

Deconstructing Sexuality and Xenophobia in Africa: A Critical Discourse on *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Under the Udala Tree*

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Abstract: This study demonstrates that prejudices towards homosexuals in Africa are stifling. Such bigotries stem from deeply rooted African traditional beliefs, and partly from the “ideals” of adopted religions. It is, therefore, unlikely for conformists of heterosexuality to experience resistance and homophobic tendencies. Adherents to this view include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chinelo Okparanta in their texts *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Under the Udala Tree* respectively. These writers also hold that restraints, constraints and exclusion of all sorts form the caucus of xenophobia towards homosexuality in Africa. The paper argues that, homosexuality is not strictly a global northern issue; but also, an African phenomenon, even though it meets with unprecedented resentment and resistance due to received religions and socio-cultural stereotypes. The objective of this study is to examine, interpret, and analyze the texts, and showcase the deplorable attitude of Africans towards LGBT practitioners. The analytical framework is based on indebt examination of the texts, using Queer and Deconstructionist perspectives as theoretical constructs. The study reveals that no form of sexuality is superior to another, as a result, no form should be encourage or discourage, because sexuality is innate. Also, heterosexuality is seemingly a sexual preference in Africa, but wrapped – up in a cluster of homosexuality which existence is behind the scene in Africa.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Xenophobia, Deconstruction, Africa, Critical Discourse

1. Introduction

Homosexuality dates from the first recorded instance of same-sex love and sexuality of ancient civilizations, involving the history of lesbians, gay, bisexuals and transgender peoples and cultures around the world. Homosexuality was the term that was used to describe non heterosexuals, and this term carried a lot of negative connotations. The term was later replaced by homophile in the 1950s and gay in the 1970s. In the 1960s, the term sexual minority was adopted as an analogy to the term ethnic minority due to the negative connotation the term “homosexuality” conveyed (<http://www.wsch.eu>lgbt-history>). [1]

Eventually, homosexuality becomes an umbrella term that englobes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) which is evidently against the traditional religious norm of

African sexuality. Sexuality to most Africans is observably not a topic for public debate because it is a private affair which is practiced and discussed behind closed doors. [15] LGBT practice is timidly discussed in Africa because it is considered a taboo and an aberration against culture, religion and laws in Africa.

This paper focuses on Africans’ attitude towards LGBT practitioners as exhibited in Chimamanda Ngozi’s *The Thing Around Your Neck* and Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Tree*. It is built on the assumption that Africans tend to reject homosexuality, though it is deeply rooted in certain parts of the continent. As a result, the practitioners experience violence and other challenges which inhibit their individuality and personality. Adichie and Okparanta record LGBT practices in some parts of Africa. In the narratives, the practitioners suffer from unprecedented stigmatization, societal stereotypes and xenophobic tendencies. Laws have

been enacted against homosexuality in Africa. Many African leaders signed laws against LGBT practices in Africa, with the argument that such practices are un-African. For instance, Frederick Chiluba, the former Zambian president and Sam Nujoma, the former Namibian president have castigated LGBT practices in Africa and brandished the practitioners as the carriers of contemporary diseases such as HIV and Aids. However, these arguments are guided by the ideals of received religions (Christianity and Islam) in Africa. Using the Queer and deconstruction theories, we argue that Adichie and Okparanta have demonstrated that no sexual orientation is superior to another, and should be read as a standard with references to heterosexuality against homosexuality. Therefore, the aim of this study is to demonstrate that prejudices towards homosexuals in Africa are stifling. Such bigotries stem from deeply rooted African traditional beliefs, and partly from the “ideals” of adopted religions. It is, therefore, unlikely for conformists of heterosexuality to experience resistance and homophobic tendencies. The analysis from these texts are informed by the Queer and Deconstructionist theories.

