

**PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN
NIGERIAN QUEER NOVELS.**

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BENIN CITY

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND
LITERATURE, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN
CITY, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
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LITERATURE**

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CERTIFICATION

I Certify that this study was carried out by Iyesogie Lysa OVIawe (MISS) in the Department of English and Literature, university of Benin, Benin City, under my supervision.

DR. CLEMENT ELOGHOSA ODIA
(Supervisor)

DATE

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Project work to God almighty, who has loved me irrespective of my flaws and has given me the wisdom and understanding needed to complete this project. God has been my source of strength and inspiration throughout the course of writing this project, and I owe all my success to Him.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the perception of sexual identity of queer characters as presented in Chinelo Okparanta and Akwaeke Emezi's novels, in order to show how queerness is portrayed in these texts. This essay covers two novels, one from each author. This essay adopts Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala trees* and Akwaeke Emezi's *Death of Vivek Oji*. The research methodology adopted in this research is the qualitative form of research. That is, the aforementioned texts have been critically analysed and studied to draw instances of queer perception and sexual identity as portrayed by the authors in the texts. The theory adopted in this research is queer theory, it is the most suitable theory because it best explains the subject matter of queerness as portrayed in the texts. This essay demonstrates that queer characters identities are shaped by social, religious and alternate perceptions in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala trees* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death Of Vivek Oji*.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose Of Study

This essay examines the perception of sexual identity in Nigerian queer novels in order to portray how queerness is presented in the novels of Chinelo Okparanta and Akwaeke Emezi's queer novels.

1.2 Scope Of Study

Chinelo Okparanta and Akwaeke Emezi have published some well received novels. Okparanta for example has the following novels to her credit, *Happiness like water* and *Harry Sylvester Bird*. While Emezi has *Freshwater*, *Pet*, *You made a fool of death with your beauty*, etcetera. However this essay covers only two novels, one from each author. Hence this essay adopts Okparanta's *Under the Udala trees* (henceforth adopted as UTUT) and Emezi's *The death of Vivek Oji* (henceforth adopted as DVO)

1.3 Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this essay is the placement of the texts to in-depth and critical examination, to extract instances of queer perception and sexual identity deployed by the authors in the texts. This research is therefore qualitative. For a more comprehensive study, other materials such as textbooks, journals, articles, and other materials both offline and online would be consulted.

1.4 Theoretical Background

The literary theory adopted for this research is queer theory. This theory is the most suitable for this research because it best describes and explains the subject matter of queerness as portrayed in the texts. According to John Anthony Cuddon's dictionary of literary terms and theory, queer theory is defined as;

A radical approach to gender and sexuality. Queer theory does not work towards the inclusion of excluded groups within dominant notions of normality, but rather seeks to understand and challenge what Michael Warner has called 'regimes of the normal'. Queerness has therefore come to be associated with all non-normative gendered and sexual experiences. (597)

The concept of queer theory is to include all non-normative gendered expression. The word queer was once used as a derogatory term to refer to non-heteronormative genders, but has now been reappropriated by gay and lesbian activists, as the "mother" word that covers all non-normative genders and sexuality which include gays, Lesbians, transgenders etcetera.

The use of 'queer' follows the re-appropriation of the pejorative term for homosexual by gay activists during the AIDS crisis of the mid- to late 1980s. though queerness has come to be associated with all nonnormative gendered and sexual experience, including bisexuality, polyamory and transgenderism. Thus queer theory is motivated by a politically progressive agenda: to help envisage circumstances where sexuality and gender can be lived in less restrictive and more creative ways.(597)

Queer theorists believe that gender and sexuality are not static. That gender should not be limited to just male and female, they argue that gender is fluid, and outside of the existing social

norm, gender could be anything. They believe that people should be allowed to identify as more than one gender and sexuality, they are of the notion that people should be allowed to be more than just one thing, and it is with this view that Craig Kagzarowski defines queer theory.

Queer theory considers and conducts a political critique of anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word “queer” as it appears in the dictionary has a primary meaning of “odd” “unconventional” or “out of the ordinary”. To queer” then is to render “normal sexuality” as strange and unsettled, to challenge heterosexuality as a social construct, and to promote gender and identity as fluid.(3).

The notion of gender as fluid means that human beings should not be limited to being either male or female, but that human beings can be whatever gender they choose to identify with, and that biology alone should not be the deciding factor of one’s gender.

Callafell and Nakayama in their work entitled *International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* define queer theory in terms of identity, stating that the fact that queerness is a part of an individual’s identity, it should not be the entirety of that individual’s identity. With this in mind, they define queer theory thus;

Queer theory is not a theory in the traditional sense of the word. It is rather a perspective that scholars take in order to better understand both how we conceptualize sexualities and how to change them. Queer theory is not another term for gay and lesbian studies, but it can be useful for understanding gay, lesbian, and bisexual lives. Queer theory begins with the notion that identities are not destiny; our identities do not determine who we are, who we become, or how we view the

world. Instead, identities are constituted and constructed in order to meet particular goals.(2)

Proponents of queer theory understand that the term “queer” is a pejorative and derogatory designation for gays, lesbians, and those with other non-cisgendered sexual identities. “They acknowledge its negative history but attempt to take that negativity and turn it on its head, thereby reworking the term into something that could change the way we think about sexualities” (2). Queer theory challenges the binary way of thinking about sexualities, as heterosexuality or homosexuality in favour of a more complex project, of capturing the enormous diversity of sexualities. Callafell and Nakayama state that certain behaviors and mannerisms that have been relegated to certain genders are not rooted in biology but rather a social construct that has been historically and culturally ingrained in our society.

For example, if someone has a new baby, people often ask: “Is it a boy or a girl?” This assumes, of course, that there are only two possibilities. If the baby is a boy, he may find himself surrounded by blue clothes, blankets, and other gendered items. As he grows older, he will face normative expectations that he should want to play with certain toys, for example toy trucks, and should engage in certain kinds of activities, for example sports. He should not want to play with dolls or engage in sewing. These gendered constructions are historically and culturally constituted; they are not necessarily the same in all historical eras or in all cultures around the world. In other words, these gendered ideas are not “natural,” or grounded in biology.(2)

Clement Eloghosa Ochia, explains queer theory in terms of an individual’s sexuality and he states that;

Sexuality, in a broad view, studies practices and behaviours as they relate to sex and how feelings are expressed towards certain preferred individuals. Sexuality studies looks at factors that engender sexual orientations in societies. It also categorises people according to their sexual preferences and establishes their social identities.(5)

Queer theorist argues that gender and sexuality are not binary and that other forms of sexuality should be considered because gender is fluid. They also say that LGBTQ+ persons should not be seen as lesser “humans”, that queerness is not a crime, and queer people should be allowed to live and exist freely in this world. It is with this in mind that Chinonso Okparanta and Akwaeke Emezi create queer characters that are not afraid to show their queerness.

1.5 Review Of Related Scholarship

The texts adopted in this research have sparked some conversation among literary critics and scholars, and they have all reviewed the texts from different points of view, each providing their own opinion and understanding of the texts presented.

Hope Lockwood in her article entitled *‘Away from the Udala trees; Postcolonialism, Lesbianism, and Christianity within Chinelo Oparanta’s Under the Udala Trees’* talks about the Homophobia that queer Nigerians have to endure, and how Nigerians treat individuals that are queer, in her article she states thus:

LGBT Africans face a particularly unique and violent type of homophobia. While it never results in physical harm towards characters within the book, there are threats of beatings throughout the novel, and each of the women knows fully what the consequences of their actions could result in being queer (3)

Lockwood also comments on how the author infuses religion into in the text, and how Ijeoma's mother attempts to pray her lesbianism away,

Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel, *Under the Udala trees*, Okparanta references religious texts, to provide a cultural background for the homophobia presented throughout the novel. Ijeoma's mother attempts to pray Ijeoma's lesbianism away. Ijeoma succumbs to her Biblical heteronormativity and attempts to comply but meets another woman named Ndidi. (2)

Hope's article brings to light the awful treatment of queer people as portrayed in the text, she compares the queer characters with other heterosexual characters in the book, stating that society does not see them as equals, and that " queerness is seen as a failure in one's ability to practice self-control" (2). Her work centers on the unfair treatment of queer people as portrayed in the text and in Nigeria as well.

The author, Chinelo Oparanta, in an interview with J.R.Ramakrishnan on www.Electricleterature.com, gave a brief insight on how the novel was received by the Nigerian literary community, she says;

The novel was a difficult book to write. On the surface, it seems a rather simple book, but it's astonishing how much effort goes into chiseling down words and ensuring they are unpretentious. The novel came at a difficult time in my life. Between the weird, threatening messages from random people who thought I should not be writing about homosexuality. (NP)

Okparanta's statement reiterates Lockwood's point on the prevalent homophobia in Nigerian society.

