

Cultural Limitations and the Postmodern Temper: Contextualising Freedom in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under The Udala Trees*

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Abstract

The apparent homogeneity of African culture vis-à-vis sex and sexuality is the basis for the prohibition and criminalisation of some sexual orientations and habits such as homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism, among others, in many African countries including Nigeria. This is the thrust of this paper which examines Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as an alternative narrative to sex and sexuality matters in African society. However, in spite of the hard stance on these seemingly exotic, queer or odd sexual orientations, African society is not totally bereft of people who are naturally inclined to them. The paper, which adopts the queer theoretical framework for its analysis, which argues that there is need for the queer community in a homophobic culture to be granted opportunity to tell their own sides of the story. The paper submits that contemporary times appear highly aversive to a monoculture, hence, the need for a multicultural experimentation which is the thrust of the postmodern age, and which is capable of accommodating new trends and developments in the society.

Key words: *African Culture, Experimentation, Orientation, Sex and Sexuality*

Introduction

Culture encompasses a summation or totality of a people's way of life which embodies their tradition, customs, religion, beliefs, values, mores, philosophies, worldview, dressing style, eating habit, and so on. For Amilcar Cabral (6), culture is the fruit of history, which reflects at every moment an aggregation of both the material and spiritual reality of society, "of man-the-individual, and of man-the-social-being". The variety of culture the world over is directly proportional to the world's vastness, wideness, and/or diversity. In other words, there is an avalanche of cultures across the globe which, of course, commensurate with the vastness of the human race. Thus, what constitutes a cultural practice or norm in a certain segment of the globe may be termed strange, odd, and therefore, unfathomable, in some others. The implication is that culture is environment or society-specific. An aspect of culture which is subsumed in a people's tradition that is of interest to this paper is marriage. Marriage is so integral to humanity generally that there is hardly any society the world over that does not have some laid down principles, guidelines, procedures, conventions or ethics, whether written or unwritten, that shape or govern its modes of operation or practice. This is apparently so because marriage is, indubitably, one of the oldest

institutions that exist in every human society. As a fallout of humanity's diversities, marriage means different things to different peoples, ethnicities and races. For example, the European and indeed the Western cultural matrices conceptualise or recognise marriage as a union of two mature individuals of same or different sexes who claim to love each other enough to accept to live together as husband and wife. While emphasis here is on monogamy, the culture constitutionally permits homosexual as well as heterosexual marriages, a practice, many believe, is predicated on the Western world's prerogatives on freedom of conscience, thoughts and choice by mature individuals, which, of course, may rightly be regarded as the fundamental basis for happiness and fulfilment.

The situation is however different in many other parts of the world, especially in Africa. In most parts of the world's second largest continent, marriage, especially traditionally contracted marriage, is strictly a heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman or women. The implication is that a man is customarily allowed to marry more than one wife so long as he has the biological and economic wherewithal to do so. In Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) Baroka, the bale, is not only married to many wives, but also succeeds in using his most senior wife to woo younger ladies whom he wishes to add to his harem. While conjugal bliss cannot be undermined or relegated to an insignificant position, the key emphasis on marriage in most African societies is procreation. In fact, a typical African (married) man appears rather despondent, agitated, and unfulfilled until he has offspring; and if he had initially made up mind for a monogamous relationship, pressure from families, friends and society generally is capable of causing him to have a rethink. For example, in Onuora Nzekwu's *Highlife for Lizards* (1965), set in Igbo society, Agom's initial inability to get pregnant and bear children results in the husband marrying another woman without her consent. Essentially, this action is predicated not necessarily on the need for the former to relish another round of conjugal bliss, but to enable him to have offspring, though Agom would later become pregnant and deliver of three children (190-192). In a near-similar scenario, Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* (1980) records that in spite of having eight children by Ramatoulaye, Modou Fall still goes ahead and picks Binetou, one of his children's classmates, as a second wife (58-62). Unarguably, the Afro-cultural matrices do not only emphasise heterosexual marriage, but also place a great deal of premium on procreation as the primary basis and an end-product of marriage. For Chukwu (26), this Afro-centric worldview is necessitated by the need for "self-preservation" and for "the elongation of the human species".

