

# ASEMKA

THE BILINGUAL LITERARY JOURNAL  
OF THE FACULTY OF ARTS  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

NUMBER 11(1)

JUNE 2021



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## **GRANT SUPPORT**

*Asemka* is funded through grants from the Office of the Dean, Faculty of Arts; the Publications' Board; and the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.

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The cover and page design elements were inspired by the Adinkra symbols of Ghana.

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## **ASEMKA: EDITORIAL**

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The Number 11(1) June 2021 Edition of *ASEMKA, The Bilingual Literary Journal of the University of Cape Coast* contains seven (7) papers centred on diverse areas of teaching and research in the Humanities, spanning between themes in Literature and Religion. This Edition contains only one (1) manuscript in French. The remaining six (6) are in English. The papers span between thematic areas in Literature and Religious Studies. The contributors are from Ghana and Nigeria. These papers were taken through rigorous blind peer-review processes and painstaking editorial work.

### **First Section**

*Britnum, A. G.'s paper titled, "Mariama Bâ/Ramatoulaye en un combat douteux dans Une si longue lettre », ....*

### **Second Section**

*Nyatname, P. N.'s paper titled "An ecocritical reading of Victor Yankah's The Pretty Trees of Gakwana and Sikaman"* examines two plays of Victor Yankah concepts within analytical framework of ecocriticism. It is a critical assessment of Yankah's ecodrama in the light of ecocriticism, a field of literary theory and criticism. It draws on the broader concepts and discourses of ecocriticism and demonstrates how the playwright shares a symbiotic relationship which has become a significant feature of the selected plays. This is to emphasise Yankah's view and preoccupations about the mutual relationship between the human other and nature - the natural world of environment with the view to prove the playwright's concern about the interference of human beings into the world of nature. A situation which adversely results in the disruption of the symbiotic (human-nature) relationship. The significance of the paper lends credence to ways in which Yankah provokes environmental debate and a rethinking in African playwrights concerning environmental issues to raise awareness and inspire environmental consciousness and ecological sustainability among people in Africa, Ghana in particular. The findings reveal both the epistemic and retributive forces of nature as well as raising concerns about the environment, ecological consciousness in advocating for ecological sustainability in modern African theatre and dramatic literature scholarship. The paper offers insight into and expand the frontiers of the discourse of ecocriticism in the global south and adds to the relatively new and developing interest in environmental discourses on the African continent and what they reveal about African environmental consciousness and ecological dimensions.

*Amissab-Arthur, H. W.*'s paper, "**Examining mothering: Race and abjection in Wilson's *Our Nig* and Walker's *The Color Purple***" analyses the concept race and abjection in African-American women's writings. It specifically emphasizes the idea of mothering during the freedom epoch of the African Americans after slavery. The focus is on mother characters in the novels of Wilson and Walker. The paper borders on some thematic components which come together in unravelling the identities of both the mother characters and their children when faced with issues of race and abjection.

*Awojobi, P. O.*'s paper, "**The Ministry of Moses Orimolade and the prophetic tradition of Israel: An ecclesio-historical study**", examines the ministry of Moses Orimolade and the prophetic tradition of Israel from an ecclesio-historical perspective. The thrust of his paper is to investigate the origin, and the place of ecstatic prophecy in ancient Israel and its reflections in Moses Orimolade's prophetic ministry in Nigeria. Historical method was used for the research. It uses historicity and ecclesiology as conceptual framework to contend that Israel's prophetic tradition started before Israel settled in Canaan where she interacted with other nations. While it cannot be disputed that Israel must have been influenced by the culture of its neighbours, there were some elements in the religion that were peculiar to Israel. The study concludes that Israelite prophetic heritage cannot be compared with the divination in ancient Near East. There exist a parallel between ecstatic prophetic ministry in ancient Israel and Moses Orimolade prophetic ministry in Nigeria. The paper recommends that contemporary Prophets in Nigeria and beyond must strive to fulfil divine mandate received by them at all cost.

*Ofei, D. & Oppong Adjei, D.*'s paper titled, "**Sexual Identities in Africa: A Queer Reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees***" analyses queer sexual identities in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. It draws on the broader concept of queer analysis and demonstrates how *Under the Udala Trees* uses its narrative to conceive space and language whose midpoint encompasses literary innovations and the significance of some experiences of queer individuals within an African setting. Ultimately, instead of simply emphasizing these sexualities as alternative solutions in adverse conditions to some individuals who cannot help being the way they are, the paper unravels the literary merits such as shock, characterization and thematic values of queer sexualities in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*.

