

From Plight to Freedom: Exploring a Lesbian's Odyssey in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the personal journey of a lesbian woman pursuing independence from the path of panic, pain, and perplexity as depicted in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. According to Nigerian folktales and people, the Udala fruit traditionally symbolises female fertility. The select book is an immediate outcry against the Nigerian government's initiation of laws with regard to queerness and queer humans. Okparanta's portrayal realistically echoes the fact that most gays and lesbians, irrespective of their true sexuality, are forced to adopt marriage as their only choice to meet their survival. In sum, this story recounts the experience of a woman with same-sex orientation struggling between her mother, society, and marriage in the Nigerian context. This article will inform readers on how these three overpowering factors, impact the heroine mentally, dissolve her true self, and disrupt the process of self-realisation as a homosexual. In large, the protagonist is subjected to the domestic spheres, circumstances, and persons rather than public settings. She completely accepts herself as a lesbian, and her coming out was successful only during her motherhood, as in the interim she was repressed by her mother until marriage and by her husband after the wedding. Nigeria is not native to queer people; nonetheless, the novelist ends the story with a non-diasporic essence, as how her queer protagonist reached liberation and was able to dwell within her native walls is the novel's emotional touchstone.

Keywords: homophobia, lesbian, marriage, mother, Nigeria, religion, struggles.

1. Introduction

Chinelo Okparanta is a Nigerian-based U.S. writer, who initially began to thematise lesbianism through a short story collection, similar to Chimamanda Adichie (famous Nigerian novelist) titled *Happiness Like Water* (2013), namely, in *Grace and America* and later with *Under the Udala Trees*. It is the first outstanding novel to buttress sapphic desires openly in the Nigerian literary tradition. Her novel was published as a literary response in 2015, the very next year when the new bill came into effect in Nigeria under President Goodluck Jonathan, who introduced the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA). This recent act upheaves numerous discourses that the novelist remarks in an interview, "I have a friend who lives in the north of Nigeria. In Abuja, we talk a lot about the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community and the law that passed back in 2014." (Staff, 2015). The modern Nigerian bill dictates fourteen years of imprisonment for same-sex partners who reside, marry, or visibly make same-sex gestures in public places. Alongside ten years in prison for associations supporting queer people. However, the notional objective of the Nigerian government is to ban marriages between same-sex individuals, but it has a severe upshot for homosexuals to suffer at the hands of police officers. One of the executive directors of an Abuja NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) reports that "Basically, because of this law (SSMPA) the police treat people in any way they please. They torture, force people to confess, and when they hear about a gathering...over to make arrests." (Isaack, 2016). For many African nations, the 1960s marked to be the beginning of the decolonisation period. Although free from the fetters of British rule, many Asian and African countries still preserve the coloniser's conception of homosexuality as a crime, without looking back on their respective historical references. Further, Ajei (2022) surmises that many Africans "oppose homosexuality because they feel they have a culturally sanctioned moral commitment to have children. And that commitment stems from the ultimate goal of promoting community welfare."

Certainly, for the past three decades, many countries have been decriminalising homosexuality under the law, even trying to legalise same-sex weddings to resolve the debates in relation to the LGBTQ community. But contrastingly, African countries in general and Nigeria in particular are ebbing backward in the process of sanctioning same-sex relationships. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) surveys the list of countries that prohibit homosexual behaviours. It reports that African countries stand the majority hitherto assigning serious punishment, sentencing people to death for engaging in forbidden activities (Reality Check Team, 2021). Specifically, Nigeria scores the second highest percentage in showing hostility, where 97% of the population found themselves sceptical and hesitant towards same-sex affairs, as reported by the Pew Global Attitude Poll (Okeke, 2021). On one hand, many western authorities and world human rights organisations condemn this code of criminalisation, but it has gained wide support from the people inside the country on the other hand.

Homophobia grew rapidly in terms of bullying, hurling stones, and attacking suspected homosexuals. In 2006, the jurisdiction of Nigeria proposed a law strictly banning same-sex behaviours with the motto, "Jail the gays". The country's threatening laws coerced many homosexuals to closet themselves to avoid harassment. In the midst of these stern grounds, Julia Dibia was the first writer to single out a full-stitch depiction of male homosexuality in 2005, which was even before the decree of proscription. His *Walking with Shadows* chronicles the life of Adrian Ebele Njoko, a gay protagonist who hides his real sexual identity in his Nigerian background. In the same vein, Okparanta contributes a full-fledged reflection on female homosexuality and endeavours to craft a sympathetic central lesbian character like Dibia in particular.

