

March 2022

Away From the Udala Trees: Post-Colonialism, Lesbianism, and Christianity Within Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

Hope Lockwood

Pepperdine, Seaver College, hope.lockwood@pepperdine.edu

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Recommended Citation

Lockwood, Hope (2022) "Away From the Udala Trees: Post-Colonialism, Lesbianism, and Christianity Within Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*," *Global Tides*: Vol. 16, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol16/iss1/1>

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Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees* is an African coming-of-age novel centered around a young Igbo girl named Ijeoma living in Nigeria during The Nigerian Civil War. The novel hinges on Ijeoma's struggle with navigating her identity as a lesbian and its impacts on her religious traditions, cultural identity, and relationships within the context of post-colonized Nigeria. Okparanta references religious texts, primarily Genesis, to provide a cultural background for the homophobia presented throughout the novel. After Ijeoma and her lover Amina are outed, Ijeoma's mother attempts to pray Ijeoma's lesbianism away. Ijeoma succumbs to her Biblical heteronormativity and attempts to comply but meets another woman named Ndidi. After her mother becomes suspicious of her relationship with Ndidid, Ijeoma marries a man named Chibundu, whom she has a daughter with. Despite her complying with her mother's expectations, Ijeoma is still deeply unhappy. After a series of nightmares, she embraces herself as a lesbian, divorcing Chibundu and returning to Ndidi. The oppression Ijeoma faces comes as a direct byproduct of the colonization of Africa and Igboland, and her mother's homophobia stems from beliefs instilled by British missionaries who aided in colonizing Africa. When examining this novel, it is impossible to separate the religious trauma and hatred Ijeoma, her lovers, and the other Queer characters face from colonization. Okparanta creates characters who use their religion to justify their bigotry to demonstrate the long-term impacts of colonization on Africans and LGBTQ people.

Many scholars and activists have sought to classify the violence the Igbo people faced as genocide. However, not until writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who made the war a central focus within her work that led to revitalized interest.¹ Studying genocide and its intersection with colonization is crucial to preserving the history of Nigeria, the Igbo people, and African cultures that European influences have damaged. Okparanta's novel serves as a memorialization to those lost in the Nigerian Civil War and those lost as direct and indirect results of colonization's lasting impact on Nigeria. This is seen directly through deaths that were byproducts of the wars like Ijeoma's father, Uzo, who died in an air raid, but it is also seen when two gay men are beaten to death because of colonization's ingrained homophobia.² However, Okparanta goes further than Adichie or other Nigerian writers since she concludes her novel with a note to readers about the Nigerian government's current stance on LGBTQ people. She describes in her note that these individuals are still at risk of violent

¹ Lasse Heerten & A. Dirk Moses (2014) The Nigeria–Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16:2-3, 169-203, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2014.936700

² Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017. 205.

homophobia, prison, and the death penalty. These acts are justified by a belief system introduced by colonizers who called themselves missionaries.

Many contemporary Nigerian novelists exist as part of what is referred to as “third-generation writing,” which is indicative of their personal and national identities as the generation that was born after the Nigerian Civil War.³ Kerry Manzo’s work “Queer Temporalities & Epistemologies: Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* & Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*” examines how growing up as part of this third-generation shapes much of Nigerian, African-LGBTQ, and Post-colonial works being published today. She describes how these authors often employ “intensely personal motifs such as sex, violence, and trauma as allegorical renderings of historical violences of colonialism and post-colonialism.” Okparanta explains that she seeks to provide “a place in...history” for both the Nigerian Civil War and LGBTQ Nigerians.⁴ Manzo argues that the decision to set *Under the Udala Trees* during the Nigerian Civil War is crucial to it as a novel because it “allegorizes the war in order to critique both ethnocentric and heteronormative aspects of nationalism by link[ing] the chivenisms of war with the homophobia of the present.”⁵ It equalizes the injustices Nigerian people face regardless of their sexuality, tribe, or class, similarly to Adichie’s *Half of the Yellow Sun* because war and bigotry do not care how rich, successful, accomplished, or powerful one is, they both simply seek to destroy and win. LGBT Africans face a particularly unique and violent type of homophobia. While it never results in physical harm towards characters within the book, there are threats of beatings throughout the novel, and each of the women knows fully what the consequences of their actions could result in. To be heterosexual is to be defined by whom you love, to be homosexual is to be defined by whom you want to have sex with. This thought process results in the perception that Queerness is seen as a failure in one’s ability to practice self-control. Those who are Queer are not allowed to exist as people who engage in relationships with the same sex, instead they must fix themselves by overcoming a destructive sexuality devoid of love or tenderness. However, setting the novel in the past acts as a touchstone reminding readers that Ijeoma and her lovers will most likely never live in a Nigeria that is not violent towards LGBTQ people. It is a tragedy that reminds readers that all Ijeoma, Amina, and Ndidi can do is hope for a day in which the violence of homophobia and transphobia can be forgiven and forgotten. This is similar to The Biafran War appearing in Ijeoma’s dream, representing her hope