Cedric Courtois in his article titled "*Lesbian(Body-)-Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta's under the Udala trees 2015*" navigates this text as a "lesbian Bildungsroman". He states that;

The plot revolves around the coming-of-age/coming-out of the Igbo heroine, Ijeoma who is eleven years old, grows up in a period of intense political turmoil and discovers sexuality and love with a Hausa girl, Amina, who is her age, but also, once she is an adult, with Ndidi, an Igbo woman.

The novel is therefore a Nigerian lesbian Bildungsroman. (9-10)

To further develop his idea of the text being a lesbian bildungsroman, he goes ahead to define a bildungsroman, and he says thus;

We may call a novel a Bildungsroman first and foremost on account of its content because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel (10-11)

Courtis also explains that in a traditional bildungsroman, the plot focuses on the "masculine identity" of the protagonist, "central to this definition of the genre is the focus on the masculine identity of the prototypical protagonist of the Bildungsroman". To solidify that the concept of "masculinity" in a bildungsroman can be changed, Courtois stresses the importance of the development of the reader and the character in a bildungsroman. From his argument, he, therefore, comes to the conclusion that *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Oparanta can be seen as a Lesbian Bildungsroman since it focuses on the development of a lesbian hero as well as the reader.

Chepkoech et al in their article entitled "*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Homophobia; Reading of Under the Udala Trees by Chinelo Oparanta and the world unseen by Shamim Sarif*" Set out to analyze how heteronormative societies respond to lesbian homosexuality, arguing that Okparanta's "Under the Udala tree" can be seen as a text that portrays compulsory heterosexuality of which compulsory heterosexuality is defined thus;

compulsory heterosexuality is a term coined by Rich, and it is an ideology that lays the foundation for understanding heterosexuality as both structural and institutional. It creates a society where lesbian homosexuals are expected to conform to heteronormative norms or live on the sidelines. This means that heterosexuality is not a choice but it is maintained by force.(2)

To further establish their argument, they state instances where the text portrays compulsory heterosexuality.

In several instances, Ijeoma's mother constantly loads her daughter Ijeoma with both religious and cultural ideas that a man and woman were meant to be united by marriage as opposed to a marriage between men and men or women and women. Her mother helps in promoting patriarchal and heterosexual values. According to her, lesbianism has no place and Ijeoma must acknowledge heteronormativity. This influences Ijeoma's decision, later on, to marry her childhood friend Chibundu not because she wants to but because that is what society expects of a young woman. She even thinks that marrying Chibundu would make her seem normal and she does not have to worry about being found out. She was however not sure about it. During her traditional wedding, she tries

to bring the issue of her sexuality up, but her mother cut her short, insisting that her marriage to Chibundu is the right thing to do (4)

Harriet Chinonso Okwara in her Journal entitled “*Homosexuality and trauma; A psychoanalytical reading of Chinelo Okparanta’s Under the Udala trees*” approaches the topic of homosexuality from a psychoanalytic angle, she argues that homosexuality in Nigeria (Nigerian texts) can be a way of expressing and processing childhood trauma. To back up her claims, she draws instances of homosexuality and trauma from Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala trees*

Ijeoma’s father was shelled. All these resulted in her mother’s near insanity. In the guise of giving her a ‘safer’ environment “Okparanta’s text pictures vividly the daily inner struggles experienced by same-sex persons in the homophobic Nigerian society. As the plot begins the writer explores a strife and hostile environment made possible by the Nigerian civil war. The protagonist, Ijeoma at the tender age of eleven had to witness the gory sight of blood, massacres, decapitation, and gruesome death which characterizes a war-torn environment. The war injects features like hate, irritability, hostility, strife, and lack of food and safety eroding the peaceful, loving, and tranquil atmosphere in which, Ijeoma is practically thrown away to Nnewi at the house of a family friend (the Grammar school teacher) where she assumes the position of a house help. (7)

Okwara opines that Ijeoma's lesbianism was her way of processing the traumatic experiences she had faced from a tender age, from watching her father die, to being forcefully separated from her mother, and having to readjust to a new and strange environment with the grammar school teacher and his wife

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* has enjoyed the attention of many literary critics as well as the queer community because of its culturally sensitive and queer themes. Akwaeke Emezi's *death of Vivek Oji* has not had enough in-depth study, probably because the text is relatively new but it has been appreciated through book reviews and short essays.

Ayobami Esther in the BN book review writes about the struggles Vivek faces, she states that Vivek's struggles can be likened to the struggles faced by most queer Africans because the African society does not accept them, "Akwaeke Emezi, who identifies as non-binary, brilliantly sheds more light on the phase most homosexuals face when trying to break free from the shackles of Pretense" (NP). Ayobami commends the author for brilliantly shedding more light on the struggles faced by queer Nigerians

"In the Death of Vivek Oji, one of my highlights is that the author captures the challenges most queer people face in Africa, particularly in Nigeria beautifully" (NP)

Abayomi also states how Nigerians (Africans) believe that religion can cure everything and Nigerians' attitude when encountering anything unconventional.

"Another issue worthy of note is the performative sanctimonious act most Nigerians are obsessed with whenever they encounter anything unconventional, believing that the deviation from the norm can be cured with Holy Ghost fire."(NP)

In a book review by the guardian, the focus was not just on the fact that the book revolves around the death of a homosexual protagonist, they also focused on the spiritual aspect of the novel in relation to the prominent theme of homosexuality.

we learn that Oji was born on the same day as his grandmother's death, with a scar like a "soft starfish" on his foot that matched hers. This spiritual conjoining will become significant later in the novel when Oji tells his friends that they can refer to him as either she or he, that he was both. (NP)

The guardian in their book review state how Vivek's spiritual identity relates to his sexual identity, and from his spiritual identity, the reader can understand why Vivek chooses to identify as both male and female.

The Washington Post, in a review titled *A painfully invisible existence*, comments on the style and structure of the novel, and how the author uses the title of the novel to prepare the reader for what they are to expect from the novel but also keeps the reader in suspense. The author was "able to swirl around events from before and after Vivek's death" without messing up the reader's flow of thought.

Emezi opposes such linear attitudes with the very structure of the novel. Rather than progress from beginning to end, "The Death of Vivek Oji" swirls around incidents, before and after Vivek's passing, not so much rising toward its climax as gradually accruing power. Again and again, we learn of events long before we understand their cause or significance. Such a presentation could easily become a muddle, but Emezi is a remarkably assured and graceful guide through this family's calamity of silence. (NP)

Apoorva Mittal in their essay entitled “*I’m not here but I’m not there either*” talks about their experience as a queer person living in India, a country where there are no human rights for the queer community, “There exist no human rights for the queer community, and as a whole, my country is unable to accept queerness”(NP) They also talk about how their family members see queerness as “unnatural” . they liken their experience to that of Vivek, (the queer protagonist in Akwaeke Emezi’s *the death of Vivek Oji*), who struggles with being queer in a society like Nigeria, “ Akwaeke Emezi’s protagonist, *Vivek*, battles with transphobia and queerphobia in the Nigerian community” (NP). They talk about how Vivek struggles to fit into a society that does not accept his queerness, and how his parents see his behavior and personality as “strange”. They also comment on how Vivek struggles to find a community that accepts him for who he truly is. Unable to find any, Vivek has to create his own community that acts as a safe space for him to fully “actualize his “queerness”. “Vivek’s chosen community consists of children of Nigerwives foreigners who had married Nigerian men. Vivek’s chosen family protects and loves him passionately. The safe space “the girls” Juju, Elizabeth, Olunne, and Somto provide for Vivek allows him to fully develop his gender expression. Vivek begins wearing dresses and eyeliner; he also paints his toe nails and lips red”

In a New York Times essay titled *His family misses him but did they really know him?* Vivek’s queerness is openly discussed as a part of his life that his parents were too afraid to come to terms with. They describe the novel as a “steamroller of a story”,

Emezi’s steamroller of a story is about what Vivek’s family doesn’t see or doesn’t want to see while he is alive, and whether or not that blindness contributes to his death. The reader understands that Vivek’s long hair and lipstick are clues to something Kavita doesn’t have words to discuss (NP)

In their essay, they state that Instead of Vivek's family talking openly about his queerness, his parents try to "fix" him through religion "church members attempt a "deliverance" to flog the "demon" out of Vivek. Stop trying to fix me," Vivek begs. "Just stop. It's enough". (NP)

In their essay, they describe Vivek as "a young person whose life contained multitudes", because there were several parts of his life that were unknown to his parents.

From the review of the scholarly works that have been done on these texts, it is evident that queer literature is something that is received with mixed reaction, and each scholar has a different and interesting point of view about the texts. This study seeks to add to the existing body of queer literature.

