

**HOMOPHOBIA IN AKWAEKE EMEZI'S *THE DEATH OF VIVEK OJI* AND
UZODINMA IWEALA'S *SPEAK NO EVIL***

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BENIN CITY

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by Blessing Ngozi OZOR (Miss) in the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State.

Dr. A. P. Mamudu
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DATE

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the almighty God, my family and friends.

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My sincerest appreciation goes to the almighty God, the creator and possessor of all life and human intellect for the privilege and grace to pursue this project to its completion. All the honor and glory be to him.

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ABSTRACT

The subject of homosexuality in Africa has generally gathered mixed sentiments. There is the general belief that homosexuality is a product of westernization and colonial impact, homosexuality is generally frowned upon in African countries like Nigeria. Homophobia which is the dislike or fear of any form of sexual orientation besides the heteronormative view (male and female) is shown to be prevalent in the Nigerian society. Hence, this study will focus on the points of conflict between the heteronormative view and the homosexual view. It makes use of the qualitative research method to carry out the textual analysis of the novels as it helps understand the perception and view that both writers have towards homophobia. Akwaeke Emezi and Uzodinma Iweala demonstrate the artistic depiction of homophobia and its impact on homosexuals in the Nigerian society. Several characters deal with their contrasting views and awareness throughout the novels. For instance, Vivek Oji suffers an identity crisis and eventual acceptance of his sexual orientation and Niru, despite opposition from family and religious leaders chooses to accept his sexuality. This research does not take sides for or against homosexuality or homophobia. It however concludes that there is a divide between the older generation of traditional heteronormative African view and the younger generation's view on tolerance towards homosexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

The proposed aim of this paper is to examine homosexuality in terms of identity, inclusion, exclusion, repression, and resistance by employing a queer perspective. The objective is to understand the factors enabling sexual and gender choices.

1.2 Scope of Study

This research examines contemporary realities in two primary novels: Akweake Emezi's *The Death of Vivik Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* as they specifically address the subject of homophobia in Nigerian society.

1.3 Methodology

This work employs the qualitative method of research with close reference to the primary texts which are Akweake Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak no Evil*. These novels will be subjected to critical literary analysis supported by secondary materials from textbooks and online journals.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the queer critical theory. Queer theory is an offshoot of post-structuralism or deconstruction, feminism and gender studies. Queer theory as a result is infused with different intellectual arguments which make it complex. The post-structuralists hold that sexuality is fluid, dynamic, fragmented and a collection of different sexual possibilities which may vary in one's life at different points. As a result, Dobie in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*

posits that “queer theorists use the strategies of deconstruction to demonstrate the fluidity of gender identity and by reversing sexual binary opposition [that is, the traditional classification of the society into male, female; heterosexual, homosexual...], they show that these are not fixed essence as they are subjected to change” (Dobie 111).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes that queer originally meant something “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” the earliest use being from 1513. However, the sodomy trial of Oscar Wilde, where he was convicted of being a homosexual and sentenced to prison popularized the word queer (as an adjective or a noun) to be associated with homosexuality, in a strictly derogatory sense” (Cordell and Pennington, 156). Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle also account that:

the first entry for the word in its homosexual sense is from 1922 in a publication by the *Children’s Bureau of the US Department of Labor* and the extensive historical account of the word reveals there was a delay of more than four hundred years before it was used in the context of homosexuality which was highly derogatory” (216).

M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham validate that:

queerness is often used to designate the combined area of gay and lesbian studies, together with the theoretical and critical writings about all modes of variance such as cross-dressing, bisexuality, and transsexuality from society’s normative model of sexual identity, orientation and activities” (327).

This shows how queerness cuts across different spectrums of humanity. Queerness is not a new practice. What is new is its intellectual engagement and theorization which had birthed the queer theory. Queerness is as old as time. Its footprints are seen across different archives in history,

including the Bible, the Quran and works of the Elizabethan literary icon, William Shakespeare (sonnet 20) etc. Queer theory is not just concerned about contemporary queer arguments rather, it “examines the discourses of homosexuality” and how they “developed in the last century to place the “queer” into historical context,” (“Queer Theory”) with which it deconstructs recent arguments.

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer was used again by some activists known as *Queer Nation* concerned with gender and sexual freedom. That was when ‘queer’ became a word that described a particular type of liberal politics. April S. Callis shows that Goldman in 1996 and Jagose in 1996 reveal that this was the period when “queer also began to be used as an umbrella term under which all nonheteronormative individuals could reside” (214). For him, “rather than rolling out the “alphabet soup” of g(ay) l(esbian) b(isexual) t(ransexual) t(ransgendered) i(ntersexed) a(sexual), queer allowed a pithy shorthand for authors and organizations concerned with inclusivity” (Callis 214).

In the book *Creating Literary Analysis*, Ryan Cordell and John Pennington buttress that gender criticism does not just focus “on women but on the construction of gender and sexuality, especially LGBTQ issues, which gives rise to queer theory” (156). Queer theory critically examines questions of gender and sexuality for both sexes. Guerin et al use Millet’s *Sexual Politics* which argues on gender and sexes by distinguishing sex as biologically determined and gender as a psychological concept that refers to culturally acquired sexual identity” (199).

The primary argument of gender criticism which is infused into queer theory is the essentialism or social constructivism of gender. “The queer theorists” have “opposed the assertion of essentialism or the idea that a person’s true identity is composed of fixed and unchanging properties” and “they instead supported the idea that human identity is formed by the culture into which one is born. Recognizing that gender, what it means to be a man or a woman, is a constantly changing concept” (Dobie 110). As a result, queer theorists uphold that sexuality is socially contrived and not an unchangeable essence.

