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Queer Identity Politics and Exclusion: A Discourse on Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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Abstract

Anti-LGBT advocacy manifests in various spheres that stalk the progress of the pro-LGBT agenda, as they base their arguments on religion, culture, tradition, and the statutory laws of the country. One of the most contentious issues related to queer sexualities relates to the arguments between the inclusion and exclusion of queers in social, political, religious, and cultural matters. While new frontiers for assessment are rapidly emerging across the African continent, pro-LGBTQIA+ advocates appear to have already established boundaries by criticising the exclusion of homosexuals and advocating for comprehensive inclusion. However, the reception of homosexuality is still largely hostile, and literary artists continue to push for equality of gender and sexuality. In Nigeria, homosexuality and same-sex marriage were criminalised in 2014; in spite of being crimes, they are also generally considered alterations to cultural and religious

ordinances. Therefore, society often excludes queers from its mainstream as a form of punishment and a strategy to 'curb' the spread of homosexuality. Reading from a queer theory-informed perspective, this paper examines the patterns of exclusion and their effects on the social relationships of queer individuals as portrayed in Chinelo Okparanta's novel, *Under the Udala Trees* (2016).
Keywords: Queer, LGBT, Homosexuality, Exclusion, Exclusion

Introduction

Homosexuality, queer sexualities, or same-sex erotic identities in general, have, for a very long time, been an issue for rigorous debate in Africa. Many of these debates are rooted in situating the cultural appropriateness of alternate sexualities (Funmanti 6). While the debate continues, one of the important "framers" of the debate is the nature of the human society. The nucleus of these debates describes Africa as a place of hostility to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and other (LGBTQIA+) groups and organisations (Dlamini 128-136). Concurrently, or rather earlier than the emergence of these debates, various African groups had begun criminalising homosexuality, as in the case of corrective rape for lesbians in South Africa; the 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda; the criminalisation of same-sex marriage, relationships, and associations in Nigeria in 2014; and, quite recently, Ghana's move to criminalise all forms of homosexual associations and identities within the country. The list of suchlike hostile reactions to homosexuality in Africa is almost endless, varying from country to country and reflecting the degree of rejection of same-sex sexual relationships within the African continent (Fumanti 1-2; Lyonga 98). The attempt at justifying such anti-LGBTQIA+ moves and developments in various countries are rooted in the argument for the preservation of "proper" African culture and values to be devoid of Euro-American impurities.

Nevertheless, the prevalence of these hostile reactions has sparked another series of related reactions in different creative ventures

across Africa. African creative ventures such as the music, literary, and movie industries contribute to the fame of this debate. Howbeit, the focus of this paper is limited to the Nigerian literary productions and, particularly, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree*s.

Following the work of Michael Foucault, the term "queer theory" was first introduced in 1990. Glickman posits that queer theory rejects the notion that sexuality is an essentialist category, defined by genetics or evaluated by unchanging standards of morality and truth, in a manner similar to that of feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies (86). He also argues that sexuality is a multifaceted web of social norms and forces, as well as forms of individual and institutional power, for queer theorists. Theorists began to apply queer theory to literature and other forms of art when they realised that literature was rife with homophobic anxieties and rigid dogma, which queer tends to disrupt and undermine. Queer theory has since become the most prominent subject of study for literature students, particularly in the Western world.

Queer theory offers a critical perspective for understanding Nigeria's reception of queer identities and the challenges of queer Nigerians, like most queer people around the world, whom Chantal Zabus asserts that "speaks from the margins in that by virtue of his, her or his position as excluded, that subject's desire interrogates what the mainstream discourse of heteronormativity tries to conceal" (12). According to Seidman, queer theory broadens its scope of analysis to include all types of behaviours, including gender-bending and non-normative sexual orientations (10). This implies that queer theory examines, studies, and critiques anything that can be classified as normal or deviant, particularly sexual acts and identities. Both Judith Butler and Cathy Cohen, in their respective works, argue that queer theory interprets all traditional forms of identity as coercive labels that, regardless of individual specificity and uniqueness, subject everyone to the legal obligation

of cultural conformity (126). Seidman further expounds that "Queer theory is a study of those knowledge and social practices that organise society as a whole by sexualizing – homosexualising – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledge, culture, and social institutions (13).