Queer theory is a field of critical theory that emerged around the 1990s out of the field of queer studies and women’s studies. Queer theory is derived largely from post-structuralism and deconstruction in particular. The term “Queer” is an umbrella term used for sexual minorities who are not heterosexuals. This term was originally used to portray homosexuals as abnormal or strange. It was also used to show the negativity and social discomfort of same sex relationships. It explores issues like sexuality, marginalization of women and other population, and power inequality in the society as well as cultures. Starting in the 1970s, a range of authors brought deconstruction’s critical approaches to bear on issues of sexual identity, and especially on the construction of heteronormativity. That is, the normalizing practices and institutions that privileged heterosexuality as fundamental in society, and in turn discriminate those outside the stem of power, and focused, to a larger degree, on non-heteronormative sexuality and social practices. Some of the major proponents of Queer theory are: Lauren Bertant, Leo Bersani, Eve Adrienne Rich, Diana Fuss, Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

According to Fuss in “The Politics of Inside/Out”, the concept of “coming out” and being visible has been normalized while simultaneously contributing to the disappearance of queerness. By declaring oneself to be visible and “out”, is declaring the ones who are not visible (7). [8] Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence” argues that, heterosexuality is not “natural” or intrinsic in human instincts, but an institution imposed upon many cultures and societies that place women in a subordinate situation. Rich holds that heterosexuality is a violent political institution making way for the male right of physical, economic, and emotional access to women (632). [22] Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* argues that, gender, like sexuality is

not an essential truth derived from the body’s materiality but rather a regulatory fiction, since gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. The status of heterosexuality as the default setting for sexuality generally depends on the intelligibility of gender (33). [2] Queer theory equally builds on the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies’ close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. While gay and lesbian studies focus their inquiries on natural and unnatural behavior, with respect to homosexuality, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity, which falls into normative and deviant categories. Eve Kosofsky [5] argues that the major interpretative key that can help in the understanding of the culture in the western world is the way of the management of identities of LGBT people which is the logic behind disclosure and concealment.

Deconstructionist theorists, just like Queer theorists, argue that nothing is standard. The term “deconstruction” first emerged on the American literary stage in 1966, when Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, read his paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science” (109). [10] Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. Equally, deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. According to Derrida, in the western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary opposition. That is, black/white, masculine/feminine, cause/effect heterosexuality/homosexuality. Derrida suggests these oppositions are hierarchies in miniature, containing one term that Western culture views as positive or superior, and another considered negative or inferior. Through deconstruction, Derrida aims to erase the boundary between binary oppositions—and to do so in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the opposition is thrown into question. From Derrida’s conviction, the notion of heterosexuality as the norm of sexual orientation in Africa as opposed to homosexuality is questionable. As a result, a rereading of the concept of sexual orientation is imperative to give credence to any sexual orientation and the rights of the practitioners.

2. Homosexuality in the Narratives of Adichie and Okparanta

Adichie and Okparanta lament on the state and status of homosexuals in their narratives. In *The Thing Around Your Neck* (“On Monday of Last Week”), Kamara’s choice of sexuality is expressed while in America. In Africa, her sexual inclination is suppressed due to the negativity that is attached to homosexuality. However, when she meets Tracy, her desire for same sex relationship resurfaces:

...Their eyes held and suddenly Kamara wanted to lose

weight and wear makeup again...She stopped eating fried plantains and has her hair braided in the Senegalese place on South Street and began to sift through piles of mascara in the beauty supply store. (79) [1].... She was both drilled and sorry, for having this knowledge she could not share with him, for suddenly believing again in ways that had nothing to do with him. (86-87)

This new found knowledge (self) of Kamara is her awareness of a new sexual desire. She admires everything about Tracy in a sensual way, and even gets jealous when Tracy admires Maren, Josh's French teacher. Her feelings for Tracy, make her to anticipate being alone with her and taking off her clothes. She is more attracted to same sex relationship and her feelings cannot be suppressed, neither can they be professed openly.

In some African communities, homosexuals are restricted from worshipping in the same church with other worshippers. In *Under the Udala Trees* "God preaching hooligans stoned and beat several members of a gay and lesbian-affirming church in Lagos...Even among Christians, it can't be the same God that we worship" (317) [19] exclaimed Adaora. Adaora's attitude is an example of the xenophobic tendencies that homosexuals experience in Africa. However, in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chinedu is a gay, and a committed follower of Christ.