Queer theory has an approach from which it criticizes a literary work and the primary aim is to trace the element of queerness and also deconstruct traditional perspectives on sexuality. Dobie gave a list of questions which form the fundamental tenet for queer criticism in a literary text:

Does the work challenge traditional ways of viewing sexuality? Does it depict human sexuality as more complex than the essentialist terms male and female suggest? What range of man and female identity do you find? Does the work accept the essentialist view of gender, does it accept that there is a fixed, unchanging self? Does the work or narrator assume that the self is a constructed one? If the self is assumed to be constructed, what performative acts construct a character’s identity? What sexual topics do you find in the work that are odd or peculiar that is, queer?

Where is gender destabilized? What destabilizes it? Does the work show how sexual identities are indeterminate, overlapping, and changing? If so, where? Does the work complicate what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual? (Dobie 112).

Therefore, using Dobie's guide on the queer theory, we examine the queerness and theorization of queerness in the both text. This study also foregrounds homosexual aspects of mainstream literature which have previously been glossed over.

1.5 Background to the Study

The subject of homosexuality in Africa has generally garnered mixed sentiments. There is a pervading belief that homosexuality is a product of Westernization and colonial import and that homosexuality is not African. Even in Nigeria, the activity of homosexuality is punishable by law. From a religious perspective, homosexuality has been frowned upon by both Christian and Muslim religions and is seen as a sin against God. Consequently, homosexuals in Nigeria and Africa at large are unable to freely express their sexual identity and are seen as going against the norm of nature and society. However, there is budding research to uncover the question as to whether or not homosexuality is natural, or if it even existed in African societies before Western intrusion. Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed in his research opines that:

in many African societies, homosexuality is seen as —un-African and a Western import and most popular belief is that gayness or homosexuality is alien, un-African, deviant, and immoral and has been foisted on Africans by the West, while some argue that it has always been in Africa even before colonialism (12).

Furthermore, the majority of the African literary works on homosexuality revolve around the usual stereotype of gayness as taboo, alien, un-African and having been imported into Africa by the

West. Modupe Kolawole says, of Africans in “Womanism and African Consciousness”, that “homosexuality is —a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to African world view” (15). Lamb states that —” it is curious by Western standards that homosexuality in Africa is virtually unknown, and Africa’s tradition is rigidly heterosexual” (20).

However, Sylvia Tamale nurses a contrary opinion and enthusiastically debunks the view that homosexuality is un-African and asserts that “it is legalized homophobia and not same-sex relations that are alien to Africa” (24). As a way of buttressing her points, she further gives a historical view of homosexuality in precolonial African times and reiterates thus:

The vocabulary used to describe same-sex relations in traditional languages, predating colonialism, is further proof of the existence of such relations in precolonial Africa. To name but a few, the Shangaan of southern Africa referred to same-sex relations as *inkotshane* (male-wife); Basotho women in present-day Lesotho engage in socially sanctioned erotic relationships called *motsoalle* (special friend) and in the Wolof language, spoken in Senegal, homosexual men are known as *gor-digen* (men-women) (24).

Additionally, Mbisi (18) buttresses this point noting that historical data reveals that the view that homosexuality is not African is incorrect, with pieces of evidence that homosexuality existed in the earliest times albeit in hidden or even culturally accepted ways. Bertolt (86) adds that among the *Mossi* people of West Africa, homosexuality is instituted in society, and homosexuals do not suffer social repulsion (Bertolt, 2019).

Chris Dunton further investigates gay behavioural patterns like paedophilia, masturbation and lesbianism in his work entitled, “Wheyting be dat: The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature”. He explores the treatment of homosexuality and the way homosexuality is used as a

plot device and observes that “most African writers portray homosexuality negatively such that the theme and subject matter are not only negative but also predictable except for the few instances where it is depicted positively and invariably sympathetically” (38).

Dunton in his survey further adds that: “the treatment of the subject of homosexuality in African literature is usually monothematic as the theme of exploitation and the idea that homosexual activity is rare in traditional African society as in the literature on colonial Africa” (40). But there are still a few which portray homosexuals in a good light or sympathetically, and even explore the lives and psychology of homosexuals.

The arguments as to whether or not homosexuality is African continues to resurface in the academic literature. Additionally, as contemporary societies evolve into a global village, and with the emergence of social media, increasing agitations for the rights and freedom of expression for all those in the LGBTQ+ becomes a common drive among the youth. Consequently, youths nowadays have grown a palpable level of tolerance and acceptance of people with different sexualities that were hitherto weird and unacceptable in society before the advent of globalisation. Coupled with the growing research in favour of both parts of the argument (for or against the historical presence of homosexuality in Africa), the need to engage in further studies becomes indispensable.

Against this backdrop, research within Nigerian society has slowly become receptive to LGBTQI+ concerns over the last few years. However, African society continues to stifle the voices of those clamouring for freedom of choice as it concerns sexuality. The majority do not consider the subject of sexual identity and preferences because knowledge is public and society constructs it “the way it should be”. In the context of this discourse, it is glaring that sexuality is a recurrent theme in African literature as a result of society’s apathy towards the subject and the contrasting views that

exist. To critically examine this stance, this research explores the experiences of the protagonists in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. Unlike some existing literature on this subject, this research does not take any sides or show sympathy for any ideology. It further uncovers both parts of the argument for or against homosexuality in Africa using the selected texts. It extracts instances of heteronormative repression and homosexual resistance to give room for further studies on this subject in the African society.

