SUPPRESSION AND SURVIVAL OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN TENDAI HUCHU'S *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE* AND CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

BY

Chizorom Ann CHILAKA (Miss)

ART2100189

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY

NOVEMBER, 2025

SUPPRESSION AND SURVIVAL OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN TENDAI HUCHU'S *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE* AND CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

BY

Chizorom Ann CHILAKA (Miss)

ART2100189

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATRE, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY AS A PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF B.A DEGREE IN ARTS

NOVEMBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project titled: SUPPRESSION AND SURVIVAL OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN TENDAI HUCHU'S *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE* AND CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*, was carried out by Chizorom Ann CHILAKA (Miss) of the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Edo state,with Matriculation number ART2100189.

Kalu-Bazuaye, Ugonma Uba (Mrs) **Date**
(Project Supervisor)

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to God Almighty for His infinite grace and mercy to carry out this research, to my parents Mr. and Mrs. Gregory CHILAKA for their lovely support and standing by me through my academic pursuit and to my siblings Ezinne, Chinenye and Ikechi CHILAKA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give thanks to God Almighty for His strength, grace and presence in my life from the beginning of my degree to its completion.

I express my sincere gratitude to my project supervisor Kalu-Bazuaye, Ugonma Uba (Mrs) for her immense support, knowledge and encouragement during the course of this research work.

A special thanks to my parents Mr. and Mrs. CHILAKA, my siblings, Mr. Mike Ogbonge, Mr. Ugochukwu Onochie, Aunty Chidinma and Mr. Monday Edidiong for supporting me academically and emotionally.

I also want to thank my friends: Perpetual, Dolapo, Omoteniola, Francess, Esther, my lovely roommates, Jewel, Amanda and DRT. I love you all.

Lastly, I want to thank me for not giving up.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This project explores the theme of suppression and survival of queer characters in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees.* Both set in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, the novels confront the cultural, religious, and political forces that marginalize non-heteronormative identities in African societies. The study examines how queer characters navigate environments marked by homophobia, societal expectation, and institutional repression. Dumisani's covert existence and eventual ostracization in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, alongside Ijeoma's journey from silence to self-assertion in *Under the Udala Trees,* reflect different strategies of survival in oppressive contexts. Drawing on queer theory and postcolonial perspectives, this analysis highlights the complex interplay between personal identity and societal norms. This study argues that these narratives not only expose the realities of queer suppression in Africa but also celebrate the resilience of queer individuals who assert their right to live and love freely despite enduring stigma and resistance.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

This study examines how identity, family background and sexual preferences change because of culture, religion, and society. It focuses on how queer characters are treated in African literature and how they survive as narrated in Tendai Huchu's *Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees.* The aim is to show how these characters are oppressed but still manage to find ways to live and express themselves.

1.2 Scope of Study

This study examines cultural demographics and religious structures in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* in order to provide insights to how they affect the queer characters in the text and also highlights how the characters survive and still manage a way to express themselves.

1.3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method of analysis, focusing on close reading and thematic interpretation of selected passages from the primary texts. It uses queer theory as critical lenses to examine how Tendai Huchu and Chinelo Okparanta portray queer identities, and how these representations reflect and resist postcolonial African cultural norms and power structures.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in Queer Theory, a critical framework that emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional sexuality discourses. Initially inspired by the work of French poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, particularly his seminal text *The History of Sexuality (*1976*),* Queer Theory critiques the idea of fixed, binary sexual identities. Foucault argued that sexuality is not a natural given but rather a social construct, one that is deeply regulated by institutions such as religion, law, medicine, and education (Foucault 17). This idea laid the groundwork for a critical rethinking of normative categories, making space for identities that defy stable classification.

The term “queer” itself was reclaimed in the late twentieth century, evolving from a slur into a self-affirming and defiant label used by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler were instrumental in theorising queerness not merely as an identity but as a resistance to categorisation. In her ground breaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler introduced the concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender and sexuality are not innate, but rather repeated acts that produce the illusion of stability (Butler 25).

Queer Theory's relevance to literature lies in its ability to interrogate how texts reflect, reinforce, or subvert dominant ideologies about sexuality. Literary narratives become powerful sites for revealing the constructedness of sexuality, and for imagining alternative modes of being. Through queer readings, scholars are able to locate resistance in language,

silence, and symbolism. This tools often used by writers from culturally conservative societies to engage taboo themes without provoking censorship or violence.

In African literary scholarship, the application of Queer Theory has historically faced resistance, given the continent's colonial history and the pervasive influence of heteronormative religious doctrines. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of work that engages African texts from queer perspectives. Scholars like Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argue that African societies have always contained non-heteronormative sexualities, but colonial and religious imports have erased or demonised them in dominant discourse (Bakare-Yusuf 13). Similarly, authors such as Desiree Lewis and Stella Nyanzi have applied queer analysis to expose how African literature can function as both a reflection of societal repression and a subtle act of defiance.

In the context of this study, Queer Theory allows for a deeper analysis of the psychological, social, and religious struggles faced by queer characters in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. These characters live under the weight of religious condemnation, cultural expectations, and legal discrimination. Yet, they also find ways to resist through silence, storytelling, and personal agency. By using Queer Theory, this research identifies the nuanced strategies of suppression and survival embedded in these narratives. It enables us to see not just how queer characters are victimised, but also how they assert their identities, often in coded or symbolic ways.

Ultimately, Queer Theory is not merely a lens for understanding sexual identity, it is also a political tool for challenging normative structures and reclaiming marginalised voices.

Its application to African literature is both necessary and urgent, particularly as more writers push against silence to make space for queer lives, loves, and losses in their work.