The foregoing, perhaps, constitutes the basis for the prohibition of same sex marriage in many, if not the entire African society. In Nigeria, for example, same sex marriage is not only prohibited, but also criminalised. *The Marriage Act* (1990) (cited in Ngozi Chukwu) recognises marriage as a union of two persons of the opposite sex. While emphasis is on monogamy, the Act also recognises the fact that some religions, Islam, for example, grant a man the freedom to marry up to four wives. However, our interest in this paper lies in the fact that there is no provision for same sex marriage in the Act. In fact, to make matters worse, the *Nigeria Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act*, 2013, does not only prohibit same sex marriage but also criminalises it. According to Section 7 of the Act, marriage means a legal union entered into between persons of opposite sex in accordance with the Marriage Act and the Islamic law. In the Act, the phrase 'same sex marriage' is defined as the coming together of persons of the same sex for the purpose of living together as husband and wife or for other purposes of the same sexual relationship. This law accordingly criminalises not just homosexual marriages but also homosexual relationships whether they would result in marriage or not. Penalties for violation of these laws are

explicitly spelt out in the Act, and range from 14 to 10 years imprisonment for homosexual marriages and gay relationships such as homosexuality and lesbianism, respectively. What this means is that those who claim to have some intractable instincts for homosexual relationships simply need to kill such drives forthwith or leave the Nigerian environment for faraway climes where such practices may be condoned.

It takes a great deal of courage for one to rise to speak in defence of a minute segment of a people whom society tags deviants, mavericks or nonconformists. In fact, it takes a postmodernist temperament to do so. Assessing the seeming difficulty by writers to break free from what may generally be regarded as the canon in literary delivery, Oyali and Mikailu (8) observe that human conduct has been dragged by social expectations to fit into a particular template or module that in some instances, inhibit self-actualisation. By living thus, the duo avers that “the society advocates a life of inauthentic selfhood, where the fear of reprimand conditions people's behaviour and not love for it”, and that this “social Apollonian insistence on order and balance becomes responsible for what eventually becomes canonised” (8). Incidentally, literary “canons” are considered the yardstick or standards by which literary works are measured, and may be considered works influential in shaping a particular culture even as canons generally adhere to social standards – what society sees as the ideal – which, of course, are recreated in literature. This is perhaps the more reason why some writers tend to shy away from some avant-garde or postmodernist realities in their domains probably for fear of social excommunication, stigmatisation, and perhaps other categories of 'unhealthy' stereotyping. But thanks to some 20th century critics and theorists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, among others, who came up with some decentring ideas, theories, and postulations aimed at decentring the “canon”, chief of which is post-structuralism, one of the aspects or facets of the postmodern theory, others being the Marxist and radical feminist literary theorising (Bertens, 131-132).

In “An Introduction to Deconstruction” Bello-Kano (363) posits that the poststructuralist philosophy is oriented towards the “destructive” analysis of stable conceptions of meaning, subjectivity and identity. In a nutshell, the critic notes that post-structuralism challenges the “traditional or foundationalist, modes of philosophical or scientific enquiry” often identified with “the old, truth-fixated, epistemological paradigm” (363). The critic further posits that Deconstruction is the applied form of Post-structuralism and that among its greatest of insights is its “timely warning against the erection, by various forms of Reason and Purist-fundamentalist Dogmatism, of a metaphysical principle as the supreme model of how human beings are, must/should live (their lives)” (363). It is perhaps, this poststructuralist consciousness or spirit that has influenced Chinelo Okparanta to offer to, very daringly, challenge the status quo. As has been pointed out earlier, it is a risk-laden venture to attempt to speak for the sexually queer community (LGBTI – Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) in a society that has formally or constitutionally outlawed these behavioural predispositions viewed largely by heterosexuals or straights as products of dysfunctional societal institutions. This paper examines Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as a work of great ingenuity and courage and appraises the author's unmitigated poise at painting or creating a new paradigm about homosexuality in an overwhelmingly homophobic environment and the need for the society to re-evaluate its stance about the queer sexual preferences and its sympathisers.

