

## Gender and Violence in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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### Abstract

Gender and violence are often recurring study interests in literary studies, and thus, there is a plethora of critical papers and research based on the subject matter. However, there has been no study of gender and violence in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree*. This paper examines the concepts of gender, sex, and gender-based violence, and the events in Okparanta's text connected to the topic. Set during the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, *Under the Udala Tree* presents the coming-of-age story of Ijeoma as she deals with the abuses inflicted on her by the war and her patriarchal culture.

**Keywords:** Gender, Sex, Violence, Abuse, Queer, War

### Introduction

Gender and the issues related to gender are serious contemporary issues. The issue of gender is a burning issue that's multifaceted. This is because in modern reality, humans

have found ways to broaden the scope of gender, and they have also found ways to complicate the issue of gender as well. From the basic understanding of gender where there are two polarized divisions of gender:

male and female; the concept of gender has broadened beyond that scope in modern times.

Nonetheless, gender is still considered valid or correct when it's between male and female division or sexes. This includes the modern era. These two sexes have different levels of relations and interactions between themselves. Often, the male is considered the stronger and more daring, and due to this, the female sex or gender is subjugated. The idea of the male being stronger also leads to different levels of violence enforced on the female gender.

Oluwole and Sofoluwe state that the concept of gender is like a matter of "oppositions" (25). It includes the disparity, or somewhat struggle, between the men and the women. The men are of the same gender and consider themselves superior to the women. There are differences between these genders in their physiology, behavior, and

every other aspect. This is the reason why the male always assert their dominance, because of the disparity and differences in the struggle. In addition, this struggle leads to violence or misunderstanding between these genders.

Due to the precarious nature of this subject matter, there have been various literary works of art that have thematically discussed the matter and have been studied in that line. However, there is a paucity of research or literary criticism of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* on the matter of gender and violence. The literary criticism of this text is usually done in the aspect of queerness or queer relationship in the text, neglecting the matter of gender and violence in the text.

Using the traditional concept of gender, there will be an analysis of the events of the text, exploring the violence caused by improper gender relations. Even though

there is the matter of queerness, the discrimination and maltreatment which follows queerness and queer relations is still out of this gender relations. All of these will be fully explored in this paper.

### **Gender and Sex**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed" (4). Thus, gender is socially made or constructed, it is not a concept that is inborn or solely natural to people. Gender are set of acceptable behaviors and norms people would have to learn as they grow up, differentiating one set from another.

There are two main genders--male and female. Most humans belong to either of these genders and are classified as such. Therefore, it is often expected that they

should behave in line with their gender. Humans learn and get to behave like the people in the gender before them because not acting or behaving like one's gender is tantamount to behaving like the opposite gender. This is why there are two opposing sides or genders.

A similar nomenclature to gender is sex. Sex points out the difference between a male and a female. Unlike gender though, sex is primarily biological than behavioral. The difference between gender and sex is clearly stated by Sotunsa. Sotunsa states that

Sex refers to the biological aspects of being male and female. Gender typically refers to the behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women.

Sex is considered a natural phenomenon, which is determined by biology, anatomy, and reproductive functioning. On the other hand,

gender is determined socially; it is the societal meaning assigned to males and females. (20)

According to Sotunsa's view of sex and gender, at the point of birth of any human, the sex of the child is already known. The child's sex is defined at that onset, and along the line of the child's growth, the child would have to pick up behavioral dispositions related to his or her sex. Sex is biological and cannot be learned while gender is a socially learned set of behaviours.

The two concepts of sex and gender are not independent of each other. They are highly connected, the only difference is that one is learned, while the other one is biological. The important fact, though, is that humans tend to learn the behaviors of whatever sex they encounter at birth. The structure of the human environment and society makes people begin to learn the

accepted ways they should behave and appear; it serves as a guide.