1.6 Thesis Statement

This essay demonstrates that queer character's identity are shaped by social, religious and alternate perceptions in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala trees* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death Of Vivek Oji*.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIETAL PERCEPTION

To understand how Nigerian society perceives sexual identity and queer individuals, the terms, sexuality, and sexual identity should be defined from a conceptual point of view. Kok defines sexuality as “the way humans express and experience themselves as sexual beings, and this would include their perception of themselves as male or female and their capacity for erotic experiences and responses” (NP). Sexual identity refers to the way an individual feels on the inside as a sexual being, and whom they choose to sexually identify as. This encompasses an individual's sexual orientation as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual.

This chapter seeks to portray how sexual identity and queerness is perceived in Nigerian society, and how queer people are seen in a predominantly heterosexual society.

The typical Nigerian society does not easily adapt to “new” and “untraditional” ways of thinking. Queerness and homosexuality are not ideologies that are welcomed in Nigerian society, reason being that the traditional Nigerian society believes in gender as being binary, and any ideology different from this is not accepted and is wildly pushed against.

Perceptions of queerness and homosexuality vary across different cultures and regions of the world. The Western world (America) for example has over time come to accept homosexuals as “normal” people, although it didn't always start out like this. LGBT Americans had to go through years of discrimination and oppression before they could be constitutionally accepted.

“On June 16, 2003, the highest court in the nation struck down the Texas Sodomy law that made consensual sex between men illegal, in doing so, the court implicitly rendered sodomy and so-called “crimes against nature” laws unconstitutional”(38).

American society has therefore over the years come to accept LGBT persons, and LGBT persons have begun to carve a niche for themselves in their society, as a result of this, other non-normative forms of gender expression have also begun to spring up thereby increasing the community. Historically, non-normative forms of gender were mostly associated with gays and lesbians, but now, other forms of gender expression have emerged, such as Bisexuals, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual, together they form the acronym LGBTQIA+.

The case is entirely different in Africa, a society that upholds heterosexual ideologies and believes in gender as being binary. A society that relegates certain behaviors and patterns to a certain gender, a society that perceives men that cry as “sissies”, and “weaklings”, where a man’s masculinity is tied to his worth and physical strength, and from a young age told, “Boys don't cry and men don't shed tears”. A woman is seen as incomplete without a man, and her worth is directly tied to her ability to bear children. Society places them in a “box”, and when people behave contrary to the “box” that society has placed them in, it raises some eyebrows among people in society, they are then discriminated against, hated, and violently attacked for not conforming to society's views. Akwaeke Emezi and Chinelo Okparanta in their novel try to capture the struggles that LGBTQIA+ persons face while trying to exist in a society that does not validate or acknowledge their existence, and sees their existence as a threat.

As earlier established, LGBT persons and queer ideologies are wildly pushed against in Nigeria, and those given to it are discriminated against and are even at risk with the law (The same-sex marriage prohibition bill was signed into Law on the 17th of January, 2013 by the then President Good-Luck Jonathan, and defectors can risk up to 14 years of imprisonment).

The fear of being ostracised by society is what Okparanta’s lesbian protagonist Ijeoma faces, and It’s this fear of discrimination from society that makes Ijeoma’s mother coerce her into

getting married to Chibundu. Ijeoma's mother symbolizes society and its heteronormative ideals, how society suppresses the individual's right to non-normative gender expression, Ijeoma, just like every female, is expected to grow up, have a husband, bear children for her husband. When Ijeoma begins to develop feelings for a woman, and even has sexual encounters with Amina, it becomes a problem, her mother tries to fix her, to mould her into what society expects of every woman. Her relationship with Amina is perceived as something sacrilegious, an act that is seen as "an abomination"(UTUT PG 105)

Ijeoma's sexuality is not one that her society expects of a woman, her society expects her to desire a man, desire to bear children, and continue the "feminine circle". "Marriage is for everyone, remember, a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all" (UTUT183), a man is seen as the prize and goal that every woman is expected to aspire to achieve, she is not expected to desire anything outside of the accepted norm. "You need to get out there and find yourself a husband. Time waits for no one." (UTUT PG 149)

Every individual is expected to fit into society's norms and expectations of them, and when individuals begin to express feelings that are not socially acceptable, they are met with extreme forms of Violence and even killed. The text shows how violent society is towards homosexual people. In the text, two gay men are stripped and killed because of their sexual identity.

They were two men. I never knew them. They were friends of Adanna from the university. For days they seemed to have disappeared, fallen off the face of the earth. And then yesterday she heard something at the market, whispers about a pair of 'sissies' being beaten by a crowd of people. She went to the bushes behind the dirt road not far from where they lived, and she found the two of them there, naked and beaten to death "We called the police. They couldn't even be bothered

to do anything, not even to take the bodies away. ‘Let them rot like the faggots they are,’ one of the officers said. The other one said, ‘If they were not dead already, we would beat them some more.’ In the end, it was Adanna and I who took their bodies,” she said. “We carried them and cleaned them and prepared them for burial. Imagine, holding their bodies in my arms. (UTUT169)

Society violently pushes against LGBT ideals, because being gay or Lesbian is seen as unnatural, the idea of two same-sex individuals copulating violates the normal, moral, and natural order of society. According to Bisi Alimi, quoting former US president Barak Obama in a visit to Kenya, addressed the discrimination of LGBT individuals in Africa, and he said; “When you start treating people differently not because of any harm they are doing to anybody, but because they are different, that’s the path where freedom begins to erode”. But the then Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta replied by saying;

“there are some things we must admit we don’t share (with the US). Our culture, our societies don’t accept.”. The African society does not see or accept LGBTQIA+ individuals. Ijeoma’s mother, knowing this tries to fix her in a way that her society would accept her. “Nwa m, ke ihe ichoro ka m me? My child, what do you want me to do? A woman and a woman cannot be”(UTUT PG 183)

Ijeoma is forced to suppress her identity, not just to be seen as “normal” but to stay alive as well, the society in which Ijeoma and Ndidi live in do not accept them, they are forced to live apart from themselves, it is in this light that Ndidi, encourages Ijeoma to go out with Chibundu because she fears that if they are found out they could be killed.

“Go out with him. See how you feel. This kind of life is not for everyone. People like us are getting killed. And anyway, you might decide you like that other life better. The kind of life that he can give you, you know, man and wife”(UTUT 176)

She is forced to hide her true identity. All Ijeoma is left with is to imagine a different kind of world where she could freely be herself and express her sexual identity without fear of being ostracized by her society, loved ones, or worse off killed.

In a different world, we might have leaned in and kissed each other on the lips. We might have held each other tightly the way that lovers do. But there was the matter of Mama being so close. She might suddenly appear and all hell would break loose. Anyone at all might suddenly appear, to the same effect. (PG 159 UTUT)

Ijeoma is well aware that her society sees this as an abomination and that outside her imagination there is no future for her and Ndidi. It is in this light that Hope Lockwood in her article entitled *Away from the Udala trees; Post-colonialism, Lesbianism, Christianity, with Chinelo Okparanta's Under the Udala trees*, states that LGBTQ+ persons are not judged and hated because of who they are, but whom they chose to have sex with, Ijeoma's society, mother, and grammar school teacher are not against her as a person, but they hate whom she chooses to sexually be with, the grammar school teacher sees her relationship with Amina as “an abomination” (UTUT PG 105), an act that is condemnable, a thing unmentionable, something unheard of, her mother sees her relationship with Amina as sinful, and tries to fix her through religion.

He had heard of such cases, in which the accused were stoned all the way to the river. Stoned even as they drowned in the waters of the river. Of course, it was

rare that such cases were spoken of. So taboo the whole thing was anathema, unmentionable, and not even deserving a name. (UTUT PG 106) .

Ijeoma eventually gives in to her mother's pressure for marriage, with the hopes that Chibundu could make her happy and that she could have a normal and safe life with Chibundu, she tries to force herself to believe that marrying Chibundu would be best for her and that marrying Chibundu would make her a normal heterosexual female.

Here was Chibundu, sweating before me, stammering, promising to make me happy. What if he actually could? What if I only had to give it a real try to see? Because when I thought of it, I did want to be normal. I did want to lead a normal life. I did want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out .(UTUT PG181)

This shows the extent to which LGBTQIA+ individuals have to sacrifice and how much they have to suffer and repress their emotions in order to avoid stigmatization and violence from their society. Ijeoma enters into a toxic and loveless marriage with Chibundu just to please her mother and her society. She does this to show her mother and her society that she is normal, to try to prove to herself that being Lesbian is a crime, a problem, an anomaly. She marries Chibundu to conform to societal norms and convention, to obey societal rules and expectations of a woman.