*Sam, C. A. & Nkansah, S. K.*'s paper, "**Evidences of our Inhumanity: Representations of Evil and the Quest for Postcolonial Healing in Tadjoo's *The Shadows of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda***",

explores the literary representations of evil in relation to the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda while simultaneously looking at therapeutic strategies in healing the wounds of the past as depicted in Veronique Tadjó's *The Shadows of Imana: Travels in the heart of Rwanda* using Kant's conceptions of evil and postcolonial literary theory. The results of the analysis is that hatred, otherness, genocide and remembrance constitute conversations for understanding travel writings and historical violence.

Inusah, A-R.'s paper, "**Lundaa as speech surrogate of Dagbamba**" examines surrogate language in Dagbani, a Mabia language spoken in the Northern Region of Ghana. The paper pays attention to its functions and its transformation from traditional to the contemporary sociocultural issues. Premised on participant-observation, the paper supports the multi-toned language represented on a pressure drum capable of many pitches. It attests that the *lundaa* 'pressure drum' is a speech surrogate used among Dagbani speakers. The *lundaa* has a wide distribution of functions but this paper is focused on the core functions of drum language that include *molo* 'announcement', *salima* 'Panegyric', *ginguani* 'invocation' and *naba* 'proverbs' as examples of drum literature and transformation. The paper suggests that the communication potential of the *lundaa* rhythms and its interpretation leads to an understanding of the sociocultural life of the people.

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# Sexual Identities in Africa: A queer reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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***Josephine Delali Ofei***

*University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.*

[josephine.ofei@stu.ucc.edu.gh](mailto:josephine.ofei@stu.ucc.edu.gh)



***Daniel Oppong-Adjei***

*University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.*

[daniel.oppoing-adjei@ucc.edu.gh](mailto:daniel.oppoing-adjei@ucc.edu.gh)

## Abstract

In Africa, queer sexual identities have received mixed feelings, leading to the debate in a bid to clearly define the legalization or non-legalization of it in various countries. And, looking at the current changing trends of this concept in Africa, the selected literary text happens to situate itself well within the fluid queer discourse. It follows then that the text provides the sub-plot of characters that have an overtly queer erotic and queer social bonding with some other characters. Consequently, the crust of this study is to draw on the broader queer concept in interrogating some pressing concerns of queer sexual identities in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Among other things, the research demonstrates how contemporary works of fiction like *Under the Udala Trees* use their narratives to conceive space and language whose midpoint encompasses literary innovations and the significance of some experiences of queer individuals within an African setting. The study ultimately uncovers the literary merits of queer sexualities in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* instead of simply portraying these sexualities as alternative solutions in adverse conditions to some individuals who cannot help being the way they are.

**Keywords:** heteronormative; homophobic; queer, sexuality; udala.

## Introduction

Sexuality is a central aspect of human life which is often influenced by the interaction of biological, sociological and religious factors, among others. For a number of Africans, for instance, it is simply explained along binary dimensions. Quite a number of Africans, therefore, mostly express their internal and deeply felt erotic emotional attachments towards the opposite sex. However, an individual within this context who happens to be sexually attracted to another person of the same sex, or something between the binary sexes is seen as going against the norm; hence, may be termed queer. “Queer” is a defining term for an array of possible sexual identities which include: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex, among others. With this definition in mind, many African texts seem to be written based on the default reading that is characterized by a set of fairly concrete heteronormative features. Such default readings touch on crucial aspects of our identities as human beings in a communal environment. Based on this assumption, queering becomes a tool of literary analysis for considering the more fluid spectrum of gender attitudes in a text such as Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*.

Following the works of Chris Dunton, Judith Butler, Eve K. Sedgwick, Rania A. Salem and Taiwo A. Osinubi, studies on queer sexualities have elicited considerable attention. The concern of this study is to draw on the broader queer concept in interrogating the literary merits and some pressing concerns of queer sexual identities in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*. Perhaps, the situation of individuals in queer sexualities is best understood by the following remark by Louis Gooren (who quotes Kertbeny) that: “In addition to the normal sexual urge in men and women, nature in her sovereign mood has endowed at birth certain male and female individuals with the homosexual urge, thus placing them in a sexual bondage...” (637). The present study becomes necessary as it specifically underscores the protagonist’s battle with a queer sexual identity in a heteronormative society.