³ Manzo, Kerry. “Queer Temporalities & Epistemologies: Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* & Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*.” ALT 36: *Queer Theory in Film & Fiction: African Literature Today*, edited by John C. Hawley et al., NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2018, pp. 132, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv136bvhh>.15.

⁴ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.152.

⁵ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.155.

that the next generation will continue to be “bent toward[s] love [raher] than fear” just like her daughter Chidinma is.⁶ Okparanta sets *Under the Udala Trees* in the past rather than the present to memorialize those who have been lost and suffered at the hands of homophobia and show how far the fight for LGBTQ people, women, and Africa has come.

In Henriette Gunkel's article titled “Some Reflections on Postcolonial Homophobia, Local Interventions, and LGBTI Solidarity Online: The Politics of Global Petitions” she states that “homosexuality is un-African” and to practice it is to fail at being African.⁷ African nations show some of the highest rates of “corrective rape” which is the practice of “correcting [a lesbian's] sexuality through rape.”⁸ Much of LGBTQ critical theory has discussed the intersection of gender, and religion, but only recently has “the importance of locality, race and postcoloniality entered the arena of queer epistemology.”⁹ Gunkel closes her research by examining the way that Europeans brought Western gender roles and homophobia to these parts of the world and now, that the Western world has become more comfortable with homosexuality and transgenderism they shame Africa and other former colonized states for carrying on the bigoted practices they instilled. She highlights how many of these colonized groups had pre-colonized practices that embraced both homosexuality and transgenderism, indicating that the work done by LGBT African activists and novels like *Under the Udala Trees* actively combat colonialism by embracing either former or creating their own inclusive practices devoid of Western influence. The scene in which Ijeoma reclaims the Bible after attempting to repent for having sex with Ndidi is suggestive of the ideas Gunkel writes about. Ijeoma has a panic attack in the church fearing that her relationship will be discovered again and she risks worse punishment this time. She struggles after having nightmares of being punished by GOD which are plagued with the religious stories her mother told her. Ijeoma narrates that “somewhere in the middle of it I remembered John 8. I knelt there at the front of the church and at last the words came out of my mouth, Jesus' words: *he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.*”¹⁰ Ijeoma realizes that there is no defense she has for her actions, but that there is no

⁶ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017. 316-318

⁷ Gunkel, Henriette. “Some Reflections on Postcolonial Homophobia, Local Interventions, and LGBTI Solidarity Online: The Politics of Global Petitions.” *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43904928>.

⁸ Gunkel, Henriette. “Some Reflections on Postcolonial Homophobia, Local Interventions, and LGBTI Solidarity Online: The Politics of Global Petitions.” *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43904928>.

⁹ Gunkel, Henriette. “Some Reflections on Postcolonial Homophobia, Local Interventions, and LGBTI Solidarity Online: The Politics of Global Petitions.” *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43904928>.

¹⁰ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017. 202.

justification for her actions being morally wrong. She rationalizes that she feels no guilt, simply fear. Okparanta and Gunkel both want their writings to demonstrate that overcoming religious trauma and internalized homophobia does not always have to be about fear, especially when placed against the backdrop of Nigeria. Instead, Ijeoma shows readers that there is still room for both hope and happiness within the conversations of Post-colonialism, religion, and homophobia.