Lesbianism is neither tolerant nor easily accepted in any African society, because "to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their worldview." (Kolawole, 1997). Africa's diverse culture naturally stays strong with the concepts of family, clan, marriage, children, and gender stereotypes, whereby it holds a popular expression that same-sex desires are un-African and non-native to their traditional values. African women have long been assigned only for domestic assignments like "procreation, child care, and collective preparation of children for communal coexistence." (Williams, 2019). Femaleness and fertility are inextricably juxtaposed in the light of cultural regimes where a woman's body becomes a site of reproduction. Therefore, women in their society are validated in relation to men, chiefly based on the roles of wifedom and motherhood. But lesbian relationships inverse those conservative frameworks of femininity because their intercourse yields no proliferation or roles to be played. Basically, in the second half of the 20th century, many African feminists were busy; aiming to differentiate their ideologies from white/western feminism by referring to theirs as motherism, womanism, nego-feminism, Stiwanism, and snail-sense feminism (Nkealah, 2016). They view "Western feminisms as often equated with radical feminism and with hatred of men... a fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood, a favoring of lesbian love, and an endeavour to invert the power relationship of genders" (Arndt, 2000). In the introduction to *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power* (1998), Obioma Nnaemeka summarised four kinds of resistance associated with African women, among which is objecting to "Western feminism's inordinate and unrelenting emphasis on sexuality...." Buchi Emecheta, a renowned Nigerian writer of Igbo origin, opines, "I am a feminist with a small 'f.' I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like them capital 'F' women who say women should live together and all that, I say No" (Abbenyi, 1997). The above statements clearly indicate that lesbianism, chiefly of Western heritage, cannot be encouraged within African culture. They are of the strong view that white women establish partnerships among women, and globally export that form to other nations simply to escape the patriarchal world. Such false consciousness emanated in first- and second-generation Nigerian feminist writers who made no serious attempts either to rally awareness or to offer any sympathetic tone on the gloomy realities of lesbians. So, queer sexualities saw the light in Nigerian literature, especially in the 21st century, as the country's writers felt there was no constraint built on them to feature same-sex behaviours through texts. An early Nigerian writer, LGBTQ activist, and self-identified lesbian, Unoma Azuah, believes "the power of writing is in its ability to affect and change lives, to begin with, our own lives" (Azuah, 2019), and her poetry as well as nonfiction writings always delved into the theme of sexuality (IFEDIGBO, 2012). Okparanta is also of the same opinion, as her novel's objective is to offer "Nigeria's marginalised LGBTQ citizens a powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history," (Okparanta, 2017, p. 325), as stated in the author's note. So, it was the third-generation women writers who were much bothered by "how homosexuality is integral to larger debates and discussions about women's struggles, sexism, imposed gender normativity, violence, corruption, religion, and immigration." (Simms, 2016). Their texts highly criticise discriminatory practices against homosexuals and Africans' unripe mindset in recognising an individual's sexual autonomy. Further, their perspectives unequivocally set them apart from their literary predecessors, who were far from the understanding of sexuality and also actively preserved lesbianism as a taboo topic. But contemporary literary articulations repeat the influence of colonisation, religion, culture, and law—all of which are indeed responsible for perpetuating prejudice against lesbianism within Nigeria.

1.1 About the Novel

Okparanta's two lesbian works were debut successes and earned her Lambda Literary Awards for best fiction. She is the pioneer to enter the genre of lesbian bildungsroman, a fresh trajectory as many women writers previously focused on female bildungsroman but not lesbians within the Nigerian context. For a long time, the development of straight heroes and heroines and their quest for self, have dominated this postmodern literary genre while simultaneously projecting heterosexuality. Later, many women writers interrupted this genre by placing the lesbian character in the middle of the narrative of any particular geographical, cultural, or social conditions. Such novels describe how the process of self-discovery as a female homosexual takes place amidst a dominant heterosexual culture. The process of learning their true selves as lesbians is based on the background in which they live, the circumstances to which they are exposed, their own strengths, and so on, which differ from woman to woman. This chosen novel aptly fits under this genre as it is a throwback story of an adult Nigerian woman narrating her own tragic journey toward her self-acceptance as a lesbian. This novel is written in the first person and is divided into six anonymous parts, further divided into 77 sub-sections, and followed by an epilogue. Also, the internal narration technique that travels along the story is pivotal in unveiling the narrator's private feelings, personal thoughts, and dilemmas, which offer deep insights to the readers. The leading character, namely Ijeoma, had two early bonds with her own sex people: firstly, a cross-ethnic relationship, followed by a same-ethnic relationship, and finally, a cross-sex relationship, which is all central to the story. The novel covers nearly four and a half decades of the protagonist's life, from childhood to adulthood, but all the recalled events are not arranged in a chronological order that grips the interest of the readers.

