

**HOMOSEXUALITY AND TRAUMA: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL
READING OF CHINELO OKPARANTA'S
*UNDER THE UDALA TREES***

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Abstract

In the recent times, African writers seem to engage in hot debate on whether homosexuality is African, alien or of western import. Scholars who project it as unAfrican validate the inhuman treatment meted out on the victims. In Nigeria, the law prescribes 14 years imprisonment for the offenders. Some religious sects go as far as sanctioning death for the victims. However, the fact remains that whether homosexuality is unAfrican or not seems immaterial as the practice speedily makes waves and continues to stare us in the face in the wake of the 21st century. The need to evaluate, analyze and look for proactive measures to cure the malady since the Nigerian law frowns at it becomes exigent. This research analyzed the causes of homosexuality, the homophobic attitudes of the society and its traumatic effects on the victims using Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. The researcher found out that the homosexuals are traumatized in Nigeria as a result they let out negative behaviour such as infidelity in marriage and frictional interrelationship with negative consequence. This research goes ahead to proffer psychoanalytical principles as its theoretical framework as well as lending its measures as solutions to the menace since it goes against the societal norms.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Psychoanalysis, Nigerian Literature

Introduction

In the recent times, the concept of homosexuality has witnessed a large support, boom, hatred and condemnation in different parts of the world. In spite of the earlier purported notion in Africa and particularly Nigeria that homosexuality is ignominious and as such too sensitive to delve into the reality has continued to stare us in the face in the wake of 21st century. It therefore becomes necessary for the writers to explore this reality in their works. Some writers have highlighted the causes of this sexuality in their works while experiences have also shown that man's need for companionship has led to imbibing this sexuality. Man as a 'social animal' desires and is in constant need for another human being either to satisfy his sexual needs or to socialize. This points to the reason why some individuals who have spent so

many years in prison would tend to gratify their sexual urge with their fellow inmates since they can only be put in the same prison cells with people of their own sex. Ajibade's *Jailed for Life* is an example of this prison sexual non conformist experience. Ajibade asserts:

My eye never seen this king thing before. Man dey f-k another man's yansh. Haba!' It was case of sodomy. Since the warder did not catch them at it, the alleged offenders were not punished. But the authority decided to increase the potash...in the prison food. They believed it would kill the sexual urge of the prisoners. But the prison still throbbed with pent-up lust. (132)

The above experience arises from the shock experienced by one of the characters who is amazed at seeing an abomination committed. It goes to show that homosexuality exists in the prison according to Ajibade. Peer group pressures and teenagers in the unisex schools also fall prey to this arrangement too. Frankie the protagonist in the novel titled *Lives of Great Men* (2017) by Frankie Edozien gets lured in same sex affair by a hostel mate who seemed to be bored by the monotonous activity in the unisex school arrangement.

Some homosexuals can on their own, decide to take on the same sex orientation as a choice. In some part of Africa especially in Nigeria, some women attribute same sex affair as an avenue for women emancipation and liberation from what the women folk tagged 'patriarchal world'. This was the case of Habiba in the novel titled *Habiba* (2013) by Razinat Mohammed. This novel has Maiduguri (Northern Nigeria) and Muslim setting. Habiba is forced into marriage with a man old enough to be her grandfather as collateral for money her father borrowed from the old man long before the inception of the marriage. Consequently, she resolves to punish her father and husband by engaging in lesbian affair with her co-wife.

Economic advantage has also been noted to influence the choices people make as regards their sexuality. A high and influential person can lure a younger and poorer partner into same sex affair with the hope of supporting him/her financially. This was the case in "Caught in the Act", a short story by Ozioma Nduka culled from a collection titled *Rakes and Dustbins* by Mbanefo Ogene. Other people may still decide to indulge in same sex affair after going through an excruciating experience in the hand of the opposite sex. In another note, early exposure of children to obscene, pornographic images and movies involving same sex affair can also cause gender non conformity in Nigeria. Parental neglect of a child in the child's early stage of life can lead to the child to make wrong choices. This was the case of Adrian in *Walking with Shadows* by Jude Dibia who finds love and acceptance from the same sex partner. It was the love and acceptance which he had longed for from his parents and was denied him.