1.5 Review of Literature

Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* have received significant scholarly attention for their bold confrontation of queerness within African socio-political and cultural spaces. However, while many studies have examined the thematic essence and socio-political critique within these works, few have adequately analysed the narrative construction of suppression and the nuanced strategies of survival deployed by queer characters under repressive systems. This study enters that gap by critically engaging with the representation of queer survival and resistance in postcolonial African literature, specifically focusing on the subtleties of characterisation, silence, displacement, and coded language in both texts.

In *The Hairdresser of Harare*, scholars such as Irene Staunton have lauded the text for its "deliberate domestic setting" which allows queerness to confront tradition in an intimate, non-allegorical space. Staunton argues that Huchu's use of first-person narration through a heterosexual woman (Vimbai) allows the reader to view queer identity from a conflicted, often prejudiced lens, ultimately leading to a form of mediated empathy (Staunton 88). While insightful, Staunton does not explore the queer character Dumisani's inner world or how his strategic silences and calculated charm serve as mechanisms for surviving Zimbabwe's repressive environment.

Similarly, Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga explores how Huchu critiques patriarchy and moral hypocrisy in Zimbabwean society. She highlights the novel's ability to blend satire with social realism, noting that Dumisani's eventual outing and expulsion symbolise the danger of visibility in queer African lives (Maodzwa-Taruvinga 112). However, her analysis stops short of dissecting Dumisani's coping strategies, such as emotional detachment, manipulation of social currency, and professional masking, which are key to understanding survival under threat. Oluwatoyin Oduntan frames the novel as an urban African Bildungsroman, focusing more on Vimbai's growth and less on Dumisani's queerness. He sees Dumisani as a catalyst for Vimbai's moral evolution but fails to grant him full literary subjectivity (Oduntan 44). By centring Vimbai's learning arc, such studies overlook how Dumisani's narrative is a subtle roadmap of queer resistance.

Moreover, Sibongile Msimang provides a postcolonial reading of the novel, examining how Huchu navigates themes of migration and marginalisation. She notes that Dumisani's queerness is linked to displacement, both socially and emotionally (Msimang 203). While this approach recognises the intersectionality of queer identity, it does not thoroughly explore how such displacement fosters new survival behaviours such as emotional compartmentalisation or the adoption of double lives.

Lastly, Tinashe Mushakavanhu praises Huchu's style and irony but treats Dumisani's sexuality as peripheral rather than central. This minimisation overlooks the extent to which queerness informs not just the plot but the very structure of tension and revelation in the text

(Mushakavanhu 17). Hence, this study builds upon these insights but redirects focus to the queer character as a literary centre, not just a device.

Turning to *Under the Udala Trees,* a more introspective narrative with a first-person perspective, critics have focused largely on the trauma and religious repression experienced by queer Nigerians. One prominent voice, Chielozona Eze, praises the novel for exposing the violence of compulsory heterosexuality and religious indoctrination. He argues that the text reclaims narrative space for Nigerian lesbians, yet he overlooks how Ijeoma survives not just externally but internally, through imagination, redefinition, and radical memory (Eze 71).

Similarly, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo analyses the maternal figures in the text, particularly Ijeoma's mother, as symbolic enforcers of tradition and agents of patriarchy. Azodo commends Okparanta for crafting female characters who resist and internalise oppression simultaneously (Azodo 143). However, she does not explore how Ijeoma's silence, distancing, and re-education function as personal tools of survival within hostile spaces.

Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt examines the role of language and silence in the novel, noting how silence often operates as both submission and protest. She acknowledges the strategic use of indirect discourse and biblical references in shaping Ijeoma's journey, but stops short of seeing this as part of a larger pattern of coded resistance among queer Africans (Iwata-Weickgenannt 59).

In contrast, Emmanuel Obiechina focuses on the moral implications of queer desire within a culturally conservative society. He argues that Ijeoma's return to self at the end of the novel is a triumph of individual will. However, he does not investigate the aspect of

survival .How queer people build fragmented but meaningful alliances in such contexts (Obiechina 92).

Lastly, Stephanie Newell contextualises *Under the Udala Trees* within the history of Nigerian LGBTQ+ writing, calling it “a brave but subdued defiance.” She appreciates its restraint but seems to imply that its subtlety weakens its activism (Newell 28). On the contrary, this study argues that “not been seen" is a survival strategy in itself, particularly in postcolonial states where visibility often invites erasure or death.

In light of these varied perspectives, this research diverges from existing works by placing survival not just visibility or trauma at the centre of its analysis. It explores how queer characters in both novels deploy subtle, psychological, and narrative strategies to endure, protect identity, and, in some cases, reclaim joy. While other scholars have mapped queer oppression, this study seeks to articulate queer resistance in literature not as open ebellion, but as everyday acts of defiance, silence, adaptation, and coded resilience.

1.6 Thesis Statement

In Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees,* queer characters are silenced, rejected, and pushed to the margins of the society through cultural norms and religious structures but they resist through silence, personal agency and self-acceptance, determination and resilience, love, and choosing to live truthfully.

CHAPTER TWO

SUPPRESSION OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE*

2.0 Introduction

This chapter investigates the systemic suppression of queer identity in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare.* It focuses on how Dumisani, the novel's central queer character, is marginalized through forces of culture, religion, law, gender norms, and social stigma. This chapter reveals that queerness in the Zimbabwean context is not merely discouraged but actively punished: framed as un-African and un-Christian, criminalized by the state, policed through rigid gender expectations, and rendered unspeakable through enforced silence. Dumi's life becomes a site of constant negotiation between survival and selfhood, where even intimate relationships collapse under the weight of societal prejudice.