Sexuality Issues and Cultural Borders in *Under the Udala Trees*

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is set in Igbo society, South-eastern

Nigeria. Like many other cultural settings in Nigeria, the Igbo culture views sex as something sacred, and which should not be talked about carelessly. In "Sex Education: Ancient Israel and Igbo Traditional Practices", Dike and Okwueze (1) note that talking about sex is one of the taboos among Igbo people and that traditionally, sex is an exclusive prerogative of two mature individuals who are married. Though men are at liberty to have sex before marriage, Dike notes that, on the contrary, women or young ladies who get involved in pre-marital sex do so in secret for fear of stigmatisation. In the same vein, James Okpiliya and Kufre Akpan aver that "within the African society, sex is a sacred reality, steeped in the culture and traditional norms of the people" (1). On same sex relationship and the Igbo cultural matrix, Urama, in an article titled "The Values and Usefulness of Same-Sex Marriages among the Females in Igbo Culture in the Continuity of Lineage or Posterity" states that:

Amorous relationship with the same sex is forbidden in Igbo culture. The sexual relationship must be heterosexual and nothing more... Any kind of amorous relationship between same-sex partners must be done in secret. It is an abomination to mention such a relationship in Igbo culture. The stigmatisation of any person who is found to be involved in gay relationship is not what one would neglect (sic) (9).

Thus, as far as sex and sexuality generally is concerned, the Igbo culture, like many other cultures in Nigeria, has absolutely no room or tolerance for same sex relationship; it is a taboo that must be avoided at all costs even as its perpetrators are in most instances regarded as those whose psyches are either unusually distorted or deserve a re-examination.

Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* revolves around Ijeoma, a young Igbo girl (eleven years at the outset of the story and about twenty three towards the end), born at Ojoto, into an upper middle family before the onset of the Nigerian Civil War. Her father, Uzo, tired of always running to hide in the bunker for safety, one day decides against doing so, which refusal results in his death from the bombs unleashed by the enemy war planes (*Under the Udala Trees*, 25-26, henceforth, *UUT*). Traumatized by the husband's demise, Ijeoma's mother, Adaobi, leaves for her paternal family home in Aba, since the war appears less biting there while Ijeoma is taken to Nnewi to live with her father's former friend, referred to in the novel as the grammar school teacher, for her safety and to enable her to continue her education (*UUT*, 39-40). Narrated by Ijeoma through the first person technique, the novel focuses on the narrator's sexual orientations/experiences right from her early days as a teenager in the grammar school teacher's house up until the period she gets married and later abandons same to enable her to live a more happy and fulfilled life.

While in the grammar school teacher's house, Ijeoma begins a homosexual relationship with Amina, a teenage Hausa girl, who is also a victim of the war, having lost many of her relations. Like Ijeoma, Amina is also accommodated by the grammar school teacher on compassionate grounds, and in anticipation of the end of the war. One day, the grammar school teacher catches the duo in a homosexual act (lesbianism) and accordingly reports same to Ijeoma's mother (*UUT*, 72). His decision to do so is most probably borne out of the fact that the act itself is not only a queer practice among Igbo people but also a sacrilegious one that should be nibbed in the bud, especially at the infantile stage, before it gets out of hand. Conversely, however, Ijeoma's mother's effort at using the Bible as the basis

for condemnation of the act and subsequent correction absolutely falls on deaf ears as the daughter would not be convinced. When Ijeoma finally leaves Nnewi after the war to live with the mother in Aba, the latter makes it a point of duty to read the Bible with her daughter as regularly as possible especially portions that explicitly prescribe or state the only natural or divinely sanctioned order or mode of sexual relationships. She also reads to her the portions that regard as sodomy attempts by persons of the same sex to be involved in sexual acts (UUT, 73-74).

Rather than dissuaded from the act viewed by the mother as an unimaginably strange orientation, Ijeoma remains defiant and unwavering as none of the Bible verses appears capable of persuading her against her convictions. In fact, she is often so discomfited by the whole episodes that the few minutes the mother spends with her studying the Bible often times appears to her as infinity. The narrator, Ijeoma herself, recalls those early days of studying the Bible with the mother and her attitude towards the lessons thus: She closed her Bible and announced that we would stop there today. The session must have lasted all of fifteen minutes in total, but the **discomfort** (emphasis ours) of it made it feel as if it had lasted for much longer (UUT, 68).