In Nigeria, many have assumed heterosexual because of social inhibitions imposed on homosexuality. When this happens the homosexual tendencies are according to Freud's psychoanalytical theory repressed, suppressed or denied which many a times cause fixations. Fixation as one of Freud's repressive model entails the inability of the human person to develop from one stage to another due to some suppressed characteristics on the course of growing up. This could result when a man grows to love another man as a result of certain experiences he had with the opposite sex at an early stage in life. The same also is applicable to the woman. A harsh and oppressive mother/son or daughter/father relationship can lead to a child seeking love with a same sex partner. As they remain fixated as a result of this long lasting experience, it becomes very difficult to convert "fully developed homosexual into heterosexual" (Freud, 151).

According to Freud, these unresolved and repressed issues which cause these fixations usual surge up when triggered by incidents and at severe cases may cause negative behaviours that are frowned at by the society. Freud however advocates for the treatment of these issues by a good application of the psychoanalytical theory. Wiedeman insists that a "purely analytical approach consisting only of interpretation, without any other elements of support, classification and confrontation with reality, hardly exist in discussions of the psychoanalytical therapy of homosexual men" (676). He goes ahead to elaborate the necessity of the theorists to help their patients internalize acceptable social values which will gradually correct those tendencies that are socially unacceptable.

Even though Nigeria has the right to outlaw whatever she deems unacceptable but a mother does not cast away a recalcitrant child. It is necessary for a body which makes a rule to also provide a remedy for victims who may get trapped as a result of circumstances beyond their control and all others in general. A good application of the provisions of the psychoanalytical measures especially in school, prisons and places where young people are mostly found since they seem to fall victim to the practice, can go a long way in checking these social anomaly.

Some of the homosexuals have confessed their helplessness at the point of acquiring the sexuality and their weakness at 'curing' it. In *She Called Me Woman (2018)*, a research work carried out by Azeernah Mohammed *et al* on twenty four Nigerian women. The authors found out that some of the women were traumatized as a result of their undying sexuality contrasting with the homophobic Nigeria society while many were vocal in canvassing for their right to exist in Nigeria. It therefore becomes pertinent to evaluate these traumas through a psychological means since it pertains to the human psych and by so doing device a way of addressing the issue.

Background and Concept of Homosexuality and Trauma

Homosexuality refers to any sexual attraction, romance, intimacy, relationship or intercourse between people of the same sex. It was referred to as 'gay' in the 1920s and 30s which according to Deana F. Morrow and Lori Messinger in *Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work Practice: Working with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People* "refers to as people (male or female) whose principal and intimate attractions and romantic relationships are towards other people of the same sex" (7). Bullough posits that "Homosexuality," a philologically awkward hybrid of Greek and Latin elements came to be the term applied to people who love those of the same sex, while "heterosexuality," equally philologically impure, came to be applied to those who gained pleasure from the opposite sex" (9).

David McWhirt et al, assert that "Karl Maria ... coined the term 'homosexual' (1869a, 1869b). This word was picked up by Gustav Jager (1884) and by Richard Von Krafft-Ebing (1894) who popularized it in the various translations of his work" (10). According to the scholars, other terms proposed by other scholars example "Sexual inversion" (1936) by Ellis and "inverted Sexual instinct" by Westphal and some other similar words for many years competed with the term as words meant to represent sexual orientations. However "...the use of the term 'homosexuality' by Magnus Hirschfeld ...carried the day" (10).