Queer Identity Politics and the Politics of Exclusion

According to Thomas, Hsieh, and Varina (n.p), queerness serves as both an orientation and a community for individuals on the LGBTQIA spectrum. Their position is that queerness is both an identity of sexuality and a community term. *Farlex* Dictionary of English calls it an "offensive slang for a gay or lesbian person and that it relates in usage to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, or transgender people. *The Oxford English Dictionary calls it "*the quality or characteristic of having a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms." Thomas, Hsieh, and Varina's definition is more encompassing; the LGBTQIA+ community is not just a community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals; it is for every other non-cisgender person, as well as other minority sexualities and genders, such as asexual, pansexual, intersex, and androgynous, and so on.

Identity is a complex term which transcends dictionary definitions because of its vast ambiguousness and alternating reception. In short, it means different things to different people depending on the nature of the discourse. However, the definitions provided by various English dictionaries summarise identity as the fact of who or what a person (or thing) is. In a broader sense, Harry Olufunwa defines identity politics as "the way in which a specific section of a given society agitates for equal rights, increased recognition, and greater opportunities based on a specific ethnic, religious, gender, or other characteristic that simultaneously binds it together as a social group and sets it apart from other groups" (127). The impulse to agitate for "equal rights and increased recognition" does

not happen out of the blue; it is afforded, or rather compelled, by an earlier reaction, which in this sense, connotes the existing prevalence of unequal rights and unrecognition (Friedland 5). By implication, identity politics reflects varying levels of discontent and dissatisfaction with treatment, classification, and, very importantly, afforded rights of a group of people held together by cultural, social, sexual orientation or any other ties whatsoever which they bear in common (Hekman 3-26). It reflects a group's attempt (or a series of connected attempts) to "push" their narrative, to be recognised, and to be able to enjoy the same rights as other groups within the same geographical area or political population and time.

As Olufunwa expresses, identity politics is a developed (and, of course, evolving) response that challenges established power structures and long-standing relationships of dominance. Identity politics is clearly subversive in concept and execution. In a complementary line of thought, Balkan (n.p.) opines that identity politics describes and makes sense of diversity as regards multiculturalism, civil rights, the women's movement, white nationalism, LGBTQIA+ activism, separatist groups, and violent ethnic conflicts. The emergence of identity politics also references not just the prevalence of inequality but also the phenomena that necessitate the agitation for equal rights and freedom of expression among groups of similar or diverse interests.

'Politics of exclusion' is a term used to explain or capture the idea of exclusion that is ideological and instituted through politics or the accepted arrangement or patterning of a social group or institution. The term "exclusion" describes the "inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life" as well as alienation and distance from the mainstream society" (Duffy 19). Such mechanisms thrive on the efficacy of separation and its relevance to the struggles of marginalised people. Exclusion thrives on separation and disengagement, which

means that a particular group is first (or concurrently) separated and disengaged. The term "politics" is used to form the phrase "politics of exclusion"; in this context, it relates to the network of relationships among people who coexist within a particular society. It also indicates the nature of the relationships, which is regulated by the principles that govern them and the culture in which they exist.

Exclusion is set up through a particular mechanism and achieved through the same or another mechanism. Such a mechanism is usually politically inclined; that is, there is typically a glaring or subtle political thread that instigates or underlies it. The politics of exclusion refers to the exclusion of individuals based on specific criteria or parameters. Given the inability to meet certain requirements, affected individuals and groups are being judged and prejudiced and extricated due to that consequence.