Adejuwon in his journal says that Africans see homosexuality as a cultural value distortion, something that can be described as “ the world turning upside down phenomenon”, and that Africans don't accept homosexuality because it lacks the basic intention of sexual union which is for procreation, and as such it would be difficult for Africans to see same-sex couples as normal couples, and that same-sex couples would not be equated and given the same respect and regard

as heterosexual couples, They would be seen as an abomination, a taboo, a violation of the social order, Africa's strong religious and traditional climate would not accept them.

Emezi in their novel, *The Death Of Vivek Oji* challenges certain qualities and characteristics that society considers as "feminine", in a bid to say that certain traits should not be relegated to a particular gender only. Traits as mundane as the keeping of hair, plaiting of hair, and painting of nails for a man could become a problem in society. For Kavita and De Chika, the fact that Vivek had stopped cutting his hair had become a thing of worry for them, they might not have a problem with it, but they worried about what people would say, and how society would accept him, worse of, they worried for his safety, what people would do to him if they saw him looking like a woman when he was indeed a man.

Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that . . . feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he's a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?" "But you know how these men are. The boy is slim, he has long hair—all it takes is one idiot thinking he's a woman from behind or something, then getting angry when he finds out that he's not. Because, if he's a boy, then what does it mean that the idiot was attracted to him? And those kinds of questions usually end up with someone getting hurt. (DOV PG 59-60).

We can see from the text that the author has purposely presented their protagonist, Vivek as being effeminate, they do this to challenge what we see as normal and abnormal as if to say that what society sees as abnormal is just society trying to process a change that is somewhat uncomfortable, something that it is not used to, it is thus strange and rather uncommon in a

typical Nigerian society for a man to have long flowing hair, wear dresses, use makeup, paint his nails.

Kavita scolded him later, after their son went out, telling him there was nothing wrong with a little eyeliner. “It starts with eyeliner,” Chika had said. “Where is it going to finish? I thought you were worried about his safety, but you’re just letting him walk around like that? What if someone throws a tire on him? (PG 165 DOV)

It seems odd for a man in a predominantly patriarchal society to appear effeminate. When this happens people don't know a better way to react to this but to violently push against it, try to offer “help”, and try to “fix” this individual, they try to make the individual see the reason why this “abnormal” behavior should be “fixed”, and Vivek's family is no different, they try everything they can to change him, they cannot understand his sexuality. To them, Vivek is a problem that needs solving. Osita his cousin whom Vivek thinks would understand him, judges him for his sexuality. Though he later understands Vivek and accepts him for who he is. Osita at first reacts the way every other person in the society would react to something that is not seen as normal.

Wait.” I felt as if my head was stuffed with surprise. “If it’s not a woman, who else would I be seeing in Nsukka?” Vivek looked at me, and there was a pause before I realized what he meant. I sat up, furious. “Are you mad? What’s wrong with you?!”

I pulled away and jumped off the bed. “Don’t touch me. You think I’m like your friends? Or like you? Is that why you decided to start looking like a woman, eh? Because you’ve been knocking men? Biko, I’m not like you —forget that one,

now-now!” “All of this because I said maybe you have a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend? It’s not that serious.” “You think that’s normal? You think you self, that you’re normal? None of this is normal, Vivek! What kind of people have you been around?” “Why are you so afraid? Because something is different from what you know?(DOV 57)

From the text, we can see that society sees people that are given to homosexual tendencies as not normal, they are seen as a threat because they threaten the normal order of the world, and they are seen as a problem that needs fixing or total eradication.

Emezi created the character of Vivek with so much care and patience, paying attention even to the tiniest details, Vivek a halfcast nonbinary Igbo boy living in Nsukka is something to consider, the author takes into consideration the nature of the Igbo culture and traditions, how male Igbo characters have been presented throughout literature, how manliness and masculinity are seen in the Igbo cultural society. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is an example of a text where masculinity is held in high regard. Okonkwo is the protagonist in Achebe’s *things fall apart*, and he is seen as a “real man”. masculinity in this sense is equated to physical strength and vigour, and masculinity is something that is held in high esteem in traditional Igbo culture, a real man is therefore seen as someone that can mask his feelings, a man that does not cry, and a man that is well-built and physically strong. The text opens with Achebe describing the physique of Okonkwo “He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look.”(TFA PG 2) this shows that the physique of a man is something that is paramount in Igbo tradition . This then brings us back to Emezi’s Igbo protagonist Vivek, an effeminate, weak, soft, and womanly. A man with long hair, a skinny man, and a homosexual man. These traits are not the expected traits of the typical Igbo male, in a traditional Igbo society. Emezi through her

character attempts to defy all societal views of a typical Igbo man by not just creating an effeminate man, but an effeminate Igbo man. Vivek's feminine tendencies worry his parents, especially his father De Chika, who in a bid to toughen him up, sends Vivek to a military boarding school.

He was about to leave for boarding school up North—some military academy that De Chika had insisted on, even though Aunty Kavita begged him for months not to send Vivek. But my uncle wanted him to toughen up, to stop being so soft and sensitive. (DOV PG 18)

De Chika understood what a typical Igbo man was supposed to look like. A typical Igbo man is a tough and hard man, a strong man, a man that showed no emotion, and he wanted Vivek to become a man in this sense, he believed that sending Vivek to military school was going to help “toughen” him up and mold him into a real man. The idea of how a “real man” is supposed to look is influenced by society. Society creates a stereotype of how an ideal man is meant to look, the true standard for a man, and everyone in a bid to be accepted by their society try to fit into society's accepted code of conduct, so of course, Vivek keeping or plaiting his hair would become a thing of worry for De Chika, Vivek would be seen as insane because of his hair “He better be washing that hair. Chika, you should have made him cut it as soon as he entered your house.” (183) because doing this would mean that Vivek was not a real man, that Vivek was a homosexual, and the possibility of that being true was heartbreaking, it was not something that they could not allow, that would mean that Vivek was not safe in that society, and that Vivek could be a threat to his society.

“She said Vivek's not safe, that he looks—” She paused “That people might try to hurt him.”My God, it's just hair! It doesn't mean anything.” Chika gave her a gentle but knowing look. “Is it

me you're trying to convince, or yourself?" (PG 60) . Vivek's physical appearance is a problem. His attempt to defy the unspoken codes and rules that society has relegated to different genders is seen as not just challenging, but terrifying. His failure to physically maintain one gender does not go down well with his parents, they fear the harm and danger that his sexuality would bring to him.

Not exactly," she said. "It's not as if I can plait his hair." "You can plait it if you like," Vivek said, without raising his eyelids. "Tch!" His mother smacked his shoulder. "Your father would kill me!" We can't plait it. I'll just tie it back so it stops falling into your face. You know that drives your father crazy."(DOV PG 54).

Emezi's novel just like Okparanta's novel shows how much queer individuals have to suppress their sexual identity in order to exist in their society, even after Vivek dies, his parents are still unaware of Vivek's sexual identity, and even when the girls (Juju, Elizabeth, Somto, Olunne), show Kavita some pictures of Vivek dressed as a woman, she refuses to believe that, that's what Vivek was, even in his death she refuses to accept the fact that Vivek is indeed a homosexual man, and that Vivek was not the son she thought he was, she is scared to accept that her son was indeed homosexual while he was alive, she likens his queerness to him being sick, and accuses the girls of taking advantage of his sickness.

What is this? "Why is he dressed like this?" "He liked to dress that way,". "He didn't want you to know—he didn't want you or Uncle Chika to worry about him." "My God," she said. "He was dressing like a woman?" "He was sick! And you people all knew this was going on, and it didn't occur to any of you to tell me or his father? We could have helped him!" "No, I refuse. It must have been you

girls! You dressed him up—you took advantage of him! You knew he was sick!”“It’s enough. You people will not sit here and tell me my son wanted you to call him she. It’s . . . it’s unnatural.”“I don’t know what you people did to him, but that was not my son! That was not my Vivek! (DOV 166-168)

Chika, even after realising who Vivek truly was, is still unwilling to accept the fact that Vivek was not the man he thought he was, he is still too scared to accept that Vivek’s secret life of homosexuality was indeed Vivek’s true identity, and just like Kavita, he likens Vivek’s queerness to mental illness, “That wasn’t Vivek. He was sick, Kavita. He was mentally unwell. That’s why he was dressing like that.”(DOV PG 172). From the text, we can see that the society likens queerness to insanity and sickness.

Emezi’s novel explores the complexities and challenges of being a homosexual man (non-binary) in a predominantly patriarchal society, where women are seen as the weaker gender, and so much regard and respect is given to the man. Through the character of Vivek, we see how queer people have to hide their true identity because of the society they live in, Emezi, through the stream-of-consciousness technique takes us into the mind of Vivek. Vivek, though dead, talks about how people see him, what they thought of him because of his physical appearance and sexuality, the shame and insults hurled at people like him, and how people saw queer people as less than human beings.“I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things; ugly words. Calling them women, as if that’s supposed to be ugly, too. Less than a man—something disgusting, something weak and shameful”. (DOV PG 104)

The use of slurs and demeaning words shows the marginalization and oppression of queer people, and it clearly states that Nigerian society is not open to queer people, and queer people are not safe because of the violent and homophobic nature of Nigerian society against them.

