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INFINITE POSSIBILITIES: RELIGION, MATERNAL DISCIPLINE AND THE MAKING OF QUEER SELFHOOD IN CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

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Abstract

This article examines how Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) stages queer identity formation in the private sphere of home, family and faith. Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of power and discourse and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, it argues that Ijeoma's desire for women is not presented as an alien import into Igbo Christian life. The household converts doctrine into daily surveillance, marriage becomes a scripted performance that fails to remove desire, and a gradual reinterpretation of scripture allows the protagonist to separate faith from the voices that condemn her. The article contends that the private sphere is both disciplinary and transformative, since it is where heteronormative power is first internalised and where critical consciousness begins.

Keywords: Chinelo Okparanta; *Under the Udala Trees*; queer theory; Nigerian fiction; religion and sexuality; performativity; heteronormativity

Introduction

Nigerian prose fiction has long treated the household as a moral laboratory. In the novels of the first postcolonial generation, family and marriage were the settings in which communal values were tested, and sexuality, where it appeared, was coded as lawful reproduction or social disorder. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) keeps the household at the centre of its design but turns the experiment around. The family remains the place where a girl learns what is expected of her. Here the lesson is that her love for another girl is a sin, and the novel asks what it costs a person to learn this from the people she loves most.

The novel follows Ijeoma from her childhood in wartime Biafra, where her father is killed in an air raid, through a displacement that brings her into contact with Amina, a girl from a different ethnic community. Their friendship becomes an intimate attachment, and its discovery sets in motion a long sequence of correction, concealment, marriage, motherhood and self-recognition. The narrative closes in 2014, the year of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, so that Ijeoma's private history is placed against a public law that criminalises the kind of life she has lived.

This article asks how religious orthodoxy, maternal discipline, marital performance and private reflection operate together to shape Ijeoma's identity, and what the novel suggests about remaining both queer and part of one's family and faith. It argues that the novel locates queer identity within Nigerian family and belief, not outside them, and that the struggle to hold the two together is the central drama of the text. The article follows the conventional sequence of a research paper: a literature review, a methodology, a theoretical framework, a textual analysis in three parts, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

Critical work on queer African writing begins from a political fact. Africa is often depicted as uniformly homophobic, and Johanna Stiebert argues that both the biblical texts and the representations drawn from so-called "homophobic Africa" are more varied and nuanced than such claims allow (389). Fiction has become one of the places where the argument is conducted, because it can set queer

characters inside the families, churches and local histories that the claim says they cannot occupy. Okparanta's novel, written in the aftermath of the 2014 Act, belongs to this conversation, and Cédric Courtois describes a confluence of poetics and politics at stake in it. The claim of foreignness is a key concept for the present article, because the household is the place where the novel answers it most directly. Ijeoma's desire grows inside an Igbo Christian family and not beside one.

The most developed strand of criticism reads the novel as a coming-of-age narrative. Courtois treats it as a lesbian Bildungsroman set against a patriarchal and homophobic society, follows Ijeoma's path toward self-acceptance, and places Okparanta among the third generation of Nigerian writers, born after 1960, who give voice to a community silenced for too long. His title, which quotes the biblical prohibition on lying with mankind as with womankind, also signals a reading in which the body undergoes formation under scriptural pressure. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez observes that the Bildungsroman has dominated Nigerian fiction since the 1990s and usually links personal growth to national evolution. She revises the form as a "bildungsromance," in which the protagonist's growth is bound to her affective attachments in both private and public spheres. In her account, fear, shame and guilt arise because Ijeoma does not conform to Nigerian customary laws, while intimate relationships prompt self-love and pride ("From Bildungsroman" 97). Two concepts from this strand matter here. Identity is treated as development and not as discovery, and emotion is treated as a force that shapes the self. This article accepts both and then asks where the negative effects come from, locating their source in the household.

A second strand concentrates on religious discourse. Titilope Oluwaseun Oriola reads the novel beside *Born on a Tuesday* through Butler's gender performativity and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and argues that the biblical and Quranic precepts used against homosexuality stand detached from the diversity of sexual orientation in contemporary society (411). Stiebert, writing from biblical studies,

observes that lesbianism is often peripheral to discussion, and she treats Ijeoma's story as data beside the life story of a Ugandan refugee (389). Cruz-Gutiérrez's second article, on the novel and Ayọbámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me*, adds the concept of "forced intimacy" and examines the obligation placed on female protagonists to conform to preestablished feminine and heterosexual models ("Postromanticizing" 317). Three ideas from this strand structure what follows: religious law as discourse that presents itself as timeless, scripture as a text open to rereading, and conformity as a compelled performance.