The politics of exclusion is a common interplay in human society and could exist in both the conscious and the unconscious. As a conscious act, it connotes a deliberate attempt to exclude some people or a particular group from the society because they do not possess certain qualities or do not have the same ideology as the mainstream. As an unconscious act, it is the product of a process—processes that have been instilled through indoctrination or any other method of unconscious acquisition or learning.

Exclusionary models or methods are not new to human beings; human societies have always found ways to exclude people who could not meet certain requirements demanded, and their existence also suggests the foundations for the start of societies, clubs, and cults. However, the basis for exclusion from social spaces and certain human networks and relationships is complex. People may face exclusion based on factors such as gender, height, complexion, race, religion, membership in an association, and so on. While exclusion could be discriminatory but not necessarily an

act of discrimination, it is nevertheless often an act of discrimination, subtly or glaringly. It has become quite common for queer people in various parts of the world to encounter the challenges and negatives of discrimination (Oginni et al. 1447-70). In some extreme cases, such decimation may manifest as outright rejection or statutory or *unstatuary* penalties such as imprisonment, jungle justice (i.e., stoning to death in Northern Nigeria, lynching, forced nude parades), and so on (Adeagbo 8). In the specific context of Nigerians and queer Africans at large, the verisimilitudes of discrimination, criminalisation and the possibility of outright rejection make queers flee the country and continent at large to believable "safe havens" and more gay-accepting countries in Europe, North America, and Australia (Amodu, *Sex Panics* 8; Onanuga and Onanuga 4). In Nigeria, before and after the same-sex (Prohibition) Act in 2014, religious intolerance of homosexuals has maimed the lives of Nigerian queer individuals, and Nigerians have also gone outside the dictates of the law to harm gay men and other queer individuals, and these culprits are not charged for their crimes (Adebanjo 132-51; Ukah 21-37). Richard Akuson narrated through an opinion piece published by CNN in April 2019. He, Akuson, is a Nigerian-based lawyer who started *Nasty Boy Magazine* in 2017. An ambush befell him in Akwanga, Nasarawa State, and he narrates his story:

> They accused me of spreading a gay agenda as they pummelled me; each punch was an assault on who I was. They took my phone, forced me to unlock it, and they found the proof of my homosexuality. They poked my anus with sticks in mock penetration.
>
> The crippling, gut-wrenching pain that followed every punch and every poke felt like my skin was being nailed to a wall. They took pictures of me to memorise their triumph in my moment of humiliation.

> And yet, even this gruesome pale in comparison to the fatal brutality many Nigerian gay men have too often experienced in the form of lynching or pillory with tyres before they are set on fire and burnt alive – not for terrorism or worse, but for being gay, for being human, in a desperately homophobic country.

This is perhaps one of the most daunting experiences LGBT individuals living in Nigeria face. As same-sex relationships are illegal in Nigeria, Nigerians who are open about their sexuality continue to flee the country, seeking asylum in countries where they can be safer (Amodu, "Screens of the Gay Dream…" 2) and for those who remain, they need to devise clandestine means of connectivity and communication that afford them optional spaces to navigate their sexualities, such as mobile applications or websites (Amodu, *Where Exactly*... 1). Nigerians such as Bisi Alimi and Edafe Okporo have fled Nigeria after being granted asylum in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively (Alimi 1). In the same vein, it is important to note that Nigeria is a nation whose population is roughly split into halves between Christians and Muslims: Muslims to the North and, largely, Christians to the South. Therefore, in the North, there are adherences to the Islamic-orientated Sharia Law, and "twelve northern states have adopted some form of Shari'a into their criminal statuses: Buachi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara" (Ostien 48).

For the queer communities across any part of the world, the highest degree of threat comes from the heterosexual community and non-allies, who are discontented or, in some nasty descriptions, disgusted by the idea of homosexuality and even homosexuals (Richman, 250). It would not be an exaggeration to state that for queer exclusion, there is a need for grounds for justification. While queers often justify the validity of their sexuality, the anti-queer community does the same to justify its

discrimination of queer people. In Nigeria and many other African countries, it is mostly religion (Richman, 250; van Klinken, 490-501).