1.6 Literature Review

1.6.1 Review of The Death of Vivek Oji

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* is the author's latest work of fiction. Published in 2020, the novel is a tragic story of the painful experiences of the protagonist, whose sexual identity is seen as abominable in his country. Mailula (2020, n.p) in his review of the novel observes that "*The Death of Vivek Oji* offers a narrative through which love and family transgress the societal limitations placed on kinship, expression and desire". In the words of Toni Morrison, "Emezi uses the analogy of people existing on the margins of society who hold on to the edge to make it to the centre as a way of rejecting the idea of marginality" (Mailula, 2020, n.p). The novel presents the story of Vivek, who against all odds tries to express his sexuality with his cousin, Osita, an act that is abominable because it is both a same-sex romantic relationship that is also incestuous.

Priyadharshan (3) in his review observes that:

Akwaeke Emezi's 2020 novel *The Death of Vivek Oji* narrates the death of the eponymous non-heterosexual character—as suggested by the title—and the emotional turmoil faced by people with non-heterosexual orientation... the novel reveals how the protagonist's death "is the product of dominant logic—the prudishness of the Igbo society, which manifests

heteronormative practices, and the legal system in Nigeria that castigate persons who diverge from normative sexual behaviour (3).

He further reveals the challenges faced by Vivek Oji as an expression of the subject of liminality which involves a contradiction between a person's lived experience and the society's system of acceptance. Elizabeth Paquette asserts that

such a contradiction is experienced because their lived reality is imposed upon them by dominant positions that exclude them. At the same time, however, because of the experiences of the liminal position, marginalized persons are well-situated to see the contradictions inherent to the normative view (142).

Collins's (2020, n.p) review in "The Guardian" notes that in the novel, "Emezi uncovers the story of a person shielded by the peace of self-acceptance against the pain of the world". He adds that it is a novel that investigates "the ideas of selfhood that transcend the boundaries of the body". For a novel set in South Eastern Nigeria in the early 80s and '90s, it is no surprise therefore that Vivek Oji's sexuality and orientation are offensive to the older generation (his parents) represented by Chika, Vivek's father who finds the expression of his identity offensive. However, some of his peers like Osita, his cousin can relate with him and accept him even though the majority still find his identity quite confusing. Being a recent novel, Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* has not been the subject of much critical review by most literary scholars, and this further justifies our engagement in this text in exploring contemporary realities.

1.6.2 Review of Speak No Evil

Speak no Evil is the second novel of Uzodinma Iweala published in March of 2018. His debut novel titled *Beast of No Nation* was published in 2005. Helon Habila in his review of Uzodinma

Iweala's *Speak no Evil* notes that "The focus for Iweala's second novel, is a high school student, Niru, living in Washington DC, who is struggling to come to terms with his gay identity and the homophobia he faces from his family and society" (np). Norah Piehl in her review observes that with *Speak No Evil*, Iweala tackles themes of immigration and identity - both national and sexual - in what is poised to be his most consequential work to date (np).

Andrew Dickson in his review of *Speak no Evil* in the online *Financial Times* article asserts that in reading the novel, it is not hard to feel for Niru, caught between a family who can't accept his sexuality and an America that can't comprehend the complexities of his identity (np). He further adds that it is a mark of Iweala's sympathy that we also feel the plight of his parents — a mother weathering modest daily disappointments; and a prideful, unbending father determined to play the role of the good immigrant, no matter the cost (np). He then describes the novel thus:

Speak No Evil could easily feel like an assemblage of trending motifs. What saves the book is its adept storytelling and eye for lucid detail; though the destination of this story is tragically unsurprising, it has the stomach-churning pace of a Greek tragedy (np).

Rebecca Shapiro in her review says that *Speak No Evil* showcases the author's adeptness at weaving vivid, emotional stories about coming of age in a world often unsafe for young Black men (np). Will Rhino in "Off the Shelf" online magazine review describes the novel as "a gut-wrenching novel of identity and pain", adding that "When Niru's traditional Nigerian parents accidentally find out that Niru is gay, the consequences are brutal and devastating" (np).

Louissa Egbunike notes in her review that Uzodinma Iweala's second novel, *Speak No Evil*, is the latest addition to a growing corpus of Nigerian literature examining LGBT lives (np). She adds that this boom has in part been a response to the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014,

which built on existing anti-gay laws introduced by the British while Nigeria was still a crown colony. Among its draconian measures was the criminalization of any “public show of same-sex amorous relationship” (np). She also reviews the move from the lens of the themes of racial identity present in the works. She avers that:

with echoes of “Back Lives Matter” reverberating towards the end, *Speak No Evil* casts the social construction of black masculinity in America as inherently dangerous, and highlights the tensions between the police and black community... Iweala repeatedly references the racial dynamics that shape Niru’s life, commenting on how his blackness sets him apart from his contemporaries (np).

Above all, while other scholars have examined both texts from a perspective of sympathy towards homosexuals, this study is an objective exploration of homosexuality and homophobia, and the responses of homosexuals in a society that frowns upon their sexual identity.

1.7 Thesis Statement

Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak no Evil* establish that heteronormative repression and homosexual resistance are points of conflict in the texts that reveal the prevalence of homophobia.

CHAPTER TWO

HETERONORMATIVE REPRESSION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the heteronormative repression in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. It extracts instances from both texts that shows the repression of homosexuals.