...He half- smiled and spoke without meeting her eyes. "I am Nigerian. I live on the third floor. I came so that we can pray about what is happening in our country" ...They prayed. He prayed in that particularly Nigerian Pentecostal way that made her uneasy: he covered things with the blood of Jesus; he bound up demons and cast them into the sea, he battled evil spirits. "Jehovah God, all the machinations of the Evil One shall not succeed; all the weapons fashioned against us shall not prosper, in the name of Jesus! Father Lord we cover the plane in Nigeria with the precious blood of Jesus: Father Lord, we cover the air with the precious blood of Jesus and we destroy all the agents of darkness..." (143-144)

Chinedu is a fervent believer in God and is patriotic to his nation, Nigeria. He is not rejected by the Supreme Being who is omnipotent and omniscient, but by man who is controlled by man-made laws. Ellen Hopkins in "*Tilt*" [11] confesses:

... We used to go to church, a lot, and I never heard one word to make me think am some sought of abomination. If God is in fact responsible for creating me. He made just as he wants me. And if he loves every bit of his hand work, he loves me and, if God is in fact responsible for creating me, he made me just as he wants me. And if all that is nothing, more than mythology what harm is there, in believing the stories anyway? When I pray or meditate or consider the universe or whatever you call it, I find comfort. Self-acceptance (99)

Man-made laws consider homosexuality as an abomination before God, but God who is believed to be the creator of man and the universe does not discriminate on sexual orientations as purported by Hopkins above. Also, in the *Thing Around Your Neck*, Chinedu's relentless faith in God and sincere prayers affected Ukamaka. "...He prayed and prayed, pumping her hand whenever he said "Father Lord" or "in

Jesus' name!". Then she felt herself start to shiver, an involuntary quivering of her whole body. Was it God?" (144). Chinedu's commitment to God kept Ukamaka uncomfortable. "she wanted to interrupt and tell him how unnecessary it was, this bloodying and binding, this turning faith into a pugilistic exercise; to tell him that life was a struggle with ourselves more than with a spear-wielding Satan; that belief was a choice for our conscience always to be sharpened" (143). Here again, the question of religious fanaticism is raised between Chinedu, a gay practitioner, and fervent believer in God and Ukamaka, a heterosexual who by her sexual orientation is assumed to be more qualified as a follower of God. Thus, religion is not supposed to be a parameter to stifle homosexuality

Again, in *Under the Udala Tree*, Okparanta showcases the loving and caring nature of her queer characters who are dismissed as nonentity in the midst of their haters. Ijeoma, a lesbian and queer parent exhibits so much love for her family (mother and daughter). This is evident when she says:

...Here was my child; my flesh and my blood...I... felt a mixture of gratitude and delight. I held her hand against my body. A beautiful baby girl, healthy, no harelip, no curse. Here she was, a little human being whom I will love the way I saw fit- love overflowing, love unrestricted. (264)

Ijeoma's loving attitude affirms the opinion in "Homosexuality and Africans: Pan-Africa Position on Gay Rights and Black Gays" which states, "every human deserves the dignity and not to extend this would violate our humanity: life is sacred and must be respected. Homosexuality is not the totality of someone's identity; it is only one aspect of their humanness" [12].

Due to societal stereotypes, Ijeoma's mother forced her into a marriage relationship to Chidi to save her face and that of her family. This is evident when she says:

Only a month later, Mama was painting my eye lids silver and my lips a bright shade of red...Mama had left the gate wide open, an invitation to the villagers to come in and join the celebration. She stood near the gate as I danced... Towards the end of the celebration, Mama tugged at my shoulders; let me inside. "You've done well. Very well" she said. All over her face was a rabid kind of excitement... What a wonderful day for us all", she said. "The day we've all been waiting for". I did not see fit to respond. "Is something wrong?" Mama asked, but then she quickly brushed away the question, so determined was she that nothing will spoil this day for her (221-222).

Ijeoma's resistance to this relationship isn't a choice, but an opening to another sexual orientation which is bisexual. She becomes a very loving wife to Chidi as well as a lesbian practitioner. Her involvement in these homosexual escapades is one of her survival strategies.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, LGBT practitioners use love as a weapon. Abhijit Naskar confirms, in "Either Civilized or Phobic: A Treatise on Homosexuality", that "Love has no gender-compassion has no region, character has no race" [18] Therefore, homosexual practitioners are also emotionally attached to each other. Ijeoma is a bisexual, who, though

married to Chidi, still has very strong feelings for Amina, a lesbian partner. This is because the love they share is natural as she explains:

... Amina was close to me now that I felt an urge to lean in and kiss her. I began with her forehead. I took a stop at her nose. Soon I was at her lips, then at the crook of her neck, which was exposed by her loose nightgown...she continued along, leaving a trail of kisses on her way down to my belly. She travelled farther, beyond the belly, farther than we had ever gone. I moaned and surrendered myself to her. I did not until then know that a mouth could make me feel that way when placed in that part of the body where I had never imagined a mouth to belong (123-124).