It is due to the nature that gender is culture-bound that people believe that people behave according to the specifications of the different cultures in the world. As one grows and matures, they learn their behavior according to their particular culture. Sotunsa makes this case when she writes that

Gender is often context and culture-bound. Whereas sex is biologically determined because an individual is born (in most cases) either a male or a female, gender is ascribed through the process of socialization. Gender classification prescribes expected roles for biological females and males but individuals do not always obey these prescriptions. Also, gender classifications are premised

on the maintenance of order and/or ideologies in a particular society. (21)

The ascribing of male and female gender to people, according to Sotunsa, is to maintain order and ideology in a community. The maintenance of order is pertinent so that the human community will be completely organized. This is why it is strange for most traditional communities whenever the specifications are not respected, or greatly differentiated.

Sometimes, the differentiation of gender is done to not only show the distinctions between male and female sexes but also to put the female aside from the male, and then have unsavory gender relations. Whenever gender relations happen, it is usually not harmonious. There have been several cases of violence or abuse whenever it comes to gender relations and interactions.

## **Gender and Violence**

Gender relations sometimes lead to abuse and violence. There are different levels of this abuse and violence; it can also come in different ways. There are a lot of factors causing the unsavory relationship between the two genders.

Oluwole and Sofoluwe state that it is usually not the distinction or differentiation that leads to the abuse but the structure put in place by the human society or culture. In addition to that, the oppression and domination of the female gender by the male gender does not occur in every human community or every sphere of the human community. There is domination or oppression in some places, cultures, and spheres. They posit that

The opposition caused by the separate genders sometimes enlarges the differences between males and females; and at other times, it

translates into the oppression and domination of one gender over the other, but this is not always the case. It is worthy of note that where these observed differences and opposition between the two genders do not translate to oppression and domination, some other sociological structure accounts for the attenuation.

(16)

Oluwole and Sofoluwe state that there can be underlying causes of oppression and domination of one gender over another. It does not necessarily have to be based on the primary issue of gender relations but a secondary reason and an offshoot. They go ahead to state that seniority and economic attainment, for instance, which affects other spheres of human life can also be a vital cause for the oppression and domination of one gender over another.

Another fact to note about gender and violence is that some scholars note it as "gender-based violence" (Watts et al., 1260). This gender violence is historically linked to the very establishment of human existence and the foundations of several human cultures. It can be traced to the first set of humans, and it is deeply tied to the history of humans.

This makes Amario argue that since the beginning of humans, there have been several forms of violence and abuse connected to gender relations. These abuses and violence "showed themselves in several human communities as a consequence of certain sectors' or groups' oppression over others. In this context, gender-based violence is a key social mechanism for upholding the oppression of women" (23). Most often, it is the male oppressing the female.

Watts et al. are also of the same view that gender-based violence is rooted in the history of mankind. It has existed since the formation of the first human culture. From the past historical time, it is connected to the present, and there are several spheres of human life it affects. Watts et al. state that "gender-based violence (GBV) is an ancient patriarchal system of oppression with global coverage, and serious public health problems that jeopardize women's health, which has a high incidence of occurrence in the underdeveloped countries of the world" (1262).

In a system rigged by the patriarchal nature of humans, women are heavily oppressed and subjugated. This oppression does not only exist in a certain location in the world, it exists everywhere on earth; it is a global problem. This affects the women's health or the health of the female gender. It also has a drastic effect on the general life and outlook of the women.

There are different levels of abuse and violence that women suffer at the hands of men and patriarchal human cultures. The abuse can be mild, semi-mild, or severe; it can also be an institutionalized abuse that's not openly showcased. In the cases where gender abuse is severe, the severity can be so frightening that it leads to loss of lives or rights to life. For instance, Airaojeb et al. note the cases that happen in some Asian, European, and African cultures as

In Asia and the Middle East, women are battered and killed in the name of prestige. Girls in Africa are subjected to genital mutilation because they believe in culture and tradition, which has been practiced and sustained from generation to generation, while in Western Europe travelers and refugee women face the challenges of persecution because they refuse to accept and conform to

their host community's standard of morals and values. (1)

Airaojeb et al. reiterate the fact that gender abuse and violence is a global problem. There are also several ways and processes of enacting this violence; it varies in cultures, and from one geographical location to another. Each culture looks for its modalities to enact the abuse.