From the in-depth analysis of the chapter, we can see how Nigerian society perceives queer individuals, and how unaccommodating Nigerians are to queer people and the LGBTQIA+ society, from the analysis of the text, we can see the struggle that queer individuals have to go through, just to be seen as normal, how they are not able to freely express their sexual identity as a result of the society they live in, how their society forces heteronormativity on them, and how these individuals have to hide their true selves from their families because of the fear of being stigmatized, ostracized or even killed. From the text, we see how these characters have to make the difficult choice to choose a life they do not want, just to be accepted by their society. From the text, we see how these characters have to make the difficult choice to choose a life they do not want, just to be accepted by their society.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS PERCEPTION

From the texts being studied, we see that one way society fights and suppresses LGBTQIA+ individuals is through religion, particularly Christianity, which plays a pivotal role in the suppression and control of the queerness of some characters presented in the texts. Okparanta and Emezi through their texts show how Christianity is a major driving force used by society to control the sexual identity of the characters. This chapter seeks to portray how religion, (Christianity), views queerness and sexual identity, and how some characters in the text, attempt to use religion, (Christianity) to correct the “abnormality” of queerness and instill heteronormative ideals in their society.

Africa (Nigeria) as a result of colonization has witnessed the widespread of Christianity. Christianity and Islam is the most practiced religion in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, although both religions differ in belief systems, on the grounds of homosexuality, both of these religions seem to strongly agree, as they both stand against it. The Koran and the bible preach heteronormativity and are firmly against homosexuality and LGBTQIA+ ideals. They assert their claim by stating that in the creation story of Genesis chapter one, God created a man and a woman,(Adam and Eve), after creating Adam and Eve, God then commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, (Gen 1;28), and by so doing God has enforced heteronormativity, and so homosexuality is sinful, as homosexuality does not fulfill this commandment. Adejuwon in his essay *Homosexuality; An African Christian perspective* states that “God’s creation of male and female and the commandment to bear children is a sign to show that God ordained heterosexuality and not homosexuality”, this shows that God does not recognize homosexuality

and that homosexuality is against the will of God and is, therefore, a sin. There are several instances in the bible where it is expressly stated that homosexuality is a sin that is punishable by God, one such example is in the book of Leviticus chapter 20 verse 13 “If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death, they have committed perversion, their blood shall be upon them”. It is upon the premise of this scripture and other similar scriptures that Christians have chosen to take a stand against LGBTQIA+ ideals, claiming that it is sinful, unbiblical, and morally unethical. Christians have not only pushed against LGBTQIA+ people, but they also offer counselling and prayer sessions to help cure the “demon of homosexuality”, this is called conversion therapy. Ohotuowo Ogbeche in her book titled *The Nature, Extents, and Impacts of Conversion Practices In Nigeria*, stated that the term “therapy” minimizes the extent and scope of actions taken in a bid to convert people’s sexual orientation or gender identity”, (PG 14) Ogbeche also states that conversion therapy is neither conversion nor is it therapy, and that suggesting the need to change someone’s gender or sexual orientation is a violation of basic human right. Ogbeche goes on to define conversion therapy (practices) as;

Conversion practices are any form of intervention, including psychiatric, psychological, medical, or religious “treatment” given to individuals to change their sexual orientation from homosexuality or bisexuality to heterosexuality. It may also be used to change a person’s gender identity from intersex or transgender to cisgender. Sometimes this practice is forced on someone. Other times, it may be requested by an individual who hopes to change. (PG 15)

These conversion therapy sessions include but are not limited to intense prayer sessions, where the person is prayed on, and this prayer is supposed to heal the person from homosexuality, it

may also include corrective rape, and exorcisms, which can sometimes become violent, in this case, the “evil spirit” is beaten out of the individuals, it also includes intense fastings, religious counseling, and sometimes these individuals are asked to ingest purifying substances in order to cleanse themselves of homosexuality. The aim of conversion therapy is to make these individuals heterosexual/ cisgender. The core of conversion therapy is not to dehumanize or cause harm to queer people but to help them become cis-gendered because most of these religious organizations see, homosexuality as a sin, an ailment that requires cure and they believe that these “practices” would help “cure” homosexuality.

Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* shows how religion is used as a tool to change a person's sexual identity, in the text, Ijeoma’s mother after finding out about her daughter’s sexual encounter with Amina subjects Ijeoma to a series of prayers and Bible studies hoping that this would help “cure” Ijeoma’s lesbianism. Ijeoma’s mother (Adaora) as earlier stated symbolizes society and its heterosexual ideals. Ijeoma’s mother is a devout Christian, and although she doesn't subject Ijeoma to extreme forms of conversion therapy, she uses her Christian beliefs to try to convince Ijeoma that homosexuality is a sin, she believes in the potency of prayers and Christianity and hopes that through intense prayers and bible studies, Ijeoma would be healed of her lesbianism, this act has been popularised into the phrase “pray the gay away”. Adaora felt that it was her fault that Ijeoma became a lesbian, that if she had come to pick up Ijeoma earlier, she would not have had a sexual experience with Amina that made her lesbian. “It’s unfortunate,” she said, looking forlornly into her cup of tea. “If only I had finished setting things up a little earlier, I might have prevented . . .” (pg 61), and so Adaora felt the need to right her wrongs by trying to change Ijeoma’s sexuality through religion. In the text, the author dedicates six chapters (chapters 13-19) to show the role that religion plays in the text, in

these chapters, the author presents several scriptures from the bible that shows that homosexuality is a sin, and how Ijeoma's mother uses these scriptures to try to change Ijeoma's sexual identity.

Leviticus 18:22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination. Leviticus 19:19 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 woolen come upon thee. Leviticus 20:13 If a man also lies with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them. (PG 78).

Adaora engages in a subtle form of conversion therapy, she constantly reminds Ijeoma that homosexuality is immoral and unnatural, telling her that she is in danger of hell-fire and that she needs to cleanse her soul, for several weeks after Ijeoma's return from the grammar school teachers house, Ijeoma's mother subjects her to intense prayers and bible study. "Now that you have had the week to settle in, we must make a schedule for you. There's nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul" (UTUT 58). Adaora lunges into several bible lessons, in most of the lessons, she tries to present pieces of evidence in the bible that state how much God hates homosexuality so that Ijeoma can see that homosexuality is indeed a sin and that she needed to be cleansed.

Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah."But what exactly is disgusting or disgraceful or scandalous about lying with mankind as with womankind? Does the Bible explain?" "The fact that the Bible says it's bad is all the reason you

need,” Mama said. “Besides, how can people be fruitful and multiply if they carry on in that way? Even that is scandal enough—the fact that it does not allow for procreation. (PG 65-66 UTUT)

Ijeoma’s mother believed that Ijeoma’s queerness was something that prayers could solve and that her queerness was some demonic manifestation that needed to be cast out from her “continuing to remember that former version of Mama, the one who believed so much that there was a demon in me”(54). Her mother held bible studies every evening in a bid to cure her of her lesbianism. “Those initial sessions, the lessons took place right there at the kitchen table, with the two of us seated across from each other. They took place in the evenings after Mama had closed up the shop, but before supper”. (59.) Her mother also said prayers to purify her soul and to cast the demon of homosexuality out of her.

Almighty God in heaven,” she began, “protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away. Zoputa ya n’ajo ihe. Protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell. Lead her not into temptation. E kwela ka o kwenye na nlanye. Give her the strength to resist and do Your will. May her heart remember the lessons You have given, the lesson of our beginning, of Adam and of Eve. (UTUT PG 63).

Although the text does not explicitly state that Amina has been subjected to conversion therapy, the author gives instances that tell us that at the same time that Ijeoma has been subjected to a series of bible studies and prayers, Amina has also had to undergo some form of conversion therapy. “ If Amina had not taken issue with the grammar school teacher’s decision to conduct Bible studies on her behalf”(126). Even when Ijeoma and Amina were in the same school, and it seemed as though their love had started to bloom again, the teachings and exorcisms conducted

for Amina had been internalized in her, and she could not bring herself to see the relationship she had with Ijeoma as normal, the teachings made her believe that she was “condemned” and that her relationship with Ijeoma was not normal. “If I said, “God loves us all the same,” she said, “Not the thieves and the liars and the cheats, not the murderers, not the disobedient. He couldn’t possibly love us all the same.” (131).