The budding love that exists between Ijeoma and Amina is a symbol of the love experience that LGBT practitioners experience in Africa. Chris Gibson writes that, "I think people should be authentic and who they are. If that calls people to same-sex attraction and same-sex marriage, then they should be true to who they are, and I think that the world could benefit by more love" (brainyquote.com/chris-gibson-768567?src=same-sex). [12] Ijeoma, being in love with Amina or Ndidi as Gibson says is being "authentic". She defends her love for her partner countless number of times before her mother. When she is asked by her mother if she still thinks of Amina "that way" (85), she replies that "Yes, I still think of her" ...Yes I still think of her that way" (85). Ijeoma's ability to accept that she still loves Amina shows that, she is courageous, bold, brave and assertive of her sexuality, and does not see it as a curse, but as something that is natural and acceptable to God. Dan Brown (2003) in *The Da Vinci Code* writes that:

"The Bible is a product of man...Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translation, additions and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book (231). [4]

Ijeoma therefore believes that, homosexuality is an orientation that is not forbidden by God but by man who wrote the Bible and made heterosexuality as the standard sexual orientation. The fact that Ijeoma questions her mother's Biblical dogmas per her sexuality shows her as a critical thinker who does not accept Biblical rules and principles as gospel truth, but thinks that sexuality is as wide as the universe. This is demonstrated when she observes that: "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 happens to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden..." (82-83).

From the above analysis, it can be noticed that LGBT characters in both Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, deconstruct the view that exponents of homosexuality and Africans have on homosexuals as mentally sick, faggots, sinners, assaults and aggressors. Unlike heterosexuals who are dogmatic, LGBT

practitioners in Sub-Sahara Africa are critical thinkers from the way they question and react to laid down rules and standards. They are bold, assertive, courageous, fearless, loving and above all, God fearing as can be seen in the character traits of Kamara, Chinedu, the Senegalese, Ijeoma and many others, who assert their sexuality in a society that considers them sick, unclean and insane.

According to Wekesa Seth Muchuma (2016), "Most African states have criminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults on the basis that it amounts to a threat to the traditional heterosexual family, ...and view the act as unnatural and unAfrican (repository.up.ac.za/handle.net). [17] In Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, queerness is seen as an abnormal way of life and a taboo in the Nigerian society as well as in Sub Saharan Africa. In "On Monday of Last Week", Kamara discovers that she is sexually attracted to Tracy. This is seen when Kamara stands in front of the mirror and imagines Tracy touching her erotically. Her mental conversation with Chinwe concerning her new found feelings for Tracy, builds on the conception of homosexuality as a sin and a taboo in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This is evident when Chinwe says "... A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have? *Tufia*" (80). Sean Wipples in "Homosexuality in Africa: The Causes of States Discrimination based on Orientation" hold that, "homosexuality...is unknown to traditional African societies. There was no man-to-man sex... homosexuality and any form of gender nonconformity is un-African" (3). [25] Wipples, just like Chinwe's statement, shows that same-sex desires are resented and considered a taboo in Africa and Sub-Saharan African societies due to the strong heterosexual culture. Kamara, being sexually attracted to Tracy, shows how many African women desire other women erotically, but are restricted by the socio-cultural and religious systems (laws) in Africa. However, Kamara gets to express her queer tendencies only in America because homosexuality is seen as a crime against nature, culture and law governing bodies in Africa. Anyone caught practising same-sex relationship is ostracized, imprisoned or lynched; thus, Adichie in her novelistic vision presents the animosity with which homosexuality is received in Sub-Saharan African society.

In Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma meets stiff resistance from her guardian and mother Adaora, when she falls in love with Amina. Adaora and Ijeoma's guardian, who are symbols of the heterosexual culture in the text, decry the lesbian tendencies which these two women exhibit as unorthodox and un-African. This is evident when she says "...it is that same behavior that led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the very same behavior... man lying with man" (73). Kapyra Kaoma (2015) in "Is Homosexuality an African or Un-African Human Right Issue" opines that,

Various predisposition-religious, cultural, and postcolonial influence the socio-political and religious disputes on homosexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the homophobic traits exhibited by African religious and political leaders towards same-sex intimate relations is driven by the desire to protect an African identity and youth from an assumed

Western assault of global sexual movement. [13]

Adaora subsequently uses her knowledge/ power of the Bible, to reveal the dominance that exists per sexuality and thus forbids her daughter from engaging in what she terms “an abomination”. The German Cardinal, Walter Kasper as quoted by Francis X. Rocca (2015) in “African Defend Conservative Line on Gays, Divorce at Catholic Bishops’ Synod”, says that, “Africa is totally different from the West...especially about gays. You can’t speak about this with Africans and people of Muslims countries... it’s a taboo. [23] In line with the Cardinal’s words, Adaora refuses to call lesbianism by name because she sees same-sex attraction as disgusting and repulsive. Adaora’s attitude towards same-sex symbolizes the contemptuousness with which Africans treat homosexuality, because most Africans like Adaora believe that homosexuality is alien, a taboo and un-African and practitioners of this form of love will face destruction just like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible.

Though Adaora does everything to dissuade Ijeoma from being a lesbian or sexually attracted to other women, Ijeoma discovers that she can’t stop herself from loving other women, and confesses to her mother that she still thinks of Amina “that way” (85). Adaora laments at this because she sees her daughter’s sexuality as an illness. This is evident when she says, “pray, I say pray! No daughter of mine will carry those sick, sick desires” (86). To survive in a community that resents homosexuality, Ijeoma lies to her mother that she no longer thinks of Amina as a lover. She further explains how she derives new means of expressing her love for Amina without being suspected of being queer. This is evident when she says:

...Maybe just holding hands is enough (144)/...Sometimes we held hands as we walked, as inconspicuously as we could, making sure to present ourselves in a manner more like that of regular school girls than that of two girls in love...And by a gratitude. And by a desire for a life time togetherness. (150)

Heterosexuality is seen as the right form of sexual orientation in Africa and the world over. According to Rubin, practitioners of heterosexuality are seen as important and sane (151). Chinelo in *Under the Udala Trees* writes that “A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all” (181). From Okparanta’s statement, one can understand that, heterosexuality is seen in Africa and Sub-Sahara African societies as the right form of sexuality. A man or a woman is considered sane or respected when he/she engages in heterosexual relationships. In respect to this, it is seen how Abidemi, Chinedu’s boyfriend gets married to Kemi, because he wants to be respected in his family, society and considered as normal. This is evident when the narrator says: “...Until Abidemi said he was getting married. Her name was Kemi and his parents and hers had known one another for long time. The inevitability of marriage had always been understood between them, unspoken but understood, and perhaps nothing would have changed if Chinedu had not met Kemi, at Abidemi’s parents’ wedding...” (160)

Here, Abidemi’s marriage to Kemi is as a result of his fears of being called a misfit in a society that considers

heteronormativity as the right form of sexual orientation. However, Adichie deconstructs heterosexuality as the right form of sexuality by creating characters that are queer in nature. Frida Ghitis in “Hillary Clinton’s Legacy on Gay Rights” writes that; “Being gay is not a Western invention. It is a human reality”. [9] In line with this, one encounters queer characters in “The Shivering”, like Chinedu, Abidemi, and the former head of state who are Africans and are queer in the text. This is evident when Chinedu says, “Back home, I was with him for two years.... was it on a Wednesday or Thursday that Abidemi had taken him to a private gay club where they shook hands with the former head of state?” (159).

Here, it is ironic that the former head of state, who is a symbol of all African presidents who fight against LGBT practices, is seen in a gay club. This suggests that homosexuality, just like heterosexuality, is instinctive in humans and as such a sexual orientation as heterosexuality. It equally shows the secret practices of homosexuality. Ukamaka’s reaction when Chinedu opens up about his sexuality shows that she belongs to the new generation of Africans who accept homosexuality with a lot of timidity. This is seen through a conversation between the two characters: “...so tell me. Tell me about this love. Was it here or back home?”, “Back home. I was with him for almost two years. The moment was quiet. She picked up a napkin and realized that she had known intuitively perhaps from the very beginning, but she said, because she thought he expected her to show surprise, “Oh you’re gay” (159). Thus, for Amina and Ijeoma to survive in heterosexual community full of hate, prejudice and violence, they must pretend not to be homosexual, since homosexuality has been demonized by the institutions and law governing bodies.