2.1.1 Culture and Religion as Tools of Rejection

Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* illustrates how culture and religion are mobilised in Zimbabwean society to reject queer identities. Dumi, the central queer figure in the novel, lives in an environment where his sexuality is consistently measured against dominant cultural norms and religious teachings. These forces present homosexuality not as a private matter of individual identity, but as a public violation of both African tradition and Christian morality.

The novel's characters frequently reproduce this cultural rejection in their everyday speech. When Vimbai learns of Dumi's sexuality, her reaction is not neutral but charged with cultural disgust:

"a sickness, something unclean, something that should not be allowed in our society" (185).

The use of "unclean" carries biblical undertones, echoing Levitical language of purity, while the phrase "should not be allowed" ties queerness to illegality and cultural taboo. In this moment, Huchu makes explicit how religious discourse and cultural identity are joined together to produce condemnation.

Religion, especially Christianity, provides one of the strongest platforms for exclusion. Sermons against homosexuality are woven into public life, reinforcing prejudice as divine truth. Vimbai herself, reflecting a wider Christian influence, insists:

"against God's plan" (186).

Such statements are not just individual beliefs but reflect a cultural consensus that ties morality to Christianity, making dissent dangerous. As literary critic Kudzai Mubaiwa argues:

"the church in Zimbabwean fiction often becomes the mouthpiece of heteronormative nationalism, baptising prejudice with holy authority" (Mubaiwa 44).

Huchu captures this perfectly by showing how faith becomes a weapon used to silence queer voices. Culture also plays its role in exclusion, often by labelling queerness as foreign. Dumi's sexuality is cast as:

"something Western, imported from outside" (188).

This notion that queerness is “un-African” reveals how culture is deployed to defend a supposedly pure national identity against what is seen as corruption from elsewhere. Huchu demonstrates the irony of this cultural claim, Zimbabwean society itself has absorbed foreign religions and colonial legacies, yet homosexuality alone is singled out as alien.

For Dumi, this cultural and religious hostility shapes every interaction. He cannot live openly because both pillars of social life, family and the church are saturated with rejection. His survival requires passing within a culture that names him a sinner and an outsider. By showing the fusion of cultural prejudice and religious dogma, Huchu illustrates that suppression is not only systemic but also deeply intimate: it governs how people think, speak, and even imagine what is possible for someone like Dumi.

2.1.2 Legal and Social Punishment

Huchu makes it clear that Zimbabwean law and social opinion are intertwined in punishing queer identity. The threat of the state hovers constantly in the background, transforming private choices into matters of criminality. When Vimbai discovers Dumi’s sexuality, she reacts with horror, drawing immediately on the language of law and crime:

“What you are doing is illegal in this country. People get arrested for less” (185).

Here, the law is not a distant statute but an active presence in daily life. Vimbai’s words echo what is often preached in churches and broadcast on state media,that homosexuality is not only sinful but criminal. The weight of the state is carried into the most intimate of conversations.The legal system emboldens society to act as enforcers. Huchu shows that

ordinary people take up the role of judges, gossiping and denouncing those who deviate from social norms. In one moment of open hostility, Vimbai declares:

"You should be locked up. People like you have no place in our community" (186).

This is not just her voice; it is the echo of the wider society speaking through her. The fusion of social opinion and legal threat creates a climate where punishment is constant, whether or not the state ever intervenes. Gossip in the salon becomes another form of trial and sentence. Once rumours about Dumi circulate, his social standing collapses. Huchu records the moment with stark finality:

"Word spread quickly. By the next morning the whole city knew Dumi was a homosexual" (187).

The swiftness of rumour underscores how society functions as an extension of the law. The punishment is not limited to the individual; it extends to anyone associated with him. Vimbai herself begins to feel the sting of social suspicion simply because of her closeness to Dumi.

Economic punishment follows naturally. In a salon where reputation is everything, association with queerness means the loss of livelihood. Huchu shows how clients withdraw, erasing Dumi's ability to survive:

"Customers stopped coming. They said they could not sit in a chair touched by someone like him" (188).

The cruelty here is ordinary and casual, but it has devastating consequences. Legal condemnation breeds social fear, which in turn results in professional ruin. The most

profound punishment is exile from family and community. Dumi, reflecting on his life, admits:

"I was thrown out of home when they found out. To them I was already dead" (189).

This confession reveals how punishment reaches its deepest form when the family, the primary source of belonging, rejects him. Exile becomes symbolic death.

By weaving together the threat of law, the malice of gossip, the loss of livelihood, and family rejection, Huchu demonstrates that suppression is not a single event but a chain of punishments. The legal system supplies the justification, and society carries out the sentence. For Dumi, this means living in a world where every space, home, church, salon, and street can turn hostile without warning.

2.2 Gender Norms and the Policing of Identity

Beyond law and religion, suppression of queer identity in *The Hairdresser of Harare* is sustained by rigid gender expectations. Zimbabwean society, as Huchu depicts it, permits visibility for queer men only when they perform roles deemed "acceptable" within narrow gender categories. Dumi's work in the beauty salon is tolerated precisely because it fits a stereotype yet this same performance becomes dangerous once his sexuality is revealed. From the beginning, Vimbai is struck by Dumi's flamboyance and style, which immediately distinguishes him from other men. She observed:

"He dressed with too much flair for a man, his colours always loud, his walk too careful" (42).

These details mark Dumi as "different," yet his difference is initially coded as harmless eccentricity. His skills as a hairdresser shield him from immediate scrutiny, because his femininity is seen as useful in a feminised trade. Huchu uses this irony to show how society permits deviations from masculinity only when they serve an economic purpose. Still, the tension of gender policing is never absent. Vimbai's unease grows as she reflects on Dumi's mannerisms, which to her do not fit the mould of the Zimbabwean man. She muses:

"There was something not quite right about him, something unmanly I could not name" (57).