Reiterating how gender-based violence and abuse is a global case, Kombate makes the same case. For Kombate, he points out that between the two basic genders, the female is susceptible to abuse. The abuse is a result of the desire of the male to be in control and the leader of the community. It occurs everywhere, and for the female, it begins in infancy even before the childhood of the female gender.

Gender violence is deeply entrenched in human societies and institutions. In this way, the female will get to experience or

encounter it throughout her life and in everything she is doing, ranging from family to religious institutions, and even to other institutions. Kombate points it out by stating that

Globally, women are vulnerable and are at risk of enduring emotional and psychological trauma through harassment, terror and threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation, and exploitation. This extreme expression of male control and power over women often begins in infancy and may accompany them throughout their lives in various relationships as daughter, sister, intimate partner, wife, and mother. All forms of violence against women and girls occur daily in homes, families, communities, institutions, and workplaces. (138)

Therefore, gender violence is deeply sown into the fabric of human life. However, the most common form of Gender-based violence is the one experienced in the family due to how it is the smallest and closest family unit, whereby the female is oppressed, maltreated, and subjugated by the male. It is from the family that the indoctrination of the male, and oppression of the female starts.

Due to this, Johnson asserts that gender-based violence in the family is often expected and felt, and there are two major forms of such violence in the family: situational family violence and couple violence (18). Sometimes, the violence in the family can escalate beyond what is necessary, and it can lead to severe violence. When it leads to severe violence, it can be as grievous as the loss of life or lives, depending on the situation.

Furthermore, harassment is one of the most common methods of gender-based

violence and abuse. It happens in most cultures, and the male gender who are often the perpetrators of the crime do not see anything wrong with it. The females are usually harassed, in one way or another, unprovoked. The consequences of the harassment are that it can be damaging to the victims.

A study carried out by the United States Agency for International Development presents the kind and nature of harassment secondary school students encounter in schools. The harassment varied, from verbal assault to physical. Girls are also coerced into relationships by their male teachers. the study states its findings:

Harassment by male teachers was reported in all three schools with various degrees of impact (from male teachers strategizing together to gain access to the girls to male teachers using sexual examples and

jokes during lessons). Girls reported fearing any attention from a male teacher. A group of four girls said that they failed two years previously because they reported a teacher. Consequently, the fear of victimization prevented girls from identifying the teachers after the research. (34)

The harassment destabilizes the girls so much. They do not walk alone in the school compound, and they do not visit the male staff room. The girls also avoid certain subjects taught by harassing male teachers. In this difficult kind of situation, the girls do not concentrate in school, as they are afraid of some male teachers.

The other form of abuse against the female gender is the systemic and institutionalized silencing of the women. Women are expected not to talk too much, not to exude so many actions, or to be in

every activity; they are to be seen, not heard. The patriarchal nature of most cultures makes women docile and inactive. Sometimes, patriarchy uses severe gender abuse to instill this docility in these women. Fortier states that

In some patriarchal societies, women are faced with all sorts of dehumanization ranging from deprivation, negligence, maltreatment, marginalization, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation, and isolation which emanate from aspects of the people's culture. In such societies, for instance, women are seen not heard. They live in the shadow of men from their maiden homes to their matrimonial homes; hence they are regarded as second-class citizens. (27)

The women are not in the same class as the men. The women are considered inferior

to the men. This, of course, is after the women must have undergone several abuses and discriminatory actions. There is already an institutionalized process against them.

Gender and violence are present in the events of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree*. This is made possible by the experiences of Ijeoma in the text, where she has to deal with a patriarchal culture as a queer person. She lives against the dictates of the culture, and this leads to several forms of abuse on her to coerce her into living within the dictates of this culture.

### **Gender and Violence in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree***

*Under the Udala Tree* begins at the beginning of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. The war is a bloody one, and Ijeoma's family struggles to survive and avoid death. Due to the war and culture present in the text, there are traces of gender and violence in the events of the text. Ijeoma is an

average school girl, staying with her family, thrown into a war she does not know about. However, her life takes a total turn when her father dies.

Ijeoma's father's death sets off a chain of events that makes her life not remain the same again. The narrator captures this moment best as "things upside down after the death of Ijeoma's father Uzo, a man who liked to wallow in thoughts" (7).

