

AFROCENTRIC PATTERNS OF RESISTANCE TO SAME-SEX RELATIONS AND UNIONS IN CHINELO OKPRARANTA’S UNDER THE UDALA TREES, AKWAEKE EMEZI’S THE DEATH OF VIVEK OJI, AND TENDAI HUCHU’S THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolls.v15i1.18>

Abstract

This paper examines fictional representations in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji*, and Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*, which demonstrate how religious and cultural frameworks in Nigeria and Zimbabwe inform resistance to the acceptance of same-sex relationships, unions, and identities. These authors depict the prevailing condemnation of homosexuality and its classification as an ‘alternative’ sexuality within predominantly heterosexual societies. The discussion highlights the Afrocentric normative patterns that construe same-sex sexuality as a foreign intrusion into long-established heteronormative cultures. Consequently, homosexuality is widely regarded as an un-African, taboo practice that conflicts with socio-cultural, religious, and historical foundations built on procreative heterosexual unions. Opposition – whether expressed through non-violent or coercive measures – thus emerges from entrenched heteronormative standards and from perceptions of homosexuality as a Western import threatening established sexual norms. Overall, the paper argues that such resistance reflects broader Nigerian, Zimbabwean, and Sub-Saharan African conceptions of sexuality that deem same-sex relationships a deviant and unacceptable ‘alternative’ to inherited heterosexual traditions. To put the discussion in perspective, the central argument draws on African critical perspectives regarding the coexistence – or lack thereof – of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Key Words: *Afrocentric sexual standards/Homophobia, Sexuality, Sexual normativity, Homosexuality, Heteronormative standards*

Introduction

The diverse forms of the condemnation and resistance to the presence of homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are shaped by the Afro-heteronormative perceptions of sexuality. In both societies, dominant sexual norms and values are rooted in long-standing cultural standards that define same-sex intimacy as an un-African and taboo – an intrusion that must be prevented from encroaching upon deeply entrenched Nigerian and Zimbabwean conceptions of sexuality grounded in heterosexuality. The reactions of predominantly heterosexual populations in these countries, vividly illustrated in the fictional works of Chinelo Okparanta (2015), Akwaeke Emezi (2020), and Tendai Huchu (2010), collectively reflect intense resistance to the coexistence of heterosexuality

and homosexuality. In essence, the vast majority of citizens in both nations adhere to a traditionally African, heterosexual understanding of sexuality, which they regard as the sole normative standard – that is, a heteronormative framework widely accepted as the only legitimate model. Within this context, homosexuality is perceived as a threat to sacred, Afrocentric Nigerian and Zimbabwean sexual norms and values.

In essence, the widespread condemnation observed in these two countries aligns with broader continental attitudes. As Mathisen (2018) notes, the number of African “[...] countries that criminalize same-sex intimacy [...] is the highest in the world. The punishments vary all the way from fines and relatively short prison sentences in countries like Zimbabwe and Liberia to the death

penalty in parts Nigeria and Somalia [...]” (p.17). Thus, rejection of same-sex practices in Nigeria and Zimbabwe must be understood within the wider sociocultural and political underpinnings that inform discourses on sex and sexuality across much of sub-Saharan Africa.

The abhorrence of homosexuality in these two countries invariably invokes the concept of *heteronormativity*, as the normative benchmark through which the legitimacy and acceptance of same-sex identities and practices are judged as being un-African. The homosexual community, along with advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, more often than not describe the rigid stance of the continent’s predominantly heterosexual population toward the visibility and acceptance of same-sex orientation as being shaped by *heteronormativity*. This interpretive perspective - frequently used to analyse the continent’s condemnation and rejection of homosexuality - derives from a Western liberal conception of sexuality. This is consistent with the view of Mkhize and Mthembu (2023) who note that “the term heteronormativity was coined by a queer theorist, Michael Warner, to describe the social processes through which heterosexuality is treated as normal whilst treating those that fall outside this standard as abnormal and of lesser value” (p.377). The concept has increasingly emerged as a critically weaponized term within global queer discourse, and particularly within debates on the African continent. It is used by proponents and practitioners of same-sex relations to interrogate and critique the entrenched sociocultural and spatial configurations of gender identity and sexuality that systematically privilege heterosexuality. These normative structures regulate social relations by rejecting non-heteronormative identities and practices, thereby reinforcing a hegemonic sexual norm across various African countries, [particularly in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, sic] (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.378). Consequently, the claim that African conceptualization of sexuality – predominantly shaped by *heteronormative* norms – are inherently discriminatory lacks substantive grounding. Such a categorical conclusion is not supported by the well-established evidence that:

Africans are culturally conservative and have been fighting to save their cultures from western adulterations. One of such battle grounds in these clashes between African and western cultures are on gender identity. In Africa gender identity is the product of nature such that any behaviour contrary to acceptable gender role is ... abominable. Thus, homosexual identities promoted by western liberal culture are increasingly challenging the conservative gender assignment in Africa.

(Okpokwasili, 2024, p. 22).

Therefore, the *Afrocentric* view of sexuality regards the presence of minority queer groups in the fictional societies of Nigeria and Zimbabwe as ‘un-African’, warranting firm rejection in order to prevent what is considered as their potential normalization. Within such considerations, the only acceptable form of sexual relationship is that between two persons of the opposite sex - a man and a woman. This pair is considered normative because their biological differences are understood to align with natural functions that are, foremost, oriented toward procreation. Consequently, any other form of sexual or emotional affinity that falls outside this normative standard is deviant, un-African, and socially unwelcome. This defence of the sacred value of life within the wider African cultural consciousness is further strengthened by the:

common sense belief that human beings possess the innate mechanistic urge to reproduce. This phenomenon has been recognized as a natural law. As such, the heterosexual component of human behaviour is by and large viewed as being genetic, whereas ... homosexuality is primarily the focus of scientific investigations into human sexual orientation. This later development is anti-African with glowing exclusive condemnation and rejection, either legally or morally or both.

