

Queer Childhood, Gender Panic and Homophobia in Unoma Azuah's *Blessed Body*

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Abstract

This study examines queer childhood and how it throws up gender panic and homophobia in heteronormative societies in Unoma Azuah's Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. The paper notes that in some African societies where heterosexuality is regarded as the natural sexual preference, there is this obnoxious fixation that gender and sex are fixed phenomenon and that, gender depends on a biological sex and sexuality also depends on a prescribed gender. Thus, children who manifest non-conforming gender roles are seen as queer and this, expectedly, attracts cruel acts of homophobia by family members and even the community. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts a deconstruction of the belief that gender and sex are fixed. Through analysis of select stories in Azuah's Blessed Body, the paper explores textual manifestation of queer childhoods as literary modes of interrogating a restrictive cultural and social contexts. Using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which lies within queer theory, this paper establishes that being a woman or man is a matter of cultural compulsion and not necessarily from sex. The paper concludes that the society's insistence on compulsory stability of sex, gender and desire is nothing but heteronormative conspiracy to perpetually demonise and persecute those with alternative sexual preference.

Keywords: Childhood, Queer, Sex-gender panic, Homophobia, Sexuality

Introduction

Queer childhood has become a trope in African literary enterprise and also a mode through which queer African writers interrogate African cultural and social claims of stable, prescribed and fixed correspondence of specific gender to a particular sexuality. It is noted that in gender development, there has been a substantial dichotomy over the relative influence of nature and nurture.

While some agree that gender is natured, some argues, it is nurtured. Yet many tilt towards evidence favouring one influence over the other. This informs why gender identity is an important feature of children's development. Given the hetero-normativised impulse of some African societies, the consequences for those who do not, or cannot live up to the prescribed gender-typed behaviour are always unpalatable. Thus, in these societies, it is commonplace to find families and communities plunged into panic and jittery, anytime a child manifests signs of non-conformity or instability in gender performances. The fear is always that, if not rebuked, they will grow up to become homosexuals in adulthood. For instance, the family and community express disapproval when a male child walks like a female or a female walks in a masculine way. A child also attracts sterner rebuke when he or she exhibits sexual characters that do not conform to his or her biological make up. This also applies to even domestic chores he or she does at home.

However, in recent centuries, there has been a considerable shift in gender roles which allows women and girls to crave for opportunities previously reserved for men. According to Angela Brogle, "Accumulating evidence shows androgynous individuals (those who possess many traits and skills traditionally considered both feminine and masculine) fare better on various measures of psychological adjustment" (2). While girls and women are generously allowed expression of traditionally masculine behaviours, boys and men continue to experience strong pressure to conform to traditional roles. In spite of the obvious positive effects of a more elastic gender roles, males who express gender-typed behaviours that do not conform to their biological sex are seen as queer and pathetically maltreated and ostracised, all in a bid to reset their gender roles and sexuality.

It is this belief in compulsory, prescriptive and naturalised heterosexuality that prompts the regulation of gender as binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term and this is believed to be achieved through heterosexual desire and performances. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to deconstruct the above unverifiable claims that sex and gender are naturally configured. The paper is also establish that childhood is an unpredictable and an unfolding space, which informs why children's gender performances may not point to their sexual preferences. In other words, a male child whose social performances do not conform to male gender roles, may not provide any clue about his sexual preference and the same goes to a female child. In the words of Madelaine Hron, childhood is "a particularly resistant space, of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of difference that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults" (30). Hron's

conceptualisation of childhood as a space of resistance here makes it a mode for interrogating the social entity's present and its orientations toward the future (Lombardi, 688).

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo vehemently refuses non-normative gender performance and is often seen lamenting about his two children; Nwoye and Ezinma, who, obviously, do not conform to the traditional gender roles. While he describes Nwoye his first son as a woman, for not exhibiting those heteronormative attributes expected of a man, Okonkwo considers himself lucky in his daughters and will often regret why Ezinma was not a man.