The situation of his death becomes a haunting memory for Ijeoma. The macabre violence in the scene mars her and her mother. The man, who she is so much attached to, dies most tragically, in a bloody war. The tragedy of Ijeoma's father's death is very well described by the narrator as:

We found him face-down on the black-and-white-tiled floor of the dining room. Mama leaped to him, bent over his body, and resumed calling out his name. His hands were

tangled strangely around his body, dying branches twisted around a dying trunk. Pieces of wood from the dining table lay scattered around him. A purple-brown hue had formed where the pool of his blood was collecting. (19)

This is one of Ijeoma's first signs of violence and disaster in the war. It is also the most devastating as she loses her father who she prefers to her mother. Even though this is not regular gender-based violence, this is still violence, and it is more of a state-orchestrated violence against Ijeoma. It affects Ijeoma's mind negatively.

The violence during the war is unprecedented. The level of destruction and death taunts Ijeoma and other characters in the text, especially Ijeoma. Still haunted by the death of her father, she witnesses other macabre and gory scenes. One of the scenes is narrated as "Corpses flanked the roads.

Decapitated bodies. Bodies with missing limbs. All around was the persistent smell of decaying flesh. Even if I was no stranger to these sights and smells, Papa's case being the foremost in my mind, still I felt a lurching in my stomach" (48).

The frequent sights she sees during the war torment her emotionally and psychologically. Thus, she is abused in this way. In addition to that, the terrible sights have more damaging effects on her than it can on any male.

Aside from the terrible sights Ijeoma gets to witness, including the death of her father, the other common abuse she suffers during the war is the blockade imposed on Biafra by the opposing Nigerian Government. The blockade leads to hunger and the lack of certain goods in Biafra. This is so much that regular things she is used to become luxury. For instance, milk is only

drunk by the very wealthy or connected in Biafra.

The narrator presents the situation through Ijeoma as "it had been some time since we'd had any bread or tea or Kellogg's cornflakes, or Peak milk or Carnation evaporated milk" (22). This makes Ijeoma malnourished in a way, although she is still able to feed. It is a grave form of abuse as Ijeoma and other characters are denied their basic needs of food.

In the travails of the war, Ijeoma discovers her queer side and falls in love with someone she shouldn't fall in love with, Amina. She meets Amina after a bombing as described: "The war propitiates Ijeoma's first encounter with Amina under an updated tree when Ijeoma goes to fetch kerosene because there is no electricity after a bombing near the teacher's house" (104). Ijeoma meeting Amina changed her life in a great way and ensured life did not remain

the same again. It is after Ijeoma meets Amina that they begin to encounter a great level of gender abuse.

It starts with her mother and her guardian frowning at their friendship due to the nature of the war and enmity at that time. Amina, a girl from the North, is not expected to be friends with Ijeoma, an Igbo girl, and this is because of the war between the South-east and the rest of Nigeria. Thus, Ijeoma is advised to desist from such a relationship. Ijeoma's mother gives a piece of advice to Ijeoma:

You're Igbo. That girl is Hausa. Even if she were able to be a boy, don't you see that Igbo and Hausa would mean the mingling of seeds? Don't you see? It would be against God's statutes' ... Besides, are you forgetting what they did to us during the war? Have you forgotten what they did to Biafra? Have you

forgotten that it was her people who killed your father? (76)

Noticing that their friendship is beyond what she thinks, Ijeoma's mother tells her that even if she is a boy, it will still be hard to be with Amina. This means that Ijeoma's situation as a girl makes the matter worse. First of all, Ijeoma has no business having a female very close friend, and it should not be someone from the North.

The situation aggravates further when Ijeoma and Amina are caught having sex by their guardian--the teacher. The patriarchal nature of their culture prevents people of the same sex from copulating. Therefore, when their guardian, the school teacher, sees them, he considers it a great sacrilege. They are emotionally and physically abused. The teacher watches the girl naked while condemning the act, using the bible as a means of supporting his actions. The teacher's actions are presented as:

Pointing to the Bible, he cried, "An Abomination!" The word reverberated in my head ... Amina and I began to cry, deep cries that made our shoulders heave ... We were naked, and we felt our nakedness as Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden, at the time of that evening breeze. Our eyes had become open, and we too sought to hide ourselves. (125)

It is a shameful experience for Ijeoma and Amina, standing there naked, while they are condemned totally. The girls are forced to see themselves through the eyes of the teacher and to see the act they had done as an abominable act made possible by the patriarchal culture. It's also a painful experience for them as they don't get to remove the thoughts in their minds.