The story opens when the Igbo heroine, Ijeoma, is 11 years old, the only child of Uzo and Adora, living in a small town named Ojoto. Set against the background of 1967 Nigeria, which was the time of the Biafran War approaching the country, the small girl's father dies at the hands of a bomber plane. Things began to crash apart once after his death, and the effects of war shattered the family, bringing them into a lower social class. Ijeoma feels, "I knew well that Mama was somehow beginning to see me as a burden... the same way the war was in fact a burden to all of us" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 33). Adora, unable to bear her husband's death, becomes mentally distressed and feels it is impossible to care for her daughter as a single parent. So, she decides to send her to stay with her husband's former friend, the grammar school teacher, and his wife, who live in the next town, Nnewi. This decision further fractures Ijeoma, who has recently lost her father and hardly detests leaving her mother. Somehow, she was compromised by Adora's promising words of a relatively short stay only, saying, "You will be better off this way. A mother always knows best." (Ibid, p. 50). So, Adora casts off her daughter forcibly to the teacher's home to work as a maid girl, and in turn, they will aid her with shelter, food, and a good education during these hard times. Ijeoma adapts to a new life as a house girl and also to a new place where her first love blossoms. She encounters a deep attraction for a Hausa girl named Anima of her same age who has lost her family in the war. She too was adopted as a second maid by the grammar school teacher in order to share all household chores and the hovel with Ijeoma. The cohabitation of Igbo Christians and Hausa Muslims is unusual because both groups are sworn enemies, but here it occurs as a result of the protagonist's displacement by force and war's consequences. In the course of time, the friendship soon turns into a deep love among the girls of ethnic differences, as Anima says, "WE MIGHT AS well be married" (Ibid, p. 118). But their strong relationship does not last long; once the grammar school teacher caught them intimate together, "He walked over, pulled us off the mattress one at a time, and slapped us on our cheeks. Over a year with him, sometimes the threat of a beating, but never an actual beating until then" (Ibid, p. 125). He shouts at them, "An abomination!" and he describes the punishment subject to these kinds of actions. This incident was the only reason Adora decided to return to Nnewi, who had ignored her every attempt to visit her daughter for nearly two years. The grammar school teacher orders Ijeoma to narrate what she did with Anima to her mother, which further makes the situation awful. Unable to describe it, she drowns in shame, and finally, both girls beg to be pardoned for their behaviours. Adora was found unbearable by the idea of making her daughter stay with a girl from their enemy tribe who had killed her husband and was majorly upset about same-sex behaviours. So, Ijeoma was rapidly withdrawn from the spot.

2. First Visit to Bible Lessons

Ijeoma's life with her mother can be divided into three episodes. First, upon her return from Nnewi to Aba, she not only steps into the new home but also witnesses a new version of her mother. In her words, "it was strange to be in Mama's arms like this. There was a distance between us that had not existed before... But things were different now. At this moment, she felt more like a warden than my own mother, more like a husk- more an emblem of motherhood than motherhood itself" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 70). Already she is carrying the wound of her mother's sudden abandonment to serve the childless couple who never showed any concern for her as a friend's daughter, "the grammar school teacher and his wife grew comfortable in their use of me as a housegirl" (Ibid, p. 59). In addition to this, her mother failed to pay her a visit for a long time but only collected her back based on complaints. She thinks in any situation, her life as a maid girl would never have happened or definitely be intolerable if her father was alive. In the course of Ijeoma's exile, Adora too shifts from Ojoto to her hometown Aba, the place where she was born and fostered. There, she finds her parent's old house and rejuvenates it with the help of the villagers into a beautiful small bungalow. She also runs a grocery shop outside the house to support economic needs. Every time she mentions this as a reason to her daughter, possibly to hide her flaw, she further claims to feel proud of her efforts in developing her own house for themselves. So, she does not really feel bad for rejecting her own daughter for years but insists she would have surely halted her indecent activities if she was nearer. Finally, Ijeoma and Anima are separated from each other to destroy their taboo love, which is against society. Adora, an overtly Christian devotee, suddenly generates Bible teaching after a week of Ijeoma's arrival as she feels it is her duty to discipline her daughter's same-sex interests, saying, "There's nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul" (Ibid, p. 65). She tries her best to make her daughter recognise what is prescribed in the Bible regarding good vs. evil, man vs. woman, in the light of the Adam and Eve relationship, and she prays to God, "May her heart remember the lessons you have given, the lesson of our beginning, of Adam and of Eve." (Ibid, p.19). Ijeoma recalls this treatment as "straightening out," which was separately done to her by her mother and to Anima by the Grammar school teacher.