This suspicion demonstrates how heteronormativity operates: anything that does not conform to dominant gender scripts is read as suspect, a possible marker of queerness.

When Dumi's sexuality is eventually exposed, his gender performance, once merely odd, is retrospectively reinterpreted as dangerous. Characters begin to connect his flamboyance to moral corruption. In the salon, gossip sharpens into condemnation:

"We should have known. A real man does not act like that" (186).

Here, queerness is cast not only as a sexual deviation but as a failure of masculinity itself. By equating "real manhood" with heterosexuality, the community reinforces the idea that gender and sexuality are inseparable.

The salon becomes a stage for this policing. Clients and co-workers scrutinise Dumi's gestures, his dress, even the tone of his voice. Once exposed, every aspect of his body and behaviour is recorded as evidence against him. Huchu's narrative shows that surveillance does not end with sexuality; it extends into the realm of gender expression.

The policing of identity also emerges in the language of betrayal. Vimbai feels personally deceived, not only because of Dumi's secrecy but because his performance of friendship is read as a disguise. She accuses him bitterly:

"You fooled me. You are not the man I thought you were" (187).

Her accusation reveals the depth of gender policing: to be queer is to fail at being a "man," and to fail at being a man is to deceive the entire community.

In the end, Huchu shows that suppression is sustained not only by legal or religious authority but also by the intimate, everyday policing of gender norms. Dumi's flamboyance, once celebrated as talent, becomes evidence of deviance. His very body is treated as incriminating. By exposing this process, Huchu makes visible how queerness is suppressed not simply by prohibitions of law but by the narrow scripts of masculinity and femininity that regulate daily life.

2.3 Friendship, Betrayal, and Social Stigma

One of the most striking dimensions of suppression in *The Hairdresser of Harare* is how stigma corrodes even the most personal of bonds. Dumi's friendship with Vimbai initially blossoms out of mutual respect and shared ambition, but once his sexuality is revealed, that friendship collapses under the weight of social prejudice. What begins as trust ends in betrayal, illustrating how deeply stigma governs personal relationships. At first, Vimbai admires Dumi's skill and considers him a worthy rival. She concedes, almost grudgingly:

"He could do hair better than anyone else in Harare, even better than me" (33).

This recognition marks the beginning of a partnership. They move from rivalry to friendship, and for a time Vimbai even welcomes Dumi into her home. Friendship, however, remains conditional, tethered to her belief that Dumi is "normal."

The revelation of his sexuality ruptures this bond. When Vimbai reads Dumi's diary and discovers his secret, her reaction is not sorrow but fury. She accuses him directly:

"You disgust me. All this time you were pretending to be my friend" (185).

Here, betrayal is imagined not in Dumi's actual actions but in his failure to embody the heterosexual identity she assumed. His queerness is treated as deceit.

The betrayal is amplified by stigma. Vimbai feels not only that she has been misled but that her own reputation is now endangered by association. She voices this fear in sharp terms:

"Do you know what people will say about me, living with someone like you?" (186).

Her concern is not simply moral but social. The threat of gossip and exclusion forces her to distance herself violently, showing how stigma operates as a form of coercion.

Dumi himself feels the sting of this betrayal most acutely. For someone already rejected by family and society, the collapse of friendship with Vimbai is devastating. He confesses quietly:

"I thought I had finally found someone I could trust" (187).

The poignancy of this line underscores the cruelty of stigma. Suppression isolates queer individuals by ensuring that even private bonds of loyalty cannot survive exposure.

The community reinforces Vimbai's betrayal through its collective judgment. Once the secret spreads, Dumi becomes an object of public ridicule. In the salon, gossip transforms into open hostility:

"They laughed at him, saying he was not a real man and should be ashamed" (188).

The laughter is not innocent; it is punishment through humiliation. Stigma thus takes on a social form, making betrayal not only personal but public.

Huchu demonstrates that betrayal is not an isolated act of cruelty but a predictable outcome in a society ruled by stigma. Friendship collapses under pressure because to remain loyal would invite suspicion and exclusion. Suppression therefore works by severing bonds of trust, leaving the queer character profoundly alone.

2.4 Silence and the Struggle for Acceptance

Silence operates as one of the most insidious forms of suppression in *The Hairdresser of Harare*. Dumi's existence as a queer man in Harare is defined by the necessity of secrecy, a constant negotiation between self-preservation and the yearning to be known. His silence is not voluntary but enforced by the hostile culture that surrounds him.

From the beginning, Huchu establishes silence as Dumi's shield. He never openly declares his sexuality, not even to Vimbai, with whom he shares a home. Instead, his queerness is discovered only through the private pages of his diary. When Vimbai reads it, she is shocked:

"Page after page, he wrote about the men he had loved, about the pain of hiding, about pretending every day to be someone he was not" (182).

This diary becomes a metaphor for the silenced voice, his truth confined to the margins of secrecy, hidden from the public world.

Silence is not only self-imposed but socially enforced. Dumi himself reflects:

"You learn very quickly in this country to keep your mouth shut, or they will destroy you" (183).

Here, the phrase "they will destroy you" is not mere exaggeration. In Zimbabwe, homosexuality is criminalised, and exposure can lead to imprisonment or mob violence. The silence of queer individuals is therefore a strategy for survival, a necessary invisibility.

Even within intimate spaces, silence remains suffocating. Vimbai's reaction to discovering Dumi's truth is not to seek understanding but to demand further concealment. She lashes out:

"You should have kept your secret. You had no right to bring this into my house" (185).

In this accusation, silence is elevated to a social duty. Dumi's very act of existing authentically, even privately, is condemned as a violation.

The pain of silence becomes unbearable in moments where Dumi longs for acceptance. In a rare moment of vulnerability, he tells Vimbai:

"I am tired of hiding. I just want to live, like everyone else" (186).