These girls feel so ashamed of this act and the way they were caught that they

inwardly intended to expunge the idea that they are queer from their minds. This is even made worse when Ijeoma's teacher and guardian her mother, and her mother kill off Ijeoma's tendency of being queer. Ijeoma's mother married her off against her will to kill off her queer nature. Marrying off Ijeoma against her will is a very disastrous act that makes her deeply unhappy.

Ijeoma suffers different levels of abuse after she is caught having sex with Amina. First, she is separated from Amina. Secondly, she is married off to Chibundu. Thirdly, she struggles with her identity as a queer woman as she could not make any other relationship work out; her mind is destabilized. In addition, she is also abused in her marriage with Chibundu. Finally, she can't get a clear image of herself and who she is, losing her identity.

Ijeoma is so traumatized by her experience that none of her other

relationships work out. First, her marriage to Chibundu, her husband, is loveless and is just for mere formality. It is her mother who pushes her into the marriage, to cover up her queer tendencies. The marriage is not only loveless, it is also an unhappy situation for the couple.

In dealing with her unhappy marriage, Ijeoma gets into a relationship with Ndidi. The relationship with Ndidi is not smooth at all as the trauma of the past is still there. Her relationship with Ndidi, the only other person she tried loving truly, hit the rocks in a very sad way. Ijeoma ends it very tragically: "I banish all thoughts of you. I banish you. I banish you. I banish you" (260). This means that she is so emotionally affected by how harsh her guardian and mother were in condemning her.

In trying to heal from the trauma, Ijeoma goes on a self-purification witch-hunt against herself. She wants to purge herself of

whatever she is feeling regarding the situation. She wants to heal from the trauma and the pain it causes, so, she thinks of what actions to take to make her heal from this trauma. She takes on motherhood as motherhood will make her "more invested in the marriage to forget Ndid and the past" (242).

Ijeoma does not only try to heal from the trauma of the past, and how unhappy her relationships have been, but she also decides to purge herself of her queerness. This is as a result of the gruesome reality and violence queer people encounter in Nigeria. The pervading patriarchal nature of Nigeria abhors queerness. Two tragic events in Aba accelerate her decision to purge herself. One, a gay couple is tortured to death and left naked in a bus (205), and Adanna, Ijeoma's lesbian friend, is lynched (207).

Ijeoma's life turns out tragically as she is given a sad life, deprived of love, and given a life she does not cherish, against her will. Chibundu, her husband, does not love her, knowing fully well she practices "an abomination" (231). He only marries her for children, and particularly for a son. Therefore, when it does not work out as he expected, he lashes out his frustrations at Iatoma, abusing her verbally and physically.

On one of their disagreements, Chibundu opens up to Ijeoma that he knows what she is into, and what he had expected from her. He says: "Before there was her, there was me. I just know that we will make it work ... You haven't tried enough ... And if all else fails, I do want my son" (285). Finally, Chibundu gives up on making the marriage work and states that he only needs a son.

## Conclusion

Gender and violence are present and can be easily validated in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree*. It is Ijeoma who suffers this mostly alongside other female characters in the text. Due to the war setting of the novel, the characters are physically and psychologically abused, maimed, and killed. Ijeoma loses her father, suffers from hunger, and encounters several war attacks. Ijeoma falls in love with a girl like her, and discovers her queer side, challenging the patriarchal system she is born into, letting off a negative chain of reactions that consume her.

In all, Ijeoma suffers different levels of gender-based violence and abuse due to her gender and her sexuality. She wouldn't have suffered this if she was male, or didn't go against the tide. At the end of the text, her life is miserable, as she discovers the life she is living is not what she wants; instead, it is the life imposed on her.

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