Lois Tyson is a scholar on critical theory who defines Post-colonial criticism as “works that have emerged from cultures that developed in response to colonial domination.”¹¹ Post-colonialism was created to directly combat and critique the way that media has historically depicted those who have been victims of colonization. It stems from the rise of decolonization and independence throughout the Global South, however, Post-colonialism, as it is recognized, has roots in Indian scholarship following the Second World War.¹² *Under the Udala Trees* is set during a time of enormous political turmoil within Africa’s history. For many, the decolonization of Africa left political unrest, destroyed economies, and left a wake of violence due to the sudden withdrawal of colonial powers that did not adequately prepare its former colonies to operate as autonomous nations. Nigeria’s history is no different. “The territorial and ethnic borders that marked Nigerian colonial society were still in place when the country achieved independence. Established as a federal state, postcolonial Nigeria was split into three main regions, each dominated by one or two ethnic groups.”¹³ These ethno-regions led to the creation of mega-tribes who each fought for Nigeria’s resources and power rather than collaborations under the European established democratic systems. Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses who are both scholars on genocide agree in their work “The Nigeria–Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide” that the Nigerian Civil War provides a unique case study acting as “a watershed in the postcolonial global order” because, despite its international press coverage at the time and initial hope that it might act as an example of decolonization done right, the infighting between these ethno-regions resulted in the Igbo separating from Nigeria in an attempt to find the state of Biafra. This separation resulted in the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War that raged from 1967-1970 and although Britain initially supported the Igbo, they eventually sided with the government of Nigeria they had helped establish because out of fear of losing access to Nigeria’s petroleum industry showing once again that regardless

¹¹ Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2015. Pp. 418.

¹² Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2015. Pp 107.

¹³ Lasse Heerten & A. Dirk Moses (2014) The Nigeria–Biafra war: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16:2-3, 169-203, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2014.936700

of efforts to move past colonization, former colonies will always in some way be controlled by those who had previously occupied them.

The segregation between the tribes is mentioned in *Under the Udala Tree*, when the grammar school teacher and his wife that Ijeoma lives with as a young teenager catch her sneaking Amina into their home. They express concerns over her presence due to her Hausa heritage fearing that her family might be searching for her and will kill them for housing her, it is only because of her tribally ambiguous features and her appearance of being a hard worker that justifies them allowing her to stay.¹⁴ Ijeoma's mother Adaora's hatred of inter-tribal relationships is shown as almost comparable to her homophobia when the two girls are sent to secondary school. After Amina becomes engaged Adaora shows happiness stating that it is "Very good... You'll be back with your own kind, back where you belong, learn a little about your people. Keep to yourselves."¹⁵ Okparanta once again has Adaora justify and defend her hateful and exclusionist beliefs through scripture using both the Parable of the Lost Sheep and Levitical instructions on the mixing of other species.¹⁶

Post-colonialism examines the dominant culture and how it sees itself "as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper "self"; [while the cultural minority was] considered "other," different and therefore inferior to the point of being less than human."¹⁷ As a literary practice that examines the oppression of people, it overlaps and intersects greatly with other literary practices such as Feminist or Marxist critical theory. Multicultural feminist theory analyses the intersection of women who fall into more than one minority category, while it was largely pioneered by African American, working-class women it has become embraced internationally and inter-racially. The concept of multicultural feminism tries to address these gaps. Tyson explains that "while all women are subject to patriarchal oppression, each woman's specific needs, desires and problems are greatly shaped by her race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, nationality, and geographical location."¹⁸ Colonized women are a group of women who have the unique experience of living with a world that devalues them on the basis of their gender performance, their sex, race, religion, sexuality, and culture. Women who are victims of both colonization and patriarchal oppression are referred to as being double colonized. However, Ijeoma's lesbianism contributes to her identity as a person who has been colonized thrice over by the British for being African, by the patriarchy for being a woman, and by homophobia for being gay. The overlapping

¹⁴ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.108.

¹⁵ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.170.

¹⁶ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.171.70.

¹⁷ Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2015. Pp 401.