2.2 Heteronormative Repression in *The Death of Vivek Oji*

In this text, the protagonist Vivek Oji represents those who are struggling to be accepted in the society because of their sexuality. The author of the novel, Akwaeke, Emezi talks about how some people in the society see themselves as unable to fit in. The protagonist Vivek struggles to find an identity for himself that is unique to him. He has a sexual interest in people of the same sex, and he prefers to dress up like a girl and put in dresses that makes him look more like a female than a male. Vivek Oji, describes himself in the novel in a way that shows his confusion and the challenge of having a clear sexual and gender identity:

I am not what anyone thinks I am. I never was. I didn't have the mouth to put it into words, to say what was wrong, to change the things I felt I needed to change. And every day it was difficult, walking around and knowing that people saw me one way, knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them. It didn't even exist to them. So: If nobody sees you, are you still there? (35)

Despite the fact that he is referred to as a male in the society, he rather prefers to identify with the female gender's way of dressing and he keeps his hair long. He puts in dresses that are basically fit for ladies only and this inspires hatred and irritation within the country Nigeria. His actions are seen as a taboo, and an abomination. Emezi describes him as a man that looks tender and weak like a female as his father Chika describes him. The world gives him only two options: to be either male or female. He cannot be in-between. This is contrary to how he feels as the novelist narrates, that he is not what society class him. He feels that he is lost somewhere, and invisible even though he has a body and walks the street.

One of the instances of intolerance that is seen in the novel is in the church. There is a show of religious intolerance and irritation for homosexuals. The pastor sees them as people tormented with demon spirits that makes the men look like women. One of the very strange ways that this demon is cast is to flog the victim who they believe is in need of liberation. Vivek's aunty takes him to the church where he is flogged and battered without the notice of Vivek's mum. And when the mum, Kavita sees her son in a sorry state, she questions her sister about it and demands to know why he has been beaten up. The reply shows that state of things within the religious circles in Nigeria and what happens when a homosexual is taken to some of the Pentecostal churches that claim to conduct deliverance sessions to exorcise demons:

Kavita, I've been trying to reach you since to tell you what happened. It's not him they were flogging, ighotala? It was the demon inside him." Kavita stopped in shock. Mary couldn't be serious. "What did you just say?" she asked, hoping she'd heard wrong. "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 (64).

The above is a revelation of the influence of religion on the way Nigerians view homosexuals. Moreover, this vocal anger towards queer people and homosexuals throws Vivek into a situation of perpetual insecurity and fear. Vivek narrates a bit of his experiences and feelings and his constant battle with acceptance in society. He realizes that he is never allowed to be his true self in the country of his birth. He reveals the default behavior towards homosexuals in one of his sexual encounters with another homosexual:

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. I'd heard it since secondary school, and I knew what that night was supposed to make me. Less than a man—something disgusting, something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway (104).

Furthermore, Vivek is also faced with stern resistance and warning from Osita, his cousin whose response to his slightest suggestion of homosexuality is met with so much fear and rebuke. Emezi narrates the reaction of Osita to him:

“Are you mad? What's wrong with you?!” I saw alarm flit through his eyes; he hadn't expected this anger from me. “Ah, no vex,” he said, sitting up and reaching for my arm. 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, ehn? Because you've been knacking men? Biko, I'm not like you —forget that one, now-now!" I slapped the palms of my hands against each other, as if dusting off the contagion of his thoughts (57).

The words of Osita cut through and represent how every other person thinks of homosexuals. For the majority of people, homosexuals are mad people suffering perhaps from a sort of mental ailment. Emezi narrates the terror that awaits people who are not even homosexuals but are perceived as so by the way they look, the way they dress, and the way they carry their hair, especially males who look like females. This she puts in Mary's words to Kavita about the potential harm her son could face the moment people perceive that they are effeminate:

"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?" Kavita's stomach dropped. The thought had worried her, too, but it was different—more terrifying—to hear it put into words. Vivek couldn't end up like those lynched bodies at the junction, blackened by fire and stiffened, large gashes from machetes showing old red flesh underneath. Most of them were thieves or said to be thieves, but mobs don't listen, and they'd say anything afterward. (59).

Due to the society's intolerance, Vivek like other homosexuals, is forced to bear the shame and disgrace of being referred to as a homosexual with his partners. He laments the fact that he is not free to express himself in the way he truly believes will capture who he really is as a person. He has a constant desire to be loved and accepted in the society for who he is. The Nigerian society

is not receptive to them and they despite the development in ideas like LGBTQ In the Western worlds which is also reflected on social media as a clamour for acceptance, he is not able to access such acceptance based on the country he finds himself.

Osita who is a cousin to Vivek is another character who later sees himself as been attractive to men. He notices that he is bisexual and can have both homosexual relationships and heterosexual relationships. He is however lucky to be able to narrate this experience to Vivek, who is the only person he can confide in. He finds this experience as a shocking moment of discovery as he narrates it to Vivek.

So I told him, my voice unstable and small: About the small, dark club I'd been in the previous weekend, the young university student who leaned in to kiss me in a smoky corner, and the way I allowed it, allowed him even though anyone could look and see us; allowed his tongue to push into my mouth, even kissing him back before I came to my senses and pushed him away and left. About how he tried to talk to me about it the next day, bright-faced and eager, how panicked I felt because I didn't know what he thought I could give him, what would he think we lived in where it was safe to do something like that. About how I lied when he brought it up, claiming I couldn't remember what happened, blaming it on whatever we'd been drinking. About the way his face collapsed in hurt and a fresh aloneness. "You were the only person I could tell," I said to Vivek, looking down at my hands. "So I came here" (98).