I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck." . . . Okonkwo was very lucky in his daughters. He never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl. (138)

Nwoye is later vindicated in *No Longer at Ease*, as he grows up and becomes a successful family man, contrary to his father's portraiture of him as queer. Against this backdrop, Margaret Mead reveals some startling variations in gender roles of children, drawing instances from military organisations of some communities in Guinea. According to her, "The Mudungunor were a cannibalistic tribe of head hunters in which both men and women were warlike and aggressive. The women scorned childbearing and raising children because it interfered with their ability to participate in fights with neighbouring villages" (Quoted in Brogle, 7). Thus, one can find a glaring evidence of gender as not only natured but nurtured, poignantly debunking Okonkwo's position on gender as natural arrangement. However, Bernie Lombardi's suggestion on Okonkwo's saga is that. . . "We reimagine Nwoye and Ezinma and explore their gender instabilities as points of entry into representations of queer sex-genderconfigurations in African literature (688). It is noted that, most times, the maltreatment meted to children considered as queer even helps in fuelling the queerness in them. In the process of correcting their perceived non-conforming attitudes, children are deprived love, care and attention. Even when, most times, they don't have a name for their feelings, the families, out of panic, will unknowingly draw their attention to their queerness and this will further push them into closet, where they'll begin to rationalise and accept the persons they are.

Jude Dibia vividly captures this scenario in *Walking with Shadows*. In this novel, being the second of three boys, Adrian who is always ill and extremely shy, knew early enough that he was not like Chiedu who was his mother's favourite or Chika who was his father's champion. Thus, he grew up a needy, attention-deprived child who would sneak behind his father while the father combed his hair after a shower for the tiny droplets of water to fall on him. For Adrian, these droplets were “showers of love”(14), and this way, he could be touched by his father because this was the closest he ever felt to his father. This fuels the queerness in Adrian's behaviour. According to Naomi Domingo et al, this ugly childhood conditions “opens Adrians childish eye to the heteronormative experience of ordering and the likelihood of his abnormality” (72). Eugene Yakubu, asserts that “these are the psychological factors proffered by Dibia himself in the narrative that might have all contributed in Adrian's sexual identity” (5).

As stated earlier in this paper, the above situation usually sets children on collision course with the family and even the community. The enduring psychological and emotional injury created by the familial lacuna indisputably stifles the emotional and intellectual potentialities of the children. Jude Iwok argues that “when a child experiences a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother or other care-giver, that child would thrive” (48). It is on the strength of Iwok's assertion that one can infer that homophobia brings and injects frustration, which negatively affects the child's personality, feelings and needs.

When physical bashings seem not too effective, most families resort to religious cleansing as a means of exorcising the demons that are responsible for the queerness in children. It becomes interesting to note that in the context of African Christianity, people suddenly becomes fixated by this belief that everything is fixable through prayers. Hence, it is not uncommon to hear people proffer church prayers as solutions to typhoid, malaria, poverty, and of course homosexuality which is termed “demonic”. In the process of casting out this demons, these children get brutally flogged, kept hungry and sometimes made to have sex with the opposite sex, as a means of correcting the compromised gender roles. At the end, it will be sadly realised that there's nothing absolutely wrong with the children.

Commenting on similar scenario in Dibia's novel mentioned earlier where

Chiedu, Adrian's elder brother recruits pastor Matthew to exorcise the gay demon in Adrian by unleashing excruciating lashes on his back, Ogede Ode opines that, "the religious correction reflects the possibilities offered by satire as a vehicle for socio-political and cultural commentary within the institution of the novel" (71). Thus the belief that religion can correct sexual orientation is not only absurd but also emblematic of Africa's religious monolithism. The same picture is created in Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak no Evil*. In this novel, Niru, a Nigerian student living in Washington DC, who is yet to understand what name should be given to his sexual feelings, receives serious backlash from his conservative, devoutly religious and unremittingly homophobic parents when they discover a gay site transferred to his phone by his friend. Without listening to his explanation, his father physically assaults and later bundles him to Reverend Olumide's church for prayers that will rid him of what they believe to be a curable disease. To be doubly sure of the deliverance, Niru is later bundled to Pastor Okeke's church in Nigeria for more prayers. Yet after all these troubles, Niru becomes even emboldened, runs from home and embrace his gay nature. The above incidences do not only reveal the dynamics of homophobic violence perpetrated by religious bodies which people should naturally turn to for love and support, it affirms Philip Collins' assertion that, "the adult world is generally hostile, vicious, uncomprehending or indifferent, or the child had to minister to instead of being supported by it" (182).