Pedro José Garcia de Menezes and Orison Marden Bandeira de Melo Júnior approach the same terrain from a dialogical perspective. They examine the role of Pentecostalism's authoritarian anti-homosexuality discourse in the conflict between Ijeoma's orientation and religious dogma, and they note that the novel had not yet been read for how it constructs both the condemnation of homosexuality and its negation (130-31). Their account of authoritarian discourse as a voice that allows no reply (135) bears directly on the scenes of maternal instruction discussed below, although their focus falls on church rhetoric and this article's on the family that carries it.

The remaining concepts come from queer and feminist theory and not from criticism of the novel itself. Heteronormativity names the system that treats heterosexuality as natural and moral, and Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality names the social arrangements that steer women toward men as though no other course existed (631-60). Both describe pressures that the criticism above documents without always naming them. Foregrounding them in a reading of the household clarifies why a mother's response to her daughter can be experienced as care and as coercion at once.

Taken together, these studies establish that the novel concerns the formation of a queer subject under pressure, and each supplies a concept used below: genre and development from Courtois, emotion

from Cruz-Gutiérrez, performativity and religious discourse from Oriola, and scriptural plurality from Stiebert. What remains underexplored is how these forces converge in the household. Religion, emotion and genre are usually treated as separate lenses, yet in the novel they arrive together, through one family and, for much of the narrative, through one voice. A reading that follows the household as a single mechanism can show how doctrine becomes maternal speech, how maternal speech becomes surveillance of the body, and how the same household supplies the tools of its own undoing. That is the contribution this article seeks to make.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive, and its principal method is close reading, which attends to narrative voice, characterisation, imagery and the placement of key scenes. The primary text is the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of the novel (2015), to which all page references refer. Secondary materials are peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on the novel, together with the theoretical works named below. Thematic analysis identified recurring motifs in the private-sphere sequence of the novel: religious instruction, maternal speech, the arrangement and failure of marriage, and scriptural reinterpretation. Passages were selected where these motifs are most concentrated, so that the analysis rests on scenes in which family, doctrine and self-understanding meet directly.

The scope is deliberately limited. The article concentrates on Ijeoma's relations with her mother, her suitors and her scripture, and it does not attempt a full account of the novel's public or national dimensions. Feminist, postcolonial and emotion-centred approaches are used in a supporting role only. The analysis treats sexual identity as a process and not a fixed category, and it avoids generalising the protagonist's experience to queer Nigerians as a whole. The main limitation is the focus on a single text, so the findings describe how this

novel represents the household and make no claim about Nigerian fiction at large.

Theoretical Framework

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* rejects the assumption that modern societies simply silenced sex. Power, in his account, works productively. It produces knowledge about sexuality by naming, examining and classifying it, and it summons individuals to speak about themselves in confessional terms (58-59). The homosexual appears as a type of person when a temporary aberration is converted into an identity (43). Power is also never total, since where it operates, resistance becomes possible (95). These claims supply the grammar for much of what happens to Ijeoma at home.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* adds an account of how such categories are lived. Gender, for Butler, is the repeated stylisation of the body within a rigid regulatory frame, an accumulation of acts that congeal into the appearance of a stable self (43-45). Because the performance must be repeated, it can fail, and the gap between the demanded script and the lived reality is where norms become visible and open to challenge. Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality names the arrangements through which women are steered toward men (631-60). Together the three thinkers describe a household that regulates a daughter's body and attachments through doctrine, expectation and confession, and a daughter who performs conformity while something exceeding the performance persists.

Queer theory has been accused of Western centrism, and the accusation deserves a textual answer. Okparanta's novel does not import an identity model into Biafra. It dramatises an Igbo Christian household shaped by war and then shows that household producing the dynamics Foucault and Butler describe: classification, confession, surveillance and performance. The theory is useful because the text invites it, and it is held accountable to the text throughout.