The fact that the response to queer people and cross-dressers is one of shock, and worry about if they were normal people is shown again when Vivek's mother was finally introduced by

his friends who accepted him the way he is. Although she is his mother and he looks so happy with those clothes on him, she is shocked and heartbroken when she saw them. Emezi narrates:

When Kavita gasped, it was like a soft blow reverberating throughout the room. She dropped the other photos in her lap and grasped the second one with both hands, staring at it. Juju had arranged them herself, so she knew which photo Kavita was holding. It was of Vivek the first time he'd worn a dress. Juju had put it near the top because he looked so happy in it; she thought that might make it a little easier for Kavita to see, that her heart might be softened because he looked so happy.... What is this?" she whispered, her eyes darting up to Juju's face and then to the others... why is he dressed like this?... 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? (165).

Vivek Oji represents a society of new people trying to be cross dressers and show it publicly Nigeria without the fear of being judged. He finds himself in a society where gear irritation and contempt for people like him, is the order of the day. He even realizes that the closest people to homosexuals who is their family, parents and loved ones are traumatized when they realize that a member of their family is homosexual or lesbian. Contrary to what the general public think, he thinks that he is not abnormal and so should be respected and allowed to live his life. He notices that love for him is lacking in his own family, as he describes himself as someone lacking love and understanding. The novelist, Emezi uses him as an example to the people who are queer in Nigeria. They find out that they are almost dead and do not fit in the broad schemes of things. Vivek Oji laments:

I was drowning. Not quickly, not enough for panic, but a slow and inexorable sinking, when you know where you're going to end up, so you stop fighting and you wait for it to all be over. I had looked for ways to break out of it—sleeping

outside, trying to tap life from other things, from the bright rambunctiousness of the dogs, from the air at the top of the plumeria tree—but none of it had made any difference. So I was giving up; I had decided to give up. That afternoon, Somto and Olunne burst into my room and spoiled my whole plan. (89)

2.3 Heteronormative Repression in *Speak No Evil*

In *Speak No Evil*, the protagonist, Niru also fights against his Nigerian culture, that resist homosexuals. Niru's father is a Perfect example of homophobia and abuse of homosexuals. He is angry when he realizes that his son is gay and beats him to a state of unconsciousness. Niru amid the abuse, tries to speak to his father about the nature of homosexuality as something he considers a natural phenomenon that the individual he has no control over. However, his typically Nigerian and African father shouts back:

He grabs my ear. ‘Daddy’, I yelp as he twists and pulls me forward. Do you want to go and do gay marriage? Is that what you want? You want to go and carry man thing and put inside your yansh? Abomination. A BOMI NATION. He pushes my face down into the kitchen table. A salty warmth fills my cheek. My tongue burns. Daddy let me tell you- tell me what? Tell me how you want to go and collect shame and disgrace for this family. (97)

Niru's father's shock at his son's sexual identity is also expressed by his question pointing to the influence of popular culture in the American society of Niru's birth when he asks him: "Where did you learn this kind of behavior? Is it in school? Is this what they are teaching you? (99). This reaction from the father is as a result of the reality that unlike the Nigerian society where they originally came from and unlike the Nigerian setting in Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*,

homosexuals enjoy the freedom to express their sexuality in the United States. This freedom to express sexuality is seen even in public places and between youths. The characters of Niru the protagonist and Meredith, a young girl exemplifies this. Both are caught in the youthful desire to explore their sexuality. When she realizes that Niru does not make any move as saying boys attracted to girls do, she seduces him. Then she is faced with the realization that he is gay. Iweala writes of the moment of realization as the novel approaches its climax::

I think- I'm gay. She slides the door back and thrusts her head out of the closet. She has wrapped herself in a blanket and her hair covers her face... She stretches her hands from the closet and then lets it fall. Then she emerges and envelops me fully in her blanket. She holds me as she murmurs "I am right here" she says. I am with you. I start to cry. I am overwhelmed by the sound of my pain (54-55).

For Meredith, admitting that he is gay, meant he "spoke his truth" (60). A practical example of the effect of popular culture in the US and the fact that heteronormative repression is not as prevalent and forceful as it is in Nigeria. Meredith as a way of assisting Niru in expressing himself and meeting new gay partners, introduces him to an application on a phone. In that application, he had the option to choose any boy of his choice, as there is a community of gay people connecting. This speaks volumes as people can openly express themselves as gay and search for similar identities. According to her, it can be an outlet for Niru:

You can just delete them, Meredith said as we sat in my car after practice. But I have always been curious and there is always desire. I looked at my phone and felt the tingling creep, the stiffness rising. Pick someone for me I said. So she swiped and searched and picked Ryan with his short twists and aggressively attractive

bleach-white smile. His profile picture shows him suspended in various forms of dance, in various stages of undress above the caption Movement is Life. (68)

Meredith is calm and supportive, revealing how the Western world is learning to completely accommodate gay people like it is done in the society where she is. A society where LGPTQ+ movements that try to reduce heteronormative repression holds sway.

In the African culture, as also seen in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, being a homosexual or lesbian brings shame and disgrace to one family. Just like Vivek's aunty, Mary, Niru's father describes the act of homosexuality as sinful, satanic, and rubbish (94) and beats Niru to a state of unconsciousness. He further believes his son is possessed by a demon for being homosexual and begins to make plans to take him back to churches in Nigeria where it is believed that homosexuals are possessed. He says: "I will personally escort you to Holy Spirit Chapel or Mountain of Fire or whichever one so we can burn this sinful nonsense from your body. (98) He however retorts back to his father telling him that he is overreacting to the situation". (99)

Just like Vivek in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Niru is taken to a Pastor, Bishop Okereke who tells him that homosexuality is a demonic situation and that he must confess and get saved. Niru again resists him and insists that he is not obliged to confess any sin as he has done nothing wrong. Niru's conversation with Bishop Okereke goes thus:

Bishop Okereke says. 'Young man if what your father say is true, will you confess your sins and rededicate yourself to our Lord Jesus Christ. If so it is simple and we know which direction we are to take. If not'- Bishop Okereke falls silent and folds his hands over his chest. What do you say? I say "I don't know you so why would I confess anything to you? (218).