*Under the Udala Trees* introduces to us what could be termed an unconventional perspective of queer sexuality in Africa. Ijeoma, the protagonist of *Under the Udala Trees*, identifies herself within the queer circle of humanity. She discovers her sexual orientation at an early age to be opposed to what is accepted by society as right and normal. In effect, Ijeoma battles with herself and society in an attempt to fall in line with the stipulated norm. The protagonist’s life story is set in Nigeria, at the beginning of the Civil War in the 1960s. Because her father (or Papa) is killed in a bomb raid and consequently, her mother (or Mama) is unable to afford the responsibilities of single parenting, Ijeoma is left in the care of a “grammar school teacher” and his wife

in another town. Here, “under the udala trees”, she meets and falls in love with an orphaned Hausa girl named Amina.

As it is commonly accepted, her first bonding in life is with her mother, another female who raises her right from conception through infancy to the period when they are temporarily separated. This falls in line with Adrienne Rich’s contention that whereas men have only one innate sexual orientation that draws them to women, their counterparts on the other hand have two intrinsic orientations: the first erotic bond toward a woman; the second, toward men. It follows then that the natural sexual bond for these two sexes is toward women. Following the Freudian theory, the new born girl is more likely to be sexually neutral. And so, in Ijeoma’s case, prenatal and postnatal factors play major roles in determining her sexual identity. She draws her sexual orientation from her childhood experiences and nurtures it on a tabula rasa. With the absence of her father during the peak of her developmental stage, her closest social interactions are largely with the few women (ranging from her mother through Amina, back to her mother and then to Ndidi) who play significant roles in her entire life.

Largely speaking, Mahrukh Khan and Kamal Haider agree with Sigmund Freud on the concept that the daughter is created to divert her sexual cravings towards the father and “along these lines, she advanced towards a heterosexual womanliness that finished in bearing a child who replaced the inattentive penis” (2). Nonetheless, Ijeoma’s father establishes at an early stage of her life that she is not carved out to tow this heterosexual order. He in turn further lacks any such emotions for her. This is realized in the part of the narration when the protagonist remarks about her father: “He let go of my hand and nudged me to go on *to explore my ordained sexuality* without him” (9, emphasis in italics is ours). So sudden was the decision taken simultaneously with the action to the extent that, the import is only realized later in the text when the protagonist battles with being in a heterosexual marriage. The main analysis is captured in the following sub-headings:

### **Breaking boundaries for queer companionship**

The theme of the desire for a queer companionship looms largely in *Under the Udala Trees* since the protagonist makes it one of her main quests. It is possible to say that the companionship a character seeks may be informed by the kind of identity the character subscribes to. The description of Ijeoma’s first encounter with Amina, who is just about her age, is symptomatic of the two girls’ transgression with the patriarchal rules. Ijeoma looks at Amina the way a heterosexual man will normally admire a woman. According to Ijeoma:

She had a skin as light as mine. Yellow, like a ripe pawpaw. She wore a tattered green pinafore that was bare at the sides. Her hair hung in long clumps around her face, like those images of Mami Wata, hair writhing like serpents. But there were no serpents on her. She looked too dazed or disoriented, or simply too exhausted, to speak (104).

By employing rich simile and colourful visual imagery in these particular expressions, Ijeoma communicates her admiration of and concern for Amina, as a (heterosexual) man would admire a woman. Similarly, it is worthy to note that by alluding to one's object of adoration, like Ijeoma does in the mind, helps to formulate one's sexual identity. It could therefore be argued that through the process of formulating such entities, the reality may be constructed. This sinks in with Sara Heinämaa's assertion that:

This notion is intuitive, and it neatly fits our common-sense conception of human affairs... We tend to love things and persons that we consider good and beautiful (or superb, terrific, cool, etc.), and we tend to value and appreciate the things and persons that we happen to love (1).

And so, in this same instance, Ijeoma draws a circle around the situated sexual identity to which both girls belong. She further *illegitimizes* the notion that there exists the man and woman gender binary constructions that assign specific roles to individuals, right from birth. Therefore, the understanding is created to the effect that, it is not always the case that because there is a man, there should be a woman; or since there is a woman, there should evidently be a man in all amorous relationships. On this, Friedrich Nietzsche argues that: "there is no being behind doing, effecting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything" (as cited in Butler 34). Obviously in this fragment, the action of admiration is what matters and not the admirer or the admired. Ijeoma's narration seems to establish the argument that, both the male and the female bodies are categories produced by the performances that define gender.

