

## HOMOPHOBIA IN AFRICA: A QUEER STUDY ON CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

Agalya C

II Year, Master of Arts in English Literature  
St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli

Article History: Received: 22.03.2023 | Accepted: 25.03.2023 | Published: 02.04.2023

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ/12.1.1596-1600>

### ABSTRACT

The neocolonial African society filled with Christian beliefs is mirrored in this novel. Majority of the Igbo tribe of the African society strictly followed Christianity. The mother of the protagonist is a representation of how the orthodox crowd weaponized the holy book of Christianity to exploit the homosexuals. It is a silent tragedy where Ijoema, a lesbian is unwillingly forced to marry a straight man because of societal norms. A narrow-minded mother with fascist ideologies has power over the young rational protagonist. The mother quotes the bible to justify her religious and racial discriminations. Ijoema gets married to a male chauvinist and endures unspeakable sufferings. Ijoema fights for her ideology until she is accepted and recognized. Amina submits to the social construct and she marries a man of her own tribe. The arrogant subjugation and total control and subsequent submission to the control is portrayed skillfully in this work by the female author. The first-hand narration of the gender issues posed on a lesbian in a limited and economically challenged society is accurate. It is a time during the tribal war between the Igbo and the Hausa tribes, and after the war, the lesbians gather as a community and hide in the bunker when they are in danger. The punishment for the people caught in engaging homosexuality is that they are burned alive. This cruel treatment, when looked at from a broad perspective, is just the cry of the human community, raising from the deep-rooted stereotypic archetype of male and female conjugal relations. The novel explores various shades of dominance and injustice in a society that is completely against a third gender and the early identification of the sexuality of a teenager.

### **Keywords**

Lesbianism, Homosexuals, Queer, Gender, Neocolonial literature, African literature, Gay fiction.

Gender is how one identifies oneself and not based on the sex organs they are born with. Sex does not determine gender, behaviour, or sexual affinity. The novel is set in the year 1960 during the war between Igbo and Hausa tribes. It is a bildungsroman where most of Ijoema's life is narrated. The protagonist belongs to the Igbo tribe of Africa and she is a Christian. Her patriotic father kills himself when their tribe was losing the war and, Ijoema is sent to a caretaker's house. She meets Amina under a Udala tree, which is an important symbol in the novel. Udala trees in African culture signifies sexual virility and fertility. The caretakers take Amina under their roof, just because there will be an extra hand to help them with their chores. When Amina and Ijoema live close together, they develop feelings for each other.

At an age of physical immaturity, they engage and develop affinity with each other, which results in very disturbing problems in their future. They identify themselves as lesbians and it takes a long time for them to accept it. Since the story is from the perspective of Ijoema, the mental turmoil that Amina went through is not elaborately described. They do not even know the word lesbian. They could not fathom the possibility of a third gender, until they felt differently. The grammar school teacher, who is the care taker of the two girls, informs Ijoema's mother about the happening.

Ijoema's mother thinks of lesbianism as an abomination of nature. The mother firmly believes in Christianity and quotes bible to Ijoema, explaining patiently how big the sin is when someone goes into a conjugal relationship that is not between the heterosexuals. She recites the story of the biblical character Job, and Job sends his own daughters for prostitution instead of the male angels, because homosexual interactions are an abomination in God's eyes. Ijoema makes a counter argument that Job only sends his own daughters because his hospitality is so grand, that he does not want to hurt his God-sent guests in any way.

The wit of this little girl frightens her mother and she gives serious punishments to scare her into not using her rational mind. Ijoema is initially rational, but rationality, coming from a female is not accepted in a patriarchal society. The opposition of her mother is not rooted from the lack of affection towards her daughter. Instead, it is because of the biased and unfair culture and the resulting cultural competencies of each individual. When looked at through Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, the archetypal memory of the particular society spoken about in the novel, is homophobic. This mother in a particular time frame, is the representative of all the people of that community in the same time.

Adoara, the mother of Ijoema, refuses to accept her daughter because she is in denial. She thinks that she is protecting Ijoema from the world that had no place for an individual's total independence. She could not even internally accept the fact that her daughter is not normal, the normality being defined as heterosexuality. The factors are both social and psychological. The collective psyche is formed by the common beliefs, and naturalized myths, in Barthes' diction. The common belief is that, God created men and women and they are to be each other's sexual partners and that is the only right way to live. The plight of a woman, who is sexually attracted to another woman, and the cultural troubles she faces is totally ignored by the heterosexual majority.

The lack of sex education is a serious problem in the African society, during the 1960's. The culture is neither completely authentic, nor fully adapted. The English culture, African culture and the capitalist culture was simultaneously existing in the society. People followed a bit of all these cultures and the resulting cross-culture is a source of great pain for the marginalized people.

Marginalization does not necessarily include only the economically poor. When there is a majority, there is a minority. The Marxist ideology of the bourgeoisie and proletariats can be applied in this context as well. The power structures that rule the society dictate how the others should live and it passes on the unfair and irrational ideologies to every other community. The power that occupied the highest position in the social ladder were mostly straight white males, who did not experience homosexuality. Ijoema is a rich girl belonging to the Igbo tribe. If it is not for her homosexuality, every other feature in her life is highly desirable by the society.

Not only is the neocolonial African society being homophobic, but also all the other neocolonial societies as well, because they are influenced by the western rulers. There are some ancient civilisations that celebrated homosexuality like the Berdache in North America, Kathoey in Thailand and fa'afafine in the Pacific. These civilizations did not view the sexes as a binary. They acknowledged the fact that male and female sexes are the extremes in between which an entire spectrum exists. Western traditions celebrate the binary and have a prejudice against the queer community. It does not stop at prejudice; it goes up to the extent of oppressing the queer community for multiple generations.

In this story, gender expression is suppressed from a very early age. Ijoema tries to suppress her sexuality, but it is not something an individual can escape. She is constantly torn between wanting to embrace her sexuality and being a respectable daughter to her mother. The respect a person deserves is directly linked to how heterosexual they are. In all the other ways, Ijoema is in the superior side of the binary. She is rich, she is fair skinned, she is highly intellectual and have a very respected lineage. The standpoint of Ijoema is not as underprivileged as others.

The author carefully curates this character in such a way that only the problems related to her sexuality and the consequent psyche is spoken about. The life of the individual Ijoema, is otherwise completely satisfied. The character Amina gets brainwashed by her community and her psyche is conditioned. She is made to marry a man and pretend like a heterosexual. Ijoema meets Ndidi in her twenties and falls in love with her. Ndidi is a school teacher, who is a lesbian. She keeps her sexual life private and interact with Ijoema on a regular basis.

They continue to stay in a lesbian relationship and finally they are separated when Ijoema is married to Chibundu. They also have a girl child named Chidinma. Ijoema returns home and her mother, after all those years, accepts her sexuality completely. The sexual life and the hesitation the queer people have is not elaborately talked about, to create awareness. People belonging to the queer community cannot identify other people belonging to the same, because gender expression of queer people is not appreciated in many parts of the world. Many revolutionaries such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir talked about the science behind the queer community. Gender studies does not aim to study only the pleasures of the queer community. It aims to create a platform where everyone, no matter what the sexual orientation is, can have an affinity and empathy for themselves and for all the human beings. Unlike the twentieth century, the LGBTQIAA++ community is empathised with and accepted in the current world and it is a very appreciable change. This novel can also be looked at from an ecofeminist and Marxist perspective.

**REFERENCES**

Barker, Chris and Jane, A Emma. *Cultural Studies theory and practice*. Sage, 2016.

Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, 2016.