2.4 Discussion

From the above analysis and from the extracts, heteronormative repression is seen in the religious and cultural circles in Nigeria. The religious cultural and even the social environment are the main factors that inspire the view that only heterosexual relationships is normal. Homosexuality is seen in the Christian and Muslim religion as something that is wrong, a sin and both religions explain that only heterosexuality which is the sexual relationship between a man and a woman is required. There are also views that homosexuality is unAfrican. This argument about whether homosexuality is African or not lingers on without any definite answer.

According to David Bahati in an interview in the BBC's *The Big Debate*, He notes that anyone who believes that homosexuality is not wrong and abnormal is believing in something that is not African. He adds that even though it has been in Africa for a long time, it was not accepted. In contrast, Sylvia Tamale a Ugandan professor believes that Africans were not really against homosexuals even though they were not sprained for throwing the right thing. He said that the acts of homophobia against them is a not Africa.

However, in the midst of this, the question that arise are: Is heterosexuality not the only form of sexuality that can be expressed by a man? Is it true that these homosexuals do not have control over their sexual preferences of same sex? And with homosexuality everywhere in Nigeria and Africa, does that mean homosexuality is not only a product of the West?

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the subject of heteronormative repression that is common in the African society. It extracts key examples in the text that show different acts of repressing homosexuals in

Nigeria and the challenges faced by a Nigerian boy who is homosexual and born abroad. It then examines whether homosexuality is justified as African or not.

CHAPTER THREE

HOMOSEXUAL RESISTANCE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at homosexual resistance in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak no Evil*. It analyses extract from the two texts that portray the resistance of homosexuals and their fight against subjugation in a society that see their sexual interests as a taboo.

3.2 Homosexual Resistance in *The Death of Vivek Oji*.

One of the ways homosexual resistance is portrayed in the novel *The Death of Vivek Oji* is in the fact that the friends of Vivek who are youths seem to accept him the way he is. They are not like the people in his parents age group that cannot withstand homosexuality. Because they have access to more information in an era of social media and clamour of LGBTQ+ acceptance, they believe that accepting him for who he is, is as important fighting against the general homophobic actions against him. They accept the fact that he is a cross dressers too. The author Emezi reveals this in one of Vivek's conversations with his friends, in the first person voice of Vivek:

Olunne reached out and pulled at my hair gently, just enough to make it stretch and spring back, then touched her fingers to the silver Ganesh I wore around my neck. "I said, I think you look pretty. Your hair is beautiful. You've lost too much weight—that's why Somto is saying you look bad. But you don't, not really." I looked from one of them to the other. "You must be tired of them talking about you," Olunne added. "Everyone is talking about you," her sister said. "They're saying you've gone mad." "Yet here you are, entering my room to

talk about it,” I snapped. Somto shrugged. “I think there’s probably something more interesting going on,” she said. “Why not just come and ask you?” (90)

From the above excerpt, Vivek realizes that with his peers he could at least try to be himself and assert his personality. While most people particularly his family members think he is abnormal, his friends think there is something interesting about him. On another occasion they tell him:

You don’t have to tell us anything if you don’t want. We just thought that maybe, if you felt like talking, it would be nice to have someone who was ready to listen. Actually listen. Not like how they like to say they’re listening.” Somto scoffed in agreement. I was, I must admit, taken aback. Alone is a feeling you can get used to, and it’s hard to believe in a better alternative. Besides, it was true that all of us used to be friends, even though it was years ago, when we and our lives were simpler. And now they were being nicer to me than anyone had bothered to be in a while, so I tried to relax. (90)

From the above excerpt, Vivek for the first time, tries to relax and be himself. He finally sees his friend as family, people who can give him the courage to resist subjugation. His friends believe that he is also beautiful in his own unique way. On one occasion he had to thank his cousin Osita, who is also more tolerant and tries to see things differently:

“Thank you,” he said, as we thumped each other on the back. “For what?” “Not treating me the way they treat me.” My hands brushed against the tangle of his hair as we pulled apart. It felt soft. I stepped away from him and wiped my hands on my shorts” (51).

Emezi further talks about how Osita and Vivek begin to feel the need to assert themselves in the society without any fear of discrimination. As a testament to his resolution to resist any form of subjugation and affirm his stand, Vivek says about one of his encounters with his sexual partners of the same sex:

“if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I’d take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway” (104).

Furthermore, Vivek starts nursing ideas that as a way of resistance, he will start wearing female clothes freely. He starts wearing dresses as the text reveals:

He was at my house. He had started going out in dresses and I tried to stop him. I told him it wasn’t safe, but he said he was just going down the road, that it wouldn’t take long. Usually he’d come back quickly (168).