(Ezebuilo, 2023, p.56)

The above discussion illustrates the underlying

rejection of same-sex orientations and relationships across the continent, particularly in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. This resistance is grounded in moral, religious, and biological arguments that are viewed as essential to preserving the sacred procreative roles associated with male and female biological sexes. As Mabvurira et al (2012) observe:

one of the foundational fears underlying homophobia is that homosexuality is contagious and therefore threatening to the majority of the population [...] the contagious hypothesis can be evidenced by the words of Zimbabwe's former parliamentarian and historian Anias Chigwedere when he said that homosexuals are a festering finger that can endanger the whole body [...]. (p.219)

Therefore, the outright rejection of homosexual identities in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, as portrayed in Okparanta (2015), Emezi (2020) and Huchu (2010), is fundamentally shaped by a normative conception of gender roles, understood to be biologically determined and sanctioned by natural law. In fact, the heterosexual population's revulsion toward homosexuals within these fictional societies reflects a broader sociocultural environment in which the predominantly heterosexual populace constructs same-sex identities as deviant and antithetical to established gender and sexual norms. It is also worth noting that this condemnation and rejection manifest in varying forms - from psychological violence, such as silence and social estrangement, to physical acts of violence, including assault, banishment, and imprisonment.

Objectives

The objectives of this discussion on the conflictual "coexistence" of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are fourfold: first, to defend the Africanist conception of sexuality and gender as the cornerstones of marriage, the family, and the perpetuation of procreation; second, to demonstrate that Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies are structured upon a heterosexual foundation in which the procreative continuity of life is sanctioned by both divine and

African cultural cosmologies; third, to argue that the perceived encroachment of same-sex practices, relationships, and unions is inevitably met with violent resistance from the heteronormative societies under study; and finally, to show that this stiff resistance to homosexuality derives from a reaction against western liberal conception of sexuality, which are viewed as undermining the sacrosanct place of sex and marriage in procreative continuity of family from an African perspective.

Methodology

The study employs close textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and postcolonial reading strategies informed by the broad Sub-Saharan views on sex, sexuality, marriage, and the family. Examples from Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*, and Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* are discussed for their narrative techniques, symbolic structures, characterisation, and thematic underpinnings with the belligerent coexistence of homosexuality and heterosexuality on the African continent where same-sex sexuality is perceived as a taboo, unconscionable practice. The method is interpretive, qualitative, and informed by socio-cultural, and religious criticism. Thus, the theoretical framework is based on African critical perspectives regarding the coexistence – or lack thereof – of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Subtle Patterns of Resistance to Homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe

The subtle use of silence and estrangement toward homosexuals in the overwhelmingly heterosexual societies of Nigeria and Zimbabwe is a powerful instrument of rejection of same-sex relations and unions. This pattern of resistance is evident within the family sphere, whereby relatives and loved ones isolate queer family members and display marked indifference to the discrimination they experience in their communities. Such indifference functions as a dissuasive strategy, signaling to same-sex-oriented individuals the unconscionable and unacceptable nature of homosexuality in cultures that uphold heterosexuality as the normative ideal. This dynamic is exemplified in Okparanta (2015), where Mama employs silence and emotional

withdrawal to deter Ijeoma from pursuing a sexual identity deemed deviant. Upon discovering Ijeoma's lesbian orientation, Mama is devastated. Her reaction reflects the perception of same-sex desire as 'un-African' within a cultural context that views sexuality through the lens of procreative responsibility. Mama's fears also stem from the potential social and legal reprisals awaiting Ijeoma and Amina in a country that remains deeply intolerant of homosexuality. In fact, what is most crucial in Mama's disappointment is her deliberate use of silence and estrangement as tools to condemn her daughter's sexuality and impressed upon her the gravity of violating the religious and sociocultural values that regulate womanhood and its procreative expectations. Mama's non-violent yet coercive strategy becomes clear when Ijeoma notes that:

The first week I was back with Mama, she did not bother speaking to me. Every morning, I came out of my room, took my morning bath and got dressed. I walked to the kitchen, found myself some food to eat, and went back to my room. For lunch and dinner, I came back out. Each time I came out, she was not there. She either was already in the shop or doing something else around the house. (p.52)

Mama's reliance on silence and social withdrawal as a subtle yet powerful form of rejecting her daughter's lesbian orientation, which she perceives as incompatible with Nigerian sexual values. Her hopes is that these tactics will compel Ijeoma to question the moral legitimacy of lesbian sexuality within a broader community structured around procreative, heterosexual norms of sex, sexuality, and family. Ultimately, Mama seeks to make Ijeoma recognise the taboo status of her lesbian identity, believing that ostracising her will push her toward renouncing what she views as unacceptable, non-African sexual practice. Within this context of non-violent but emotionally coercive condemnation, Ijeoma is left with little choice but to perform heterosexuality in order to escape being treated as an outcast by her own mother. Mama's reaction is a reflection of Mathisen (2018) that "it [is] 'common sense' to be repulsed by expressions of homosexuality.

Sexuality in general [in Sub-Saharan Africa is] closely linked to a strictly dichotomous idea of gender identity: Men and women have closely defined sexual roles that must not be deviated from [...] (p.17). It can be said that Mama's attitude is informed by the socio-cultural discourse which hold that "[...] same-sex relationships [...] are not part of African culture" (Olaogun, 2024, p.71).