Notwithstanding the epistemic paradoxes that bound the main perceptions of identity, the body as a conceptual entity as well as the body as a performative could be seen as emerging from a formulative approach. It follows then that an ideological appraisal of identity may not necessarily generate its validity. Hence, the paradoxes rather seem to examine a body's conceptual effectiveness. These include a person's scope of reproducing or contending the dominant norms; as well as the magnitude to which it

legitimizes marginalized individuals by the status quo (Rahal 36). Ijeoma's conceptualization of her nonconforming identity as performative, challenges the dichotomization of her gender while empowering her against the absolute traditional gender norms of her society. This constructed reality becomes the true identity of both Ijeoma and her partner, Amina, and later on, Ndidi, another queer character. However, emphasis is particularly laid on Ijeoma because as will later be spelt out in this piece, her body emotionally rejects anything that has to do with the opposite sex.

Alternatively, this admiration episode is further interpreted as Ijeoma's practical efforts in helping both her and Amina to reconstruct their sexual reality which subverts the heteronormative standards of their society. The two girls' transgression is further evident in the way they stare at each other. Besides, Ijeoma admits an intimate attraction towards this new girl as she confesses: "The moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her" (105). Notably, starring admiringly at a fellow female in a heterosexual environment remains arguably a prerogative of the masculine gender. As a matter of fact, this action of the two girls deviates from the stipulated heterosexual order in their social setting. By deviating from this designated norm of the authoritarian heterosexuality, the two girls further hamper the moral economy of socially delineated sexual expressions. On this, Cedric Courtois in his study agrees with John Berger when the latter remarks that:

*men act and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. [...] The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (Berger 47, as cited in Courtois 126).

The two girls' subconscious minds work in unison while forming special opinions about each other without realizing it. Something in the way each of them looks and acts at that particular time triggers their emotions, causing an amorous attraction. This meeting of these girls is therefore skillfully weaved into the plot of the story to foreshadow the beginning of the *abominable* act that the two characters are yet to commit in their heteronormative setting.

Strategically, the narration of the queer love between these two girls commences under an udala tree, making it necessary to take a consideration of the symbolic representation of this tree in the Nigerian context. The udala, also known as udara (*Chrysophyllum albidum*), according to Okechuku C. Agukoronye, is a popular fruit tree which is mostly found in the community square. It is: "a kind of native apple tree, which for the Igbo symbolizes



fertility and the spirit of children” (Agukoronye 95). Metaphorically, the two girls sitting under an udala tree can be read as appropriately providing strategies to conceive a justifiable space for their queer sexual desires. As may be observed, the activities performed under this tree by the Igbo community express companionship, love, as well as sharing and caring. Coincidentally, the protagonist in this novel is an Igbo girl whose belief in the significance of the tree as a deity is foregrounded by the fact that, she compares her object of love to a water goddess. In line with this, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen intimates that: “The concept of the ‘mother water’ goddess, *Mammy Water*, is more than of a divinity. She also embodies and manifests important aspects of womanhood in pre-colonial Igbo culture and society” (30, emphasis in italics is ours). The double description and emphasis laid on the divinity in this fragment indicates a divinely ordained encounter between this pair.

Besides the above, Okwuosa et. al. opine that the Igbo mother water goddess controls both the entry and the exit of every member of the community into and from the physical world. She is recognized as the goddess of the crossroads and so, she sits at a vantage point to control the membership of this world. This goddess is responsible for challenging the pact of destiny between one’s body and soul which may be endorsed by the Supreme Being. The goddess is also believed to endorse the destinies of her true worshippers. With these explanations, the understanding that could be established is as follows: *Under the Udala Trees* subtly broaches upon the theme of queer sexualities as a seemingly inherent trait. Also, Ijeoma sitting under the tree and acknowledging the fair skins of both Amina and herself, as well as the long flowing hair of Amina, is symbolic of her veneration to this deity. Consequently, the tree becomes one of the literary strategies for normalizing queer sexual desires in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*. It is under the atmosphere of this tree that the two girls first awaken their queer sexualities. Also, under the shade of this tree, Ijeoma shares her time, love and body with Amina. Perhaps, it is under this tree where the girls sit and stare at each other that the reader begins to assume that Ijeoma’s queer sexual identity is one of the character traits with which she was born.

