

> She approached until she towered above me. She got down on her knees. A scent of incense floated out of her. Her voice was weak, even a little apologetic, as she said, "I've been thinking. It's not you." My head snapped up in her direction. She continued. "No, it's not you at all. There's nothing wrong with you. It's the devil causing you to be this way. (76)

Mama's postulation and her treatment of Ijeoma show how Africans, mainly Nigerians, treat homosexuality. Many Africans believe that homosexuality is aberrational and influenced by the devil. After all the rituals to cleanse Ijeoma, Mama tells her that "You will be cured by the glory and power of God." She used the word 'cure' as if Ijeoma is suffering from a sort of illness.

The psychological blackmail takes a toll on Ijeoma at some point in her life. First, it is with Amina. Her sessions with the grammar school teacher affect her psyche so much that she starts having nightmares that are similar to the allusions in the book of revelation, and, at some stage, she starts avoiding Ijeoma until she marries the opposite sex.

Ijeoma begins to react mentally to the verbal and psychological violence she encounters from her mother that her sexuality is an abomination, and she is doomed if she does not repent. She begins to react by having nightmares. On a night that she falls asleep with a sense of satisfaction, "I had slept only a couple of hours when I woke up with a start." The instant she wakes up:

> Memories of my Bible studies with Mama rushed back to me yet again, no matter how much I tried to put them away from my mind. Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream, as if to mockingly ask me how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach. (160)

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After the episode of the dream is the beginning of Ijeoma's witch-hunt against herself: "In that moment, I began to believe myself a witch under the influence of the devil, and if Mama's exorcism had not worked, then it seemed that I owed it to myself to find something that would. Self-purification was the goal" (162). Ijeoma starts going to church to pray to relief herself off the devil's fang as she starts to believe that she is possessed.

After much coercion from her mother and the psychological torment through dreams, she decides to marry Chibundu. Despite being married to him, her affection for Ndidi does not stop because she obliged to the marriage for Mama's sake, Mama's voice came booming: Hush before you breathe life into your doubts! Marriage is for everyone*! Remember, a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all*…" (183) (Italicisation is ours.) Her marriage is also partly to hide her identity from the society as Ndidi advised her, "Go out with him. See how you feel. This kind of life is not for everyone. *People like us are getting killed*" (177). It is also crucial to note that while Ndidi urges Ijeoma to try out a new way of life, she makes it seem like Ijeoma's sexuality is situational, "And anyway, you might decide you like that other life better. The kind of life that he can give you know, man and wife." Ijeoma fumes over this sort of perspective, as she rebukes, "How could she imply that I even had a choice in the matter? How could she imply that it was that simple that I should just go on and order myself to try things out with a boy? Had she? Was that how it worked for her?. (177) A plethora of mental violence from Mama makes Ijeoma start doubting her normalcy at some stage. Out of resignation, she says, "Because when I thought of it, I did want to be normal. I did want to lead a normal life." (181) The criminalisation and demonisation of Queerness by Mama and the entire society start affecting Ijeoma to the point that she stops seeing herself as natural.

The tacky part about Ijeoma is her lack of insistence until the end. In her bid "to be normal" (181) and "lead a normal life," she takes advantage of Chibundu's love for her. As she said, "I did want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out." Because she does not want to be "found out," she accepts to marry Chibundu even when she does not feel anything for him. A portrayal of the opportunist side of Ijeoma is in display here. Although some critics might believe that it is not her incursion because she tries to tell Chibundu about herself in the church where she tells him she is an abomination, he debunks it and says it is society's backwardness that informs labelling people and things as abominations if they do not have an idea about it. But, despite all Chibundu's good gesture, even after their marriage, Ijeoma keeps writing to Ndidi. Despite that she breaks Chibundu's trust, he has this to say:

> "I don't hate you for it," he said. "I really don't. You know already that I don't believe all that nonsense about abominations. Maybe there's something special about that kind of love, about a man loving another man or a woman loving another woman in that way. Maybe there's something appealing about it. *But what makes me so angry is that I loved you first. Before there was her, there was me. And more than that, you made me a promise. Marriage is a promise, not just to marry, but also to love.*" (233) (Emphasis added)

Chibundu is both the victim and villain of Ijeoma's story: at one point, he is the victim whose wife cannot get over her love affair but marries him because she wants to hide her sexual identity from society. At another time, he is the villain who feels a male child is all that matters.