This strategy of non-violent resistance and condemnation of the relationship between Ijeoma and Amina - implemented by community figures such as Mama and the grammar School teacher and his wife - ultimately proves effective. Its impact becomes apparent when Amina is persuaded to marry a man from her ethnic group, a decision intended to sever her emotional bond with Ijeoma. This heteronormative marriage functions as a deliberate mechanism of separation, meant to compel both girls to renounce what is construed as an un-African sexuality. Consequently, when Amina's wedding is announced, Mama, the teacher, and his wife express profound satisfaction, viewing the marriage as a means of further isolating Ijeoma and suppressing her lesbian identity alongside Amina's. Amina's marriage - actively promoted by these authority figures - is upheld as the normative model of sexual union, grounded in biologically determined and socially sanctioned gender roles where "[...] men and women have clearly defined sexual roles that must not be deviated from" (Mathisen, 2018, p.17). This perspective is evident in the teacher's wife's efforts to instill in Ijeoma the heteronormative values that structure marriage in Nigerian society. This is highlighted when Ijeoma recalls: "Mama and the teacher were still going on and on about Amina. His wife looked at me. There was something sympathetic in her eyes, and she spoke, she spoke softly. 'It's the way things are done [...] You understand, don't you? [...] Don't worry. Somehow it all works out'" (Okparanta, 2015, pp. 147-148). Although the teacher's wife shows sympathy for Ijeoma's forced separation from Amina, her guidance ultimately reinforces the belief that same-sex relationships are incompatible with the heteronormative sexual ethos of Nigerian society.

At this juncture, the parental figures above

symbolise a segment of the heterosexual community who, although they understand the plight of homosexuals, nonetheless believe that sex, sexuality, and marriage - domains governed by heteronormative norms – are the foundations upon which the society is built. Their apparent success in compelling the two young women to recognise the perceived taboo inherent in their relationship underscores the extent to which isolation, as a strategy to curb the continuation of same-sex relationships, can be effective within such sociocultural contexts. The interventions of these parental figures are shaped by broader societal norms, values, and expectations surrounding sexuality in Nigeria – norms which assert that “the gender roles and sexual relations of heterosexual masculine men and feminine women are naturalized, and sexual relations between LGBTIQ+ individuals are considered abnormal and as being deviant forms of sexual expression [...]” (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.379). Their attempt to eradicate Amina’s and Ijeoma’s lesbian orientation therefore reflects a wider societal reaction rooted in normative sexual frameworks consistent with broader sub-Saharan African conceptions of sex and sexuality. Indeed, their actions reinforce Okpokwasili’s (2024) argument that “Africans are culturally conservative and have been fighting to save their cultures from western adulterations. One of such battle ground in these clashes between African and western cultures are on gender identity. In Africa gender identity is the product of nature such that any behaviour contrary to acceptable gender role is seen as abominable [...]” (p.22).

If Mama and the grammar school teacher employ a subtle form of isolation as a strategy to oppose homosexuality in Nigeria, Dumi’s parents and family in Zimbabwe adopt a more direct and punitive approach by imposing a financial embargo on their gay son. In his diary, Dumi reveals that he has been ostracised because his sexual identity is regarded by his family as un-African, “[...]My life feels hollow and no one to turn to or talk to except you, little black book [...]my break from my family should come this way [...]” (Huchu, 2010, p.134). This deliberate withdrawal of emotional and social support is

intended to pressure him into renouncing a sexual orientation the family considers dishonourable. However, when this emotional estrangement fails to produce the desired result, Dumi’s parents intensify their strategy by cutting off his financial assistance. He records the consequence in his diary: “Moved in with a colleague. Couldn’t afford to pay rent at the house in Aondale anymore since allowance got cut off [...] Didn’t know being broke could be such a drag [...]” (Huchu, 2010, p.134). The financial embargo thus becomes an extension of the family’s broader effort to force Dumi into abandoning his homosexual identity. Taken together, these methods – social isolation, moral condemnation, and economic deprivation – are coercive tools aimed at compelling conformity to the heterosexual norms upheld by his family and by the wider Zimbabwean society. This is because sexuality is framed as heteronormative, gender-specific, and biologically determined. And Dumi’s experience therefore exemplify how familial and societal structures collaborate to enforce normative sexual identities and suppress deviations from Afro-heteronormative expectations.

In fact, the experiences of Dumi who is obliged by family to renounce homosexuality proves that

[...] home is a place of comfort, a retreat from the world[...] however, [...] for [...] queer people in Sub-Saharan Africa, a home can be very uncomfortable and alienating since it is shaped by assumptions of heteronormativity that are present in their social relationships with parents, siblings, and others around the home [...]

(Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.379).

Thus, the pressure exerted on Dumi constitutes the family’s method of resisting what they consider as his ‘abominable’ and ‘un-African’ sexuality. He is rejected and left to fend for himself on the streets of Harare, despite coming from a wealthy background. Against the backdrop of intense family pressure to abandon his sexuality, Dumi’s refusal to do so renders him an outcast. The idea of visiting home for his brother’s heteronormative

marriage to a woman – whose gender is assumed to be biologically determined - fills him with fear because of his non-conformity to the family’s normative sexual expectations. Aware of how his sexuality is viewed as despicable within his family, he chooses to attend the wedding accompanied by Vimbai, whom he presents as a conventional girlfriend. Despite this ruse, Vimbai observes that “his eyes had a vacant stare as if he was fearful of something. I’ve never seen him this agitated [...] I could see Dumisani tense up as if the prospect of meeting his family was unbearable” (Huchu, 2010, pp.87-93). His reaction to the thought of encountering his family further reinforces the argument that Dumi is acutely aware of how abnormal his sexual identity is considered and that his family’s opposition to it is unwavering. Consequently, he feels compelled to conform to heteronormative sexual norm by pretending to have renounced his sexuality in favour of a heterosexual relationship, and potentially a future union, with Vimbai. In fact, the family’s attitude seems to be informed by the overall opinion about same-sex individuals in Zimbabwe expressed by a “[...] former parliamentarian and historian Anias Chigwedere when he said that homosexuals are festering finger that can endanger the whole body” (Mabvurira et al, 2012, p.219). The attitude of the parliamentarian, which might have influenced the response of Dumi’s family to his chosen sexuality, derives from the ideological guideline of society upheld by the country’s leadership since “the late and former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, described people expressing same-sex identities and sexual behaviors as ‘worse than dogs and pigs’” (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.382).

