

Gender, Sexual Identity, and Resilience: A Queer Analysis of Forbidden Love in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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Abstract—This paper explores the themes of forbidden love, resilience, and identity in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* from a queer theoretical perspective. Set against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War, the novel tells the story of Ijeoma, a young girl who discovers her sexual orientation in a society where homosexuality is both criminalized and taboo. The analysis concentrates on Ijeoma's journey of self-discovery and how her experiences challenge the heteronormative expectations of her community. In a society that punishes queer love, Ijeoma's emotional and romantic desires become acts of resistance and resilience. This study focuses on the complexities of identity formation in a context shaped by societal, cultural, and religious pressures. Additionally, the paper examines the intersection of gender, sexuality, and socio-political factors and how these elements influence Ijeoma's sense of self and her navigation of societal boundaries. The queer analysis reveals that Ijeoma's love for another woman subverts societal norms and creates a space for queer identities to challenge oppressive structures. Focusing on Ijeoma's internal and external struggles, this study provides insight into how marginalized sexual identities are negotiated in hostile environments. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Under the Udala Trees* is a powerful narrative tool advocating for greater acceptance of diverse sexual and gender identities in African literature. It emphasizes the importance of representing LGBTQ+ voices and the resilience required to assert one's identity in the face of societal opposition.

Keywords: Forbidden Love, Identity formation, Queer Theory, LGPTQ+ Representation, Under the Udala Trees.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is a compelling exploration into the intricacies of human identity, love, and resilience against societal repression. The story is located in the context of the Nigerian Civil War. It is written from Ijeoma's point of view, a young Nigerian girl, as she navigates through self-discovery in a society that abhors same-sex relationships. Through Ijeoma's emotional and romantic journey, Okparanta skillfully navigates the intersections of gender, sexuality, religion, and culture to point out the struggles that such individuals face when they exist outside the heteronormative boundaries drawn by their communities. According to Peter Barry, queer theory "explores the complex and contradictory relationship between sex and identity in a society where heteronormativity dominates" (Barry 2), and this perspective is essential to understanding Ijeoma's rebellion against the norms of society. Where homosexuality is not only frowned upon but also criminalized, Ijeoma's love, loss, and acceptance of herself are all representative of the more significant struggles LGBTQ+ people face in homophobic cultures. M.H. Abrams notes that these sexual identities are "marginalized or suppressed in many cultural frameworks" (Abrams 65), indicating the cultural and legal boundaries that define the Ijeoma journey.

This paper applies queer theory to analyze the theme of forbidden love in *Under the Udala Trees*, with particular focus on gender and sexual identity. This research aims to see how Ijeoma's love for another woman, which becomes an act of personal defiance, also constitutes a form of resistance against heteronormative structures. Barry argues that queer theory "challenges the binaries of gender and sexuality that limit the understanding of identity" (Barry 98). This framework is important in exploring the novel's

criticism of oppressive social, cultural, and religious forces seeking to smother marginalized sexual identities. Furthermore, the paper examines how Okparanta's narrative creates space for LGBTQ+ voices, offering a counter-narrative to the often invisible or silenced queer experiences in African literature, much like the works of Baldwin (*Giovanni's Room*) and Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*) that also challenge conventional representations of love and identity.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a queer theoretical framework to analyze Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Using key texts such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, the study examines how the novel critiques heteronormative structures and explores themes of forbidden love, identity formation, and resistance. The methodology combines close textual analysis with an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the intersections of gender, sexuality, and socio-political factors within the narrative. Comparative analysis situates the novel within the broader canon of queer literature, drawing parallels with works like James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Through these practices, the research underscores Ijeoma's self-discovery journey and resistance as a window for societal contestation and representation of the LGBTQ+ individual in African literature.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ultimately, this paper argues that *Under the Udala Trees* is invaluable to African literature because it challenges traditional ideas of love, gender, and identity. It is a testament to the power of narrative to illuminate the lives of marginalized voices and advocate for greater understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual identities. Through this queer analysis, the study brings out the possibility of change that love could bring and the strength it would take to survive in a world where difference is treated with hostility and rejection, as discussed in key queer theoretical texts by Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) and Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*) (Butler 52; Foucault 121).