The narration demonstrates that the queer bond between the protagonist and Amina is not solely based on the sexual exploits the two girls undertake. It is birthed from a series of companionship that the two derive from nowhere else other than from each other. Ijeoma is half orphaned whereas Amina is the only surviving member of her immediate family. The two lack any form of parental love since the grammar school teacher and his wife only regard them as “more help” (106) to the household chores. This further helps them to develop stronger queer ties. In a flashback, Ijeoma recounts: “That evening, Amina and I peeled the yams together, rinsed them

together, our fingers brushing against each other's in the bowl... At the end of it all, I carried my lantern and led Amina into my hovel, where I offered half of my mattress to her" (106 –107).

Metaphorically, half of her life becomes Amina's, with the crickets singing their night song which serves as a stimulus that gradually turns the spark into fire. This fire symbolizes the physical erotic encounter that occurs between the two girls right after their usual night bath. The protagonist lets us in on this aspect of her life to prove the possibility of a queer erotic encounter between same sex partners. It is actually something that starts off as a spark which explodes into a pleasurable desire for both of them. This is evident in the following:

I ran my hands up and down Amina's braids some more, up and down her arms. And Amina did the same to me... In the near darkness, our hands moved across our bodies. We took in with our fingers the curves of our flesh, the grooves. Our hands, rather than our voices, seemed to do the speaking. Our breaths mingled with the night sounds. Eventually our lips met. This was the beginning, our bodies being touched by the fire that was each other's flesh (117).

The progressive and erotic encounter in this episode is one of the affectionate manifestations of the love they had earlier and silently developed for each other. The protagonist contrasts this intimate experience she shares with Amina to the kiss she shares with Chibundu, her husband, when they were still little kids. Describing it, she cleverly chooses her diction to denote her total resentment for any heterosexual encounters. In the manner now being indicated, Ijeoma calls the kiss she and Chibundu share "a clumsy kiss" (233) which she equates to "taking a spoonful of chloroquine when you had malaria" (46). Consequently, she adds that: "There was hardly another option, so you just did it. The first spoonful and then the next, and then the next. If not, things would only get worse" (46). With this, she proves that the kiss was just to relief Chibundu from an awkward situation created by the pair. Although this was a platonic kiss, Ijeoma grows up to still resent the mere thought of it. The opportunities provided for heterosexual intimacies between Ijeoma and Chibundu attest to the belief which may be held by some persons that her body was not made to accommodate heterosexual intimacies. In contrast to the longing she has for Amina, Ijeoma detests the mere touch of her husband, Chibundu. All her encounters with Chibundu are narrated as unendingly exhausting journeys. In contrast, the second encounter Ijeoma has

with Amina also depicts a longing that is narrated with passionate attachment. This is discovered and Ijeoma is sent to Aba to live with her mother.

Before that, everything seemed to be going on well with both girls until an adult character intrudes. The feeling of companionship and the chastity of children which is characterized by the *udala* are snatched from these queer partners the moment the “grammar school teacher” walks in on them. This particular encounter signifies the conception of Ijeoma’s subsequent traumatic experiences. The appearance of the teacher in this episode unsettles all three characters like a blow, leaving them all in a surprised mood. And so, the actions that follow are in quick successions. The teacher draws a link between their sexual exploits and what the Bible has to say about it: “An abomination!” (125). He inflicts both physical and mental pain on the girls by first pulling them off the mattress and slapping each on the cheek. At that instance, the mental agony the girls experience is marked by an allusion to Adam and Eve who are infamously credited with the primary cause of the sinful nature of humanity: “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).

Like the biblical Adam and Eve, this also marks the first instance in Ijeoma’s life where she is told by a superior person she has sinned. This feeling of guilt is conditioned into them by the cultural context within which they find themselves. Nonetheless, Ijeoma still expresses the innocence of their love by declaring before the small tribunal that comprises the grammar school teacher, his wife and Ijeoma’s mother that: “Amina and I, we didn’t think anything of it” (128).