Nigerian Reception of Queer Sexualities

The reception of queer sexualities in Nigeria has been generally hostile such that there is a statutory sentence of up to fourteen years for homosexuals, and in Northern Nigeria, there is a death sentence (Amodu *Black Lesbian Solidarity* 2023). This hostile reception of queer sexualities in Nigeria continues to be hostile despite queer activism and campaigns for inclusion. In fact, the exclusion of queers is multifaceted, such that they become targets of derogation, statutory crackdowns, and violent and verbal victimisation in physical and virtual spaces (Oguntola-Laguda, 38-9). There appears to be an unending conflict between acceptance and rejection of queer sexualities in Nigeria; while some Nigerians are becoming accepting of it, some other Nigerians have increased their hostility to be mediated through various platforms of opposition, including film, music, social media, and even academia (Lasisi, 33-40; Lyonga, 97-103; Onanuga and Alade 600). Bashiru Lasisi (33-40) opens a conversation in "Ice in the Desert: Homosexuality in Nigerian Drama and Films," where he examines twenty plays and twenty films produced between 2000 and 2013 that were randomly selected for sampling. Lasisi highlights that homosexuality has not been given its desired attention in Nigerian drama and films. He notes that people's perceptions of homosexuality are conditioned by culture, religion, and other stories of myths and legends which are heterosexual-normative in their outlook. For Lasisi, he explains that:

> […] myths, legends, fables and histories in different societies in Nigeria which form the basis of the people's value formation only accentuate heterosexual relationship. Even, the relationship between the gods and other entities in the spirit

> world is portrayed to be based on heterosexual relationship. (34)

While Lasisi's assertion is true, he expressly offers a different perspective on the epistemology and realities of the presentation and representation of homosexuality in cultural elements. He highlights the contributions of linguistic and cultural artefacts, such as fables, histories, myths, and legends. He argues that the issues surrounding homosexuality are yet to be exhaustively discussed regarding film production. Six years later, Paul Onanuga and Blessing Alade establish the presence of homosexual representation in Nollywood films, a testament that homosexuality is represented, however, in two broad perspectives: pro and anti. While their research reflects a paradigm shift over the years of producing homosexuality-themed movies, which is the change in representations of homosexuality from what is unacceptable and demonic to something that is entirely personal, objective, and should be expressed without discrimination; they see it as an assertion of sexuality which should not be met with the kind of opposition it receives now (Onanuga, *Shackling (Im)morality* 89-98). Thus, their idea corroborates Frida Lyonga's position that "homosexuality, like any other form of sexuality, can also be grounded on strong love and respect. It portrays non-straight persons as different from others only in terms of sexual orientation and not in terms of a failed gender or an evil or inhuman nature" (103).

The rejection and call for exclusion of homosexuals is an agenda that has been mediated through social media too. Studies have reflected how social media spaces such as Twitter and Facebook have been utilised by Nigerians to vent their discontent or show solidarity for queerness (Onanuga 489-504; Onanuga and Schmied 825-839). In fact, in all Nigerian creative industries, there had been one time or the other, that people in these industries utilise their platforms to express opposition of queer sexualities in Nigeria. While Nigerian queers continue to struggle with coming out and

utilising every available platform for advocacy, anti-queer supporters seem to have locked heads with them, making the opposition and arguments across many spaces continue to progress.

Patterns of Exclusion in *Under the Udala Trees*

This chapter of the paper contextualises the politics of queer exclusion in Chinelo Okpranta's *Under the Udala Trees*. It examines the ways in which the politics of exclusion interplayed in the text, including its effect on the social relationships of affected individuals, and the ways and it can be corrected. Okparanta's novel stands out in many ways and one of them is that it is the first Nigerian novel to be tagged as a 'lesbian fiction,' and it talks exclusively on lesbian relationships with reference to sex and solidarity, and it also presents a "revised paradigm of the postcolonial Nigerian nation through the exploration of the figure of the black lesbian in Nigeria" (Seron-Navas 111).