The literature of *Under the Udala Trees* seems to heavily engage with queer theory and its intersection with African cultural and gender norms. Olajumoke Ojo, in "Sexuality and Gender Identity in African Literature: A Queer Reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*", offers a queer reading of the novel, focusing on Ijeoma's resistance to the societal rejection of her sexual identity while analyzing how her forbidden love challenges gender, sexuality, and cultural expectations in a homophobic society (Ojo 45-63). Chijioke Nzewi, in *Resilience and Resistance: The Role of Queer Love in African Fiction*, explores queer love in African fiction, specifically in Okparanta's work, where Ijeoma's love becomes a site of resistance to cultural and religious oppression, but also emphasizes the resilience of marginalized sexual identities (Nzewi 200-221). Sulaimon A. Abdullah, in "Homosexuality in African Literature: A Study of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Its Cultural Implications," analyzes sexual identity and cultural resistance issues in the novel, focusing on the coming-out journey of Ijeoma in a society shaped by traditional African norms (Abdullah 34-49).

Chukwuma P. Kalu, in "Queer Theory and African Sexualities: Decolonizing the Narrative of Love in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*," critiques the imposition of Western heteronormative standards on African sexualities and explores how the novel offers a nuanced portrayal of queer love, challenging colonial and postcolonial ideas of sexual identity (Kalu 102-118). Finally, Esther N. Musa, in "Reimagining African Gender Norms: A Queer Feminist Critique of *Under the Udala Trees*," uses queer feminist theory to explore how Okparanta reimagines gender norms, mainly through Ijeoma's struggles for sexual autonomy in a society that denies her agency (Musa 89-103). Collectively, these studies show the contribution the novel makes to African literature and queer theory in its discussion of resilience, resistance, and reimagining of gender and sexual identities within a heteronormative, homophobic society.

In many African societies, including Nigeria, the homogeneity of culture criminalizes non-heteronormative sexualities such as homosexuality and lesbianism, often branded as "foreign" or immoral (Asukwo et al.). However, growing literature challenges this view, positing that non-heteronormative sexualities have always existed, although suppressed. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* offers an alternative narrative, amplifying queer voices in a homophobic society. This finds support in the queer theory, which necessitates inclusion of marginalized identities with a broader perspective on sexuality. Academics advocate for this multicultural approach, which in contemporary African society is considered important for accommodating sexual orientations.

Chinelo Okparanta's novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) narrates the life of a young Nigerian woman, Ijeoma, who travels through self-discovery against Nigeria's civil war and societal expectations. It is set during the Nigerian Civil War. It spans several years of Ijeoma's life, from childhood to adulthood, as she grapples with the complexities of love, identity, and societal pressure. Ijeoma's story starts amidst Nigeria's brutal civil war, and her journey mirrors her country's emotional and political turbulence. The novel deals with issues as complex as sexual identity, traditional values in contrast to modernity, and the limitations imposed on women in patriarchal societies. Okparanta uses Ijeoma's experiences to show how internal and external forces mold one's identity and desires.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the main themes developed within *Under the Udala Trees* relates to the tension between personal identity and social expectations. This becomes quite central to the plot: the inability of Ijeoma to reconcile her love for a woman with the conservative, patriarchal norms of Nigerian society. From early childhood, Ijeoma learns to conform to social standards, but gradually, she finds her attraction for women, leading her to self-discovery and inner conflict. The text also states: "It was as though I had been living a life of half-truths as if part of me had been buried under the layers of silence and pretense" (Okparanta 72). This quote unveils Ijeoma's consciousness of the distance between her actual self and the life she has been made to lead by societal influence. In an identity context, the political background of Nigeria heightens the feeling of inner struggle because Ijeoma's transition into womanhood falls within the time of civil war.

Another pivotal moment in the novel is when Ijeoma falls in love with her fellow female peer, Amina. In short, *Forbidden Love* pits Ijeoma at a crossroads against her family and, in fact, community, and all in its favour by oppressive forces: the novel critiques societal homophobia and the dangers of repression. Ijeoma poignantly captures this internal struggle as she reflects: "I could not bring myself to imagine a world where my love for Amina could be accepted. I could not picture a space where we could just be" (Okparanta 114). Here, Okparanta shows Ijeoma's yearning for acceptance but also the harsh realities she faces in a society that marginalizes same-sex love. This quote talks about the emotional isolation that most LGBTQ+ people experience in such environments. Another significant theme of the novel is the role of family in determining one's identity.