Vivek continues to grow in boldness and even leaves his hair to flow down to his back. It is on one of these occasions where he starts putting on dresses and leaving his hair to flow like a woman’s hair that he meets his demise:

He was at my house. He had started going out in dresses and I tried to stop him. I told him it wasn’t safe, but he said he was just going down the road, that it wouldn’t take long. Usually he’d come back quickly, but that day—” Here, Juju’s voice broke. “He didn’t come back at all. And there was the riot at the market—” “And it burned down,” Kavita completed, her voice flat. The akwete cloth over Vivek’s body had smelled of smoke. Juju nodded tearfully. “I think he walked too far and someone caught him,” she said. Kavita’s throat clenched. She imagined the scene: Vivek caught in a mob, someone staring too much before shouting He’s a man, bodies pressing around him, tightening like a noose, hands ripping off his clothes, someone throwing a stone that broke open the back of his head. Her boy crumpling to the ground. A sob tore through her and she folded in half to keep it in. – (168).

The friends of Vivek also shows the resistance towards homosexuals by having a heated quarrel with the parents and family of Vivek for showing him no love because of his sexuality. When his mother kept yelling after his death that her child was not normal and was influenced by his friends into crossdressing and going out, one of Vivek's friend Somto shouts back at her:

He didn't belong to you," Somto growled, and they all looked at her, appalled. "You keep talking as if he belonged to you, just because you were his mother, but he didn't. He didn't belong to anybody but himself. And the way you're behaving now—that's why we couldn't tell you. That's why he lived the last months of his life as a secret. That's why he couldn't trust you. You think you own him, when you didn't know anything that was going on in his life."

Her challenge of Vivek's mother, Kavita is as a result of the fact that even when Vivek is dead, she refuses to accept him for who he is. She is a representation of the voice of resistance against the views that homosexuals are abnormal people. Somto challenges family members who in her view should be the closest to homosexuals, but who force them to do everything in secret and pretend that all is well. When Kavita, Vivek's mother responds in shocked in the way Somto talked to her, Elizabeth responds to her to tell her that they (his friends) actually tried to take care of him and protect him: "We were just trying to protect him," Elizabeth said. "We didn't want anything to happen to him. We took care of him." (168). Kavita soon realizes that they have failed and maybe did not do enough to resist the suppression and the eventual murder of her son. She tells this to her husband:

" Kavita stood and rounded on her husband. "We don't know anything about him. You just had this your idea of who your son was supposed to be, and you were so busy having your affair that you missed out on his last months on earth. We can't keep

insisting he was who we thought he was, when he wanted to be someone else and he died being that person, Chika. We failed, don't you see? We didn't see him and we failed" (173).

3.3 Homosexual Resistance in *Speak no Evil*

In Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak no Evil*, the protagonist Niru resists the ill treatment of homosexuals and continues to have affairs with other men despite the molestation from his family. His act of going on even in the face of the threats shows his determination to resist repression and homophobia. He begins by embarking on a risky attempt to teach his religious father and his pastor at home in Nigeria, that they are wrong about homosexuals. He prefers to be beaten up and insulted than to keep quiet in the face of religious views against homosexuality. Niru's mother continues to condemn homosexuality to the hearing of Niru despite his attempts to validate it before his mother. She says:

God said man is for woman and woman is for man. That is how it is supposed to be. And God was always right (52).

However, while she tries to tell him that being homosexuals is abnormal, Niru continues to work on his mindset and sometimes exclaims to himself with words of assurance that all is well with him: "There is nothing wrong with you, I say into the darkness" (94).

The rate at which Niru fights this battle to be accepted both by society and by religious bodies who consider him a sinner who is possessed is seen in the way he challenges the Nigerian Pastor, Reverend Olumide who is of the view that he needs salvation and deliverance from the demonic sin of homosexuality. Niru says:

What if I don't need help? Maybe you shouldn't be concerned. Maybe you should just let me be. I have done everything right. I get good grades. I come to church. I believe in God. You make it seem like it would be better if I have murdered someone. Maybe it would, my father says. What is your problem? I say as I stand up. Easy my friend, easy, Reverend Olumide says. This is your father. You are talking to your father. We don't speak like that to our elders no matter what. This is not our way. My father says, You see what this place is doing to this boy. Well what does he want me to do then, I retort. I can commit murder. It is not that hard, I say starring directly at my father in the eye (147-148)

For Niru, even the church needs more orientation on homosexuality. For him, being homosexual has nothing to do with the holiness of life. He is of the view that people that have zero tolerance for homosexuals to the point of torturing them are worse sinners than the homosexuals themselves. He emphasizes that he is a normal human being like every other straight person who loves God and always tries to do what is right. He further reveals the loopholes of religious fanatics who hate homosexuals even more than they hate grievous sins like murder. The response of his father to him, saying that it were better if he was a murderer is an example of what Niru condemns. Unlike Kavita, Vivek's Indian mother, Niru's Nigerian father has zero tolerance for homosexuals and even believes that a serial murderer is better than a homosexual. The fact that he rises up against his own father and raises his voice at him and questions him too reveals his strong intent to resist homophobia.

Niru, like Vivek also shows a desire to express his sexuality even in public places as a show of resistance. This seen in the novel as Niru and his friend, Meredith, a girl return home in the evening. Meredith is surprised that Niru has not made the first sexual move and she goes further

to seduce him. Meredith soon realizes that all her attempts to engage in sexual intercourse with Niru and all her seductions fail because he is gay. (50-55). He describes how he doesn't even watch the porn that his classmates watch on phone because he prefers the men (53).

Meredith like Vivek's friends (Juju and Elizabeth) is more calm and supportive, revealing how the Western world is learning to completely accommodate gay people thanks to resistance and movements like the LGBTQ+ community. Iweala writes revealing the calm of Meredith on getting the news when Niru opens up to her, which also shows she has gotten access to information from media and other outlets that being gay is not evil:

I think- I'm gay. She slides the door back and thrust her head out from the closet. She has wrapped herself in a blanket and her hairs covers her face... She stretches her hands from the closet and then lets it fall. Then she emerges and envelops me fully in her blanket. She holds me as she murmurs "I am right here" she says. I am with you. I start to cry. I am overwhelmed by the sound of my own pain (54-55).