The girls’ innocence is reinforced by the fact that these same adults who are condemning the act now are the very people who indirectly and arguably orchestrated the act. In the first instance, Mama’s depression resulting from Papa’s death, as well as some difficulty she encounters in catering for herself and her daughter compels her to send Ijeoma off to live with family friends who she believes may look after her better. Secondly, if the grammar school teacher had not allowed Amina to share a living quarter with Ijeoma, the possibility of any sexual intimacies would have been slim. This situation justifies the debate by some individuals that queer sexuality is birthed from natural circumstances surrounding us. Comparatively, the adult interference of young queer love is paralleled in Monica Arac de Nyeko’s *Jambula Tree*. Symbolically, there is the development of lesbian love under a fruit tree which signifies growth and life. And in both instances, the girls are separated by the adults in a bid to correct their erroneous acts. It could be argued that the queer character’s goal in *Under the Udala Trees* is overpowered by the African moral

conscience, mostly expressed in Mama's curative approach which is explained in the subsequent section.

### **“God who created you must have known what he did”**

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Mama is informed of her daughter's transgression and she comes back for her with the hope of normalizing her. Mama who strongly believes that her daughter is being possessed by a demonic spirit is determined to “straighten [Ijeoma] out” (129). Her attempt is to use the Bible and prayer sessions as tools to alter Ijeoma's sexuality. In so doing, Adaora, her mother, identifies some verses in the Bible that demonize queer sexuality. Mama's curative approach creates space for Ijeoma to draw a link between her sexual preference and her Christian background. Unfortunately, Ijeoma considers the Bible to be a narrow reflection of the heteronormative cultural belief and her mother's interpretations to be pigeonholed.

Mama's “*straightening*” method begins from Genesis with the creation story. She is of the view that, this story will help Ijeoma realize God's master plan for the organization of the gendered humanity where a man becomes one flesh with a woman. In this fragment, meaning is therefore generated that woman and woman, or the alternative man and man amorous relationships are each considered unique individuals who can never be joined together as one flesh. Attempting to do so breaches the Biblical laws, thereby orchestrating the cosmic disorder.

Notwithstanding, Ijeoma reflectively questions this interpretation and the subsequent understandings of the biblical stories provided by Mama. In so doing, she provides alternative interpretations to the stories. To her, the story does not necessarily mean a definite existence of binary relationships. Her probing indicates the existence of alternative possibilities that are each feasible:

But *so what* if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did *that* have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. (pp. 82-83).

Her choice of the word *possibilities* and use of the *if* conditional clause is indicative of the existence of alternative sexual preferences that are not explicitly stated in the creation story. She gives a detailed interpretation to this assumption by adding that the Adam and Eve creation story could have only meant that the bond between this pair was possible because of the strong companionship they shared and not necessarily because they were a man and a

woman. With this, she emphasizes that, such a bond can exist between same sex partners. As noted by Amber Frateur, “The stress on companionship corresponds with the interpretations of the theological concept of *Imago Dei* (Image of God) described by van Klinken and Phiri” (p. 45). Ijeoma further considers the biblical stories as the use of mere allegories to correct her. She even wonders who Cain might have married if the only people in existence then were Adam, Eve, Cain himself and his brother, Abel. If he had married any of his relations, then it should also be queer because incest in most African settings is prohibited, particularly one between direct siblings. Additionally, Ijeoma’s consistent use of the *if* clause demonstrates that the actions in each case can only be fulfilled, provided a certain condition is met.

In a similar vein, Ijeoma does not hesitate to question Mama’s understanding of the Sodom and Gomorrah story in the *Bible*. This story remains one of the passages used in support of, or to contest against queer sexuality. The story is centered on God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of the queer sexual practices of the people living there. Ijeoma tries to convince her mother that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is as a result of inhospitality and not necessarily queer sexuality. Thus, she may be perceived as drawing on the ideas shared by scholars such as Bartlett and also Phyllis to argue that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were punished not because of their sexual perversions but mainly because of their lack of hospitality to strangers who happened to be guests of the two cities. The protagonist is rather surprised by the decision of Lot to compromise the interest of his family for the safety of some visitors. She connects this interpretation of hers to the subsequent biblical story about the Levite and the ‘damsel’. Instead of seeing how it relates to her as intended by Mama, Ijeoma rather broods over “the terrible image of the rape, of the poor damsel lying unconscious at the doorstep, and then being flung over the donkey by the Levite. The terrible image of the Levite cutting her body into pieces” (80). Ijeoma believes that the men offering up the woman to be raped is an indication of cowardice on the part of the men.