Bible lessons followed by a prayer continued every evening once the shop was closed. Adora reads certain passages aloud twice to preach that man-woman unions are the correct order of life in line with God. Numerous biblical stories were explained, mainly the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by God for the sin of homosexual acts. In every account, she fails to give proper justification for Ijeoma's clarifications but tells her that God's messages must not be questioned anymore. She insists activities like hers with Anima are futile and disgusting (abominations). Anything that does not allow for procreation and thereby highlights infertility is also an abomination. To Ijeoma's mind, this specific point brings back the lonely couple- the grammar school teacher and his wife who has no children. Likewise, several doubts flood her mind regarding the mismatch of biblical text with reality. Therefore, she suspects that those references might be allegories or histories of particular people or periods. However, she becomes voiceless and fears giving her points of interpretation contrary to her mother's teachings, which would definitely increase the lessons twice a day. Besides the lessons, she was unable to flush out any memories of Nnewi or dreams about her first attraction, Anima which, is evident at the completion of Old Testament. Ijeoma proudly admits "yes" when her mother asks whether she has the same feelings for the Hausa girl. This reply, in turn, rages her mother, who starts to scream, "You must ask God for the forgiveness of all your sins, but especially for that one particular sin in you... Pray I say! No child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires. The mere existence of them is a terrible disrespect to God and to me!" (Ibid, p. 86). This sort of response also

appears in the famous 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (the father of Nigerian literature). The hero of the novel, Okonkwo, comments to his daughter about his son Nwoye's effeminate aspect, saying, "You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people." (Achebe, 2021, p.172). Both novels underline the pattern of Nigerian parents' obsessiveness with respective gender conformity and their tendency to disown their young children for the shame of emerging queerness. Furthermore, religious Adora believes her daughter was inflicted by some demonic spirits driving her to lesbianism, so brings a clay flask containing red liquid inside and lets the droplets fall onto Ijeoma's neck, following her face, and implores, "In the name of Almighty God, I order you to leave my child alone" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 88). This incident makes clear, her homophobic inheritance in terms of religion, addressing lesbianism as a devil. Her mother's vehement response to revealing the truth and treating her as a sinner severely aches Ijeoma. There is no one to console her at critical times, and the absence of her father is a huge drawback for the lonely and helpless protagonist, who struggles to readjust with her mother. Adora takes complete control over her daughter in her husband's absence and does not physically assault her for same-sex activities, like Jenette's mother in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985), a post-modern lesbian classic. In the classic novel, the adopted protagonist, Jenette is exposed to exorcism and her lesbianism is intentionally disclosed to members of the church community by her mother in the name of disciplining. Whereas here Adora declines physical abuse and does not drop the truth on anyone, she undertakes the obligation to get rid of her sexually transgressive daughter with religious teachings. Herein, in order to fix her daughter's mind, Adora uses the Bible as a weapon to perpetuate hostility against same-sex desires. The Bible essentially accords supreme authority to Christian followers, containing the "word of God" on the topic of homosexuality. Gunda specifies two approaches to holy book reading that have loomed in relation to same-sex practices. On one side, Christians in greater part make use of "explicit texts" (namely, Gen. 19:1-29; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; 1Cor. 6:9-10; Rom. 1:18-32; and 1Tim. 1:10)". From another side, homosexual people illustrate the same book in another way as "the central message of the Christian faith represented in the empathy and love demonstrated by Jesus towards those on the fringes of society" (Gunda, 2010, p. 20). At the juncture of the novel, Adora adopts the same scriptures mentioned within the first mode that spans six months for covering both the Old and New Testament to load Ijeoma's mind that a woman must love a man and vice versa alone is normal, natural, and socially acceptable order. On the final day of the teachings, she pens down all the specific Bible excerpts from Leviticus 18:22 to Revelation 21:8 and starts to lecture again on all those important things. For instance, she highlights the word "abominable" as a reminder to her daughter, never to think of same-sex love at any time. But Ijeoma as a homosexual, from the beginning, takes the stories in a contrasting way to her mother (the second mode mentioned by Gunda, 2010). Although it was a long tutoring session, in the end, she could not accept all the messages given by her mother with Bible references. She feels no changes have actually happened in her, but she is exhausted from those continuous learnings and prayers. Before joining the boarding school, Adora again confirms her daughter's fondness for Anima. But knowing well of her adverse reaction, she cleverly gestures, "I forced myself to shake it with authority, making sure not to blink. It was the first time that I lied to Mama" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 92). It is clear that the dominant religious mother implicitly aims to change her daughter's lesbianism which further complicates their relationship.