Quite similar to isolation and estrangement, the use of conscientization coupled with condemnation emerges as another strategy deployed to suppress the visibility of same-sex relations in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. This approach, which conveys strong moral revulsion toward homosexuality, is rooted in what postcolonial queer theorists identify as Afro-normativity – a sociocultural conception that defines permissible sexuality through appeals to ‘tradition’, cultural purity, and biologically determined gender roles.

As Achille Mbembe (2001, pp.1-23; 24-65; and 103-14) and Epprecht (2004, pp.1-34; 101-132; and 195-226) note, such norms are often shaped by colonial histories but later naturalized as ‘authentically African’, thereby legitimatising the exclusion of non-normative sexualities. The strength of this method lies in its ideological reach: by framing homosexuality as a threat to communal cohesion and national morality, it exerts powerful pressure on individuals to abandon same-sex relationships. This aligns with Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of performative regulation, in which individuals modify their behaviour to conform to socially sanctioned norms under threat of stigma or violence (pp.22-34; 136-149; and 185-203).

Hence, Amina’s experience exemplifies the effectiveness of this strategy. Her decision to renounce her queer identity arises from an intensified awareness of its transgression within a heteronormative Nigerian setting. After Amina and Ijeoma are discovered, the grammar school teacher, his wife, and Mama subject them to a process of moral instruction aimed at making them recognise the abominable nature of their relationship. The grammar school teacher’s warning highlights the stakes of non-conformity: he stresses that their relationship could provoke violent reactions from the wider community. Amina’s subsequent fear of being harmed becomes the decisive factor compelling her to abandon the relationship. Ijeoma later recalls the teacher’s admonitions, which emphasised the potentially fatal consequences of allowing their un-African sexuality to become known:

he had heard of such cases in which the accused were stoned all the way to the river. Stoned even as they drowned in the waters of the river. Of course, it was rare that such cases were spoken of. So taboo the whole thing was, anathema, unmentionable, not even deserving a name.

(Okparanta, 2015, p.107).

The teacher’s description offers a vivid depiction of the harsh treatment to which people identified as homosexuals are subjected within various Nigerian communities. For the grammar school

teacher, the violent measures used by a predominantly heteronormative society to ‘stamp out’ same-sex orientation demonstrate the extent to which the society’s socio-cultural and religious foundations reject what is viewed as an encroachment of an unwanted ‘alternative’ sexuality – one that, in their view, does not accord with Afrocentric understandings of sex and sexuality. Thus, the teacher suggests that the dominant heterosexual majority is willing to resort to extreme forms of violence to prevent the spread of same-sex intimacy. The teacher’s portrayal of the dangers faced by individuals engaged in same-sex relationships is a warning intended to make them aware that their practices are considered un-African. The figures of cultural authority such as Mama and the teacher confirm Olaogun’s (2024) view that “the attitude against same-sex relationships stems from the conviction that these relationships are not part of African culture” (p.71). According to this narrative, any continuation of lesbian relationships would expose Ijeoma and Amina to the risk of severe, even lethal, punishment sanctioned by a society that polices sexual norms. This strategy of advice as deterrence proves effective, as Amina and Ijeoma come to recognize the potential consequences of being identified as lesbians (Okparanta, 2015, p.107). Their reaction demonstrates how the intertwined strategies of awareness-creation and condemnation function as mechanisms for enforcing heteronormativity and dissuading same-sex relationships.

This narrative’s logic instils in them a sense of the alleged moral and cultural transgressive nature of their sexuality – a realization symbolically linked to the biblical ‘fall’ of Adam and Eve (Couric, 2000), and metaphorically extended to the perceived threat homosexuality poses to the nation’s moral order. The penalty associated with the practice of same-sex relations is evident in Ijeoma’s comparison of their fate to that of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:1-24 (Couric, 2000, pp.2-3). The biblical allusion that Ijeoma employs to liken their experience as lesbians in a heteronormative Nigerian society to God’s condemnation of humankind, symbolised through Adam and Eve, is significant within the

broad discourse of societal revulsion toward homosexuality. Just as the damnation of humanity results from Adam and Eve’s disobedience of the divine normative order governing harmony on earth, the overwhelmingly heterosexual community reacts harshly towards individuals who advocate or embody homosexual identity, symbolised by Ijeoma and Amina. Unlike Adam and Eve, who were banished from the Garden of Eden, Ijeoma and Amina are estranged and endangered by their community, which could even resort to lethal violence in an attempt to eradicate their same-sex orientation – seen as a threat to cultural conception of sex, sexuality, and the procreative continuity that heterosexuality alone guarantees.

In essence, the grammar school teacher’s peaceful awareness campaign, aimed at pressuring Ijeoma and Amina to renounce their lesbian identity, is a formidable tool against what the community views as un-African sexuality. The effectiveness of this strategy is demonstrated in Amina’s eventual rejection of what the community labels as the ‘sexual perversion’ associated with her adopted lesbian identity. Although the narrator notes that Amina is distressed by her inability to control her feelings, she nevertheless feels compelled to repress her desire in order to conform to the heteronormative socio-religious structures that underpin Nigerian society. The impact of the grammar school teacher’s strategy of conscientization is evident when Amina begins to suffer sleeplessness rooted in guilt and fear. This internal conflict manifests vividly in her nightmares, including one that Ijeoma recalls, where Amina wakes up trembling: “her body shook as she spoke, almost as if she was shivering from a fever” (Okparanta, 2015, p.132). While Amina’s reaction is partly driven by fear of the violence, she knows she could face, it also reveals the deep taboo surrounding lesbian identity in a society founded on socio-cultural and religious norms of heterosexuality. It is this newly internalized awareness – shaped by communal pressure and moral fear - that ultimately leads her to abandon her lesbian orientation in favour of heteronormative sexuality, symbolised by her marriage to a biologically male partner, Chibundu.