Trauma on the other hand refers to a severe encounter or experience that leads to intense sadness, pain or sorrow. People's traumatic experiences are varied and their responses too are in different forms and degrees. The traumatic experiences of rape, chronic illness or natural disaster could result to severe effects while some others are latent and seem not painful that we see them as part of everyday life. In this instance we have the structural violence. This arises as a result of laws and structures by an organization or a state which deprive individuals of their basic needs. This particular trauma seems painless and many a times lasts longer than necessary that the individual fails to see its effects. In this study therefore, trauma refers to the negative effects of the discrimination, intolerance and outlaw on the homosexuals emanating from Nigeria's religious and cultural orientations. Homosexual trauma in Nigeria arises out of the homophobic attacks on the victims by individuals and the law which proscribes fatal measures to them. These lead them to practice their sexuality in the closet with many assuming bisexual to fit into the society.

Homosexuality in African's Conception

The belief that homosexuality is alien to Africa in the prehistoric times can be traced to Edward Gibbons's assertion in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1781)*. He says that "I believe, and hope, that the Negroes, in their own country, were exempt from this moral pestilence [i.e.,

homosexual ‘vice’]” (506). This could however be erroneous as further studies by Stephen Murray suggest that “hardly any Europeans had traveled more than a few miles into the African interior than Gibbon made this assertion” (x1). According to Murray, Sir Richard Burton was later to validate Gibbon’s view in his statement that “the Negro race is mostly untainted by sodomy and triba[l]ism” (246). Burton made this assertion after observing homosexuality indiscriminately practiced Near East and South Asia as against what he witnessed in Africa. In 1987 however, Daniel Hrdy supports Gibbon’s position by stating that “homosexuality is not part of traditional societies in Africa” (11-13).

On the other hand some people believe that homosexuality existed in Africa but was introduced by the Europeans. The first in this regard is Daniel Vignal’s essay in 1983 in which he analyzed twenty three African novels and concluded that homosexuality was introduced into Africa by the Europeans. Few years later Chris Dunton reaffirms Vignal’s investigation with his text, *Wheyting Be Dat: The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature* after analyzing many African texts elaborately. Against the above assumptions Steven Murray and Roscoe carried out a more elaborate research in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* and found out many instances of homosexual practices in Africa. For instance in Lesotho same sex affair was practiced. Cicero opines that:

In Lesotho, females engage in what is commonly considered intimate behavior to the Western world: they kiss, sleep together, rub genitals, participate in cunnilingus, and maintain their relationships with other females vigilantly. Since the people of Lesotho believe sex requires a penis, however, they do not consider their behavior sexual, nor label themselves lesbians. (Lesbianism in Africa, 1)

Scholars have also traced same sex attraction in Nigeria. Bisi Alimi in her seminal article titled “If You Say Being Gay is not African, You Don’t Know Your History” maintains that “in digging up facts, I found that while many Africans say that homosexuality is un-African, African culture is no stranger to homosexual behaviours and acts” she goes further to state that “in my local language (Yoruba) the word for ‘homosexual is adufuro...in the Northern part of Nigeria, yan dauda is a Hausa term to describe effeminate men who are considered to be wives to men” (1). The above denial and acceptance dichotomy have remained unresolved and as such homosexuals are intimidated and their existence threatened leading to the trauma witnessed among them in Nigeria. More attention is given to this impasse against the expedient psychological measures needed to re-orientate the victims on the need to embrace the societal acceptable sexuality in Nigeria as a basis for societal reintegrate.

Homosexuality in Nigerian Literature

Previously, the concept of homosexuality was seen as too dishonouring and of western origin. Some of the African writers in general and Nigeria in particular were a bit reserved in delving into the concept as a result of detachment to what they call 'alien' to their culture. Some of the writers who ventured into it portrayed it negatively and seem to 'throw' it back to its originators by creating only white gay men in their works. The character of Joe Golder in Soyinka's *The Interpreters* is an American homosexual. In Dilibe Onyeama's *Sex is a Nigger's Game* the western racists fabricate tales of high sexual prowess in the Africans. However Brian (a white) is gay and comments that homosexuality was brought into Africa by the western colonists.