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The Weight of Being Queer and a Woman in Nigeria as Portrayed in the Text

Being queer in Nigeria is dangerous; it is even more dangerous to be a queer woman. Beside Ijeoma being a lesbian, her gender places her on a rougher edge. The stress that accompanies her sexuality becomes higher when Mama starts pressuring her to marry. Making a statement such as, "Remember, a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all…" (183), begins to place Ijeoma in a box. Okparanta uses the character of Ijeoma to portray how difficult it is to be a black and a queer woman. By interlacing the two phenomena: she shows that there is a traditional order that oppresses homosexuals and women and it, therefore, becomes difficult being both. As Julie L. Nagoshi et al. note in *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*, "Society then uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices to enforce adherence to these gender roles" (16). This is a typical portrayal of Mama, Ijeoma's mother. While Ijeoma tries to use dialectics and reason to make Mama view things differently, she resorts to religious and cultural beliefs. When Mama comes to Port Harcourt after Ijeoma's marriage, her first observation is Ijeoma's failure to keep her home clean so that her "guests will know that a woman lives here"(312). She blames it on the war that prevented her from teaching Ijeoma some of the things that define a woman.

The traditional justification for gender roles shows why society sees homosexuality as aberrational. It begins with the perception of sex. For Chibundu, as accepted by society, sex is for the bases of procreation, and importantly, the procreation of a male child. This line of a biological and evolutionary inkling of sex also relates to why society sees same-sex activities as an abomination. As Nagoshi et al. succinctly put it, this line of belief "leaves out the utility of sex for reasons of pleasure and sexual acts between the same sex" (17). The note of exclusive essentialism of sex is the historical base for defining gender role.

Okparanta shows through Ijeoma's challenge the problem that the African woman faces; while she bears the burden of her queer identity, which is termed a transgression by Christianity and the indigenous religion, she still battles with the economic problem that beguiles the third world and stipulated gender roles. While in Europe, as noted in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, there is a transfiguration of seeing homosexuality as not being aberrational, but as "an act that is the expression of an innate identity," things are different in Africa. (11) Nikki Sullivan notes "[T]he shifts from *sodomy* as a crime of which anyone is potentially capable, to an act that is the expression of an innate identity. […] From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, medical analyses of various forms of non-procreative sex as categorisable perversions and deviations came to replace the religious association of undifferentiated non-procreative acts (sodomy) with sin." (11). Sodomy at the period is dubbed as the same-sex act, mainly penetration. While this development ensues in European countries to redefine homosexuality as physiology and "indiscreet anatomy," such development did not occur in Africa to see them as a new "species".

CONCLUSION

From this textual overview, it becomes safe to draw deductible conclusions that are based on Bernard Matilino's logic of "harm" which applies mostly in justifications of what the society considers to be of value. Value according to Matolino, can be viewed from two perspectives: that which constitutes "communitarian" codes that are adjudged acceptable, and that which makes the "personhood" of the individual (72). In this case, his justification is not on the fact that there is a vice in that which constitutes the person, as such as it affects or "harms" the

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society, but the fact that the individual can make out pleasurable experiences from such societal codes and values. Okparanta presents us with characters who, though practicing a seemingly "deviant" sexuality, face extreme harm that their sexual life could not have caused in reciprocal sense, to the society. Matolino justifies this in the assertion that homosexuals simply "seek to live their lives to the best of their experiences as opposed to pursuing an agenda that diminishes the experience of the full cycle of African life" (75).

It has also been argued that while homophobic tendencies exist in law and spiteful actions against homosexuals, there is the negligence or undermining of their humanness, and the fact that normal humans pursue feelings and react to them. The justification that man is meant for a woman and the woman is meant for a woman goes to a large extent to be stereotypical as it places certain sects of humans on the threshold of subordination and discrimination. It does not allow for that individual assertiveness of emotional will-power and choice. This is also one of the stereotypes that Okparanta's characters face as a justification for, and the need for them to conform to societal standards of sexuality (heterosexuality), and a yardstick for the condemnation and disabuse of their orientation towards emotional choice (homosexuality).

The female characters like Ijeoma must be made to understand that "Marriage is for everyone" and such a union should be to the opposite sex. Yet, in the midst of this gospel of heterosexuality, the author, maybe deliberately or not, makes the homosexual characters to display every sense of natural attachment, trust, and fidelity, which many heterosexual unions hardly keep. This is also supported by Matolino's argument that any sexual relationship is open to possibilities of the same joys and frustrations that any intimate relationship between two people could bring -be it heterosexual or homosexual. According to him, "opponents of same-sex orientation can possibly object to this characterisation along the lines that it is not possible to have or imagine same- sex couples in a long-term relationship that exhibits the same characteristics as heterosexual couples. However, it suffices to point out that in societies that are tolerant of same-sex monogamy, long- term same-sex partners seem to exhibit much the same spectrum of constructive relationship behaviour, and destructive behaviour, as heterosexual marriages" (62). This study sums this up in the postulation that disregarding the choice of homosexual females as represented in Okparanta's novel, while at the same time subjecting them to patriarchal cycles is also a double Jeopardy for the African woman

Footnote

1) The phrase was used by the protagonist of Jude Dibia's (2005) Walking with Shadows to refer to the many gay Nigerians who hide their sexualities behind various facades to avoid the wrath of the society.

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