¹⁸ Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2015. pp.100-101.

source of this oppression can be traced back to the Bible. The novel begins with Adaora's Bible lessons which are later revealed to be the punishment for Ijeoma's relationship with Amina and Adaora's attempt at convincing Ijeoma that her lesbianism is sinful and morally wrong and seeks to convert her back to heterosexuality. In one scene, after Adaora explains to Ijeoma that GOD made marriage to be between a husband and wife, she begs GOD to fix her daughter's sexuality. She prays for GOD to:

“Protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away... protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell. Lead her not into temptation...give her strength to resist and do Your will. May her heart remember the lessons you have given, the lesson of our beginning, of Adam and of Eve.”¹⁹

This scene specifically is the first real introduction to Ijeoma struggling with her mother's faith. It provides the context of why Ijeoma feels the need to hide her relationships and why throughout the rest of the novel she feels shame towards how she loves women. Throughout the novel, her mother forces her to take part in these prayers that demonize Ijeoma for her sexuality, and her mother uses scripture in order to shame and harm Ijeoma into conforming to her belief that marriage, love, and relationships must follow the structure introduced to her by colonization. Her mother's behaviors, lessons, and prayers demonstrate her active use of both scripture and prayer in order to justify her homophobia and hatred of her daughter's sexuality. It provides the much-needed context for why Ijeoma and her partners behave the way they do, why they feel the need to love each other in secret, and why they feel rejected by both the church, religion, and the people around them.

At the end of the novel, Ijeoma has found herself the victim of two failed sapphic relationships and fully processed the potential risks of continuing to engage in lesbian relationships. Ijeoma forces herself into a heterosexual marriage and has a son with her husband in an attempt to conform to her mother's expectations of Biblical marriage only to be left unfulfilled. Ijeoma leaves her husband and returns to her mother informing her that she tried to pursue the version of Christianity her mother taught her and that she tried to assimilate into the mold she was shown. She tried to be straight and tried to fit into straight Europe's definition of both Christianity and womanhood and it just did not work. She tells Adaora that she tried and failed and is simply not built to be straight and in response, Adaora tells her that “GOD, who created you must have known what

¹⁹ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.72.

He did. Enough is enough.” before Okparanta dedicates the novel to Nigeria’s LGBTQ population.²⁰

This novel is important because so much of LGBTQ and coming-of-age novels are dominated by maleness and whiteness. Okparanta is neither of those things and inherently her novel takes a political stance as a Queer African coming of age story that is explicitly about a female character — one that is neither white, straight, nor a man. It also forces readers to reconcile with their own preconceived notions of what a Queer story and what an African story looks like; it forces readers to see that there are stories that exist that are both Queer and African. It is vital to examine the intersection between the way religion, specifically, the Bible has been used in order to harm women, LGBTQ people, and African people, and to examine these four topics and their intersection is to study the history of harm and harm reduction. It is a way for people to educate themselves on the world outside of the West and outside of Western preconceived notions on diversity. It is about educating oneself on what it means to be exiled to the margins and to overcome that.

Under the Udala Trees is an unapologetically lesbian, Post-colonial, feminist novel that examines the intersection of the complex identity of an African lesbian and how Christianity and the Bible are actively weaponized against people who are Queer and African. The novel depicts Ijeoma’s trauma in a tangible way, showing readers how her mother’s lessons and Nigeria’s treatment of LGBTQ people not only follow her, but shape her life, her mental well-being, and her relationships. In the end, Ijeoma chooses to reject these teachings and leave her new husband, and “Even with those [teachings] in [her] head, [she] could not help [but to be herself],” (Okparanta 150). Ijeoma chooses to overcome her own internalized homophobia and navigate her life not in spite of her sexuality, but because of it.

Ijeoma rejects heterosexuality, tradition, and colonization as seen through her dream at the end of the novel. While the udala tree represents reproductive heteronormativity since women are only meant to be producers of male heirs. But, after Ijeoma sees her child being hung by the noose of the udala tree she realizes that she and her daughter are being choked by traditions and superstitions that don’t ascribe to them. It is only through rejecting her husband and returning to Ndidi that Ijeoma is able to reconcile with her religion and create for herself a new path devoid of colonization, heteropatriarchal expectations, and the religious trauma she experienced as a child. It is only then that Ijeoma begins to heal and show readers that there is life after survival and all who have been oppressed by homophobia, patriarchy, colonialism, and religion deserve to have that chance.

²⁰ Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.323.

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