Certainly, Adaobi has done what an ideal mother who wants the 'best' for her child would, but Ijeoma is not a typical child that listens to the entreaties of parents.

Ijeoma grew up with an exceptionally stubborn spirit – an orientation that refuses to accept everything she is told hook, line, and sinker. Hers is indeed a poststructuralist temperament that does not only probe into or asks questions about some long-held structures or assumptions, but also, very courageously, confronts those assumptions with a view to considering some alternative paradigms. On Deconstruction, which is the applied form of Poststructuralism, Bressler notes that:

Rather than providing answers about the meaning of texts or methodology for discovering how a text means, deconstruction asks a new set of questions, endeavouring to show that what a text claims it says and what it actually says are discernably different. By casting doubt on most previously held theories, deconstruction declares that a text has an almost **infinite number of possible interpretations** (95, emphasis ours).

Ijeoma's deconstructionist temperament finds expressions in her doubting and also questioning many of the precepts of the Bible vis-à-vis creation, gender, sex and sexuality, among others. For example, when the mother reads the first chapter in the book of Genesis that dwells on the very beginning of things including human beings, specifically the story of Adam and Eve created to be husband and wife, respectively, Ijeoma contends that some Bible stories are either allegories or mere fictions that should not be taken seriously. For her, the story of Adam and Eve was purely incidental, for it could have been the other way round, that is, Eve being the husband and Adam, the wife. For her too, Adam and Eve would have been mere symbols of companionship, and therefore, emphasis on following strictly those orders of creation as well as the assigning of specific roles based on people's gender need not be overly contemplated or imposed (UUT, 82).

Specifically, Ijeoma finds it illogical to accept the condemnation of homosexuality by the Bible as the mother would want her to. For Ijeoma's mother, homosexuality is one of the worst crimes human beings would ever commit against God, and therefore, the actual reason why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Try as the mother may, Ijeoma would not

be swayed about the Bible's basis for condemnation of homosexuality. She is particularly incensed at the episode recorded in Genesis Chapter 19 in which Lot offers his two daughters to the men of Sodom instead of the angels that the Sodomites originally wanted to sleep with. For Ijeoma's mother, Lot's decision is not only rational but also in conformity with the scriptural and natural order of things. The narrator presents the portion of the Bible thus: Two angels had come to visit Sodom, and Lot had persuaded them to lodge with him. But then came the men of the city, knocking on Lot's door, demanding to see the guests. *Bring them out to us that we might know them* (sic). But Lot refused. Instead, he offered the men his two virgin daughters, for them to do to the daughters as they wished, so long as they did not harm the guests, so long as they did not do as they wished unto the guests (*UUT*, 73).

Ridiculing the whole idea, Ijeoma, though euphemistically, describes Lot's action as an act of "hospitality" even as she finds no justification whatsoever in a man handing over his virgin daughters to a mob and rapists in place of his male guests. For Ijeoma, therefore, it would have been more rational for the host (Lot) to preserve and protect his own daughters than expose them to unimaginable danger in the hands of the wicked men of the city just to uphold some religious principles and/or the purity of his guests. The dialogue between her and the mother proves or shows the side of the divide each of them falls:

"The idea that he was willing to put in danger his own belongings, and that he was willing to risk the welfare of his own family members in order to safeguard his guests. It could simply have been a lesson on hospitality", I said. It isn't, Mama said. "Everybody knows what lesson we should take from that story. Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (*UUT*, 73-74).

Thus, while Mama exhibits a credulous disposition and an absolute conviction towards the words of the scriptures, Ijeoma remains unapologetically sceptical. This is why she would attribute the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (if, for her, it actually happened), not to homosexuality, but to the "selfish", "inhospitable", and "violent" nature of the people (*UUT*, 74). In fact, at no point would Ijeoma hide her poststructuralist temper.