In “Out in Africa: Same-Sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures Cultures” Chantal Zabus (2011) contends that “As often the case, an individual who has been racially oppressed maybe blind that the same mechanism of exclusion and denigration are at work in gender oppression (254-268). [26] In line with this, it is seen how LGBT practitioners are oppressed and marginalized in Sub-Saharan Africa because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Students are tortured in *Under the Udala Trees* because of their sexual orientation. This is evident when Ijeoma recounts:

...Last year, a prefect found two female students making love to each other at the university in Lagos... (317). The two female students’ school mates, some of whom were Chidima’s own students, decided to take matters into their own hands. They stripped the lovers of their clothes and beat them all over until they were black and blue. They shouted “666” in their faces, and “God punish you”. Those who did not participate in the beating stood around watching and recording the incident with mobile phones. Nobody made a move to help the woman. (318)

The unscrupulous and disgraceful beating of the lesbians is an indication of the violent tendencies channeled towards LGBT practitioners in Sub-Saharan Africa. It equally shows how conservative African cultures are traditionally designed. These conservative tendencies are embedded in Adaora, who

sees lesbianism as an abomination rather than sexual diversity. This is seen when she says “Tufiakwa” Even among Christians, it can’t be the same God that we worship” (317).

Equally, since Africans associate LGBT practices with colonial influence, Kole Omotoso in *The Edifice* as quoted by Chris Dunton (1989) in “Whyting Be Dat? The Treatment of Homosexuality in Africa Literature” writes that “Dele’s sexual experience is as a result of him studying in a colonial school, and the aspiration that later persuades him to study in the West. Dele’s excellence in English is seen as a pretext by a homosexual teacher at the school for an attempted seduction (427). [6] In this regard, we are tempted to say that the lesbian characters stoned in a university in Okparanta’s novel could be said to develop their queer tendencies when they came in contact with a colonial institution (Western education) like Dele.

Adaora being a conservative and traditional woman who believes that homosexuality is un-African and unnatural holds that, “A woman and a woman cannot be. That’s not the way it’s done. You must let go of any remaining thoughts you have of that /If that’s what this is all about, you must let of it. It’s not the way things are done” (223). Ademule David Oluwashia (2014) in “Why Can’t He Just Be Like Everyone Else? An Open Letter to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” argues that:

“Homosexuality is not African; in fact, in all ramifications alien to the culture of Africa.... Homosexuality, if it ever existed in ancient African societies, would not and could not have been tolerated. Having a handful of Africans indulge in homosexuality is very insufficient to attach an African origin to it” (Para 20).

Because Adaora and many Africans consider homosexuality as alien, it is seen how LGBT practitioners are eliminated in Aba. This is seen when Ijeoma says:

Two weeks, nearly three, had gone by, and still all the talk in Aba continued to be about the discovery of the church and the burning. No one could say who had made the discovery, or who had taken part in the burning, but everyone seem to agree that all of it was necessary, that the discovery was aided by God, that an example needed to be set in order to cleanse Aba of such sinful ways (210).

Furthermore, the traditional and conservative nature of Adaora is seen in her belief that marriage or sex is meant for procreation and nothing else. Through a conversation with Ijeoma, Adaora takes her stance concerning lesbianism. This can be seen in the conversation below:

Ijeoma: “What is the meaning of ‘abomination?’” I asked.

Adaora: “simple: something disgusting, disgraceful and a scandal”.

Ijeoma: “But what exactly is disgusting or disgraceful or scandalous about lying with mankind or womankind? Does the Bible explain?”

Adaora: “The fact that the Bible says it’s bad it’s bad is all the reason you need, / Mama said. Besides, how can people be fruitful and multiply if they carry on in that way? Even that is scandal enough-the fact that it does not allow for

procreation” (75).