This pressure on Amina and Ijeoma derives from the fact that :

Africans are culturally conservative and have been fighting to save their cultures from western adulterations. One of such battle ground in these clashes between African and western cultures are on gender identity. In Africa gender identity is the product of nature such that any behaviour contrary to acceptable gender role is seen as abominable. Thus, homosexual identities promoted by western liberal culture are increasingly challenging the conservative gender assignment in Africa.

(Okpokwasili, 2024, p.22)

Just like Amina, Ijeoma also undergoes a form of religiously informed purgation that instils in her a persistent sense of guilt. This guilt is symbolised by recurring nightmares that arise whenever she becomes emotionally or physically intimate with female partners such as Ndidi. These nightmares take on a symbolic significance as she interprets them as divine reprimands for what her sociocultural and religious environment has labelled a forbidden sexuality. Indeed, after expressing her affection for Ndidi in a way that affirms their bond, Ijeoma observes that:

At home that night, the panicked dreams were worse on all the preceding nights combined. Throughout my sleep, I was confronted with Mama's scolding face, her reprimanding finger wagging at me, threatening to pop out an eye. The images of Mama were interspersed with a thunderous sound that, in the dream, was the voice of God scolding also like Mama, reprimanding, condemning me for my sins. Each time I fell back to sleep, the same dream. Eventually I rose from bed, no longer willing myself to sleep. I pulled off my nightgown, changed into one of my day gowns. Dressed, I

went back to bed and sat, not daring even to lie down. I sat there for hours, wide awake, waiting for day to break.

(Okparanta, 2015, p.175)

The apparition of Mama's anger combined with what appears to be God's voice reprimanding Ijeoma for her 'unholy' form of sexuality – one that is rejected by both the Nigerian/African cosmology represented by Mama and by the universal cosmology symbolised by God - vividly illustrates the underscored unconscionability of homosexuality within her socio-cultural environment. At another level, these nightly hallucinations represent the internalized impact of society's condemnation of her sexual identity, a pressure that intensifies each time she defies naturalized principles of sex and sexuality by engaging in intimacy with Ndidi or any other lesbian partner. From this perspective, what she experiences each time she contravenes culturally, socially, and religiously informed heteronormative norms may be understood as the first stage in her gradual movement toward renouncing lesbianism. On this basis, conscientization coupled with moral condemnation operates as a potent strategy for inhibiting the spread of non-normative same-sex orientations in Nigeria. This is because in Nigeria, and Africa, "[...] same-sex relations [is categorise] as unnatural, but also distinctively un-African. Indeed, same-sex practice is not only a disgrace to God but also humanity; it is a taboo that cannot be tolerated in any normal society" (Ezebuilo, 2023, p.61).

So far, it is obvious that the heteronormative foundations underpinning the condemnation of same-sex relationships frequently mobilise religious discourse as a legitimate framework. Religion thus becomes a powerful ideological instrument through which queer identities are constructed as incompatible with, or even oppositional to, culturally sanctioned notions of 'Africanness'. This dynamic is exemplified in Mama's reaction when Ijeoma discloses that she continues to think about Amina and the emotional and sensual bond they share. Faced with such admission, Mama compels Ijeoma to pray for divine forgiveness, interpreting her daughter's feelings as spiritually impermissible.

Ijeoma's narrative reveals this pressure when she recounts:

Suddenly Mama was rising from the floor, flailing her hands in the air, shouting about prayer and forgiveness. She pulled me up by the collar of my dress. 'Get on your knees now I say, get on your knees...pray!' she screamed. 'You must ask God for forgiveness of all your sins, but especially for that one particular sin in you. Did I not just tell you to pray? Why do I not see your lips moving? Why do I not hear any sound coming out of your mouth? Pray. I say! No child of mine will carry those sick. Sick desires. The mere existence of them is terrible disrespect to God and to me! [...] Only your own prayer will save you now. I have prayed all I can for you. Now you must pray for yourself! Only God can save you!' (Okparanta, 2015, pp.71-72)

According to Mama, Ijeoma's emerging homosexual identity constitutes an abomination because it contravenes the cultural and religious values that underpin African constructions of sexuality. In essence, Mama's "[...] attitude against same-sex relationships stems from the conviction that these relationships are not a part of African culture" (Olaogun, 2024, p. 71). Within this worldview, heterosexual normativity is identified as both natural and divinely sanctioned, positioning queer identities as deviations from established moral and procreative expectations. Beyond categorizing queerness as contrary to nature, Mama further interprets her daughter's lesbian identity as an affliction – something akin to a moral disorder – and as a violation of God's ordained principles of creation and life. This view aligns with her symbolic function as a staunch advocate of procreative continuity within the narrative. Consequently, Mama insists that Ijeoma must pray for divine pardon in order to 'save' her soul from what she perceives as spiritual peril. Mama's attempt to dissuade Ijeoma from continuing with the un-African sexual practice reveals how religious discourse – rooted in moral injunctions and procreative imperatives – operates as a central argumentative force in the condemnation and suppression of homosexuality

in Nigeria. This stance reflects the overall cultural ideology whereby:

in Nigeria, religion, morality, and culture are often intertwined [...] the traditional Nigerian culture defines the family as the cornerstone of society [...] this perspective typically prioritizes procreation and the continuation of family lineage thus, same-sex relationships and non-binary identities [...] are seen as deviating from the traditional expectations of family and marriage. (Olaogun, 2024, p.71)

In fact, the religious discourse that informs heteronormative condemnation of homosexuality frequently draws on biblical notions of taboo to pressure queer individuals into renouncing their sexual identities. The rhetoric of damnation that Mama invokes during her Bible study sessions with Ijeoma becomes a key strategy through which she seeks to underscore what she considers as the moral transgression associated with queer desire. The narrator highlights this view through scriptural references that depict the punitive fate believed to await those who engage in or support same-sex relationships:

Revelations 21:8: But the fearful, and unbelieving and the abominable, and murderers and whoremongers and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death

Leviticus 18:22: Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is abomination.