Furthermore, Ijeoma would not be persuaded to accept procreation as the cardinal basis for heterosexuality as the mother and indeed the Bible would want her to. Upholding her deconstructionist opinion, Ijeoma cites examples of culturally or heterosexually married couples who have no children, and cynically wonders why such should be the case. She cites the grammar school teacher and the spouse who have lived together for a long time without having any child as a typical example, and wonders why childlessness on the part of married couples is not regarded as an abomination the way homosexuality is biblically portrayed (*UUT*, 75-76). Ijeoma appears the more dissuaded at the mother's interpretation of Leviticus Chapter 19 Verse 19 where the Bible says:

Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee (*King James Version*).

For Ijeoma's mother, this scripture does not only prohibit homosexuality and related orientations but also, very affirmatively kicks against such practices with foreigners,

unbelievers and/or enemies. Thus, for her, Ijeoma, who is Igbo has absolutely no reason to have had a homosexual relationship with Amina, who is Hausa. Her position is chiefly predicated on the nasty experience Igbo people underwent in the hands of the Hausa before and during the Nigerian Civil War which automatically makes the latter enemies of the former. Such “mingling”, for her, is profaning, disparaging and unacceptable. Below are her exact words:

I'll give you a hint. You're Igbo. That girl is Hausa. Even if she were to be a boy, don't you see that Igbo and Hausa would mean the mingling of seeds? *Don't you see* (sic)? It would be against God's statutes (*UUT*, 76).

Very unfortunately, however, all efforts on the part of Ijeoma's mother to convince the daughter on the need to develop an aversion for homosexuality fail abysmally as the former remains pig-headed, unconvinced, and totally unwavering. Instead, however, whenever she reminisces on her sexual escapades with Amina, all Ijeoma recalls is a highly therapeutic, nostalgically pleasant, and very memorable experience that is worth repeating even as her feelings for the former remain interminably undiminished. Specifically, Ijeoma's deep feelings for Amina made the kisses they had together profoundly meaningful to her each time she recollects the whole experience (*UUT*, 142-144). It would be recalled that while in the grammar school teacher's house, Ijeoma was so emotionally attached to Amina that she wished to get married to her. This probably accounts for the reason why she slipped into a pool of despondency when Amina broke the news, not only of a changed sexual orientation in tandem with the dictates of her culture, but also her readiness to get married to a young Hausa boy anytime soon. Commenting on the rudiments of the postmodernist aesthetics, Andrew-Essien (4) posits that one of its cardinal thrusts is that “morality and traditional rules of conduct are subjected to personal opinion and in some cases out-rightly (sic) subverted”.

Of particular interest in the narrative is the tenacity and doggedness on the part of Ijeoma's mother to try to talk the daughter out of the path she considers odd, weird, abominable, and self-destructive. She does not only regularly study the Bible with the daughter, but also, very frequently, prays with and for her. She also encourages her to attend church programmes regularly in the belief that such is capable of helping her grow morally sound and straight and also influence and correct her 'wrong' choice of sexuality (*UUT*, 83-86). Her prayers, however, appear answered when Chibundu, Ijeoma's early childhood playmate whose parents were close friends of the Uzo's in Ojoto takes Ijeoma as his wife (*UUT*, 204; 222-228). With this development, Ijeoma's mother appears the most happy woman having 'succeeded' in convincing the daughter to go for a heterosexual relationship instead of the 'abominable' option she had opted for and grown up with. This 'feat' is also, for Ijeoma's mother, a triumph of good over the forces of 'evil' and a victory of her native Igbo culture as well as her Christian precepts and values over some 'queer' cultural orientations and/or inclinations.

Prior to meeting Chibundu, Ijeoma's first friend at Aba was Ndidi, a secondary school (lady) teacher in the city. Adaobi is indeed elated to have a friend, especially a working class type for her daughter, for she feels Ndidi is socially well positioned to connect or introduce Ijeoma to her male colleagues for a possible relationship (heterosexual) that might result in marriage (*UUT*, 184). In no time, however, Ijeoma soon finds out that Ndidi's sexual orientation is at par with hers and so the duo, without much ado, gets entangled in a gay relationship where they regularly cuddle, kiss and make love to each other to the point of

reaching orgasm (*UUT*, 200). At evenings, the duo would go to the LGBTI members' club where persons of similar sexual preferences regularly meet to fraternise with one another. As earlier mentioned somewhere in this paper, the traditional Igbo culture has an unabashed disdain for homosexuality as a practice and for those who indulge in them. Thus, Aba, where Ijeoma, Ndidi, and other categories of LGBTI members find themselves is a highly homophobic environment. So, in spite of keeping their meetings strictly secret, and in spite of the fact that the building they use for the meetings is originally a church premises where Christians worship during the day time, they are still uncovered and attacked, resulting in burning to ashes, not only the building itself but also a member of the same sex community (Adanna) who was not smart enough to have escaped the way others including Ijeoma and Ndidi did (*UUT*, 206-209).