The teachings Amina received made Amina hate her sexual identity, it made her see herself as “condemned”, and “fallen”, and she began to see her relationship with Ijeoma as sinful. “Maybe it was a sign, she said. Maybe we were the fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness.”(127). Even when Ijeoma tries to convince her otherwise, she does not agree. Ijeoma unlike Amina questions the teachings she received from her mother and she did not wholly accept the teachings she has received as the truth, she just pretends to believe the teachings so that her mother would stop worrying over her, and increase the therapy sessions.

It was turning out that all that studying was not actually doing any good; if anything, it was making it a case between what I felt in my heart and what Mama and the grammar school teacher felt. The Bible was beginning to feel almost negligible, as it was seeming to me more and more impossible to know exactly what God could really have meant. The thought occurred to me: Yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But so what if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did that 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. The joy of my discovery washed over me. My first instinct was to go to Mama and

present my case to her. I had just reached the door when I realized I'd be better off not trying to present these theories to Mama. What good would arguing over it do? She might decide that I was being insubordinate to her and to God, and then maybe she would increase the lessons to two times a day. (PG 73 UTUT).

From the text, we can see that Ijeoma's conversion therapy did not yield the results her mother hoped for, instead, it made her question the bible and doubt its credibility. Ijeoma just pretended to believe so that her mother would not increase her study sessions from once a day to two times a day. But Amina, on the other hand, did not question the teachings, the author uses this irony to show that, being queer in a society where it is seen as a taboo could occur in different forms, that some queer individuals in the face of conversion therapy and criticism from religion, could either be like Ijeoma that question everything and try to make sense of things, try to reason things out and ask why it is wrong to be queer, or be like Amina and believe everything that they are told, to suppress their sexual identity because they are told that it is a sin. The teachings that Amina had received from the grammar school teacher had internalized in her the belief that homosexuality was a sin and so she began to resist Ijeoma and even has a dream that they were condemned.

She woke up with a start, asking me if I had seen it, if I had heard it. "Hailstones," she blurted out, "and fire, pouring down and forming craters where they landed." Her body shook as she spoke, almost as if she were shivering from a fever. She described the dream, something about a carriage in the sky pulled by golden horses with no horseman. "The children," she cried, her voice shaky now. "Small children, sweat dripping from their heads. So much sweat that their clothes were soaking wet." "Maybe it was a sign," she said. "Maybe we were the fallen children,

the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness (PG 127 UTUT).

Amina's dream becomes a turning point for her, because of her dream, she breaks up with Ijeoma "I know," she said, pulling her hand out of mine. "Maybe next time." I moved closer, I raised my hands to hold her by the waist. My hands had hardly touched her waist when she cried out, "Please stop!"(130), This shows how much the teachings had been so ingrained in her subconscious.

The rejection, heartbreak, and betrayal from Amina hurt Ijeoma, so much that even though she knew that the prayers and bible studies did not do anything in changing her sexuality, she still held a glimmer of hope that maybe the revivalist coming to her school could help her, that maybe he could cure her of her queerness, maybe he could repair her relationship with Amina, that he could "fix" her. "The impending visit took on the feel of medicine. In my mind, it was as if all I'd have to do was show up at the revival, take a full Sunday regimen of onye ocha prayer tablets, and just like that, everything would be fixed". (PG 134)

Jefferey .L. Siker in his book *Homosexuality and Religion; an Encyclopedia* asserts that Christian conservatives see homosexuality as a sinful behaviour that shakes the very foundation of society, the homosexual is seen as a medieval sodomite, a sinner, a heretic, and a contagious disease of the society. Siker's assertion gives us an insight into Adaora's character and helps us understand why Adaora (Ijeoma's mother), was hell bent on cleansing Ijeoma, and blaming her queerness on the devil, an evil spirit "She was speaking to the devil, crying for him to turn back and leave me alone"(76), and why Adaora thought that Ijeoma was possessed by a demon, and that Ijeoma's queerness was a sin that needed forgiveness. "Don't you worry," she said. "There's no sin so bad that it can't be forgiven, no wrongdoing so terrible that it can't be repented of. You

will repent and you will be forgiven by the glory and the power of God.” (77) and she did all she could to make sure that Ijeoma became cis-gendered.

As a result of the bible study’s and prayer sessions from her mother, Ijeoma begins to believe that she is indeed a sinner, even though she didn’t feel like a sinner, and deep down she knew that she was lesbian and she was scared and believed that her queerness would indeed lead her to eternal condemnation. She would wake up early to go to church begging God for forgiveness, scared that her lesbianism is sinful and wrong. In the text, there are several instances where Ijeoma goes to the church frantically praying and screaming for forgiveness. From these instances, we can see that Ijeoma is indeed a Christian, and that she reverences God, but she cannot just understand why she is lesbian, and because of the bible lessons she has received from her mother on how much God hates homosexuality, she believes that being Christian and being Lesbian are two identities that are mutually exclusive.

The images of Mama were interspersed with a thunderous sound that, in the dream, was the voice of God, scolding also like Mama, reprimanding, condemning me for my sins My breathing finally stabilized. I attempted once more to string together the words to form a prayer, but nothing came. I remained mute. Not a single word to express myself, not a single one to explain or to defend myself, not one single word to apologize and beg forgiveness for my sins. All I felt within me was a trembling from this questionable sort of guilt. A sense of defeat washed over me. Tears spilled out, forming tiny dark spots on the gray cement floor of the church. (UTUT PG 166-167)

Okparanta through this text pushes the narrative that religion cannot change a person's sexual identity, because their sexual identity is innate, and it is not a switch that can be flicked on and

off, although it can be suppressed as in the case of Amina and even Ijeoma, but it cannot be completely eliminated. An example of this ideology is seen when Adaora's efforts are frustrated because Ijeoma's homosexuality had not miraculously been healed even after all the bible lessons and prayer sessions she had held.

“Do you still think of her?”“Do you still think of her in that way?”The answer was simple: of course I still thought of Amina. And, yes, in that way. How could I force away memories of a person with whom I'd shared all that time? “Yes, I still think of her,” I said. And, “Yes, I still think of her in that way.” Pray!” she screamed. “You must ask God for the forgiveness of all your sins, but especially for that one particular sin in you. Did I not just tell you to pray? No child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires. The mere existence of them is a terrible disrespect to God and to me!”Only your own prayer will save you now. I have prayed all I can for you. Now you must pray for yourself! Only God can save you! (PG 74-75 UTUT).

Emezi and Okparanta share this same narrative. Emezi in their text also presents instances where their gay protagonist was subjected to an extreme form of religious conversion therapy and exorcism. In Emezi's text, *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's parents think that his “condition” is a phase and so his mother says countless prayers in hopes that Vivek would become “normal” and stop looking so feminine, Kavita did not want to imagine the possibility of Vivek being gay, and she believed that if she prayed earnestly, her son would be “healed” of his queerness, so she visits the priest with hopes that he can see into the supernatural and tell her what Vivek's problem was, but all he did was tell her to pray some more.

Kavita thought it was a phase—that Vivek was just going through something and it would pass. So she prayed and said countless rosaries, rubbing the color off the beads with hundreds and hundreds of Hail Marys until she thought her hands were actually full of grace. When Vivek came out from their conversation, his forehead was wet with holy water. “Pray some more,” the priest told them, and Kavita believed him, trusted him. If there was something more, something spiritual, wouldn’t the father have seen it? She wasn’t sure. (DOV PG 59)

When her prayers did not bring her the desired results, Mary suggests that Vivek attends her Church stating that her church would help cure Vivek’s queerness. “You should allow him to come to Owerri, so I can take him to my own church. They fight these things with holy fire.” (DOV 59). From Mary’s statement, we can deduce that homosexuality is seen as the work of the devil, a disease of the supernatural that can only be cured by exorcism, she states that Vivek’s feminine physical appearance is the work of the devil, and that Vivek needed to be delivered of his ailment, stating that, Vivek’s long hair and feminine physical appearance meant that Vivek was possessed with the demon of homosexuality.

Has he cut that hair?” “I don’t think that’s important—” “Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It’s not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that . . . feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he’s a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?” “Let me take him to my church,” Mary insisted, when she called that evening to ask how the visit went. “It can’t hurt, Kavita. They will try and remove any evil thing that has attached to him. You believe in prayer, I know you do. Your own church has not done anything for the boy. Let us try, biko. (DOV PG 59)

Kavita although not presented as a religious character in the text, allows Vivek to go to Mary's church, by doing this, she subjects Vivek to an extreme form of conversion therapy where Vivek is severely beaten in a bid to deliver him from the spirit of homosexuality, an act that puts a strain in her relationship with Mary.