Textual Analysis

Doctrine in the Household: Prayer, Surveillance and the Language of Sin

Religion is the principal language through which Ijeoma's desire is interpreted, and in the key scenes it reaches her through her mother. Mama's response to the discovery of the relationship is to command prayer: "Pray!" she screams, and Ijeoma must ask God for forgiveness of her sins, "but especially for that one particular sin in you" (Okparanta 86). The scene is about the body as much as the soul. Mama demands, "Did I not just tell you to pray? Why do I not see your lips moving?" (86). Compliance must be visible. The mother watches her daughter's lips for evidence of repentance, and the question shows how doctrine operates as surveillance. Foucault argues that modern power draws confession from its subjects and judges its sincerity by outward sign (58-59), and the scene dramatises exactly that demand.

The same scene supplies the novel's sharpest statement of classification: "No child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires" (Okparanta 86). Three features of the sentence deserve attention. The adjective "sick" joins a medical vocabulary to a moral one, and the repetition turns the judgement into a verdict. The verb "carry" treats desire as a burden or contagion that a child might bear, as though it were an object rather than an attachment. The possessive "mine" places the daughter within a lineage whose respectability she is expected to protect. In Foucault's terms, the sentence converts an act into a kind of person, the type of daughter who carries sick desires (43). In the language of the literature review, it enforces heteronormativity as a standard against which every other attachment is judged and found wanting.

The repertoire widens as the novel proceeds. Ijeoma is told, "No more of that nonsense between you and that girl" (Okparanta 134), a phrase that reduces her attachment to triviality while forbidding it. Later the idiom turns demonic: "The devil has returned again to cast

his net on you" (150). The word "returned" places the source of desire outside the girl, as a visitor to be resisted, and "again" marks a disciplinary cycle in which each lapse calls forth a fresh round of correction. The vocabulary of "abomination" recorded elsewhere in the novel (125) completes the set. Prayer, nonsense, the devil and abomination are all names for a love that the household has no word for. Menezes and Bandeira de Melo Júnior's account of authoritarian discourse is apt here, since the imperatives are issued as commands that expect obedience and allow no reply (135).

Cruz-Gutiérrez rightly identifies fear, shame and guilt as forces in Ijeoma's development ("From Bildungsroman" 97). The reading offered here adds their source. These emotions are products of a discursive arrangement in which a loved parent, a sacred text and a watching community combine to define an attachment as sin. Because the commands come from the person Ijeoma loves and depends on, the discipline cannot easily be dismissed as external. It is addressed to a child by a mother, and it makes the child's emotional security conditional on her compliance. This is how the household turns doctrine into a daily practice of self-observation, and it is why the later work of reinterpretation, discussed below, is so costly.

Marriage, Performance and the Compulsory Script

If religious instruction supplies the language of condemnation, marriage supplies its institutional form. In the novel marriage is not a private arrangement of affection. It is a public institution through which gender roles, lineage and respectability are maintained, and Ijeoma's marriage to Chibundu is accordingly a strategy of survival and not an expression of heterosexual desire. Cruz-Gutiérrez's description of female protagonists obliged to conform to preestablished feminine and heterosexual models fits the situation precisely ("Postromanticizing" 317). Chibundu is known to Ijeoma from earlier in her life, and the familiarity makes the match appear reasonable to those around her. The novel does not make him a villain at the outset.

It makes him a figure who fits the script, and it shows that fitting the script is not the same as being loved.

The courtship is rendered in the language of acquiescence. Of a gentle kiss on the cheek, Ijeoma reports that "I allowed him to do so" (Okparanta 220). The verb is telling. She does not describe desire or choice. She describes permission, and the grammar locates agency in the person who acts on her and not in her own wish. Butler's account of gender as a repeated stylisation of the body within a regulatory frame (43-45) clarifies the moment. Ijeoma performs the part of the receptive fiancée, and the performance is visible as a performance because the narrator keeps her distance from it.

That distance finds its figure in the image of the snail. Ijeoma acknowledges that "sometimes I am a snail" (Okparanta 234), a creature that withdraws into a shell when touched. The image conveys vulnerability and the need for self-protection in a single figure, and it names a strategy of survival under compulsion. A woman who cannot decline the marriage and cannot explain why it is unbearable retreats inward, and the body registers what speech cannot. The regulatory frame of Butler's account is visible around the figure: it includes Mama, the church and a community that makes marriage the condition of acceptance.