Adaora’s view is tied to what the Bible has prescribed concerning identity, sexuality, and procreation. *The Holy Bible (NIV)* in Genesis 1:28 and 35:11 says that “God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it” (2). [14] And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from you...” (32). Adaora thus being a religious woman who treasures traditional and biblical teachings knows that any relationship that will not permit procreation is a scandal, disgrace and above all a taboo. Her daughter being a lesbian, is committing a grave sin by engaging in what she terms “the other thing” (74). Thus, her refusal to name lesbianism is because homosexuality is considered a sin and an abomination that should not be named or talked about in the Nigerian society and in Sub-Saharan Africa in general.

To survive the brutality on LGBT practitioners in Aba in particular and Nigeria as a whole, Nnidi tells Ijeoma in a dream that “you don’t drink *kai kai* for its taste. You’re focusing on the wrong sense. You drink it to feel its effect on you. Feel, not taste” (251). This implies that, Ijeoma has to get married or endure her marriage to Chibundu not because she likes it but because she needs to do that to survive in a hostile community like Nigeria.

From the above analysis, it is noticed that LGBT persons in Africa in general and Sub-Sahara Africa in particular experience a lot of resistance, enmity, disdain and marginalization because of their sexual orientations. Not only do they experience physical violence, they equally go through a lot of psychological and emotional trauma. However, to survive in a community that hates homosexuals, LGBT characters in Adichie’s and Okparanta’s texts have come up survival strategies.

3. Sexual Binary and Dialectics in the Texts

In Sub-Saharan African societies, it is believed that heterosexuality is the right form of sexual orientation, and anyone who does not follow this pattern of sexuality is cursed and described as sick, or strange. Thus, in Adichie’s “Jumping Monkey Hills”, Senegalese news of “coming out” as a lesbian is received with mixed feelings and considered strange or unnatural. Because her sexuality is seen as strange, the Black South African “looked alarmed when he heard “lesbian”. He got up and walked away” (102) and Edward Campbell, like the black South African and many Sub-Saharan Africans holds that, “homosexual stories of this sort weren’t reflective of Africa...how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?” (108). The black South African’s reaction and Edward’s statement concerning the Senegalese sexual status shows that in Africa and the world at large, people are prone to understand that heterosexuality is the right form of sexual orientation. Gayle S. Rubin in “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the

Politics of Sexuality” writes: “desires are not preexisting biological entities, but rather that they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices” (149). [24] This means that Africans considering heterosexuality as a pre-existing biological entity need to rethink their argument.

However, Adichie in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, deconstructs this view, that heterosexuality is the right form of sexuality, by creating variant gay characters. For as Gayle quips, sexuality, just like gender, is socially constructed. The fact that Adichie uses the names of countries to name her characters like the black South African, the Senegalese, the Kenyan and many others is an indication that, homosexuality is practiced in Africa, and is reflective of the African heterosexual reality.

In Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, Adaora believes that heterosexuality is a sexual orientation that is biblically and traditionally acceptable in the Nigerian society and in Africa. She tells Ijeoma that; “This is the way things go...The will of God, The wonderful will of God...Marriage is for everyone! Remember, a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all. Besides, good men are rare these days, now that you have found one, you must do what you can to keep him...” (222-223). According to Rubin:

Modern Western societies appraise sex act according to a hierarchical system of sexual values. Marital reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with the certified mental health respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support and material benefits. (151)

Adaora, in line with Rubin’s argument, believes heterosexuality is the right form of marriage, and a married woman is more respected in the society than a single woman or a lesbian. That’s why she urges her daughter to get married. However, Ijeoma proves her mother’s premise wrong by loving women and being successful in her relation with them than with her heterosexual husband.

Ijeoma is seen on several occasions defending and confessing her love for Ndidi and Amina than she has done for her husband Chibundu. She says “...I still think of Amina that way” (85) ...my love for her being as large and wide as a whole country” (254). Ijeoma’s ability to assert her love for these two women shows just how much she loves them. Due to her love for them, Ijeoma leaves her husband to be with Ndidi. Ijeoma’s action shows that her sexuality is innate and unalterable. Chinelo Okparanta, as quoted by Molly Rose Quinn (2015), says in “Being Gay in Nigeria: Her Debut Novel, *Under the Udala Tree*, Launches at Housing Works” that, “Ijeoma’s mother says a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all. Coming from the space of many traditional Nigerian women: this is what a number of traditional women do: they hold fast to their conviction”. Despite being against her daughter’s sexuality, Adaora’s inner arguments prove that a woman without a man might be stronger and more capable and much more a woman than a woman with a man” (Para 11). Ijeoma’s mother being unable to alter Ijeoma’s sexuality accepts her daughter just the way she is. Her ability to accept

her as she is shows that Africans timidly accept homosexuality as a sexual orientation. Equally, Ijeoma gains respect from her daughter, ex-husband, and mother who all applaud her determination in standing for what she believes in. Thus, Ijeoma’s sexuality is innate and not chosen or a taboo.