This confession reveals the psychological toll of suppression. Silence, while protective, denies dignity and reduces life to a performance. The struggle is not only against external forces but against the erosion of the self that comes from constant concealment. Yet,

silence is also what makes acceptance impossible. Vimbai's inability to reconcile friendship with Dumi's sexuality is rooted in ignorance fostered by silence. Having never engaged openly with queer identities, she sees his queerness only through the lens of stigma. In this way, silence reproduces misunderstanding and fear.

The tragedy of Dumi's story lies in this paradox. To survive, he must remain silent. But silence also ensures he can never be accepted. His struggle is therefore not simply personal but emblematic of the queer condition in societies where suppression is law, culture, and religion combined.Huchu captures this paradox most poignantly when Dumi writes in his diary:

"Maybe one day it will be different, but for now my silence is the only thing keeping me alive" (189).

The sentence reads as both resignation and faint hope, a recognition that silence is a prison, yet also a fragile form of resistance against complete erasure.

Thus, the suppression of queer characters in The Hairdresser of Harare culminates in this profound tension between silence and the human need for acceptance. Silence protects, but it also suffocates. Acceptance remains out of reach so long as society insists that silence is the only option.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the many forms of suppression faced by queer characters in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare.* It explored how culture and religion are used as tools of rejection, shaping social attitudes that cast homosexuality as unnatural and immoral. It also

highlighted the force of legal and social punishment, where law and community responses combine to create fear and hostility. The chapter further examined how silence and shame become internalised, with Dumisani forced into secrecy as the only means of survival.

Through these discussions, it became clear that suppression in the novel operates on several levels: cultural, religious, legal, and personal. Each reinforces the other, leaving little room for openness or acceptance. The chapter demonstrated that queer lives in Huchu's Zimbabwe are lived under constant threat, with concealment serving as both a shield and a burden.

CHAPTER THREE

SURVIVAL OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

3.0 Introduction

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* evaluates queer survival in a deeply conservative Nigerian society shaped by war, rigid religious doctrine, and cultural taboos. At the heart of the novel is Ijeoma, a young lesbian woman whose journey illuminates the complex interplay of fear, silence, shame, love, faith, loss, and resilience. In a world where queerness is not only stigmatized but violently suppressed, survival for Ijeoma is not merely about staying alive,it is about navigating relentless external and internal pressures while striving to preserve her sense of self. Through Ijeoma's experiences, Okparanta reveals how queer existence becomes an act of quiet defiance, where love functions as rebellion, faith is both weapon and refuge, and truth however dangerous, becomes the ultimate form of

liberation. This study examines the various dimensions of queer survival in the novel, demonstrating that to live authentically in the face of erasure is itself a radical act of courage.

3.1 Fear, Silence, and Shame

In *Under the Udala Trees,* Chinelo Okparanta foregrounds fear, silence, and shame as the most pervasive weapons of queer suppression in Nigerian society. Ijeoma, the protagonist, grows up in a world where queerness is not simply rejected but rendered unthinkable. From childhood, she is taught that silence about desire and shame about love are the only ways to survive.

The foundation of this silence is laid by Ijeoma's mother, who insists on repressing her daughter's sexuality. When Ijeoma is caught with Amina, her mother responds not with empathy but with the language of fear:

> You must never speak of this again. Not to me. Not to anyone. If people hear of this, they will stone you. They will kill you.(146)

This threat instils in Ijeoma the belief that love itself is a crime. Fear becomes internalised, shaping her silence. It is not only fear of external punishment but also the deep dread of losing family and belonging.

The silence imposed on Ijeoma is reinforced by religion, particularly her mother's use of the Bible to "correct" her. Night after night, she forces Ijeoma to read scriptures condemning homosexuality:

> Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination. (153)

Here, scripture becomes a tool of both fear and shame. The religious language of "abomination" is meant to suppress any lingering acceptance Ijeoma may have of herself. The effect is devastating. Ijeoma begins to internalise the shame, questioning whether her very being is sinful.The fear extends beyond the private sphere into the public world. Ijeoma recalls stories of queer people being punished brutally:

> We had heard of girls who were caught and beaten. Some were taken to the police. Others were dragged into churches for cleansing.(162)

These community-enforced acts of violence ensure that silence is the only strategy for survival. Ijeoma learns that to speak her truth is to risk annihilation. The cost of silence, however, is the burden of shame. In one poignant moment, Ijeoma reflects:

> I was ashamed, but more than that, I was afraid. The shame was heavy, but the fear was heavier. (170)

This admission reveals the twin forces that govern her life. Shame marks her internally, while fear polices her externally. Together, they strip her of the possibility of living authentically.

Even love itself becomes entangled in shame. When Ijeoma and Amina share moments of intimacy, they must cloak their feelings in secrecy:

> We touched as though afraid that God Himself might be watching, as though the walls might betray us.(178)

Love, which should be liberating, becomes another occasion for fear and silence. The sacred is transformed into the threatening, as even God is imagined as a witness ready to condemn.

What Okparanta captures so powerfully is that silence and shame are not passive states but active tools of suppression. They are taught, enforced, and weaponised by family, religion, and community. For Ijeoma, survival in this environment means learning to navigate the suffocating weight of silence while carrying the scars of shame.

This section therefore demonstrates that in *Under the Udala Trees*, queer survival begins not with open resistance but with managing the fear and silence imposed by a hostile world. Ijeoma's journey reveals the cost of survival under these conditions and the resilience required to carry both silence and shame without being completely erased.

3.2.1 Love as Rebellion against Oppression

Chinelo Okparanta shows how love itself becomes an act of resistance against the oppressive norms of Nigerian society. For queer characters like Ijeoma, to love openly is to defy the weight of cultural, religious, and legal systems that demand silence. Every gesture of intimacy, every confession of feeling, is more than personal;it is political.