"I'm never going to Owerri again," he said, his voice tight. "You people can go if you like, but I won't follow you. You hear?" "Have you ever been to her church before?" "Yes, of course, beta." "No, I mean have you ever gone when they're doing a deliverance?" "They are bastards!" he spat. "You think it's all right to treat someone as if they're an animal? In the name of their useless deliverance? Mba, wait. They called it an exorcism. Because, apparently, I have a demon in me, did you know? They had to beat it out." He lifted up his shirt, revealing a swath of dark red welts on his side. (DOV PG 62)

Mary who is presented as a christian fanatic in the text, symbolizes how the christian society perceives homosexuality, this reiterates Sikers assertion that conservative Christians view homosexuality as a sin. Mary who is a fanatic, is blinded by religion and does not see that the methods taken by her Church to "cure" Vivek of his homosexuality as not only brutal but inhumane. She believes that whatever is done in the Church is true, and that by violently beating Vivek, the spirit of homosexuality would leave him. This shows the degree to which Christians hate homosexuality, from the text we can see that although Mary does not hate Vivek or Kavita, she just cannot nurse the thought of Vivek being queer, because not only does the society disapprove of it but her religion vehemently preaches and pushes against. This tells us that Christians do not hate the person, but they hate the fact that the individual sexually identifies as being homosexual.

He showed me what those bush people at your church did to him!“Kavita, I’ve been trying to reach you from since to tell you what happened. It’s not him they were flogging, ighotala? It was the demon inside him.”“The demon inside him,” Mary repeated. “Yes o, that’s what Pastor said. The boy is possessed by a very, very wicked spirit, a strong demon. It’s what has been causing all of this, the long-hair thing, the wasting away of his physical body. Supernatural forces are feeding on him—on your child! Pastor said we must cut his hair because they are drawing their power from it, like the locks of Samson. This is one of the sources of their strength. But when one of the deacons approached him with scissors, the demon started to fight back! “It wasn’t your son,” Mary continued blithely. “Pastor was saying it, and even everyone in the congregation, we could see it as well. It was the demon fighting to not lose its power. (DOV 63)

It is not surprising to see that Mary doesn't see that the methods taken by her church to “help” Vivek is inhumane and violent, she goes on to support them because that's what she believes to be true, and she believes that she is being helpful. Emezi uses Mary's “ignorance” and fanaticism to show that, ignorance does not justify the violence perpetrated by religious groups in a bid to “cure” an individual of queerness, she does this to show that not only is this an act of wickedness, but also it is an act done in sheer and baffling ignorance, she also uses this to show that conversion therapy is not only an inhumane act, but also a futile effort at “curing” homosexuality, “And stop trying to fix me. Just stop. It’s enough.” (PG 63) . From the text, we see that the deliverance session and prayers does not stop Vivek from expressing his sexual identity, it only makes him not to trust his parents and withdraw from them, but it does not hinder him from fully expressing his sexuality.

CHAPTER 4

ALTERNATE PERCEPTION

The previous chapters explored how society and religion view queerness and the individuals given to it. This chapter seeks to portray how queer individuals see themselves, and wish to be perceived by their immediate society, the kind of acceptance, love and support they would require from their society and religious groups as they try to navigate the complexities of their sexuality. In this chapter, the thought process of queer individuals, how they view themselves and how Akwaeke and Okparanta have been able to represent these characters in their novels will be explored. This chapter will also discuss how these queer characters navigate platonic friendships, romantic relationships, family and religion while discovering their sexuality. These individuals have been able to create a safe space for themselves despite the prejudice and discrimination from their society. This chapter would also explore how these individuals have managed to live and develop meaningful relationships despite the rejection they face from their society.

Cedric courtois in his article titled "*Lesbian(Body-)-Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta's under the Udala trees 2015*" explored Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as a lesbian bildungsroman, emphasising that the text follows the growth and development of the lesbian protagonist Ijeoma who after physically watching her father die in air raid, and her mother leaving her in the grammar school teachers house begins to have sexual feelings for Amina. Okparanta uses Ijeoma's character shows the stages of development queer people experience in their journey to self acceptance, and this journey to self acceptance doesn't just affect them alone, it also influences those around them as well. In the novel, we see that Adaora who is a force that fights

against Ijeoma's queerness, but at the end of the novel we see that Adaora's character has also experienced growth as well, Adaora accepts Ijeoma's queerness and even comes to the conclusion that "God, who created you, must have known what He did. Enough is enough." (UTUT 268) and we also see that other characters like Chidinma (Ijeoma's daughter), and even Chibundu her husband also experience this growth and accept Ijeoma for who she is. Adaora even begins to advocate for LGBT+ rights.

Several years ago—2008—reports had it that a bunch of God-preaching hooligans stoned and beat several members of a gay and lesbian-affirming church in Lagos, bashed their faces, caused their flesh to become as swollen as church in Lagos, bashed their faces, caused their flesh to become as swollen as purple-blue balloons. Mama put down the newspaper from which she was reading about it and exclaimed, "Tufiakwa!" God forbid! "Even among Christians, it can't be the same God that we worship!" (UTUT 260-261).

Okparanta's characters have witnessed growth, and even though the rest of the society still doesn't accept LGBTQIA+ individuals, she uses the characters of Adaora, Chidinma and Chibundu to show a point to which society and religion can get to, a point where they no longer see LGBTQIA+ persons as a threat to their society, but hold LGBT couples with the same dignity and respect to which heterosexual couples are held, that LGBTQIA+ couples should also be seen as couples in love, that the love shared between LGBTQIA+ couples is the same as the love shared between heterosexual couples, and that there is nothing wrong with a man and man or woman and woman in love. At the end of the novel Ijeoma's character has grown to the point where she undisputedly knows that being Lesbian is not something to be ashamed of, and just like any other couple, she feels that the affection she shares for Ndidi is not sinful, neither is it

an abomination, she sees herself as a woman in love, and she fancies a Nigeria where same sex couples are allowed to freely express their love, where they don't have to be afraid to be together.

Some of those nights when we are together and in bed, Ndidi wraps her arms around me. She molds her body around mine and whispers in my ear about a town where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani. Ndidi describes the town, all its trees and all the colors of its sand. She tells me in great detail about the roads, the directions in which they run, from where and to where they lead. (UTUT 268)

Ijeoma believes that her relationship with Ndidi is nothing short of being real, she believes that a time would come when their relationship would be legalised and socially accepted, where they could be legally married, and Ijeoma believes that Ndidi is her true love.

These days, I think a lot about something Mama used to say: that a bicycle has two wheels. And, of course, it does. Ndidi is one, and I am the other. We have now shared decades together, and though there can be no marriage between us (a relationship like ours is still too dangerous a thing, let alone a marriage), we feel ourselves every bit a couple. (UTUT PG 262)

Ijeoma realises that her being lesbian doesn't make her any less of a woman, and that there is nothing wrong with a person identifying as being gay or lesbian, and Ijeoma believes that in Chidinma's generation lesbians and gays would not be forced to live their lives in hiding, she believes that Chidinma's generation would stand up against the oppression of LGBT+ individuals, and that that they would come to understand that LGBT love is real love too.

so Chidinma was not there to see it, or else she might have stepped in, might even have risked her own life as she did. She is, after all, of that particular new generation of Nigerians with a stronger bent toward love than fear. The fact that she herself is not of my orientation does not make her look upon gays and lesbians with the kind of fear that leads to hate. (UTUT PG 260).

From the novel, it is evident that Ijeoma has also witnessed growth in her approach to religion and God, she no longer believes that God hates her, she believes that God made her Lesbian, and that He (God) does not disapprove of her being lesbian, she realises that she is a child of God and that God loves her regardless of her sexual identity. Ijeoma believes that the parts of the bible that condemn homosexuality have been done away with, because those biblical covenants have been changed, she comes to a conclusion that from the old testament to the new testament, change is something that is dominant. She rests in the belief that she is now under the covenant of grace and not the law. She no longer has contradicting and scary beliefs that God hates her and that she is condemned. She feels at peace with God, knowing that God loves her and he has done away with the “old faulty laws”(263) that told her that she was condemned, the laws that told her that being Lesbian is sinful.

Sometimes I sit with my Bible in my hands, and I think to myself that God is nothing but an artist, and the world is His canvas. And I reason that if the Old and New Testaments are any indication, then change is in fact a major part of His aesthetic, a major part of His vision for the world. The Bible itself is an endorsement of change. Even biblical covenants change: In the New Testament, no longer the need for animal sacrifices. Change. No longer the covenant of law, but rather the covenant of grace. Change. A focus on all mankind rather than a

focus on the Jews. Change. So many other changes, if a person were the listmaking type. (UTUT 263).

