Love Beyond Gender and Sexuality: A Queer Perspective of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under The Udala Trees*

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of homosexuality using Queer Theory to determine if homosexuality is biological or a social construction. The paper adopts Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as a case study to ascertain whether same-sex attraction is biologically determined or socially constructed. The paper explores the issue of homophobia and self hatred of homosexuals occasioned by compulsory heterosexuality and heterocentrism of the predominantly heterosexual world. The study further interrogates the concept of biological essentialism, which held that a certain number of human populations are naturally homosexual. Furthermore, the research paper critically engages with cultural, religious and political discourses that shape attitudes towards same-sex love and relationships in Nigeria society. It underscores the role of narrative fiction in challenging dominant ideologies and offering alternatives understandings of gender, identity and sexual desire. The paper highlights how language, social structures, and social expectations contribute to repression or expression of homosexual tendencies. The study draws conclusion that all humans have the capacity to develop, either heterosexual or homosexual feeling depending on one's priorities, environment and association. The paper discovers and establishes that heterosexuality is biological, while homosexuality lacks substantial evidence to be considered natural; therefore the paper recommends social construction.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Queer, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Natural.

Introduction

It is a common belief and practice among humans that men are naturally sexually attracted to women and vice versa. This is a heterosexual or straight sexual relationship. However, there is a section of the human population that believes that same- sex sexual relationship or homosexuality is equally biological and not a product of social construction. This view that homosexuality is as natural as heterosexual relationships is what gay and lesbians are advocating. The heterosexual society has been pushing the homosexual minority to accept sexual relationship with the opposite sex as the only natural and biologically approved sexual relationship and this has resulted in homophobia against the homosexual world. The pressure on homosexuals to deny their sexual feelings for the same sex has often resulted in discrimination, attacks and marginalization of all sorts for the gays and lesbians. These pressures and marginalization are premised on the view of the heterosexuals that the sexual orientation of the homosexuals is abnormal as they believe that there is nothing as the gay gene. Homosexuality is becoming popular despite the discrimination homosexuals suffer in the society. Those who practice this believe that sexual relationship with the opposite sex is not natural to them. The heterosexual critics believe that people become gay or lesbians based on their priorities, environment or their association and all these are social construction not biological. They held the view that if same- sex sexual feelings are natural, animals will be having same- sex sexual intercourse but they are attracted to their opposite sex.

In addition to the absence of scientific evidence supporting a biological basis for homosexuality, critics argue that the growing acceptance of homosexual practices is largely driven by media influence, cultural liberalism, and political agenda rather than natural

orientation. They believe that constant exposure to pro-LGBTQ+ narratives, especially in films, music, and social media, can condition individuals, especially youths, into adopting or experimenting with same- sex relationships. From this perspective, homosexuality is seen not as an inherent identity but as a learned behavior influenced by environment and peer associations. Critics also argue that legalizing and normalizing homosexual relationships may pressure societies to redefine long- standing cultural, religious, and moral boundaries, which they view as essential for the preservation of social order and traditional family structure.

Besides LGBTQ people believed that homosexuality is natural to them and a part of their identity as they believe their sexual orientation is natural to them. it us their stand that everyone should have the freedom to love who one wants. For them, relationships between two men or two women are just as natural and meaningful as relationships between a man and a woman. They feel that people should not be judged or treated unfairly because of who they are attracted to. Being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual is not a choice, it is simply a part of who someone is, and that should be accepted and respected. LGBTQ individuals believe in being true to yourself and living honestly, without hiding your identity. They want a world where no one is bullied, rejected, or harmed for loving someone of the same sex. Supporting homosexuality means supporting fairness, kindness, and equal rights for everyone.

Queer theory: A Theoretical Clarification

Queer theory is an approach to studying identity and sexuality that began to take shape in the early 1990s. It draws from several fields of thought, like feminism, psychoanalysis, and gay and lesbian studies. At its heart, queer theory questions fixed categories like

"male", "female", "straight", and "gay". It argues that these labels are not natural or unchangeable, but created by society and shaped by history, culture, and politics. In other words, the idea that people are supposed to fit neatly into one gender or sexual identity is something society teaches us and not something we are born with. Examining the Queer theory, Lois Tyson observes that:

> The word queer is used to indicate a specific theoretical perspective. From a theoretical point of view, the words gay and lesbians imply a Definable category- homosexuality-that is clearly opposite to another Definable category: heterosexuality. However, for queer theory, Categories of sexuality cannot be defined by such simple oppositions as Homosexuals /heterosexuals…queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities (237).