Recently, some Nigerians have imbibed the practice of same sex affair though some writers too still project it negatively. In Razinat's *Habiba*, the protagonist Habiba engages in lesbian affair with her co-wife to punish her husband and father for forcing her into early marriage with a man old enough to be her grandfather; an act deemed abominable among the Muslim adherents. The above texts give an unsympathetic portrayal of the theme of homosexuality as against recent works which witness an upsurge of homosexual themes in a positive light. Texts like Edozien's *Lives of Great Men* tells the story of the selfasserting homosexual character Frankie in America, Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* also tells the story of Ijeoma, a closeted homosexual in Nigeria. There are so many others like Ikpo's *Fimi Sile Forever*, Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, Iweala's *Speak No Evil* and a lot of short stories.

A Psychoanalytical Reading of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

Different societies have different views about homosexuality and this shapes their attitudes towards them. These attitudes emanate from one's cultural, religious, legal and sometimes ideological orientations. The homosexuals have been loved, appreciated, tolerated, despised, hated, banned or outrightly killed depending on the societies they belonged. Attitudes to same sex relationship give birth to the notion of homophobia and homophilia. Homophobia is total rejection, discrimination and intolerance to same sex orientation while homophilia is the acceptance, appreciation and love for homosexuality.

These attitudes however lead to different responses among the homosexuals. They are either 'proud' or in the 'closet'. A proud homosexual is one who asserts his/her sexuality without fear of intolerance, rejection or death while a homosexual in the closet is afraid of negative attitude. He hides behind closed doors to express his/her sexuality. Homophobic attitudes have been classified into societal, cultural, legal and religious categories. However, societal and religious homophobic attitudes give rise to the depressing and traumatic

experience witnessed by the protagonist Ijeoma in the text *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta.

Okparanta's text pictures vividly the daily inner struggles experienced by the same sex persons in the homophobic Nigerian society. As the plot begins the writer explores a strife and hostile environment made possible by the Nigerian civil war. The protagonist, Ijeoma at the tender age of eleven had to witness the gory sight of blood, massacres, decapitation and gruesome death which characterizes a war torn environment.

The war injects features like hate, irritability, hostility, strife, lack of food and safety eroding the peaceful, loving and tranquil atmosphere which characterized Ijeoma's home. Ijeoma's father was shelled. All these resulted to her mother's near insanity. In the guise of giving her a 'safer' environment, Ijeoma is practically thrown away to Nnewi at the house of a family friend (the Grammar school teacher) where she assumes the position of a house help. These experiences form the initial trauma as Ijeoma had to readjust to another home where the Grammar school teacher and his wife were to be her guardian. In Nnewi, she indulges in lesbian affair with Amina, a displaced Hausa girl. It was a shock to the two girls as the grammar school teacher (their guardian) opens the door and found the two girls copulating. The first words that bring them to consciousness are "...an abomination" he goes ahead to elucidate the gravity of the offence "...that is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! ...the Koran condemns it as well. I don't know much of Islam but I know enough to know that the Koran and the bible see eye to eye on this matter!" (UUT, 125).

Ijeoma leaves Nnewi to be with her mother in Aba on account of the 'abomination'. The tag of taboo and the religious background of Ijeoma's mother make the house too contemptuous for the two of them to live in. Her mother perceives the act as despicable, abominable and as such Ijeoma needed God's forgiveness and divine cleansing. Her mother begins a bible cancelling sessions with the hope of casting away the demon of homosexuality.

Against what her mother believes in, Ijeoma wishes to assert her sexuality. Consequently two contrasting worlds are created; one of her mother who pulls from a different standpoint and Ijeoma who sees the issue differently. Her mother desires that her daughter repents from the evil of same sex desire perceived with a religious lens as sinful and contravening the design of "a man and a woman" by God. She continues to preach to her daughter on the evil inherent in her actions "...man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (UUT, 74). Borrowing from Leviticus 18, she made it categorically clear the bible's take on the issue "...thou shall not lie with mankind, as with

womankind: it is an abomination” (UUT, 75). Ijeoma on the other hand tries without success to educate her mother on the contrary. She says “woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? Infinite possibilities, each one of them perfectly viable” (UUT, 83).