Patterns of exclusion refer to the specific methods and systems through which certain groups are cut off from society. This also includes general criteria for societal inclusion of individuals and groups, such that if the individuals or groups do not meet the requirements, they are deprived of the feeling of belonging to that society (Adams and Emmerich, 107-40).

Societies have always found ways to exclude people for various reasons, and this also includes stratification based on some communally accepted constructs. For instance, the high and low-class constructs in societies are based on individual or family's availability of economic resources, such as the amount of money an individual has. In some other cases, the pattern of exclusion may be based on gender, such as making certain benefits available to a specific gender. This also extends to cultural practices and "politics" (in its sense of governance and administration) (Madanipour 238; Whitty, 288-9). In some traditional cultures,

there are certain roles women are not allowed to play while men can; there are also certain positions males may occupy but females cannot. Speaking of extension to "politics" in its sense of government and administration, women are not allowed to occupy certain positions, sometimes constitutionally and sometimes structurally. For instance, in Nigeria, the setting of the novel, has never had a female president or vice president. There has never been a female executive governor of any of its thirty-six states either. This explains the politics of exclusion, and among queer people, the yardstick for exclusion are sexuality and sexual orientation, and this is to the detriment of queer people, especially gays and lesbians (Brightwell 19).

In the novel, religion is one of the tools anti-LGBT characters use to justify their opposition to homosexuality (Onanuga and Alade 600). Africans are many groups of people who believe in religion, especially Christianity and Islam, which are the two major religions in the region. They justify it by saying that these Abrahamic religions frown on homosexuality and thus make it invalid. In these religions, homosexuality is considered a great sin against God. Therefore, society tends to exclude people who have preferences for sexual relationships with people of the same sex (Amodu *Black Lesbian Solidarity,* 11). The exclusion breeds hatred, such that queer people are treated as outsiders in their own land and even among their own family members (Amodu *Black Lesbian Solidarity* 3-5). As much as Ijeoma, the major character, seems to be innocent and just asserting her identity, it is registered in her subconscious that she needs to keep it a secret, even though she does not even realise why she is doing so. Ijeoma's sexuality comes into the limelight when she meets Amina and becomes romantically involved with her, and at a point, they think about getting married. Consummated in the action, the Grammar School Teacher who had taken them in his custody to sponsor their education walks in on them. Okparanta wrote: Pointing to it, he cried, "An abomination! The word reverberated in my head. He

looked directly at me". He shouted, "That is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! That is what the Bible calls it!" (156)

The Grammar School Teacher refers to their action as an "abomination" which signifies it to be a cultural, religious, moral and ethical disruption. Nigerians and Africans generally utilise religion to strengthen their opposition to homosexuality. Knowing that Amina is a Muslim and may not accept the Bible's perspective of homosexuality which the Grammar School Teacher had just pointed out, he uses the Quran, which is the holy book of Muslims. He tells her that the Quran condemns it and that the two books - the bible and the Quran have hell punishments for people who have that kind of feeling and engage in such practices. Adaora, Ijeoma's biological mother is also portrayed to be a staunch Christian. She too shares the same belief that homosexuals will spend eternity in hell. She begins to sit her daughter down and quotes bible passages for her in a bible study session in an attempt to re-convert her and make her repent.