One of the major thinkers who influenced queer theory is Michael Foucault. He showed how people's understanding of sexuality has changed over time and how it is controlled by those in power through language and social rules. Another key figure is Judith Butler, who introduced the idea that gender is not something we simply are, but something we constantly perform through our actions. For example; being masculine or feminine is not fixed, rather it is an attribute we learn and practice. Queer theory builds on this idea, suggesting that all fixed identities are flexible and can change, rather than being set in stone. When applied to literature, queer theory is both a way to analyze texts and a way to challenge dominant ideas. Queer theory does not just look for LGBTQ+ characters;. The paper also explores how the African society reflects and questions traditional beliefs about gender and sexuality. Sometimes this means looking at characters whose same sex friendships might carry hidden

romantic or emotional meanings. These readings do not try to claim that a character or author is secretly queer. Instead, they point out that literature often includes mixed messages or hidden layers that show the complexity of identity and desire. Queer theory also does not limit itself to obviously queer themes. It can be used to examine any text to understand how it supports or questions the Idea that heterosexuality is the normal or preferred way to be. Even stories that seem completely 'straight' can show signs of discomfort, silence, or contradiction that reflects deeper struggles with gender and sexual norms.

Another important idea in the queer theory is the concept of the 'closet' a space where people may hide their true identities due to fear of judgment or rejection. In literature, this becomes a powerful way to explore themes like secrecy, pressure to conform, and the struggle to be authentic. The closet is not just personal issue; it is also shaped by society and politics, and reflects larger questions about who gets to be visible, and who is forced to hide. Queer theory also emphasizes the idea that identities and meanings are fluid. It resists putting people or ideas into neat boxes. Instead of looking for simple answers and clear definitions, queer theory celebrates uncertainty and multiple interpretations. It challenges fixed boundaries such as male versus female or normal versus abnormal and encourages readers to see this divisions as created by culture not by nature.

Over time, queer theory has expanded to include ideas from other areas like Trans theory, race studies, disability studies, and global perspectives. This makes it an even richer tool for understanding how different forms of identity and power overlap and influence each other. Queer theory has lead to more detailed and inclusive ways of reading, that goes beyond just sexuality and look at how queerness interacts with things like races, class and nationality.

Queer theory encourages us to think more openly about whom we are and how we see others. It helps us question what society tells us is normal and opens up new ways of thinking about people, stories, and society around us. By embracing complexity and challenging rigid ideas, queer theory gives us a way to look at literature from different perspectives.

Love Beyond Gender and Sexuality: A Queer Reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Trees*

Chinelo Okparanta exploring the issues about gay practice in her novel, *Under the Udala Trees* began with the issues of guilt which many gay people feel at the initial stage when they harbor or express sexual feelings towards an individual or people of the same sex. Ijeoma, the heroine of the novel, a lesbian, struggled with a feeling of guilt to the point of going to church to pray for God to take it away. According to her, "….I sat in church and for the first time, I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. I wanted to ask God to help me turn my thoughts away from Amina, to turn me instead onto the path of righteousness" (57). The author uses Ijeoma's view to stress the views of those that believe that gay practice is not natural. The sense of guilt here stems from the fact that sexual orientation Ijeoma discovered within herself is not in line with the cultural practice, unpopular, and at the same time, strange to many people. The author noted that Ijeoma could not express herself in the place of prayer but ended up going home with her inner struggles and continued with the lesbian practice. Ijeoma's mother, Adoara, who interpreted Ijeoma's behavior as an abomination, condemned her and read the bible repeatedly to Ijeoma believing that it would give her a change of heart that will help her discontinue with her lesbian practice.

Okparanta in this narrative captures Ijeoma's mother's thought as thus; "It's the same behavior that lead to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the very same behavior that you and that girl – what's her name again- engaged in" (59). The mother being critical of Ijeoma and openly condemning her sexual orientation, showed the attitude of the majority of the population that are against homosexuals. This has led to open attacks on homosexuals and it constituted the homophobia discrimination which they suffer in the society. Ijeoma's mother narrated the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the bible and reminded Ijeoma that God destroyed those cities because of homosexuality. According to her, "Everybody knows what lesson we should take from that story. Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed" (59).

Adaora's response to Ijeoma sexual orientation reflects the deeply rooted religious and cultural belief that dominate Nigerian cum African society by extension. African society where homosexuality is often equated with sin and moral decay. By invoking the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Adaora relies on the scripture as both a spiritual guide and a disciplinary tool, believing that religious instruction can correct what she sees as deviant behavior in her daughter, Ijeoma. This depicts the general societal stance where the Bible is frequently used to justify intolerance against the homosexuals. Adaora in the novel reflects the fear of divine punishment. She emphasizes that same-sex love or homosexual love is not only sinful but also worthy of God's destruction. In presenting Adora's reaction, Okparanta reflects on the internal conflicts many homosexual individuals face when their personal or sexual identity is at odds with the dominant religious teachings, family expectations and cultural orientation.