Later, Ijeoma and Anima join the same Igbo Christian boarding school, out of the grammar school teacher's support. Adora paid a few visits in the beginning, but not later, mainly to check whether her daughter resumes in touch with the Hausa girl. Besides her mother's strict warnings, Ijeoma was the first to try to reconnect with her old love when she met Anima after a long time. But she is avoided by her initially, and later their relationship gets reconciled anew, unlike the old flame, as both try to expose themselves as close friends despite their true love. Both girls were uneasy due to their strict upbringing once their romantic relationship was found out, and thereby a compulsion was set down on them to avoid each other at school. Although away from her mother, Ijeoma's mind rushes back to imagine her mother's response undoubtedly for being again in a Hausa love, "THE DEVIL HAS returned again to cast his net on you" and remembers her words that "Adam and Eve, not Eve and Eve' But even with those words in my head, I could not help myself" (Ibid, p. 150). She struggles with the extreme dilemma of her mother's teachings as well as being unable to give up her pure passion for Anima. Their relationship soon broke again when Anima encountered a haunting dream and showed an unwillingness to continue their love. Ijeoma too could not convince her to come back as did earlier, so they stayed apart until the end of their schooling. Of the two girls, Anima was the first to identify herself as straight by disclosing her marriage decision with a Hausa boy on the final day of school. This was sad news for Ijeoma, as she knew well that it was not her true desire, but eventually, it became happy news for the grammar school teacher, his wife, and even for her own mother, saying, "Did you hear that, Ijeoma?... please-o, hurry up and find yourself someone like that before you wind up getting left behind. But she added, 'Igbo, of course'" (Ibid, p. 170).

3. Second Visit to Marriage

Ijeoma, after her schooling, did not proceed with any further studies. She rejoins her mother in Aba and continues to live by helping her at the food outlet. Her previous stay was packed with Bible sessions and now it is about bridging her towards heterosexuality as obligatory. The upcoming scene corresponds to the reference of a popular feminist and author of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (2011) claims that "A young girl's free choice was always highly restricted, and celibacy—except in rare cases where it bears a sacred connotation—ranked her as a parasite and pariah; marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence. Here, tremendous pressure has been flung on the heroine by her mother to associate with any good man of her choice swiftly and get married like Anima, which is not Ijeoma's utmost wish but Adora's. She airs that, "A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all. You won't stay young forever. Even that girl has gone and found herself a husband. Why won't you do the same?" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 181). In days after, the space of Anima was not filled by a man but once again by another woman named Ndidi, who is also Igbo and works as a school teacher. She very often visits the

food store, where they both fall in love with each other. Adora accepts their friendship, unaware of the reality behind it, and allows Ijeoma to go to Ndidi's apartment. The actual intention in back of letting her daughter visit Ndidi is to pick a suitable partner for herself from her new friend's male co-workers. Contrastingly, Ijeoma is not interested in looking for any man, and with this route, she earns a little liberty availed of by her mother to meet Ndidi frequently, through which both develop a tumorous relationship. In an instant, she was happy with her new love, who took her to the "small dimly lit church" (Ibid, p.190) situated at the dirt road in the town's margin, she bumped into a community of closeted women like her kind, meeting secretly to talk, share, and dance happily with their partners freely. Also, on the contrary, she becomes restless about living near her mother and maintaining a close relationship with a woman, again hiddenly against the warnings, which would definitely pose a problem that was not felt earlier at boarding school. After the secret visit to the church, her mother's words constantly began to echo in her dreams, "Memories of my Bible studies with Mama rushed back to me yet again, no matter how much I tried to put them away from my mind. Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream as if to mockingly ask me how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 195). It is clear that she emotionally battles with her mother, the Bible's teachings, and her sexual preference. On one particular day, unable to resist all her inner conflicts, she pursues church, kneels, and begs God to show the sign of evil troubling inside her in order to forsake it: "I screamed at the sight, because if this was God's sign, then Mama was the evil in my heart" (Ibid, p. 197). She was shocked to find her mother in front while opening her eyes. Actually, Adora was searching for her daughter, who had been missing suddenly for long hours, but for Ijeoma, her appearance applies to God's response that her mother is the real vicious perturbation and not her lesbianism.