It is against this backdrop that this paper argues that when a society is psychologically gendered and where traditional gender roles are the central plank of cultural life, tension and conflict become inevitable. When children are stripped of their rights, which are supposed to include parental care and guidance, on grounds that their gender roles betray the society's expectation, they will not grow up stably and may use their haphazard childhood as a medium of constructing queer selfhood.

Children, Gender Panic and Construction of Queer Selfhood in Azuah's *Blessed Body*

Unoma Azuah's *Blessed Body* is a coming-out anthology that chronicles the harrowing lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Nigerians. The anthology contains personal confessions of struggles by these Nigerians to discover and embrace their identities as sexual beings in their families, villages and towns, cities and countries, religions and cultures. Most

importantly, this anthology emerged to puncture the unverifiable and widely-believed notion that homosexuality is unAfrican. Susan Cork's has argued that "the ferocious backlash against homosexuality that is characteristic of many African politicians and the strong homophobia within African populations is grounded in the "notion that homosexuality is 'unAfrican'" (11). Cork's argument corroborates Chris Dunton's earlier assertion that in Africa, "non- normative sexuality is read or studied and criticized as not only "unchristian but also unAfrican" (728). Above all, stories in this anthology are catalogued to expose the injustice of the Nigerian Government in its "jail the gay" bill that was signed into law in 2014.

In all the thirty-six stories, the Nigerian society and its institutions such as the church, mosque, culture, customs and traditions are indicted for consistently espousing anti-gay viewpoints that have been responsible for the rejection and criminalisation of homosexuality which have consequently forced most homosexuals in the country to live closeted lives; hiding their sexuality from the society around them. In some of the stories, the narrators paint a vivid picture of a society that is constantly engulfed in apprehension and anxiety over children who do not conform to the heteronormative gender in their gender performances. This apprehension may be the reason children learn quickly to identify and believe that parents will think cross-gender-type play is queer. It is also noted that it may be due to homophobia that the observation that girls like playing with dolls and boys, with trucks becomes an entrenched attitude that girls must play with dolls and boys, with trucks. Cahill and Adams note that "In one study of early childhood teachers' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were strongly related to child rearing gender role beliefs (37).

In *Blessed Body*, the stories are categorized into seven groups; Discovery: Coming of Age, Blurring Lines, Facebook Fantasies, Homo-sexing, Unwanted Marriage, Secret Lives, The Church and Unapologetic. Each of these groups forms a thematic area that graphically explore the harrowing experiences of homosexuals and those whose gender roles do not conform to the traditional hetero-sexual masculine roles. But it is in "Blurring the Lines" that Azuah projects, through the stories therein, queer childhood and its attendant gender panic and further explores how this triggers up cruel acts of homophobia which indirectly fuels the queerness in victim children. This is what this paper problematizes as will be shown in the analysis of the select stories.

In “A Nigerian Sissy”, the narrator reveals the trauma and pains that accompany his atypical behavior in childhood. As noted earlier, in some hetero-normative societies, parents generally prefer their children exhibit traditional gender-role behaviours, and are concerned when they are not. The fear is always that their non-conforming attitudes are obvious predictor of future homosexuality. As such, they enforce strict gender roles, in an attempt to avert homosexuality in adulthood. The explanation is that there is an assumed linkage between gender roles and future sexual orientation, and given the cultural and social standard of homophobia, this belief has prevented adults from allowing more latitude in their gender role expression.

In this story, the narrator's parents see his atypical gender role as worrisome and constantly remind of the consequences of “this flaw” (59). Being conscious of the hetero-normative nature of the society they find themselves, his attention is always drawn to the fact that the society is cruel to “soft” (60) men like him. “I would get abused, mistreated and I would not amount to anything if I don't toughen up” (60). To the narrator's parents, sex and gender are stable and natured and thus, there's inherent speculation that boys who engage in nontraditional gender behavior might grow up to be homosexual. Judith Butler disrupts this speculative and binary view of sex, gender and sexuality when she asserts that:

Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (519).