It is important to note that Ijeoma did not come to these realizations in isolation, her environment also affects her into thinking that change is possible, she reasons that if her society can forgive, forget and move on from a war that tore the country apart, surely it can be more accepting of LGBTQ+ persons, she reasons that if Nigerians can decide to forgive the leaders that incited a civil war that claimed many lives, destroyed families and rendered people homeless surely they can grow to accept same-sex couples and see them as “normal”. Seeing that same-sex couples do not in any way pose harm or danger to the society. Ijeoma is of the opinion that if Nigerians truly want a unified country where there is peace, then LGBTQ+ individuals should also be allowed to exist freely, Okparanta through the character of Ijeoma argues that homosexuals should be allowed to exist freely in their country without fear of being discriminated and hated by their society and family. she states that homosexuals have committed no crime to society, and that the only crime they seem to have committed is simply existing. She argues that in a bid to build a new nation, LGBT persons should not be excluded, seeing that they are human beings, and as such they matter too.

Gowon had said in his speech: The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation. Forget that Gowon was a Northerner. Forget that his name is synonymous with the war and its atrocities. But remember the war and its atrocities, and remember the speech, and remember that aspect of national reconciliation, and of the building of a new nation. Forgive Gowon. Forgive Ojukwu. And forgive the war. (UTUT PG 258-259).

While Okparanta's protagonist (Ifeoma) eventually receives support from her family and she spends the rest of her life with the love of her life (Ndidi), Emezi's protagonist (Vivek) dies at a young age, and his family aren't even aware of the conditions that lead to his death. Although Vivek's life is cut short, it still doesn't stop him from fully expressing his sexuality as a non-binary male. Vivek identifies as both male and female, he didn't deny his masculinity, but Vivek believed that inside, he was a woman, and he longed for an environment where he could fully express this part of himself, and he was able to do this with his friends (the girls) Juju, Somto, Olunne, Elizabeth and Osita his cousin. He wore dresses, makeup and wished to be addressed as Nnemdi.

She had put lipstick on him, a bold red framing his teeth, and he had drawn on his eyeliner, dark on the lower lid and then a thicker line on the upper, so his eyes seemed lost in black borders. "Why is he dressed like this?" "He liked to dress that way," "My God," she said. "He was dressing like a woman?" "He said he was dressing like himself," Somto interjected, her face resolute. It made him happy, Aunty Kavita. (DOV PG 166)

Vivek felt happy, safe and secure being addressed as Nnemdi. Whenever he wore dresses and eye makeup, he felt more like himself. The girls (Elizabeth, Somto, Olunne and Juju) knew about this and they did not judge him or tell him that it was abnormal for him to be dressing this way, instead they supported him and gave him a safe space to express his sexuality, they allowed him the freedom he needed to thrive, because of them, Vivek lived his last months on earth being himself, he dies as himself, and even in death, Vivek is happy, he is happy for the life he lived, the love and support he got from his friends, he dies being who he believed

himself to be, he dies knowing that he got to live as Nnemdi even though it was short lived, he dies in the arms of the one he loves.

I often wonder if I died in the best possible way—in the arms of the one who loved me the most, wearing a skin that was true. I watch him grieve and I want to tell him he’s already been forgiven for everything and anything he could ever do to me. I want to tell him that I knew I was dancing with death every day, especially when I walked outside like that. I knew it, and I made my choices anyway. It wasn’t right or fair, what happened, but it wasn’t his fault. I want to thank him for loving me. (DOV 187).

Vivek is not the only queer character in the novel, amongst his group of friends, there are two lesbian characters. Their characters are not explored in detail, but the author gives a little insight into the lives of these characters. The author gives a sub-plot of Juju and Elizabeth, a lesbian couple trying to navigate the complexities of their lesbian relationship, the author through Juju and Elizabeth’s relationship show us that a lesbian relationship is no different from a heterosexual relationship, that the same way couples experience problems in heterosexual relationships, same-sex couples, also experience problems as well, and that they are just as “normal” as heterosexual couples, the same kind of problems that occur in a heterosexual relationships also occurs in a homosexual relationships. The same way cis-gendered couples fall in love and get to live a normal life with their significant others, homosexual couples also fall in love as well, and should not be judged or hated for falling in love and wanting to have a normal relationship, Emezi through these characters helps us see that lesbian couples are just as “normal” and “in-love” as heterosexual couples, and that same-sex couples should not be segregated, ostracised and hated for

falling in love, that love, like homosexuality is normal and people should be allowed to live their lives as they deem fit.

I know you love me,” she’d said. “Why won’t you say it out loud? Are you afraid it will make this too real, or what? Are you ashamed of us?” It frustrated Juju as well. She knew she loved Elizabeth and she wanted to tell everyone, even their parents. The possessiveness she’d felt over Vivek had faded, and in its wake she could recognize what real love was, that it was what shimmered in the air between her and Elizabeth. Juju wanted to hold her hand anywhere—in front of their friends and family, when they were all at each other’s houses. She wanted to be able to cuddle on the sofa and not have people think there was something abnormal about it. It wasn’t fair—there were times when people assumed she and Vivek were together, and no one seemed to have a problem with that. If anything, it made Vivek seem a little more “normal,” it made people more comfortable with him. But she and Elizabeth were a different story. (DOV PG 136).

Emezi’s novel tells the story of individuals who are on a journey of self-discovery, individuals trying to live a life that seems unacceptable by their society, her novel explores the lives of young queer individuals who are scared to publicly talk about who they are for fear of what their society would do to them, and so they have to pretend to be who and what they are not.

It is important to note that while this novel brings to light the horrible treatment of queer people in post colonial Nigeria, the novel also tells the story of individuals who are determined to live their lives despite what their society would think, it tells the story of a protagonist though dead, is happy to have lived and died being who they truly are, Vivek though biologically a male is happy to have died in a “skin” that is truly his “I often wonder if I died in the best possible way—in the arms of the one who loved me the most, wearing a skin that was true”(DOV PG 187).

The novel tells the story of true love , a love that seems unacceptable, abominable and incestuous, but is nonetheless true, the novel tells the story of friendship, a friendship devoid of judgement and discrimination, a friendship in which Emezi believes that society can learn from. Vivek's friends (Juju, Elizabeth, Somto, Olunne and his cousin Osita), can teach society what it means to support and love queer individuals, how to provide a safe space for queer individuals to thrive and be themselves.

Emezi and Okparanta present characters that are on a journey of discovering their sexuality, learning to love and accept themselves for who they are, the two novels explored in this research paper gives us an insight of how queer people are perceived in the Nigerian society, the prejudice and discrimination metted against them, how they manage to thrive despite living in a toxic society, how these queer individuals wish to be seen, and how they view themselves.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Nigeria is a country that is deeply rooted in culture and traditions, although with each passing generation, the impact of culture and traditions lessens, the fact still remains, that majority of Nigerians are unwilling to accept non-normative gender expressions, and see queer and LGBTQIA+ persons as “unnatural”. This study proves this by critically analyzing Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Akwaeke Emezi’s *Death Of Vivek Oji*. This research paper explores perception of sexual identity and queerness in three different aspects, which are societal, religious and alternate perception.

Societal perception of queerness explores in detail how society views queerness and the individuals given to it. It explores in detail the expectations of men and women in traditional african society, what responsibilities are relegated to different genders, and the standard to which society holds every gender. The typical African society to which Nigeria is not exempted from does not accept queerness and see’s it as a violation of the natural and spiritual order of the society. Queer people are seen as abnormal.

The society tries to change them and mould them into the ideal standard, this is seen in the case of Vivek and Ijeoma, who struggle to fit in as a result of their queerness. Although these characters still looked for ways to express their sexual identity irrespective of what their society thought of them. For Ijeoma, her mother accepts the fact that she is lesbian, it doesn’t change the fact that her society doesn’t accept her still, and her society is violent and homophobic towards LGBTQIA+ persons.

Both texts show that religion is used as a tool to suppress and even try to change people’s sexual identity. The methods employed by religion is not always the best, but it’s core is to help

“fix” the individual, because for religious people queerness, is seen as a manifestation of an evil spirit, queer people are seen as individuals that are possessed by the devil and as such need to be excorsised, even if it means physically harming the individual.

In both Novels, we see that both Ijeoma and Vivek’s character realise that being gay is not something to be ashamed of, and the fact that their society doesn't accept them doesn't mean that they shouldn't accept themselves, this realisation also affects the people around them. They know that their society may never accept them, but they are content with the knowledge that they at least get to live their lives being what they truly believe themselves to be, even if it's for a short time.

Emezi and Okparanta create characters that do not fit into societal norms by reason of their sexuality, characters whom as a result of their sexual identity are ostracised and marginalised by their society. The texts makes us aware of the struggles of queer people, it helps readers understand that queer people are not an enigma, or a concept only seen in documentaries, the texts emphasises the “realness” of queer people in Nigeria. Being queer in a country like Nigeria is like having a death wish dangling above your head everyday, queer people constantly have to look over their shoulders and try to appear “normal” just to stay alive. The texts gives us an insight on what its like for queer Nigerians, and what the future holds for queer people in Nigeria. Both authors end their texts with the hope that the future would be better for queer people, they hope that Nigeria would one day be accommodating of it's queer citizens.

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