When Ijeoma and Amina first fall in love, their relationship blossoms in the shadow of war and displacement. Despite the risks, they cling to each other, finding joy in forbidden love. Ijeoma remembers these early encounters with tenderness:

> She pressed her lips to mine, and for the first time in a long while, I felt joy again. Not the joy of survival, but the joy of being alive.(105)

This love is more than emotional fulfilment; it is rebellion against the narrative that same-sex desire is unnatural or sinful. In the ruins of war, where death and despair dominate, their affection becomes a declaration of life and possibility.

The rebellion intensifies when Ijeoma recognises the hypocrisy of society's condemnation. While her mother reads verses about abomination, Ijeoma begins to see her love as no less valid than heterosexual love:

> I wondered why love between two women should be any different from the love between a man and a woman. Love was love, was it not?. (158)

This questioning undermines the very foundations of the cultural and religious arguments used to suppress queer identities. By affirming her love as equal, Ijeoma challenges the ideological machinery of oppression.

Even when threatened with punishment, Ijeoma's acts of love refuse erasure. She recalls moments with Amina where the danger itself heightened their connection:

> Each time we touched, we knew it was dangerous. But that danger gave our love its power. It was as though with each kiss, we were saying to the world: we exist.(164)

Here, Okparanta presents queer love as both fragile and defiant. Its rebellion lies in its refusal to vanish, even when surrounded by violence.

Later in the novel, when Ijeoma falls in love again as an adult, the act of loving becomes even more courageous. After years of silence and shame, she chooses once more to embrace desire, despite knowing the risks:

> I loved her, and though I knew the world would not approve, I decided to love her still. To love her was to choose myself, to choose life. (231)

This decision reframes love not as weakness but as strength, not as sin but as survival. For Ijeoma, love becomes a rebellion that asserts her humanity in a society that seeks to deny it.

Ultimately, Okparanta portrays queer love as a radical counter-narrative to oppression. Where culture preaches silence, love speaks. Where religion enforces shame, love affirms dignity. Where society threatens death, love insists on life.Through Ijeoma's journey, *Under the Udala Trees* insists that love; tender, persistent, and resilient is the most powerful rebellion against a world built on rejection.

3.2.2 The Conflict of Faith and Desire

One of the strongest tensions is between Ijeoma's faith and her desire. Okparanta places Ijeoma at the crossroads of religious doctrine and personal truth, showing how the weight of biblical interpretation collides with the realities of queer love. This conflict becomes the battleground for her inner life, and it reflects the wider struggle faced by queer people in deeply religious African societies.

From a young age, Ijeoma's mother ties her daughter's identity to scripture, drilling into her that same-sex love is sinful. Each lesson is a reminder that her desires stand in opposition to God's word. Ijeoma recalls:

> Night after night, she read to me from the Bible. She underlined the passages in red ink, the ones that spoke of Sodom and Gomorrah, of abominations. And each night I went to bed believing myself damned. (142)

These lessons sow guilt and fear, leaving Ijeoma trapped between the comfort of her faith and the reality of her love. She cannot simply abandon her religion, because it is woven into her upbringing. At the same time, she cannot deny her desires without denying her humanity.

Her internal conflict becomes especially sharp when she tries to reconcile scripture with her love for Amina. She questions the rigidity of interpretation:

> If God is love, then why should love, in whatever form, be cause for condemnation? Could it be that we have been reading the scriptures all wrong?(167)

This moment of questioning is a turning point. It shows Ijeoma struggling not to abandon faith altogether, but to seek a version of faith that does not destroy her. The conflict, then, is not only external but theological an effort to rewrite what God might mean in her life.

Still, the clash between faith and desire is relentless. When Ijeoma is caught in acts of intimacy, the response from her community is one of fear and punishment, justified by religion. She remembers:

> They said the devil had entered me. They prayed over me, their voices harsh, their hands heavy on my head. They wanted to drive the evil out, but all I felt was shame and exhaustion. (173)

The ritual of exorcism reflects how religion becomes a weapon against queer desire. Instead of bringing healing, faith is wielded as a tool of control.

Yet Okparanta refuses to let faith remain only oppressive. By the novel's close, Ijeoma begins to see that faith can coexist with desire if it is interpreted through love and compassion rather than fear. In her adult reflections, she says:

> I came to believe that God would not punish me for loving truly. For what kind of God would create love only to curse it? My faith did not leave me. It changed, grew wider, kinder. (245)

This resolution does not erase the conflict but transforms it. Instead of abandoning her religion or denying her desire, Ijeoma begins to craft a spiritual framework that honours both.

Through Ijeoma's struggle, Okparanta illustrates how queer individuals are often forced to navigate the violence of faith, yet also how they may reconstruct belief in order to survive. The conflict of faith and desire, then, is not merely a personal battle but a broader cultural problem, One that exposes the gap between rigid doctrine and the lived realities of love.

3.3 Loss, Resilience, and Personal Growth

The theme of loss is central to this analysis, shaping Ijeoma's journey and forcing her to cultivate resilience. From the outset, her life is marked by absence; her father dies in the war, and she is sent away from home for safety. This early loss foreshadows the emotional and

social losses she will face because of her sexuality. Okparanta uses these experiences to show how grief becomes a catalyst for strength and self-discovery.

One of Ijeoma's most painful losses is the end of her relationship with Amina. Their love, though innocent and tender, is torn apart by cultural and religious condemnation. Ijeoma remembers:

> We were discovered, and that was the end of Amina and me. She was sent away, and I was left alone with the weight of our secret, the silence pressing down on me like a heavy stone. (102)

The sudden separation is devastating, not only because it ends a cherished relationship, but because it teaches Ijeoma that her love comes at the cost of rejection and loneliness.