Adaora, who is a symbol of the conservative and heterosexual culture, believes that homosexual tendencies are evil and practitioners of this form of sexuality are sick. This is seen when she says; “Everybody knows what lesson we should take from the story. Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” (74) ...Pray, I say pray! No child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires” (86). Adaora, thinks that her daughter being a lesbian is due to an illness, or some demonic influence and as such, she prays that her daughter be cured of it. This is seen in her prayer:

...lets us pray. Almighty God in heaven...protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away. *Zoputa ya n’ajo ihe*. Protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell. Lead her not into temptation. *E kwela ka o kwenye na nlanye*. Give her the strength to resist and do your will. May her heart remember the lessons you have given, the lesson of our beginning Adam and Eve. (72)

Moon argues that, the very possibility that anyone might experience sexual fluidity often provokes a sense of threat for lesbian, gay, transgender and allied people because the possibility of change has been so closely wedded to the belief that if any gay or lesbian sexual orientation can change, all lesbian, gay, and bisexual people should become heterosexual. Stories of change are often used coercively by authorities who see homosexuality as a sinful and/ or sick, and attempting to change at will has been painful and disastrous for many LGBT people (3).

Because Adaora thinks Ijeoma’s sexuality can be changed, she uses fasting and prayers to alter her sexuality. Ijeoma, due to the ordeal she goes through in the hands of her mother, equally prays that her sexuality be altered because her society considers it a sin and an illness. This is seen when she says “... I want to ask God to help me turn my thoughts away from Amina, to turn me instead onto the path of righteousness. I want to ask Him to guide me, to allow His word to echo in my heart” (72).

However, as Adrienne Rich (1980) in “*Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*” quips that, any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal, “natural phenomenon, or as mere sexual preference or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations, is profoundly weakened thereby, watering its contribution. She further holds that heterosexuality is not a natural or intrinsic human quality, but an institution imposed on many cultures and societies. In some situations, it pushes women to subordinate positions (632). [22] Because heterosexuality is not natural, Ijeoma struggles with her lesbian tendency in order to adapt to the traditional sexual practice but fails because her sexuality is innate, and natural. Thus, she cannot help but love and think of Ndidi and Amina.

Dalacoura, citing Marshall Hodgson in “Homosexuality as Cultural Battleground in the Middle East: Culture and Postcolonial International Theory”, says that despite strong disapproval, the sexual relations of a mature man with a subordinate youth were so readily accepted in upper class circles that there was often little or no effort to conceal their existence. Sometimes it seems to have been socially more acceptable to speak of a man’s attachment to a youth than to speak of his woman, who were supposed to be invisible in the inner court... (5). [7] The existence of sexual relationship between a man and a young man is proof that homosexuality as a sexual orientation exist. In like manner, Chibundu in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Tree* rightly remarks that, “Maybe there’s something special about that kind of love, about a man loving another man, or a woman loving another woman in that way. Maybe there’s something appealing about it... (285). Chinedu’s ability to recognize homosexuality as a special kind of love is a suggestion that homosexuality may neither be a sin nor a foreign import in the African continent, but that it is an African reality.

4. Conclusion

After a close examination of the binaries that exist between homosexuality and heterosexuality in the texts under study in relation to African societies, it is discovered that homosexuality has always been part and parcel of the African reality. Adichie’s use of countries’ names such as Senegalese, the Black South African, the Kenyan and other queer characters like Kamara, Abidemi, Chinedu in the collection of short stories of *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Okparanta’s use of queer characters like Ijeoma, Ndidi, Amina, in her narrative, all point to secret practices of homosexuality. Though many Africans hold that LGBT practices in Africa are due to foreign influence, Mckaiser holds that what was handed down to Africans is homophobia rather than homosexuality (www.theguardian.com/world/2012/octo/02/homosexuality-unafrican-claim-historical-embarrassmet).

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