Even though she tries, Ijeoma gets subdued by the increasing religious indoctrinating power of her mother which condemns her sexuality. It has become an ever increasing shouts of “...you must ask God for forgiveness of all your sins especially for that one particular sin in you...no child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires. The mere existence of them is a terrible disrespect to God and to me!”(UUT, 86) in the house. In the protagonist, Okparanta portrays an individual who is inwardly tormented by increasing religious tenets, environmental tag of taboo and abomination projected by her society (Aba).

As the plot progresses, the reader is made to see that Ijeoma is battling to lie afloat against the teeming homophobic environment of her mother who represents her society that frowns at her sexuality and would go to the extent of burning the victim. One such case was the case of Adanna who gets burnt upon discovery. The mob who led the burning raid believed that the act “was aided by God, that an example needed to be set in order to cleanse Aba of such sinful way” (UUT, 210).

At the height of her mother and societal rebuff to her sexuality, Ijeoma resorts to self pity and depression. She goes to church often to plead for God’s forgiveness and cleansing as she had been labeled sinful and her acts despicable. “In the moment I began to believe myself a witch under the influence of the devil, and if Mama’s exorcism did not work, then it seems that I owed it to myself to find something that would. Self purification was the goal.” (UUT, 196). She really engages in a soul torturing dilemma. On a particular day, the dejection in her heart seems to envelope her. She goes to the church to seek answers from God as she states:

Just reaching the pulpit, I knelt down, pulled out my bible...I opened my bible, placed my palms firmly on its pages. Closed my eyes and prayed: Dear God, what is the meaning of this?...Dear God I am a sinner, and I come before you to beg you to please show me the path to righteousness. But what if I am not, in fact, sinning? What if I am subjecting myself to this guilt for no reason at all? Lord, I am confused. Please give me a sign. If there is any evil in my heart, please give me a sign so that I might recognize it and in doing so, avoid it. (UUT, 197)

She also finds herself weak to battle two opposing forces of homophobic attitudes and the ever undying lesbian desire. She tries to wobble between the two phenomena but happiness eludes her as the two are polar opposites. She however realizes that it is difficult to repress the homosexual pleasure she feels especially when triggered by euphoric and lustful thoughts of Ndidi. Okparanta writes:

I was full of thoughts of Ndidi. As I changed into my nightgown and climbed into bed, there she was, taking up all the spaces, right down to the cracks and crevices of my mind. I could not help myself ... I have myself having a physical reaction to her in my thoughts. I become so engrossed, so swollen with desire... memories of the bible study with Mama rushed back to me yet again, no matter how hard I tried to put them away from my mind. Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream, as if to mocking ask how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach.(UUT, 194-195)

Ijeoma continues to groan under the heavy burden of undying sexuality and internal fear of homophobic attacks. She despises men and heterosexual marriage in preference to her same sex partner Ndidi. This points to the reason why her marriage to Chibundu (a male) fails.

Conclusion

Homosexuality and trauma have continued to be enduring issues in a homophobic society. As homosexual traits remain undying and continue to manifest in the individual's life, he/she perpetually stands at loggerhead with his/her society that kicks at such orientation. At the height of it, the individual degenerates into trauma, frustration and depression. While analyzing the text, one observes the protagonist, Ijeoma who gets choked by two worlds of enduring same sex orientation and her immediate homophobic society. This however leads to depression, frustration, intra family fracas and many a times a failed heterosexual marriage as in the case of Ijeoma who had to quit her marriage with Chibundu to be with her homosexual partner, Ndidi.

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