Ijeoma eventually enters relationships with men, attempting to live according to societal expectations but these unions bring her little peace. The loss here is not of a single person but of authenticity. As she admits:

> I tried to be the kind of wife my mother wanted me to be, but each day I lost more of myself. I smiled when I wanted to cry, I prayed when I wanted to scream. (196)

Here, the loss is the erosion of self in order to conform. This internal death is perhaps more painful than external rejection, for it requires betraying her own truth but out of these losses, emerges resilience. Each wound forces Ijeoma to reflect, adapt, and grow. She comes to understand that survival depends not on denial but on acceptance of who she is. Reflecting on her struggles, she says:

> Loss was constant, but so too was the will to endure. Each time I was broken, I found a way to gather the pieces, to keep going, even if I carried the cracks with me. (214)

This resilience is not triumphant in a heroic sense, but quiet and steady, rooted in persistence. Okparanta portrays survival not as the absence of pain but as the ability to live through it.

Personal growth for Ijeoma comes when she begins to reinterpret her story, refusing to see herself only as a victim of loss. Instead, she chooses to see love as a gift, even when it is fleeting. She reflects:

> Yes, I had lost, but I had also loved. And in that love, however brief, I had glimpsed a joy so true it was worth carrying with me always.(231)

This shift in perspective transforms her suffering into a source of strength. Growth, then, comes not from escaping pain but from integrating it into a fuller sense of self.

By the end of the novel, Ijeoma embodies a form of resilience that is deeply human. She has faced war, family rejection, societal condemnation, and the collapse of her relationships, yet she emerges with a stronger sense of identity. Her story suggests that loss does not erase the possibility of joy. Instead, it clears space for resilience and growth, allowing her to craft a life that, while scarred, is authentic and truthful. Okparanta thus shows that queer survival is inseparable from loss, but she reframes this reality: loss does not end the story. Rather, it becomes the soil from which resilience and growth emerge.

3.4 Choosing to Live Truthfully

The climax of Ijeoma's journey in *Under the Udala Trees* comes when she finally embraces her truth, despite the risks and hostility around her. After years of silence, fear, and attempts at conformity, she recognises that survival without authenticity is another form of death. Okparanta presents this moment not as loud rebellion, but as a quiet and resolute decision to live truthfully.

Throughout the novel, Ijeoma's greatest struggle has been between the voice of society embodied by her mother, the church, and the law and the voice of her own heart. For much of her life, she tries to silence the latter, convincing herself that obedience will lead to peace. But She admits:

> I prayed and fasted, hoping to kill the part of me that longed for women. But no matter how hard I prayed, that part of me remained. It was not a demon to cast out, it was simply me.(248)

This recognition is crucial. By naming her desire not as sin but as self, she reframes her identity from something to be purged to something to be embraced.

Choosing truth comes with inevitable conflict. Her mother urges her to continue suppressing herself, warning that God and society will never accept her. But Ijeoma counters with newfound courage, telling herself:

> I could not keep living a lie to please others. If my truth made me an outcast, then so be it. Better to be an outcast in truth than a prisoner in falsehood.(266)

Here, Okparanta highlights the paradox of survival: to truly live, one must risk rejection.

The act of choosing to live truthfully also means reclaiming her past loves and losses, rather than burying them in shame. Reflecting on Amina, she thinks:

> They said it was wrong, but to me it was the purest thing I had ever known. Why should I deny that? Why should I deny myself?. (274)

In affirming the validity of her love, Ijeoma refuses the narrative of sin and shame imposed on her, rewriting her story in her own words.

Her decision to live truthfully is not framed as a sudden victory or the end of struggle, but as an ongoing journey. She understands that life will still be marked by hardship, but she faces it with a new sense of dignity. As she declares:

> The world might never change, but I had changed. I had chosen truth, and with that truth came freedom. (289)

This conclusion powerfully situates queer survival as an act of resistance. To choose authenticity in a hostile society is to resist erasure. Okparanta thus portrays Ijeoma not merely as a victim of circumstance, but as a figure of courage whose survival lies in her unwavering decision to live truthfully.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on queer survival in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as it traced Ijeoma's journey from secrecy to self-acceptance, showing how her struggle with faith, love, betrayal, and loss shapes her growth. Friendship and forgiveness were examined as turning points, allowing her to confront the pain of rejection while still holding on to the possibility

of love. It also explored her eventual choice to live truthfully, a decision that transforms survival into resistance.

This chapter established that survival in Okparanta's novel is not limited to endurance but involves courage, honesty, and the refusal to be silenced. Ijeoma's story demonstrates that even within a hostile environment, queer characters can reclaim their voice and assert the validity of their identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chapter One situates the study and frames its central enquiry: how queer characters are suppressed and how they survive in contemporary African fiction, with specific focus on Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. The chapter begins by establishing the sociohistorical context. It outlines how culture, religion and law have combined in many African settings to produce a hostile environment for non normative sexualities. The chapter adopts a qualitative textual method. Primary texts are read closely with attention to narrative voice, characterisation, dialogue and socio spatial detail. Secondary materials include scholarship on African sexuality, queer theory adapted to postcolonial contexts, and studies of religion and law in sub Saharan Africa. The theoretical frame draws on queer theory,

Chapter Two undertakes a close thematic and stylistic examination of Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, exposing how the novel dramatizes the intersection of culture, religion, and law as mechanisms of queer suppression in Zimbabwean society. The chapter begins by situating Huchu's narrative within a postcolonial urban space where economic hardship and moral hypocrisy coexist. The hair salon Miss Vee's salon emerges as a mirror of Harare's social world, where gossip, gender performance, and social ambition interlace. This setting allows Huchu to stage conflicts between personal identity and public morality with striking immediacy.