Ijeoma's mother is a devoutly religious and conservative woman representing the culture. Her love is conditioned on Ijeoma's living according to those principles. The generational conflict and division between traditionalism and modernity is emphasized by the tension between Ijeoma's desires and her mother's expectations. She looked at me as though she could see into my soul, and I could tell that she already knew, but she would not speak of it. She would not say what she feared most (Okparanta 153). This moment illustrates the weight given to Ijeoma by her mother's silence and her fear of societal judgment. The tension between Ijeoma's truth and her mother's unspoken knowledge of it underscores the cost of emotional investment in living by the expectations of family and tradition.

The novel also explores the psychological cost of repressing one's true identity. Throughout Ijeoma's journey, she grapples with guilt and shame, emotions that stem from her perceived betrayal of her family's values. As she navigates her relationship with Amina, Ijeoma must also come to terms with her sense of guilt and internalized homophobia. At one point, Ijeoma reflects:

I had always believed that God would condemn me for what I felt, and yet there were times, like now, when I could not imagine life without this love that I carried in me. I had prayed for so long that this love would disappear, but it stayed, stubborn and unyielding, like the deepest root of a tree that could not be uprooted. How could I live with it when the world around me demanded I deny it? However, there were brief moments when I thought that maybe- just maybe- it was a love that was not so wrong after all. (Okparanta, 196)

The textual lines above show many internalized struggle when their desires conflict with religious or cultural doctrines. Despite her guilt, Ijeoma realizes that love cannot be beaten in the gut, which forms a pivotal moment in her emotional growth and acceptance of herself. It is against this setting of the Nigerian Civil War that sets the narrative's tone and themes.

The war, which has ravaged the country, also symbolizes Ijeoma's internal conflicts and, to a more significant extent, the outer forces that attempt to define herself. Okparanta uses the war as a framework to explore how large-scale violence and division mirror the personal conflict of self-identity. In one passage, Ijeoma reflects: "The war had taken so much from us already. It had stolen so many lives, and now it threatened to take my spirit as well. But I knew, deep down, that I would fight it. I would not be defeated" (Okparanta 220). Here, war is more than a historical moment; it is a sign of the destructive forces that challenge Ijeoma's right to love and live authentically. The war parallels her inner struggle against societal norms, and her defiance signals her desire for personal autonomy.

From the research, it shows that *Under the Udala Trees* presents a potent social, cultural, and religious critique to the oppression experienced by LGBTQ+ people. Ijeoma's love for Amina represents acts of defiance against the hegemony of heteronormativity as a show of resilience and resistance. The novel brings out both the emotional and psychological pressures of being in a society that criminalizes and marginalizes same-sex relationships but also advocates for greater acceptance and inclusion of diverse sexual identities. The Nigerian Civil War, therefore, provides a metaphor for national as well as personal conflict by mirroring Ijeoma's struggle for self-acceptance in a hostile environment. Therefore, it concludes that the novel does not only reimagine queer identity in African literature but is a transformational narrative that calls for social change and inclusivity.

V. CONCLUSION

In a word, *Under the Udala Trees* is a moving and reflective novel in the context of Nigeria's cultural and political challenges concerning issues of identity, love, and societal expectations. Chinelo Okparanta creates a narration through Ijeoma's life that not only engages with issues about LGBTQ+ but also critiques the oppressive forces of tradition and religion that suffocate individual expression. The novel is a poignant personal journey and a powerful commentary on the forces shaping society's treatment of marginalized individuals. It underscores the painful realities of growing up queer in a profoundly homophobic culture. It reveals the emotional toll of conforming to societal norms at the expense of one's true self. Okparanta calls for greater acceptance, understanding, and freedom for those outside the mainstream by discussing resilience and courage in meeting all those challenges. *Under the Udala Trees* is a testament that one should embrace their authenticity, no matter what price this brings.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable

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