The negative reception of homosexuality in society as well as the effects of 'forceful conversion' of homosexuals have enormous effects on the individuals, which relates to psychological stress and trauma (Oginni et al., 1447-70). This hinders queer people from expressing themselves freely for fear of discrimination and victimization (Folayan et al., n.p). Adaora, Ijeoma's mother begins to have bible lesson sessions with her as part of her "conversion therapy," which she believes would help her reconcile with God, and therefore make her "normal". The sessions were based on the Bible starting with the creation story the first chapter of Genesis. Adaora links the creation story as God's purpose for human beings, which is to be fruitful, and to multiply, and as such, non-normative sexual manifestations are a hindrance to plans of God, and therefore a sin. Religion becomes an alternative for seeking solace. Adaora expresses her concern through a soliloquy to God in prayers, she says:

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

Falling back on God and religion largely is a common part of a way of straightening among African queers. The hold of religion is very strong in Africa, and as such, there is a dependence on supernatural powers for things as biologically and socially complex as sexuality (Shingange & Mavhandu-Mudzusi 8-10; Venn-Brown 81-91). Ijeoma becomes haunted and begins to believe herself to be a witch under the influence of the Devil. All night, she hears her mother's voice in her dream, warning her about following the Devil to the grave. A time came when she could not stay around her mother because her voice was the source of her turmoil. She asks God for forgiveness; she later asks herself what if what she's doing is not a sin. She becomes traumatized and confused:

> Dear God, I am a sinner, and I come before you to beg you to please show me the path to righteousness. But what if I was not, in fact, sinning? What if I was subjecting myself to all this guilt for no reason at all? Lord, I am confused. Please give me a sign. If there is any evil in my heart, please give me a sign so that I might recognize it and, in doing so, avoid it. (207)

At this point in anyone's life, there would be nothing as invaluable as finding solace and a confidant. The importance of having a companion has significant relevance to quality of life (Adeagbo 8).

As such, human beings, at one point or the other, need companionship and solace (George and Ekoh 58-9). Finding companionship and solace is both a social and psychological task, nevertheless, the environment, and individuals' understanding and ability to navigate social and psychological terrains matter (George and Ekoh 57). Relatively, it is easier for heterosexuals than for queer persons living in an LGBTQIA++-hostile society like Nigeria. It is difficult to risk up to a fourteen-year sentence, it, therefore, becomes almost impossible for the queer man or woman (or even non-binary) to express themselves without fear of victimisation or attack (Adeagbo 9).

By the same token, norms and other cultural value have far-fetched impacts on the dynamics of relationships; therefore, it facilitates the exclusion of queer people in Nigerian society (Onanuga and Onanuga, 166-89). People who display public, private, or both opposition towards queer sexualities sometimes strengthen their arguments with cultures and traditions. This also includes the perceptions of gender, gender roles, and sexuality. The African society is steeped in gender roles as well as heteronormativity. As another Nigerian feminist writer, Chimamanda Adichie said, "girls are taught to aspire to marriage". This notion is also furthered by Adaora, who believes that every woman is incomplete until she is married to a man. She said:

> Marriage has a shape. Its shape is that of a bicycle. Doesn't matter the size or colour of the bicycle. All that matters is that the bicycle is complete, that the bicycle has two wheels. The man is one wheel, she continued, the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being? Under her

> breath, she said, "a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all". (243, emphasis ours)

Marriage, in all its dynamism, is yet another very complex institution, which reinforces the idea of heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality, which thrives on the ideology that every person should be heterosexual (Adrienne Rich). Rich terms *compulsory heterosexuality*, as a form of integrative socially institutionalised practices and deep-rooted biases that eras non-heterosexual existence and marginalises non-heterosexual identities. Ijeoma's mother's submission conceptualises gendered dependency enforces a politics of lack and hierarchy-oriented subordination, whereby women's selfhood is contingent upon male presence and validation. Cultural maxims and paradigms also reflect this innate bias of compulsion. In that passage, Ijeoma's mother articulates a deeply heteronormative ideology rooted in patriarchal logics that configure gender and sexuality within rigid binary structures. The metaphor of the bicycle—where the man leads and the woman follows—functions as both a discursive and symbolic mechanism of subordination, even though it is overly glaring that both "wheels" need to be in order and sync for the bicycle to operate effectively. Through such rhetoric, heterosexual marriage is constructed as the only legitimate relational form, with any deviation rendered abnormal, incomplete, or even dangerous.