The action of the homophobic individuals in Aba who attack the LGBTI gathering may be seen to be borne out of a culturally-induced derision for homosexuality and related practices. They are so engulfed in this homophobia that the humanity of this people means absolutely nothing to them. The situation is so unfortunate that even if the police are informed about such unpleasant developments, they do absolutely nothing about it. A case in point is the killing of two male lovers by an angry mob. The matter was reported to the police but no action followed – a deliberate inaction indicative of the overall disparagement of the practice by the entire society, including an arm of government that should ordinarily be at the forefront to protect the lives of everyone and punish those who take the laws into their own hands (*UUT*, 205). It is this general atmosphere of revulsion, insecurity and unease that causes Ndidi to later advise Ijeoma to accept to go out with Chibundu. Prior to this time, the former treated the latter's love advances with a pinch of salt. It is therefore safe to observe that Ijeoma's decision to accept to subsequently marry Chibundu is not necessarily borne out of the love she has for him nor the willingness to marry out of volition as someone that is naturally or sexually ripe for it, but a result of an unbearably hot, loathsome and unfavourable socio-cultural environment which does not grant her and indeed persons of her socio-sexual class the freedom to live their preferred lives. For Ijeoma, therefore, marriage is nothing but pretence which she, of course, likens to the attitude of some dispassionate worshippers who “sit in church with so much unrest, but at home carry on the pretense that all is just as it should be” (*UUT*, 230).

Naturally, marriage thrives when there is mutual love and trust between the partners. Conversely, a marital union bereft of these key rudiments is bound to hit the rocks sooner than expected. Ijeoma has absolutely no love for Chibundu. She only accepted to marry him, as earlier pointed out, because of pressure from the mother and, of course, the exceptionally homophobic society she finds herself. Thus, while physically living with the husband, her mind and spirit is with Ndidi, her female lover. For Ijeoma, therefore, “the gender of your first love determines the gender of all your future loves” (*UUT*, 228-9). Ijeoma's “first love” is Amina (female); even her second love is also female (Ndidi), and so, for her, the probability that she can afford to love a man does not exist. In spite of the magnitude of love shown her by Chibundu, the former's heart is always far away from the latter. Again, in spite of being pregnant and carrying Chibundu's child in her womb, Ijeoma's heart is always with Ndidi and sometimes with Amina (*UUT*, 222). This is the dilemma that is responsible for the unfulfilled experience that characterises her matrimony.

Towards the end of the narrative, Ijeoma is delivered of her baby, a beautiful girl named Chidinma. But rather unexpectedly, Chibundu is overtly unenthusiastic about the child because, for him, it would have been a boy. In the place of the enthusiasm that often times accompanies the birth of one's first child, Chibundu is visibly unexcited and rather

romanticises about the possible birth of another child – anytime soon – which should most probably be a boy. He is so obsessed with this male child fantasy that he begins to buy the anticipated boy's toy car when the said child has not even been conceived. This is amidst the fact that Chidinma has not enjoyed any such affection, care or attention from the father since she was born. In fact, an attempt by her to go near the toy car is seriously rebuffed by the father (*UUT*, 288-292). This arrant display of bias and immaturity on the part of Chibundu becomes the immediate basis for Ijeoma to decide to walk out on the barely two years old marriage though the remote grounds still remain the fact that she never, from the outset, loved Chibundu. In fact, apart from Chibundu, she does not have a natural (sexual) affection for men generally. So, as the chips are down, Ijeoma walks away from the marriage with her 'unloved' daughter (*UUT*, 313). She abandons the marriage primarily because, for her, the girl child is heavily bogged down by the weight of tradition especially as it affects the preference of the male child over the female. The remote reason, which, ordinarily, is the most categorical or established basis for terminating the relationship is Ijeoma's unqualified aversion for heterosexuality and an unmitigated predilection and love for gay relationship. Thus, Ijeoma, without minding what the mother and indeed the society generally would say, walks away from Chibundu to enable her to devote all her time to the love of her life – Ndidi.