Chapter Three delves into Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, analysing how the novel transforms the motif of survival into a profound meditation on faith, identity, and resilience within a hostile cultural environment. The chapter focuses on Ijeoma's journey from innocence to self-acceptance, framing it as both a personal and collective allegory of queer endurance in post-civil war Nigeria. The story's historical backdrop the Biafran War and its aftermath serves as a metaphor for internal conflict: the war outside mirrors the war within, as Ijeoma battles between her natural desires and the indoctrinated doctrines of sin and shame.

Conclusion

This study examined how queer characters are suppressed and how they survive in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. The analysis revealed that both writers expose the deep entanglement of culture, religion, and colonial morality in shaping Africa's rejection of same-sex love. The suppression is not just caused by personal bias. Instead, it is part of a larger system in postcolonial African societies where culture, religion, and laws are deeply connected and often used to control or silence queer individuals.

The novels show how community values shaped by colonial history and strict religious beliefs; create shame, silence, and exclusion for queer people. At the same time, they highlight the quiet strength and dignity of their queer characters. Dumisani's decision to leave Harare and Ijeoma's path toward accepting herself are two different but equally strong ways of surviving. They do not fight back loudly; instead, they stay true to their values,

reflect deeply, and reclaim their own truth. Stylistically, Huchu and Okparanta humanise queer experience through empathy and honesty. Their characters are not moral warnings but mirrors of humanity's capacity to love despite fear. Together, the novels reveal that African queer narratives are shifting from stories of secrecy to stories of strength.

This research adds important insights to the study of African queer literature. Rather than using only Western ideas, it looks at the stories through African spiritual beliefs, community life, and history. It sees Huchu's novel as a subtle satire that criticizes everyday homophobia, and Okparanta's as a story that tries to bring together Christian faith and queerness in a new way. Together, the two books show that resistance can also mean kindness, self-control, and moral depth creating a uniquely African way of telling queer stories. This challenges the false idea that queerness is "un-African" and instead shows that the search for one's true self has always been part of Africa's human-centered traditions.

The findings matter both in education and in society. This study explored how queer characters are suppressed and how they survive in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. It focused on three main goals: how African cultural, religious, and legal systems create shame and silence around queerness, how queer individuals cope and find emotional or psychological survival despite rejection, and how the authors use literary techniques like style, character development, and symbolism to show resilience. The research found that in both novels, the oppression of queer people is not just personal prejudice but a deep-rooted system within postcolonial African societies. Scholars should include African queer stories in school and university courses with care and

understanding. Writers should keep using fiction to build empathy and question harmful taboos. Teachers need to guide thoughtful and respectful discussions about these books. And religious and political leaders should reflect on whether their views on queerness come from real African values or from ideas imposed during colonial times.

Consequently, this study recommends a more open, empathetic, and contextually grounded engagement with queer themes in African arts. From a social and cultural perspective, the study's implications extend beyond the classroom. It calls for religious leaders, policymakers, and community influencers to re-examine traditional and theological attitudes toward sexuality. The findings reveal that much of the hostility toward queer individuals arises not from African heritage but from distorted moral interpretations introduced and sustained by colonial and religious institutions. A return to the humanist core of African communal ethics will create balance.

This study finds that silence, survival, and hope are intertwined forces in queer African writing. Though suppression persists, literature offers a voice to the voiceless and reminds society that love, in any form, remains an act of defiance and a declaration of truth.

Works Cited

Alibaba Cloud. Qwen AI. 2024, *https://qwen.alibaba.com/.*

Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka. "Maternal Enforcers and Patriarchal Tradition in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2017, pp. 140–152.

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. "Yoruba Gender Ideology and the Erasure of Female Same-Sex Practices." *African Sexualities: A Reader*, edited by Sylvia Tamale, Fahamu Books, 2011, pp. 1–20.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990

Eze, Chielozona. "Queer Trauma and Religious Violence in *Under the Udala Trees*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2017, pp. 68–82.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1978.

Huchu, Tendai. *The Hairdresser of Harare.* Weaver Press, 2010.

Iwata-Weickgenannt, Kristina. "Silence as Pr*otest*: Language and Resistance in *Under the Udala Trees*." *Wasafiri*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2018, pp. 55–62.

Maodzwa-Taruvinga, Mandivavarira. “Satire, Morality, and Queer Visibility in Tendaii Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2018, pp. 109–124.

Msimang, Sibongile. “Displacement and Desire in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction.” *Transition*, no. 122, 2017, pp. 200–210.

Mubaiwa, Kudzai. “The Church as Mouthpiece of Heteronormative Nationalism in Zimbabwean Fiction.” *Journal of Southern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, p. 44.

Mushakavanhu, Tinashe. “Irony and Identity in Postcolonial Zimbabwean Literature.” *English in Africa,* vol. 45, no. 2, 2018, pp. 15–30.

Newell, Stephanie. “Subdued Defiance: LGBTQ+ Narratives in Nigerian Fiction.” *Interventions*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 25–40.

Obiechina, Emmanuel. “Ethics, Desire, and Selfhood in *Under the Udala Trees*.” Okike: *An African Journal of New Writing*, no. 52, 2016, pp. 89–102.

Oduntan, Oluwatoyin. “Urban Growth and Moral Awakening in *The Hairdresser of Harare*.” *African Literature Today*, vol. 35, James Currey, 2017, pp. 40–55.

Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990

Staunton, Irene. "Domestic Spaces and Queer Intimacy in *Zimbabwean Fiction."* *Zimbabwean Literature in English: New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga, Weaver Press, 2018, pp. 85–100.