To Butler, it does not follow that the construction of men will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that women will interpret only female bodies. She opposes to the belief or the view that sex or gender is stable, but regards ...gender as a multiple interpretation of sex (*Gender Trouble*, 8). In the narrator's boarding school, the same harrowing experience in his home plays out. “I did get taunted a lot by fellow students and teachers alike. They call me all sorts of derogatory names... I always had a target on me and I did get beaten up when the opportunity came, simply out of hatred” (60). Even the term 'Sissy' used in describing him carries queer connotation and is culturally pejorative. Following this, the narrator drifts into trauma and begins to nurture low self-esteem. “A lot of this affected me and gave me a complex. I was a withdrawn child” (60). This brings the reader face to face

with the trauma and pains some children are exposed to, in the context of homophobia.

As the narrator leaves Nigeria for further studies abroad, he begins to renegotiate his sexual being. This affirms one of the positions of this paper that bringing children to the knowledge of their atypical behaviours and trying to forcefully reset their nonconforming gender roles rather facilitates their quest to attaining their queer selfhood. The narrator's recovery of self in Malaysia indicts Nigeria as a dangerous homophobic terrain. The narrator reveals thus: "I discovered myself, built my armour, my self-esteem and every essential tools that every sissy needs to navigate this world with...everything that was ugly about me became beautiful, so I loved it. I lived it and I was grateful for it" (61). This same picture resonates loudly in the next story "Beyond My Skin as the Butterfly: The Enigma".

In this compelling narrative, the narrator, a trans woman, graphically relates a gory ambience of a hate-filled home and community that almost consumed his childhood. Her parents see her as cultural and heteronormative rebel, for exhibiting biological behaviours that are culturally appropriated to boys. At the initial stage, her parents simply dismiss it as a phase. This is because most times, there's this belief that girls will eventually grow out of their cross-sex lives in adulthood. It has also been noted that although boys are often the recipient of the most rigid gender behavior restrictions, anecdotal evidence suggests that the tolerance for girls' cross-gender behaviours wanes with the onset of puberty. This may account for the reason gender-atypical behaviours in girls are so much more accepted than in boys.

As years go by, the narrator doesn't seem to have grown over her cross-sex behaviours and this, heightens and confirms her parent's fear for possible homosexuality in her adulthood. This equally heightens the homophobic atmosphere in her home and community.

My mother detested everything I was because it reminded her of what her Christian God said I should not be...Everyday while with my family, I go through the pain of emotional torture, physical torture and even "spiritual torture. They use clobber scriptures from the bible to execute their disdain towards me. They stole my laughter from me and implanted in me sadness that evolved into depression that nearly made me take my life (65).

The narrator's startled revelation above shows that religion welds a very strong grip on the individual and society's psyche and has subjected life variables into binary categories: anything sanctioned by religious text is good and the other way round is evil. It is also this humanity's vulnerability in the face of religion that has triggered off strongly politicised and public discourses on what constitutes an ideal sexuality. Enrique Rueda argues that: "religious belief is probably the single most important factor in the near-universal rejection of homosexual behaviour" (243).

In some African societies, it is commonplace to find Christian adherents deploying strongly -inspired Bible-based rhetoric and other Christian imaginaries to depict homosexuality as a serious moral pervasion and a dent on African morals. This paper notes that such anti-homosexual viewpoints have, for a very long time, been repeatedly espoused in African societies through Christian churches, and these have been responsible for the incessant corrective' rapes, physical assaults, tortures, murders, arbitrary arrests, detentions, extra-judicial killings and executions, forced disappearances, extortion and blackmail' that sexual minorities experience in Africa (Kaoma, 16). In the words of Adrian Van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, the above picture

"might be another example of how the Bible has found a home in Africa and how Christianity has become an African religion...." (2). This argument has also led to this widely-accepted position that, "in contemporary Africa, the Bible has become 'a site of struggle' where the debate on homosexuality is being fought" (Gunda, 22).