Leviticus 20:13: If a man also lie with mankind as a lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death: their blood shall be upon them. (Okparanta, 2015, pp. 75-77)

Considering the penalties outlined in the verses from Revelations and Leviticus quoted by Mama, it is obvious that her intention is not only to highlight the supposed 'abomination' of same-sex relations but also to emphasize their considered

unnaturalness – an offence that, in her view, provokes God’s wrathful condemnation. The awareness she seeks to instil in Ijeoma aims to persuade her to renounce a practice Mama believes violates the universal laws governing humankind as established by God. Consequently, Ijeoma is urged to abstain from lesbian sexuality and seek divine redemption, as previously illustrated when Mama instructs her to pray for forgiveness. She warns Ijeoma that even the attempt to adopt what she calls an ‘alternative’ to God’s ordained heterosexual constitutes “[...] terrible disrespect to God and [...] Only your own prayer will save you now. I have prayed all I can for you. Now you must pray for yourself! Only God can save you! (Okparanta, 2015, pp.71-72). Thus, the use of biblical doctrinal narratives becomes a powerful instrument of dissuasion – central to the condemnation and suppression of homosexuality within a heteronormative Nigerian society grounded in Afrocentric norms and values regulating sex, sexuality and communal life. The religious basis of Mama’s attempt to stop Ijeoma’s affinity for lesbianism reflects the common practice in heteronormative Nigerian society.

Like in Okparanta (2015), Huchu (2010) also depicts Zimbabweans’ reliance on religious discourse to suppress homosexuality in the country. This strong religion-based resistance to the taboo sexuality is embodied by the Pastor Roger Mvumba of the Methodist Church. The Church’s stance, which is resolutely heteronormative, is seen when the pastor states:

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Today I want to talk to you about morality. As a messenger of God, I cannot keep quiet. It is my duty to speak the truth. Some of you may not like it, but these are not my words, they are the words of God. The end of the world is nigh, ‘The cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and liars. They will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death’ Revelations 21, verse 8. The Lord will come like a thief in the night

so be prepared! [...] You must be on the lookout for homosexuals and sexual deviants. Perverts shall burn. How can a man and another man sleep together? God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. Can a woman and a woman make a baby? ‘Be careful of those would lead you astray from the narrow straight path which leads to the house of your father...’ (pp. 65-66)

Pastor Roger Mvumba’s allusion to the wrath of God directed at homosexuals is a firm indication of both the revulsion toward same-sex practices and the broader Zimbabwean condemnation of homosexuality. The abominable nature of homosexuality is underscored through the categorization of this group as perverts who promote a deviant sexuality viewed as being out of tune with God’s purpose of creation, which is fundamentally procreative. This dimension to the fight against the ‘alternative sexuality’ is clearly articulated through the rhetorical questions: “How can a man and another man sleep? [...] Can a woman and a woman make a baby? [...]”. The answers to these questions are presented as unequivocally negative given that “[...] God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve [...].” Consequently, homosexuality is described as incapable of ensuring the procreative continuity of humankind, in contrast to the normative heterosexual orientation, which is positioned as the foundation of reproduction. The Preacher’s condemnation of the practice reflects Robert Mugabe’s position on homosexuality when he holds that the “[...] [natural] way is when a man engages in a sexual act with a woman. When a man or woman engages in a sexual act with a member of the same sex [it becomes an] [unnatural] sex” (Chabata, 2024, p.7).

Apart from religion as a weapon of dissuasion, the maternal strategy of persuasion characterised by soothing language and emotional appeal is also a means of stopping the existence of homosexuality. Mama combines biblical arguments, such as those discussed above, with a maternal voice of conscience to resist the propagation of same-sex orientation, which she thinks poses a threaten to the Africanist

foundations of Nigerian society. This is noticed after Mama convinces Ijeoma to marry, Chibundu Amanze, only to discover that her daughter continues to cling to a lesbian identity by refusing to consummate the marriage. In her effort to persuade Ijeoma to embrace heterosexual intimacy, Mama demonstrates a measure of empathy by acknowledging that the transition to a normative sexual relationship with a biologically determined male partner would be gradual. She expresses sympathy for Ijeoma's distress when she counsels her: "my child [...] 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 [...] you must let go of it [...] You'll see. This will all work out" (Okparanta, 2015, pp.194-195). Enveloped in maternal affection, Mama's pleas are intended to compel Ijeoma to conform to heteronormative expectations by allowing her husband the opportunity to demonstrate the supposed benefits of heterosexuality. Ultimately, Mama draws on both religious doctrine and Africanist discourse, rooted in maternal authority, to communicate what she sees as divine and cultural revulsion toward homosexuality, alongside the affirmation of heterosexuality. Mama's stance in this case is a reflection of the overall positions of the heterosexual population who base their resistance "[...] on the fact that same sex marriage will damage the family unit, damage the children and damage society" (Ogisi, 2017, p.56).