As the novel progresses, one day Adora recognises one of their Ojoto family friend's sons, named Chibundu, who accidentally comes upon their shop. She comes to know that he too lives in the same town working as an engineer after his studies. The very moment she feels that the young man would be the perfect suitor for her daughter. Similarly, seeing young Ijeoma after several years causes him to fall in love with her. Despite these two people, Ijeoma did not express any interest in him, as she had already been smitten enough with Ndidi. Later on, Chibundu makes frequent visits to the shop to meet Ijeoma and also to draw her attention to him. One day, he requests her to join him for dinner after knowing that she has yet to engage with any boyfriend. Adora responds to this call and assures him that her daughter will join him for sure. In this context, despite Ijeoma, her mother desires very much to settle down her daughter with an Igbo man (Chibundu), whom she knew well from an early age. For example, she does her best to convince her daughter to accept Chibundu's invitation, saying, "You might like it. I really think that you should at least try it out and see. Have you ever?" Further, she requests the following, "Do it for me as a favor. If you don't like it, then at least I'll also know and will never have to worry about a boy stealing you away...."

I remained quiet for some time, fuming. Finally I said, "Okay," more out of spite than out of acceptance. 'You want me to go out with a boy? Okay. I will.' ...

She turned away and said, 'Good. Just one date. It will be all the confirmation I need.'" (Ibid, p.215).

A quandary arises within the main protagonist about whether to follow her mother's suggestions or her own choices. From the impact of the two incidents, she comes to a conclusion and also begins to consider that her mother's attempts in curbing her same-sex desires seem to be correct and, even at one point, infers that some witch really stalks her with the motive of damning her to hell. Firstly, one day the townspeople suddenly raid the covert church, where all lesbians including Ndidi and Ijeoma are present inside as like usual joining. Unexpectedly during the fierce attacks, one of their lesbian friends, Adanna (school teacher) is made to burn alive as a sign of warning and lost to death. None of the girls could save their friend, instead found the scorched dead body before their eyes. Except for Adanna, all the other girls, including Ijeoma and Ndidi, gracefully escaped the mob attack by hiding in the bunker. This crisis became the buzz of the town people for nearly three weeks, as all assumed, "that the discovery (secret church) was aided by God, that an example needed to be set in order to cleanse Aba of such sinful ways." (Ibid, p.310). This news turns into a point of pride for Adora who feels glad that she and the grammar teacher tenaciously redeemed Ijeoma from the sin already, unaware that her daughter is one of the victims of a violent incident. Secondly, Ndidi narrates about one such incident that happened months ago in their town to her lady love about two gay men, friends of Adanna were publicly beaten to death. Following these incidents, Ijeoma becomes entirely disturbed; each and every day moves off hard as her mind is unable to get rid of the picture of her fellow friend, who was slain in the fire, and she tends to be frightened of society's brutality towards same-sex people. In intense panic and overwhelming pain, she distances herself from Ndidi, and their lesbian relationship ends in vain to shun her mother's growing suspicions. Hence, she decides to espouse her mother's wish of getting yoked with her childhood friend, Chibundu, and agrees to his marriage proposal to lead a normal life like every other without any anxiety. Similar to Anima, Ijeoma too gets married to a man. Now, Adora feels successful in her daughter's transformation into a married woman. All through the novel, the relationship between Adora and Ijeoma aligns with the theory of Nancy Chodorow, a feminist who published a text in 1978 based on Freudian psychoanalysis titled *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Her work was a milestone in provoking the understanding of mother-daughter bonding from a socio-psychological perspective around the 1970's. According to Chodorow (1978) compared to sons, mothers will probably embrace their daughters as, "Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself" because both members pertain to the same gender. In consequence, Mothering becomes a cyclic process, as every woman primarily attempts to relate herself earlier with her own mother and later with her daughter. On this core, mothers never give up their domestic duty and become conscious when it comes to their daughters' upbringing and shaping their characteristics, especially transferring and instilling the destined feminine personalities that they inherited in their

daughterhood as Adora does. Therefore, a teenage daughter commonly undergoes a mass entanglement between her mother (with whom she has developed close and emotional ties) and autonomy (that will remain pending) that results in inefficiency in forming an identity for themselves (Nayar, 2009). Here, the novel's heroine swallows and sacrifices her lesbian desires for the sake of her mother's happiness is transparent. For instance, Ijeoma senses, "How would I face Mama when it got back to her that Chibundu had proposed and I had declined? She would be devastated, would most likely be heartbroken at the fact that I passed up the life she wanted for me – and perhaps the only opportunity that I was likely to have with a man" (Okparanta, 2017, p.220). It was the first time she was able to see her mother in extreme bliss, as well as her tireless efforts as a single woman in making the wedding arrangements for her.