Ijeoma's sense of fulfilment knows no bounds the moment she leaves the 'lacklustre' relationship with Chibundu and devotes all her time to Ndidi. When she reminisces on her experience with Ndidi, having spent “decades” so far with her, all she recollects is an amalgam of pleasure, bliss and fulfilment (*UUT*, 320). Though society would not permit them to get married, their clandestine affairs are all the same therapeutic and fulfilling (*UUT*, 320). Thus, from all indications, they have no regrets about their choice of life neither do they owe anyone an apology. Bolstered by the postmodern spirit, Ijeoma seems to be setting the pace for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and other categories of the LGBTI people to rise up in defence of their rights for choices of their preferred sexual predisposition irrespective of what the consequences might be. By undermining what the mother would say by her decision, Ijeoma seems to be urging members of the queer sexual community to take decisions that would guarantee their happiness and fulfilment whether it goes down well with the larger society or not. But above all, Ijeoma and Ndidi yearn for a society that does not only respect people's preferred sexual predispositions but also legitimises same (*UUT*, 321).

Literature reflects not just the milieu but also the moment. Thus, all writers are influenced essentially by the time in which they live. For, as Hudson (27) puts it, “no writer is ever completely cut off from his age. He may seem to be going against the current, but it will be found that every age has its cross-currents as well as its main tide” (cited in Oyali and Mikailu). The “main tide” of writers is what society may regard as the “canon” described earlier in this paper as what society sees as the ideal which is reinforced or recreated in literature. On the other hand, the “cross-currents” may be seen as the avant-garde or postmodernist literary creations that reflect some personal or minority ideologies that may not totally align with the sensitivity of the majority of members of the society. Thus, for this latter category, pushing forth an ideology constitutes the main thrust of literary creativity. Barber (207) puts it more succinctly thus:

All literature is ideological. Whether the author is aware of it or not, every work of literature reveals a configuration of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of the world, which is never neutral. It serves particular social interest by legitimising, tacitly or explicitly, certain social structures.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the Nigerian society has zero tolerance for homosexuality, lesbianism and other related sexual proclivities in spite of the fact that many citizens are obviously inclined to them. *Under the Udala Trees* is therefore Okparanta's bold effort at re-appraising the social dynamics of the African society within the framework of realistic contemporary experiences. The work tends to project homosexuality as not being totally alien to the African culture, hence, the need for a more rational re-evaluation or re-appraisal of the act and its perpetrators in tandem with global ideals and best practices. Like Ijeoma and Ndidi, the novelist feels it is time the Nigerian and indeed the African society generally re-appraised homophobia and the associated legislations to ensure a more egalitarian or inclusive society that guarantees freedom, happiness and fulfilment for all and sundry.

Conclusion

In recent decades, sex and sexuality questions constitute topical subjects that have garnered the attention of African literary artists. This is occasioned by the fact of the ever-changing nature of the world which results in a situation where queer sub-cultures unimaginably spring from societies that hitherto enjoyed a homogenous culture for years. This paper examined the quest for freedom by queer sexual individuals or community in a typical homophobic society. Apart from serving as an indictment on the Nigerian and indeed the African society for choosing the path of conservatism in a capricious world, Okparanta's narrative is a categorical call for a re-examination of the homophobic culture to accommodate the interest of the LGBTI people who are also bonafide members of the society. Thus, for the postmodern artist, the world has gone multicultural in a bid to accommodate diverse and divergent views, beliefs, opinions, preferences, orientations, and inclinations. Okparanta is therefore voicing the faint and grumbled voices, wishes, and cravings of the queer, the denied, and the excommunicated especially because the denial of their existence does not in any way undermine or obliterate their existence; rather, it gives them resilience and grants them urgency.

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