The Shades of Violence as Strategy in the Fight against Homosexuality in Zimbabwe and Nigeria

Mkhize and Mthembu (2023) hold that the prohibition of same-sex practices and identities in African countries often "[...] entails sexual and physical abuse towards queer people, [...] gay bashing, hate speech, and predominant heteronormative mannerisms that exclude them from engagements and socializations" (p.382). These reactions are inherent in the fictional representations of the fight against the spread of homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are reflections of reality. In essence, the resistance to homosexuality in both countries often assumes violent proportions, with the majority heterosexual

society resorting to physical violence to express its revulsion toward same-sex orientation. In the case in Zimbabwe, Huchu (2020) indicates that violence functions as an instrument for the eradication of homosexuality. The experience of Colin, an expatriate gay character, illustrates the use of violence by Zimbabwean authorities to curb the spread of homosexuality in the country. Colin's deportation from Zimbabwe represents a resolute decision by both Dumi's parents and the Zimbabwean authorities to eradicate the foreign and/or western source of the potential spread of same-sex sexuality in the country. Indeed, according to Dumi, the security agents who escort Colin to the airport for deportation are sent by his father after he discovers the un-African sexual relationship between Dumi and Colin. Through a flashback, Dumi recounts Colin's expulsion from Zimbabwe:

The sound of the door breaking and booted footsteps still wake me at night. I can still hear the sound of his screams as he was dragged from bed and bundled into a van. There is no doubt in my mind that it was father who sent them... He knew and I knew what it was all about... Maybe someone saw us together in the bar late one night, our arms round each other. But that my break from my family should come this way... and on top of Colin's peremptory departure. (p.157)

Dumi's father embodies state power in Zimbabwe's fight against homosexuality. Concretely, Colin's deportation stems from state authority, which determines belonging by excluding those whose sexual culture is incompatible with heteronormative national norms. This strategy seeks to prevent the normalization of a sexual practice considered contrary to Zimbabwean conceptions of sex and sexuality. Therefore, the expulsion exposes to Dumi the depth of these norms and the extent to which society seeks to eradicate an un-African sexuality. In Africa, this discourse entrenched in the cultural and religious consciousness "[...] is grounded in resistance to the perceived intrusion of a sexual practice regarded as incompatible with

heteronormativity, upon which the continuity of life depends. Indeed, same-sex practice is not only a disgrace to God but also to humanity; it is a taboo that cannot be tolerated in any normal society (Ezebuilo, 2023, p.61).

Such intolerance toward this un-African sexual practice is also expressed in acts of lynching employed by the heterosexual majority to resist an apparent attempt at the 'globalization' of homosexuality in Nigeria. This is evident in the case of Ndidi, Ijeoma, and a group of other homosexuals who are attacked by the populace with the intention of lynching them and erase same-sex practices from Nigeria's social space. The narrator indicates that members of this homosexual community are forced to seek refuge in bunkers to escape lynching by marauding heterosexual crowd. Ijeoma compares their precarious situation to experiences during the Nigerian civil war, when the Igbos were hunted for asserting their difference from the rest of the nation: "we stood quietly, our breaths hushed, the way we used to do those days during the war" (Okparanta 2015, p.180). By likening the raid against homosexuals to the persecution of Igbos during the Civil War, Ijeoma foregrounds the belligerent coexistence of heterosexuality and homosexuality. In the Nigerian society where such coexistence is rendered a battlefield, the bunker symbolizes the same-sex community's awareness of heteronormative hostility toward an un-African sexuality. This symbolism reaches its most intense expression in the lynching of Adanna, as recounted by Ijeoma:

We made our way out one by one back above the ground, the smell of burning tires was strong... We had hardly walked two yards when we saw, in the backyard of the church, a flame of orange and blue. A stack of burning logs. Ndidi began to cry and then all of us were crying too, because we had all seen what remained of the face and we had all recognized her. Adanna in the midst of the logs, burning and burning and turning to ashes right before our eyes. (Okparanta, 2015, p.181)

The lynching of Adanna, though condemnable,

illustrates the deep-seated hatred of same-sex practices in Nigeria, which drives defenders of heteronormative sexuality to take a human life on the basis that this can halt the spread of homosexuality in their country. Thus, the palpable fear evident in the reaction of the group upon encountering the ashes of one of their own vividly underscores their awareness of their unwelcome existence.

Like the lynching of Adanna, Okparanta (2015) also portrays the murder of members of the homosexual community, known as the Sissies, who are beaten to death because their sexuality is considered as a threat to the dominant heteronormative order. This resistance strategy against the entrenchment of homosexuality is noticed in the narrator's account of the marketplace lynching:

There was a beating yesterday [...] They were two men [...] For days they seemed to have disappeared, fallen off the face of the earth. And then yesterday she heard something at the market, whispers about a pair of sissies being beaten by a crowd of people. She went to the bushes behind the dirt road not far from where they lived, and she found the two of them there, naked and beaten to death [...] This sort of thing has always happened. Like several years ago when they burned down that other church, I told you about. But I hadn't been going to that church, so the burning did not feel completely real [...] This time it basically happened right before my eyes, and I can't shake the feeling that it could easily have been me or you [...] We called the police. They couldn't even be bothered to do anything, not even to take the bodies away. 'Let them rot like the faggots that they are [...] if they were not dead already, we would beat them some more'. (p.178)

The deaths of the Sissies and the two gay men awaken Ndidi, Ijeoma, and others to the reality of their unwanted status in a nation grounded in heteronormativity. Such violence, compounded by the indifference or tacit approval of the heterosexual population and law enforcement,

makes it clear that homosexuals are cast as deviants whose national belonging is conditional upon the renunciation of the taboo sexual identity. And Ndidi's fear thus reflects a collective realization that survival requires conformity to Nigeria's heterosexual norms.