By bringing in biblical views expressed in the Bible against homosexuals, the author subtly used such views to show that many people were against the practice simply because the bible is against it, other than stance taken out of rational thinking. The author challenges this biblical views as Ijeoma asked; "But what exactly is disgusting or disgraceful or scandalous about lying with mankind as with womankind? Does the bible explain? (61). In view of this, an article published by Rustin Times supports Okparanta's view when it observes that:

> Typically when 1 argue about LGBT rights with people 1 ask them to give me non-religious arguments against homosexuality (since religious morality is not universal) sometimes people say gay unions cannot be fruitful they are invalid and by extension an abomination. However, in this book question was answered (1).

The article supports Ijeoma's position that if the purpose of marriage is for procreation, there are cases of men and women in marriages that could not bear children, Ijeoma used this view to counter her mother's position that if homosexuality is promoted that it will be a threat to procreation, Ijeoma noted:

> I knew enough to know that the grammar school teacher and his wife could not have children. I knew enough to know that there were other men and women, husbands and wives like them, who also could not have children. But even with a man and a woman procreation is not always possible (61).

Similarly, in another view by Noire Histoir, the article observed that:

> Amina and Ndidi are great loves in Ijeoma's life because while together, they see her for whom she is allowing her to be who she wants to be. Adaora also sees Ijeoma for who she is but thinks she can be better. Chibundu sees what he wants and tries to coerce Ijeoma into fitting the mold of what he dreams she could be (1).

These differing responses to Ijeoma's sexual identity reveal the border societal tension between acceptance and control of the queer individuals. While Amina and Ndidi offer ijeoma spaces of emotional truth and self- exploration, Adaora and Chibundu represent expectations imposed by family, religion, and tradition. Adaora's approach is driven by fear – fear of divine punishment, societal shame, and cultural dishonor, while Chibundu's intentions though framed as love, are ultimately self- serving, shaped by patriarchal ideals of what a wife should be in both cases, Ijeoma is denied the agency to define herself. Okparanta's uses the heterosexual relationship to highlight how love that is filtered through the lens of societal norms can become an erasure, reducing individuals to roles they are expected to play rather than the people they truly are.

Verah Omwocha in reviewing the novel notes that Ijeoma went through both internal and physical struggles in the narrative, and self identity in a family that refuses to see and accept her true self and the society that is full of stereotypes. This is illustrated by Omwocha as thus:

> The text chronicles Ijeoma's life into adulthood and her struggles with sexuality. Her voices from helplessness in finding herself in that complex situation to a determination of breaking free from societal rules; question tag time tested traditions. She often questions

> God on why she, they rather, cannot be accepted by the community (1).

This is to say that Ijeoma represents many gay people who claim that the homosexual feelings they express are innate and should not be questioned by the heterosexual population in the society. The author created Ijeoma as a character who could not explain why she was having homosexual feeling and at the same time could not overcome or stop it. This is all in a bid to show that the feeling is natural and biological other than being a social construct borne out of association and influence.

Ijeoma further queried the authority of the Bible in condemning a feeling that comes to her naturally when she said that the Bible should not have recorded only the story of Adam and Eve but ought to have added a story of Eve and Eve, and Adam and Adam to strike a balance. In her words, "Why do they 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"(67).

In this narrative, Okppranta further reveals how Ijeoma argues that Adam and Eve could be mere symbols of companionship other than being a reflection of reality of human race. ''surely there must have been other set of man to the same kind, other possibilities of human existence, Adam and Eve being only one instance, a symbolic representation of them all"(68).

One major argument against homosexual practice being natural is that other animals are not sexually attracted to same sex. Some critics held the view that if homosexuality is biological and natural, lower animals could have been practicing it. But to homosexuals, this view should not hold as they held that some

persons that have never been exposed to sexual activities of any kind whatsoever grew to discover that they are naturally attracted to the same sex for sexual pleasures. The homosexuals used this view to counter the claim by heterosexuals that the homosexual feelings are occasioned by environment, priorities and influence. The author sustained this view of gay experience being natural in the novel by ensuring that the preaching of Adaora to her daughter Ijeoma and all the prayers made concerning her did not have any effect on her. Ijeoma believes that the sexual feelings she has for the same sex is natural and continues to struggle with it. Ijeoma further buttresses this assertion further when she narrates that the sexual effect Amina had on her the very first time they met. According to her, "The moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her" (85).