4. Third Visit to Liberation

Throughout the novel, the main character does not encounter male dominance from anyone, including her father, but patriarchy reaches her readily through her husband, Chibundu, in the guise of marriage. The course of her struggles does not disappear in the new life but shifts from place to place and person to person. After marriage, the fresh couple moved to Port Harcourt, where a myriad of problems awaited Ijeoma. Their union mirrored more a kind of loveless, dull, and materialistic connection than an emotional and understanding one because he was able to view Ijeoma solely as an object of sexual desire. On the other hand, Ijeoma did not sense any love or romantic feelings towards him, akin to Anima and Ndidi. She is already an impaired product of her mother, who is the foremost reason for establishing an increased sense of guilt within her by accusing her of homosexual tendencies as an abomination and unnatural act. For instance, she often runs to church with her Bible, apart from Sunday masses, before marriage and even continues after marriage to seek forgiveness for the sin (lesbian love) that she has committed. Chibundu is the direct opposite of his mother-in-law, meaning a non-religious person who prevented his wife from revealing the reality of her abomination to him while finding her in the church. Living as a straight woman on the outside and a lesbian on the inside adds a double burden for her in person. She longs for Ndidi only, even after marriage, and also extremely regrets cheating on her lover, as the Hausa girl did to her. She even secretly posts letters to Ndidi's address without her husband's knowledge. Between the days, Ijeoma was visited by her mother, who teaches her to be alluring to her husband's attention through culinary aspects and helps to furnish in changing the couple's poor home into a lovely space. Alongside, she learns about her daughter's pregnancy, which gives her complete contentment. "You've done well," she said. "You've made your mother proud. Do you know what this means?" (Ibid, p.249). Later, Ijeoma gives birth to a beautiful girl named Chidinma and becomes more dedicated to nurturing her. The heroine's existence, in a nutshell, is apropos to the statement of Nadaswaran (2013), "that woman, etymologically, is the wife of man, prefaced by her daughterhood, which prepares her for motherhood, a grand finale."

Undoubtedly, Chibundu is not happy with the first baby for being a girl and begins to remove himself from Ijeoma, this act mirrors that he merely punishes her for not yielding a son. In her words, "I had in fact noticed that he was starting to go in to work on some Saturdays... but it was clear that something had gotten into him. The way he was snapping more often than ever. As if all the world, and especially me and Chidinma, had become like thorns on his skin." (Ibid, p.266). One day, unexpectedly, Chibundu spots many hidden letters that Ijeoma has written, but not posted for her Aba girlfriend. Actually, she stopped sending letters, thinking Ndidi was not responding to her. But shockingly, she came to know that Ndidi's reply letters had already been stolen by the cunning Chibundu. Also, Ijeoma becomes speechless when he starts to read the letters one by one that she had penned down: "He is my husband, yes, but you are the one I love." (Ibid, p. 278), and another letter displays, "I can't wait for my baby to be here. I love the precious little thing already and can't wait to hold him or her in my arms Poor Chibundu... But not a moment passes when I don't wish you were the one here with me, the one with whom I would raise my child." (Ibid, p. 279). Her words of sharing more love with someone else wrath Chibundu, and he begins to blame her as a dishonest wife in their kinship who had broken his trust totally. It is vivid to note that since marriage he has been spying on his wife's personal matters clandestinely in order to allege her, later with evidence. After the letter circumstance, he decides, that making her wife more sexually devoted to him will definitely fill the gap between them. The next day, he apologises to her and demands a need of a son immediately. Ijeoma, though, feels it would be too soon to have a second child next to the newborn daughter. Further, when she refuses his sexual urge, he treats her very badly with no patience. She mourns that "Marriage to him was what I now knew as normal and familiar so that even with this terrible treatment of me- calling me a whore throwing money in my face, and the rest – the thought never once occurred to me that these were grounds on which I could now pack up my bags and leave." (Ibid, p.294).