Motherhood deepens the tension without resolving it. Ijeoma's daughter, Chidinma, brings attachment and social recognition, and the roles of wife and mother offer protection because they appear to confirm acceptance of the heterosexual order. They do not close the distance between Ijeoma's public identity and her private self, and her relationship with Ndidi continues beneath the marriage. Okparanta avoids any simple opposition between queer identity and maternity. Ijeoma is a loving mother and a woman who desires women, and the assumption that these are incompatible belongs to the heteronormative frame and not to life. Rich's term applies to the whole arrangement,

since compulsory heterosexuality damages the people, it recruits on both sides of the marriage (631-60). Foucault's remark that resistance is coextensive with power (95) explains why the script never holds. A performance that must be enacted daily cannot be natural, and the effort of keeping it going is evidence of what it conceals.

Reinterpretation and the Reclamation of the Self

Ijeoma's journey is not completed by her first experience of love or her discovery of her orientation. It unfolds through a prolonged struggle between what she knows and what she has been taught, and it proceeds largely through interpretation. The decisive move comes early. In the course of her religious instruction Ijeoma finds that "the Bible was beginning to feel almost negligible" (Okparanta 82-83), and she begins to read it as "a history of a certain culture, specific to that particular time and place" (82-83). The two phrases perform different work. The first records a loss of authority, and the second supplies a method, since a text that belongs to a particular time and place can be read as history and not as timeless law.

From this method follows a series of questions that unsettle the creation story used against her. Ijeoma asks why the doctrine that woman was created for man should "invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories" (Okparanta 83), and she reasons that "Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman?" (83). The conclusion she reaches is "Infinite possibilities, and each of them perfectly viable" (82). The argument is modest in tone and radical in effect. It does not deny the text. It declines the assumption that one reading exhausts it. Oriola's claim that religious law presents itself as timeless (411) and Stiebert's finding that biblical and African receptions are more varied than claims of uniform hostility suggest (389) find a literary form in these passages. A text that is read can be read differently, and the instruction meant to discipline Ijeoma supplies the tools she turns against it.

The novel returns to the point near its close with greater humility. Ijeoma reflects, "Maybe the rules of the Bible will always be in flux" (Okparanta 322), and she allows that "there are the ways of God that have already been made known to us" while adding the hope that "Maybe we have only to open our ears and hearts and minds to hear" (322). The repeated "maybe" keeps the reflection provisional, which matters because it avoids replacing one certainty with another. Faith is not discarded. It is reopened as a practice of listening, and the voice that once dictated is replaced by an openness to what has not yet been heard. This is the novel's answer to the authoritarian discourse described earlier. Where authoritarian speech allows no reply, Ijeoma's final stance is built on the possibility of continued response, and it resonates with Butler's view that norms sustained by repetition can be repeated differently (43-45).

The reclamation is also relational. It is shaped by Ijeoma's attachment to Amina, her later relationship with Ndidi, and the responsibilities of motherhood, and the text thus resists an individualistic account of identity. This distinguishes the present reading from accounts that locate agency in a single site, whether emotion, scripture or the nation. Identity in the novel is assembled from all of them, and the assembling takes a lifetime. Silence belongs to the process. Ijeoma conceals her attachments for much of the narrative, and a reader accustomed to narratives of public disclosure might regard this as evasion. Within her social world, speech has consequences, and silence is a strategy developed under pressure, a response to power and not a sign that the desire is unimportant. The title's image of the udala tree suggests the same fragile shelter, a place of growth and encounter beyond adult surveillance that the novel presents as real and temporary.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Under the Udala Trees* presents the private sphere as the first and most formative arena of queer identity.

The household teaches Ijeoma, through commanded prayer, the vocabulary of sin and the expectation of marriage, that her desire is a fault, and it does so with the authority of love. The novel makes the mechanism visible: Mama watches her daughter's lips for proof of repentance, condemns "sick, sick desires" as a stain on her lineage, and the daughter's later marriage is told in the grammar of permission. The snail that withdraws into its shell records the cost of the division between the self that is shown and the self that persists.

The novel does not end in rupture. Ijeoma does not abandon her culture or her faith in order to become who she is. She questions the interpretations that deny her humanity, and she finds in the same materials, scripture and the habit of reading, the means of reinterpreting them. The household that disciplined her also supplies the tools of her resistance. Claims that queer identity belongs to an alien and secular world are answered by a narrative in which a queer woman inhabits a Nigerian family and church and keeps faith with both on new terms. Further work might test whether the mechanisms traced here recur in Nigerian texts set in public and urban spaces, where surveillance takes other forms.

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