The narrator further reveals that after being taken to many unknown destinations for spiritual cleansing, "...yet nothing seemed to change. It only got worse for me because it put me constantly in pain" (65). This arises from the erroneous belief that non-traditional gender roles are curable and that it could be reversed by religion. It has been argued that the cultural management of the endemic crisis surrounding the performance of both heterosexual and able-bodied identity effects a panicked consolidation of hegemonic identities (McRuer, 94). The above also negates Butler's position that gender is nurtured rather than natured. Butler seems to believe that "One is not born a woman or a man, but rather becomes one. (*Gender Trouble*, 8). Almost every child in the above condition will relapse into trauma and low self-esteem and wouldn't hesitate to leave such a stifling environment at the

slightest opportunity.

In “The Down-Low Glow” the narrator reveals the tsunamic shock that greets his mother when she realises that the person he has communicating on phone, whom he claims is his girlfriend is actually a man. She reminds him of the usual Biblical rhetoric and other Christian imaginaries that God and the Bible hate not just sin, but gay sin. “God called it an abomination. And she said if I wasn't careful, I would be given up to a pervasive mind and God would abandon me” (69). Yet she does not say anything about his brother who fornicates with reckless abandon, an act that is equally condemnable by the Holy Scripture.

Thus, it becomes a morbid hypocrisy when adherents of Christianity only claim moral certainty on the homosexual sin and ignore other listed sins in the same scripture. This informs why queer scholars are critical of this one-sided Biblical interpretation and maintains that, to hold an absolute moral standard, similar Biblical injunctions must be treated in the same manner. Eric Sias argues that “when someone is ready to follow the Biblical mandate completely to the letter, without a political or individual convenience, then they can talk about forbidding homosexuality for religious purposes” (V11). The paper views it as a heteronormative conspiracy: a situation where the society is reeked with men and women who are culpable of other sexual sins, yet it has never been heard of any that has been killed, tortured, arrested or banished from the society, as experienced by homosexuals. Sias further advises that “we must understand that if we use the Biblical law as justification for our modern-day laws, we risk the very dangerous slippery-slope of picking and choosing the Biblical laws that best fit our own convenient agendas”(iv).

Upon the revelation that the narrator has sexual feelings for boys, the hitherto cordial relationship existed between the duos becomes sour. “My mother started treating me like a stranger. Sure, I got my regular ration on food and all that, but simple gestures like trying to help her do the dishes would have her give a sharp “No!” (70). This consequently will create further psychological and emotional trauma for any child in this circumstance. His father seems to show some level of understanding and blames his son's condition on the fact that he is still at a tender age to know that he is gay. Moreso, he may not have met a special woman that will make him interested in her. It is believed most times that atypical behaviours in boys could be corrected through sexual

intercourse with the opposite sex. This has been responsible for the several corrective rapes, with its attendant trauma, sexual minorities have been subjected to.

The pains and trauma emanating from the above stories spotlight the abhorrent depravities of homophobic culture that has eaten deep into all fabrics of African life and also underscores the acuteness and intensity of psychological trauma children are subjected to, in an attempt to “cure” them of their non-conforming gender roles. Despite the widely-held beliefs that gender roles behaviour alone in children do not determine their sexual identities, some African societies are still holding on to the idea that childhood gender non-conformity remains a strong predictor of same-sex partner preference in adulthood. This has attracted untold homophobia to children who are supposed to be loved and cared for by adults.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that there is a strong link between sex, gender and sexual orientations and in some heteronormative societies, like in Africa, where sex and gender are prescriptive, people who do not fall into the traditional model of gender development are susceptible to all kind of speculations as to the root causes of their non-conformity which ranges from curiosity and concern to disgust and fear. This is what this paper has attempted to deconstruct by establishing a position in lines with Butler's concept of gender performativity that sex and gender are not natured but nurtured. In other words, the non-conformity of one's gender role in childhood does not in all cases predict homosexuality in adulthood. The African society's insistence on heteronormative gender roles for everybody is viewed by this paper as a grand conspiracy to perpetually subject the sexual minorities to cruel acts of homophobia, which has been responsible for so many of them living in the fringes of their own societies.

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