The main character, by submitting herself to "compulsory heterosexuality," evolves into a victim of sexual slavery and loses her right over her body like most women. Rich (2003) registers heterosexual relations as equivalent to rape for the women's commitment to reproductive function. Shortly, regardless of interest, Ijeoma becomes pregnant for the second time just to fulfil her husband's wish, who wants a son, but that ends in an abortion soon. In the hospital, Chibundu fails to console her for the bitter incident but reminds her to keep trying together until a boy arrives. As chiefly obsessed with a boy child alone who can "pass on my family name" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 273) and a symbol of pride. Here, he does not care much for her daughter and fails to offer his part of love as a father. For instance, when Chibundu buys a new car as well as a big toy car, he gets angry when his baby daughter touches the toy. He forcefully pushes her away and further orders Ijeoma to take away her daughter, uttering that he brought this, especially for his future son and not for "your" girl. Without spending much time with his wife and daughter, he appreciates himself for giving his family the best and most comfortable life possible, but Ijeoma is certainly distressed by his kinds of dealings with her and Chidinma as unrelated to him. Nevertheless, she did not resist him in every incident, instead endured his different infuriating acts in silence. Later on, one day night she has a haunting dream of her daughter drooping under a tall Udala tree, which provokes her to quit her husband the very moment silently. She recollects, "It was then I made the realization: Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of

something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, the weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends... I sat up in bed, set my feet firmly on the floor. The solution to my problems became clear. Why had it taken this long for me to act? There's a way in which life takes us along for a ride and we begin to think our destinies are not in fact up to us" (Ibid, p. 312–313). Metaphorically, the title of the novel gets expression at the end with Ijeoma's words, which waves the whole African womanhood pressed traditionally under cultural constructions of gender from which they could not divorce themselves. The main protagonist begins to be aware that the life she has been living so far is not an appropriate path to proceed with. She is breathing far away from her true self and no longer belongs to the straight ring. Finally, she bids farewell to her marriage bond and returns to her mother with Chidinma. Thus, for Ijeoma, marriage (the expected norm) and motherhood (fertility) had been the best quilt to protect herself from the heteropatriarchal and homophobic clasp, despite the fact that both drown her in an immense depression, as apparent from the above references. According to Rich, this double life empties the energy of the lesbians living in the closet, owing to the lie maintained by them, and they will become "psychologically trapped," for "trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script." (Rich, 2003).

5. Conclusion

Through a literary prism, this paper successfully explored the odyssey of a lesbian woman progressing towards peace who crossed through profound emotional suffocation following sexual dominance owing to her sexuality. The main character favours a man and marriage by force, mainly not to disappoint her mother, to conform to society, and due to the threatening atmosphere of Nigeria. In analysing the novel, young Ijeoma suffers under the aegis of her stereotypical mother and selfish husband, who merely enforced their wishes on her and never laid ears to her once her lesbianism was discovered. Onanuga (2022) claims that male and female homosexuals suffer from psychological conflicts and oppression during forced outings. Most homosexuals consciously suppress their sexual identity to pass through homophobia and rejection. The same is reflected in Ijeoma's case, as she either lies or hides her interest in women from persons around her, meaning fails to come out as a lesbian openly. In masking herself as a straight woman, she combats internally with fear and inferiority, and finally, she is able to achieve inner tranquility and fulfillment, once she opts for self-outing. Thus, her third visit signals the flight to freedom, where the novel's happy epilogue opens several years later, in 2014, with multiple metamorphoses that took place in between the years. Informs three turning points in the protagonist's life namely: Ijeoma's night departure from her husband gathers a great surprise when her mother receives (accepts) her warmly with no arguments; her old relationship with Ndidi is also revived; and finally, Chidinma (a university professor) even accepts her lesbian mother. Here, the riveting point lies in the continuance of two generations of mother-daughter bonding.

This study concludes that Okparanta has re-emphasised the power of the maternal-daughter bond in terms of lesbianism. In *Oranges and Udala*, both mother characters share religious extremism as their common aspect, and then the dissimilarity rests on the treatment of biological (Adora) versus non-biological (Louie) mothers, which is clearly visible, implying what each did once they discovered their young daughter's lesbian tendencies as discussed above. So, besides female homosexuality, the chosen novel equally portrays mothering through Adora, who plays a significant role in both feeding heterosexuality earlier and later rescuing her daughter from it, instead of trying to push her into the same hell, this act adds value to the mother character on one side. Except for temporary periods of separation, she travels along with her daughter's entire life journey. Therefore, a mother is the one who has the key potential to fence her lesbian daughter amidst the heteronormative and homophobic web, which marks the climax of the novel. On the other side, even in the worst of past situations, Ijeoma never thought of quitting or slicing her bond with her mother but won her approval in the end. Totally, she moves away from her mother three times and finally comes back to the same mother after accepting who she is and gathering the strength to come out as a lesbian regardless of responses. Their reunion dovetails with Chodorow's concluding point that the mother-daughter connection is a robust, sacred thread that never breaks. This special attachment makes anything possible and is also vivid with the two major characters, who never want to give up on each other at any cost, even though bitterness befalls them.

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