Synonymous to lynching, flogging is equally another violent strategy used to resist the entrenchment of same-sex sexuality in Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies. This is illustrated by Vivek in Emezi (2020), who is flogged in a church as part of an exorcism meant to purge the 'immoral spirit' believed to inhabit them and is the source of their taboo sexuality. This form of religiously induced violence is championed by Mary, who seeks to convince Kavita, Vivek's mother, to allow her to take Vivek to church for 'healing' from what she describes as the disease of homosexuality. Mary justifies this religiously sanctioned flogging as a necessary means of exorcising the demon she believes is responsible for Vivek's 'unnatural' sexual orientation. This is evident when Mary tells Kavita:

It's not him they were flogging [...] It was the demon inside him [...] That's what Pastor said. The boy is possessed by a very very wicked spirit, a strong demon. It's what has been causing all this, [...] Pastor said we must subdue the demon at all costs, and so we were praying and binding and casting it and he brought out his cane to lash it, because you must lash it out with holy fire and his own is like the staff of Moses. (Emezi, 2020, pp.52-53)

This episode represents another instance in the struggle against homosexuality in which religious discourse mobilises violence as a means of 'cleansing' the spiritual curse that queerness is believed to embody. Therefore, the flogging inflicted on Vivek by members of the Pentecostal congregation is grounded in the belief that homosexuals are possessed by evil spirit, and that violent ritual punishment is the only means of delivering them from such malevolent forces.

Like Emezi (2020), Huchu (2010) also shows that the flogging of members of the

homosexual community in Zimbabwe is a strategy used to eradicate same-sex practice. Unlike in the Nigerian context in Emezi (2020), where such violence is enacted by ordinary heterosexual citizens, in Zimbabwe, as depicted by Huchu (2010), it is sanctioned by political authority, symbolised by Minister M_. Dumi is flogged almost to death by the Minister's thugs after she discovers her husband's marital infidelity with him. At this point, it is important to note that the violence inflicted on Dumi is not intended to make him renounce his homosexuality per se, but rather to deter him from continuing with what is construed as an unholy relationship with the Minister's husband. The dissuasive intent of the flogging is underscored by the narrator's account that "[Dumi] got seriously beaten up. Someone found him in a ditch [...] He was drifting in and out of consciousness [...] His skull is fractured" (p.172). The severity of this punishment suggests that flogging serves to ensure that Dumi would no longer be able – or dare – to pursue such same-sex relations, whether with Minister M_'s husband or any other biologically male partner. This interpretation is reinforced when Dumi recounts the incident to Vimbai, Michelle, and Mr M_ during their visit to him in hospital:

I don't know where I was taken, but it was to some sort of torture house in the city. They beat me on the soles of my feet. One of them kept saying, 'We haven't been told why we're doing this, but we'll fix you.' They must have worked on me all day, reviving me with water whenever I passed out. I begged them to let me die and they said I would soon enough. The last time I passed out they must have thought I was dead and dumped me somewhere. There are many gaps in my memory. (Huchu, 2010, p.174)

Dumi's vivid account of his ordeal exposes broader societal perception of homosexuals like him. The flogging he endures is a warning to homosexuals that they have no place in Zimbabwe. Minister M_'s decision to order Dumi's torture can be understood through two related dimensions.

First, homosexuality is viewed as an abominable crime in a society unwilling to accommodate this sexual identity alongside entrenched heterosexual norms. Second, the violence is fuelled by Minister M's personal humiliation: her husband's infidelity occur not within a culturally sanctioned heterosexual or polygamous framework, but through a same-sex relationship, which profoundly undermines her social image and political ambition.

In conclusion, the discussion has shown the different Afrocentric patterns of heteronormative rejection and resistance against the introduction or banalisation of homosexuality as an 'alternative' sexual option in Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies. In both fictional contexts, homosexual identities are constructed an abnormal within normative African societies founded on heterosexuality, which guarantees the perpetuation of life through its anchor in procreativity. Procreation is understood as possible only through the union of biologically gendered opposites who are believed to complement one another in their socially and biologically determined roles. Consequently, homosexuality is resisted in various ways because it is regarded as a taboo practice threatening the procreative foundations of Nigeria and Zimbabwe. The discussion has shown that the struggle against this un-African sexuality thus assumes two broad forms: non-violent, educative, and persuasive resistance, and violent resistance, including flogging, threats, and the murder of homosexuals.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the fictional worlds represented in *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta, *The Death of Vivek Oji* by Akwaeke Emezi, and *The Hairdresser of Harare* by Tendai Huchu offer powerful literary insights into Afrocentric patterns of resistance to same-sex relationships and identities in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Across these texts, resistance

emerges not as a monolithic phenomenon but as a continuum ranging from subtle mechanisms—silence, estrangement, moral persuasion, and economic pressure—to overt coercion and threats of violence. Such responses are deeply embedded in heteronormative cultural logics that privilege procreative heterosexual unions as the foundation of family continuity, social stability, and cosmological order. Religion, communal expectations, and perceptions of cultural authenticity operate together to frame homosexuality as taboo, deviant, and externally imposed, thereby legitimizing both private and public acts of exclusion.

At the same time, the novels reveal that this resistance is neither purely ideological nor merely legal; it is profoundly affective and relational, unfolding within intimate spaces such as the family, the home, and the community. Characters who embody non-normative sexualities experience alienation, fear, guilt, and forced conformity, illustrating how social norms become internalized forms of discipline. By foregrounding these lived experiences, the narratives complicate simplistic binaries between "African tradition" and "Western modernity," showing instead how postcolonial histories, religious interpretations, and contemporary anxieties about cultural survival converge to shape attitudes toward sexuality. Ultimately, the study concludes that Afrocentric resistance to same-sex relations in these texts reflects broader societal efforts to preserve perceived moral and cultural continuity in the face of change. However, the persistence of queer desire, identity, and subjectivity within the narratives also suggests that such resistance, while powerful, is neither total nor uncontested. Literature thus becomes a critical space for negotiating the tensions between normativity and difference, tradition and transformation, silence and visibility in contemporary African societies.

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