Another pattern of excluding homosexuals from society is through extrajudicial killing and mobbing which often go unprosecuted. There have been many cases of homosexuals "caught in the act" paraded nakedly, victimised, mobbed, and lynched and the perpetrators of the crime go scot-free.

In the northern part of Nigeria, the reception of homosexuality is more hostile than it is in the South, the Islamic court, that is, the Sharia Court prescribes a death sentence for homosexuals and this law in conjunction with the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage

Prohibition Act of 2014 (SSMPA), fuel anti-LGBTQIA+ attitudes and violence against LGBTQIA+ persons in the country.

Social isolation describes a lack of a sense of belonging, the inability to engage and connect with others, and the neglect or deterioration of social relationships (Gracia et al., 2020). Ijeoma experiences social isolation, and she is withdrawn from the society and people around her as an aftermath of being *caught* with Amina. Her social isolation and withdrawal transcend many phases, but she, the narrator, succinctly describes:

> But Mama was not done with me yet. She said, "A word to the wise: go out, make some friends, socialize. How will the young men even know that you are available if you spend all your time moping around at home?"
>
> It was true. Other than church and work at the shop, and some errands to and from the market, I spent all my time at home. Even in church I sat alone, at the very back of the room, and I'd be gone the minute the final benediction was said. (212)

Therefore, queer people result to hiding their relationships and in the worst case, they bottle up their feelings. They are exposed to the hazards of "jungle justice" which could range from a forceful public naked parade to lynching. In the novel, homosexuals hide and run a gay club in disguise where they can be themselves and assert their sexualities, but it was burnt down. Ndidi tells Ijeoma about Adanna's friend from the university that was beaten to death because they were homosexual:

> "They were two men. I never knew them. They were friends of Adanna from the university. 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."

Within a queer theoretical framework, this violence is not incidental but rather symptomatic of a socio-political order that constructs queer lives as unintelligible and disposable (Butler, *Undoing Gender*). The two men were brutally murdered because they had behaviours typically associated with femininity. They are also reported to be "sissies," and this illustrates how non-normative gender expression and queer embodiment become targets of public discipline and erasure. As Berlant and Warner (546-66) argue, heteronormativity does not merely privilege heterosexuality but actively structures public spaces and moral orders to render queer existence both hypervisible and punishable. The crowd's collective punishment acts as a spectacle of moral enforcement, where queer bodies become sites upon which the community reasserts cultural purity and heteropatriarchal dominance. The biased expectations of all men to conform to some internalised way of being. However, Butler argues ender is something we do rather than something we are. According to this view, we perform gender through repeated acts and behaviours that create the illusion of a natural, stable identity.

Such incidents reveal that exclusion is not a passive act of omission but a violent mechanism of control, sustained by cultural scripts that frame queerness as deviant and, therefore, punishable by death. Nevertheless, amidst all hostility, they tried to report the matter to the police and this is their response: 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 they are, one of the officers said. The other one said, if they were not dead already, we would beat them some more. (51)

The government is lackadaisical about homosexual feelings, mental health, and general safety. In fact, they are treated as outcastes and reported cases of violence against them are not taken

seriously. The fact that the gay bars and clubs operate in disguise of churches and in the night (when it is dark apparently) reveals the fact that visibility is hardly possible; therefore, the assertion of sexuality is denied. Butler further argues that Gender performativity is compulsory and regulated by social punishment. Society enforces gender norms through various forms of discipline and exclusion for those who fail to perform convincingly. This regulatory power makes gender performance feel mandatory rather than chosen, creating the appearance that we simply "are" our gender rather than continuously doing it. This intention to punish deviations breeds' oppression, which further complicates existing taxonomies and manifestation of inequality. In support, Obi-Young argues that "Oppression based on gender, sex, and sexuality can be eradicated if the problem of gender is fixed, because all of them exist in that most basic of binaries; femininity versus masculinity; a competition that patriarchy developed and, in order to not lose it, developed misogyny" (71).