Throughout the novel Ijeoma struggled with this strange feeling but later got married to a man Chibundu in order to please her mother. This is succumbing to societal pressure which stems from homophobia. The marriage crashed after one kid Chidimma within a few years. Ijeoma later took a bold step and left her husband Chibundu. From the time she separated from her husband Chibundu, she is convinced that God created her as a lesbian, therefore she refused to continue living a lie by being in a relationship with a man. The author bringing in the issue of marriage where Ijeoma could not cope living with a man as her husband, is to further show that the sexual feelings of Ijeoma is probably natural as she has tried to set her homosexual feeling aside to no avail. While Ijeoma was in her marriage, she was exchanging love letters with her lesbian friend, Ndidi until her husband discovered it and she decided to leave. The author attempts to use the scenario of marriage to prove that Ijeoma has made efforts to overcome her lesbian practices but failed, does not truly prove the point that Ijeoma might have been born a lesbian as

there are several men and women who might have been heterogeneous but could not successfully live under same roof as husband and wife. Furthermore, Ijeoma's emotional detachment and dissatisfaction within her marriage can be seen as the consequence of unresolved internal conflict and the psychological impact of early same- sex experiences rather than the impact of fixed sexual identity. Her marriage to Chibundu was entered into under pressure, not out of genuine affection or desire, which determines the authenticity of the relationship from the onset. Many individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, struggles in marriages that are not built on mutual emotional connection. In Ijeoma's case, her past experiences and the societal condemnation she internalized may have led to confusion, resistance, or even guilt, which interfered with her ability to fully commit to her husband. Therefore her failed marriage does not definitely affirm a biological basis for her lesbianism but rather highlights the emotional complexity involved in navigating forced heterosexual conformity after same- sex attachment.

It is also worthy of note that prior to Ijeoma's marriage she has largelyindulged *in sexual practices with same sex and this could alter her mindset not* to appreciate the sacredness of living with a man in marriage. Ijeoma's inability to sustain her marriage should not be taken as conclusive evidence of an innate homosexual orientation, but rather as a result of her prolonged exposure and commitment to same sex relationships prior to marriage. This is to say that continuous emotional and physical involvement in lesbian practices could have shaped her desires and psychological responses, making it difficult for her to adjust to a heterosexual relationship. Moreover, many heterosexual couples face marital challenges due to incompatibility, personal differences, or lack of emotional connection, which means that the failure of Ijeoma's marriage cannot be solely attributed to her

claim of being born a lesbian. Instead, it supports the argument that sexual orientation can be influenced by past experiences, choices, and social environments. Her rejection of the marital bond, therefore, may be less about biological determinism and more about an internalized preference reinforced by earlier same- sex encounters.

Besides, while talking to Ndidi about her husband Chibundu, Ijeoma said, "He is my husband, yes, but you are the one I love" (236). The author uses this to convey the message that a woman's marriage to man does not automatically classify her as heterosexual. This suggests that being a lesbian is not solely determined by physical intimacy with the same sex, but rather by one's internal acceptance of one's sexual orientation and the emotional or psychological expectations they hold.

Earlier in the novel, Ijeoma and Amina, her classmate, contemplated getting married but for the backlash the society would have given them and they being too young made them not to go ahead with the idea. Amina told Ijeoma, "We might as well be married" (97). Ijeoma being afraid of people's judgment noted, "But that's not the way marriage works, you know" (97). Although Ijeoma was afraid to consider marriage with Amina, she maintained her as her lover in order to give expression to her homosexual feelings. In her words, "I crave Amina's presence for no other reason but to have it. It was certainly friendship too, this intimate companionship with someone who knew me in a way that no one else did: it was a heightened state of friendship" (122).

The findings in study reveals that the author used different sexual activities Ijeoma engaged in with the stereotypical stance held by the heterosexual society that homosexuality is unnatural and therefore an abomination. From this study, we also discovered that

many people are against homosexuality from religious point of view without having any other justification to stand against it. However, in the narrative, Ijeoma questioned several perspectives on the homosexuals in a bid to undermine the stance that homosexual practice is unnatural. Overly proving that homosexuality is natural was a big burden to her as various arguments she put up in defense of lesbianism and gay practices as being unrealistic, unnatural and a wild fabrication of human mind borne out of influence and priorities.

Conclusion.

Under the udala trees subtly yet deliberately invites readers to engage with the contentious debate surrounding homosexuality, especially within a deeply religious and cultural conservative society. While the author attempts to humanize and normalize same- sex desire through Ijeoma's experiences, the novel does not fully succeed in providing irrefutable evidence that homosexuality is a natural and biological orientation. Ijeoma struggles with faith, societal expectations, and sexual identity reflect the broader conflict many queer individuals face when their desires do not align with dominant moral and societal narratives. Her repeated attempts to question religious teachings underscore the weight of doctrinal influence in shaping public opinion, yet her arguments often lack the universality and biological grounding needed to convince staunch heterosexual critics. The absence of consistent same- sex behaviour in the animal kingdom and the failure of same –sex relationship in the novel to be framed as wholly fulfilling or sustainable further bolster the viewpoint that homosexuality may be more of a socially influenced orientation than a natural state of being. Ultimately, Okparanta's novel recommends critical reflection but also leaves room for readers

to maintain the belief that heterosexuality remains the more biologically grounded and socially cohesive norm.

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