Overall, Niru tries his best to fight against the forces of his parents and different ministers and pastors in Nigeria so as to be accepted for who he is. A simple gay person who has done no one any harm. Like Vivek, he also seek ways to express himself in the midst of the challenges and seeks who to confide in.

Furthermore, going further with his fight against homophobia, Niru questions his parents on why they would arrange to have a discussion with a Pastor that requires his presence and no one takes permission from him (148). And when his father responds that he wasn't asked because he is still a child, he speaks back: I am not a child. I am eighteen. This is my life. I am perfectly capable of

deciding for myself (150). When he is taken to a church where they pray for him like someone possessed, his anger reflects his rebellion against such action.

“I feel their strength grow the longer they pray. I feel anger expand in my chest, then shame then anger again, now in my stomach. I pray for anything to free me from this room and these hands holding me down” (240).

Niru's mother also reveals her fear for her son, because of the rebellion of youths and his adamant nature about his sexuality.

Again Niru is taken to another Pastor, Bishop Okereke who tells him that homosexuality is a demonic situation that he must confess and get saved. Niru again resists him and insists that he is not obliged to confess any sin as he has done nothing wrong. Niru's conversation with Bishop Okereke goes thus:

Bishop Okereke says. Young man if what your father say is true, will you confess your sins and rededicate yourself to our Lord Jesus Christ. If so it is simple and we know which direction we are to take. If not-Bishop Okereke falls silent and folds his hands over his chest. What do you say? I say "I don't know you so why would I confess anything to you? (218).

Overall, Niru tries his best to fight against the forces of his parents and different ministers and pastors in Nigeria so as to be accepted for who he is. He tries to make it known that he is a simple gay person who has done no one any harm. He confronts the bishop, telling him that he has no right to get any form of confessions from him.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the points in both texts where the protagonist resist every act of subjugation and suppression of homosexuals. It reveals that despite the fact that homophobia is common in the society, some of the youths who are guilty of the act try to make it known that they are normal human beings and homosexuality is natural to them. Niru and Vivek do not even care to such an extent that they are willing to be tortured and even die in the face of religious and societal condemnation of the act which is usually seen as a taboo in Nigeria.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This study has examined homophobia in Nigerian society using two texts: Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. The first chapter introduces the study. It highlights the purpose of the study and the scope of the study, which refers to the areas the study covers. It notes that the primary texts used to discuss the subject of homophobia are Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. This chapter then reveals that the theoretical framework used for the analysis of the study is the queer theory. This theory is employed in discussing issues relating to identity, homosexuality, and queerness. The texts used for this study are reviewed paying attention to the ideas of other literary critics and scholars on the texts and what the texts represent and portray. Then a thesis statement that guides the research is presented.

The second chapter examines heteronormative repression in both texts. This has to do with examining points in the text that reveals areas where homosexuals are resisted and made to feel cut out of society on the basis of their sexuality. In this chapter, instances where homosexuals are beaten, discriminated and treated like people having challenges of a spiritual or psychological nature are examined. This chapter reveals that the resistance cuts across society and religions in parts of Africa particularly in Nigeria (which is the specific focus of the text). The chapter shows how homosexuality is received in Nigeria and the fact that people believe that only heterosexual relationships are correct forms of sexual relationships and frown upon other forms of queer relationships and sexual relationships.

The third chapter goes on to explain homosexual resistance from the texts. It reveals how homosexuals as a response to suppression and repression react and resist the ill-treatment experienced in the church, among their peers, in society in general, and even from their families. This chapter shows instances where these homosexuals even rebel by trying to educate superiors like parents and pastors that believe they are possessed by demon spirits. Other queer forms of resistance like cross-dressing on the streets as a way of stamping their feet and reasserting their status as people who are also normal human beings and should be accepted as part of the society are also analysed from this chapter. This fourth chapter then concludes the research.

From the different chapters analyzed above, it is clear that homophobia continues to be a thing in Nigerian society. Africans continue to consider homosexuality as something unnatural. However, the extracts and passages analyzed from the texts also reveals that civilization and globalization has had a very transforming effect on the youths. The youths are seen in both texts as people who are more tolerant of homosexuality and seek ways to accept them. This is partly the result of the current movements in society known as the LGBTQ+ movements that is driven by the Western world to bring many African societies and even Western societies to see same-sex attraction as something natural to some people. The youths who are in the midst of these changes, orientation, and information because of social media and other forms of communication that break the distance barrier are then the primary pioneer of a mindset that homosexuality and other queer forms of behaviour are normal. Therefore things like crossdressing, transgender, and homosexuality seen as unnatural and abnormal by the majority of people in African societies are now seen as normal and acceptable. Currently, people who do not see these people as normal and as people that should be accommodated and made to mingle with everyone without fear or worry about discrimination, are now tagged “homophobic”.

Therefore, the new generation and the older generation seem to be divided today. While the older generation consider themselves as the people trying to restore sanity to the society moving fast to accept a lot of things, the younger generation considers themselves as more educated and enlightened with a responsibility to teach the old and make them see the need to accept homosexuality and homosexual. For them, it is a crime to be homophobic and it is inhuman. This study does not take any sides or push for any of this ideologies. This study simply reveals the contrasting views and the contrasting ideas on homosexuality today and opens the way for further research to be conducted on the subject as the world continues to evolve and become more civilized.

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