The effects of exclusion are multidimensional, apart from trauma and other related psychological instabilities it may cause, excluded person may suffer. They feel disconnected when they attempt to reconnect with the people who had discriminated against them. Ijeoma felts a "restrain" when her mother hugs her, she narrates:

> My first thought was that it was strange to be in Mama's arms like this. There was a distance between us that had not existed before, not even in her initial embrace when she had come to collect me from the grammar school teacher's. There was a strain. She was my mother, and I should have leaned into her embrace, should have relished it like I did the day she had come to pick me up from the grammar school teacher's and like all the days before she sent me off there. But things were different now. In this moment, she felt more like another warden than my own mother, more like a

> husk more an emblem of motherhood than motherhood itself. (14)

Exclusion breeds distance between people who should have been connected. The emotional and physical dissonance conveyed in Ijeoma's reflection—particularly her perception of her mother as "another warden" and "a husk... an emblem of motherhood"—signals the psychological toll of heteronormative exclusion on familial intimacy. Queer theory offers a valuable framework for unpacking how normative structures fracture affective relationships by demanding alignment with dominant sexual and gender ideologies. In this moment, the maternal embrace, which would typically signify warmth and security, is stripped of its affective meaning and transformed into a performative gesture devoid of comfort. The term "warden" underscores the carceral logic imposed upon Ijeoma's body and desires, situating her mother not as a caregiver but as an agent of disciplinary power. This aligns with Taket et al.'s (4-11) assertion that "the concept of social exclusion attempts to help us make sense out of the lived experience arising from multiple deprivations and inequities experienced by people and localities, across the social fabric, and the mutually reinforcing effects of reduced participation, consumption, mobility, access, integration, influence and recognition" (p. 4). Ijeoma's alienation within her only familial relationship exemplifies these "mutually reinforcing effects" (4), where lack of recognition leads to emotional withdrawal and fractured kinship. This also furthers the notions of exclusion among homosexuals and heterosexuals; exclusion leads to withdrawal and undue separation.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed asserts that orientation is not merely about physical direction but about how bodies are shaped by norms and how they inhabit spaces in ways that align or misalign with dominant scripts. She contends that those who do not follow the "straight" lines of normative sexuality are rendered out of place, experiencing the

world as disorienting and unwelcoming. As Ahmed notes, such experiences of exclusion disorient queer subjects within spaces that should feel safe, producing a sense of estrangement that is both spatial and relational (Ahmed 11). The maternal body, traditionally associated with unconditional acceptance, becomes a terrain of anxiety and ideological contestation, mirroring the broader societal repudiation of queer existence.

Conclusion

Social exclusion of all forms affects the victims not just physically, but emotionally too. The novel acknowledges that limitations to self-expression consciously or unconsciously imposed on queers in across various African societies. The feeling of rejection and social isolation are commonly associated with the aftereffects of exclusion (Brightwell 18). Excluding people from various frameworks of society because of their sexual orientation or subjecting them to abuse, condemnation and other extremely inhumane acts (such as lynching or mobbing) should not be condoned, especially given the level of civilisation and the barbarity of the act itself (Carr 153-6). Homophobia creates a barricade between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This barricade is often strengthened by exclusion and all forms of homophobia, including violence and victimisation of homosexuals (Onanuga and Onanuga 166). Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is the author's own contribution to the campaign against homophobia. The characters are able to win the reader's sympathy as Okparanta tries to communicate the validity of homosexuality (Amodu *Black Lesbian Solidarity* 12). We conclude that the exclusion of people based on sexuality and sexual orientation is a denial of their fundamental human rights, especially the right to life, the right to assembly, the right to freedom from slavery to torture, and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. In the same vein, homophobia can cause a great divide in society and is also an instigator and promoter of violence (Okanlawon, 56-8).

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