This draws in the cases of queer sexually identified persons the grammar school teacher had heard of, where the victims were stoned all the way to the river and drowned. This story represents some of the inhumane homophobic attacks experienced by queer people. At the point that this story is being told to her and Amina, both girls think about the prospective damages that will be inflicted on their bodies and the fear of the possible river drowning should anybody get wind of it. Consequently, they begin to cry. The cry is not primarily because they are remorseful, but because of the fear planted in them by the grammar school teacher. Later in Aba, Ijeoma listens to a narration of homophobic attacks concerning the horrific killing of two homosexuals who

were caught in the act, and she shudders. This foreshadows a similar encounter that awaits them at their queer hideout in Aba.

Ijeoma and Amina reunite in a boarding school. Notably, Amina tries to act different at different times. Her alternation between queer and heterosexuality is supported by the notion of sexual fluidity. On this, it could be argued that the understanding of gender and sexuality as free-floating seems to augment the probability of recreating sexual identity. This is premised on the post-structuralist perception of non-essentialized identities that may be seen as sites in becoming; both culturally constructed and contextually determined, while evolving through space and time (Tilsen and Nylund 8). That notwithstanding, Amina's fear of the moral inappropriateness of being queer finally breaks the bond she shares with Ijeoma. The novel being read in light of the construction of a queer self indicates that, this action of Amina further slows down the creation of an absolute queer identity by the protagonist.

Ijeoma establishes a stronger relationship with Ndidi who works as a teacher in Aba. It is after a mob raid of a group of queer individuals that the two halt their relationship. Ijeoma's Mama coerces her to get married to a young man named Chibundu, who had been Ijeoma's childhood friend. Ijeoma gives in out of fear and frustration and, only after Ndidi convinces her to try being with a man.

So, her identity construction process continues to drag along in its snail pace. The couple move to Port Harcourt where Ijeoma endures an unhappy marriage since she is not romantically and sexually attracted to her husband. Like Amina, Ijeoma agrees to sample a heterosexual relationship. However, she is still mindful of the notion that heterosexuality remains an unnatural identity for her. She comes to regard Chibundu as a domineering husband who wishes to have his conjugal rights at all cost. This domineering attitude of Chibundu can be traced to Oko, the husband of Esi in Aidoo's *Changes: A love Story* and Akobi, Mara's husband in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Tamara Shefer et al. explain that the sexual prowess of such domineering African men is one major way of articulating their masculinities in society. Although Chibundu is fully aware his wife identifies as queer, he hides this knowledge from her with the hope of correcting Ijeoma's sexuality. The critic, Thabo Msibi (2011) argues: "...that increased expressions of homophobia in Africa are not only reactions to the 'personified' and visible homosexual identity, but also a tool for sexism, an attempt to solidify men's position in society" (pp. 70-71). Ijeoma, knowing she has no other option, gives in and the couple has a daughter whom they name Chibdinma. It is after Ijeoma loses their second child that she eventually decides to leave, taking her daughter along with her. She goes back to her mother who finally comes to terms with her daughter's

sexuality. Here, Mama is portrayed as an empathic character as she comes to acknowledge that: “God who created you must have known what he did. Enough is enough” (p. 323). In effect, Ijeoma feels at ease and resumes her queer relationship with Ndidi who imagines a utopia that promises hope for queer sexualities in their Nigerian setting. This utopian moment of imagination stimulates the likelihood of conviction for a future social order that embraces all forms of love. Thus, Okparanta’s novel could be seen as staging a platform for possible future queer couplings.

## Conclusion

The novel provides a prophetic space for interrogating queer sexual identities in the Nigerian setting, and Africa at large. This prophetic space is created in the utopian imaginations of Ndidi who foresees a future Nigeria where all forms of sexual orientations are acceptable. The protagonist’s sexual preference is largely developed from some mundane activities she takes with her first queer partner. The novel describes queer intimate relationships as fluid and so unpredictable, just as Ijeoma’s relationship with Amina proves to be. The protagonist, Ijeoma, clears the way for a new way of understanding certain normative concepts. She characterizes her queer sexuality as a defensive detachment from one little hurt child who yearns for true companionship. More importantly, the setting categorizes this novel as a daring exploration of queer sexualities since Nigerian laws criminalize all forms of queer articulations. *Under the Udala Trees* does not stand in isolation; rather, it stands in unison with both the wider Nigerian tradition (as earlier stated), and other scholarly works such as Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* and Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*.

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