

Creative Challenges to the Narratives of Heteronormativity in Selected works of Contemporary Twenty-first Century Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

This thesis examines how selected twenty-first-century Nigerian novels challenge the social and cultural normalisation of heterosexuality in contemporary Nigerian writing. While earlier Nigerian literature largely rendered queer identities invisible, recent authors have begun to foreground queer experience, thereby unsettling the dominance of heteronormative sexual and gender norms. Through close readings of Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005), Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), and Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023), the thesis explores the diverse strategies through which contemporary writers contest normative constructions of gender and sexuality. The study draws on Queer Postcolonial Theory, which illuminates how colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures continue to constrain queer expression, alongside indigenous cosmological frameworks—particularly Ogbanje and reincarnation beliefs—that offer alternative conceptions of identity beyond binary gender categories. The analysis argues that each text disrupts heteronormativity in distinct ways: *Walking with Shadows* breaks the silence surrounding queer male identity; *Under the Udala Trees* re-routes female sexuality away from compulsory heterosexuality; *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* rejects patriarchal masculinity and patrilineal expectations while directly engaging with the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014); *The Death of Vivek Oji* reimagines identity through reincarnation; and *Freshwater* dismantles gender and sexual binaries through its portrayal of a subject constituted by multiple self. Collectively, these novels challenge prevailing sex-gender norms and expand the imaginative possibilities for representing queer lives in Nigerian literature. The thesis demonstrates how contemporary Nigerian fiction contributes to broader debates on identity, belonging, and the reconfiguration of gender and sexuality beyond the binary.

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Introduction

Background to the Study

Debates about diverse gender identities and sexualities have become topical in contemporary times within national and global discourses. This is due to the emphasis on human rights and the need to define the limits of the nation-states in relation to the expression of an individual's gender and sexual identity. Before now, the binary understanding of gender has informed the way identity issues are discussed; the privileging of binary gender has resulted in the exclusion of individuals with diverse gender and sexual expression. In 2011 and 2012, the United Nations recognised sexual orientation as a marginalised identity on Human Rights Day, calling for the enhanced protection of marginalised identities including gender nonconforming individuals worldwide (Gary and Rubin 2012). In 2016, the United Nations appointed an Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) whose role involves addressing violence and discrimination against people based on their gender identity and sexual orientation (United Nations 2016). These actions highlight the mainstreaming of an inclusive discourse around gender and sexuality and have led to the call to recognise the rights of nonconforming identities worldwide. However, despite the progress made globally where laws now offer greater protection for queer individuals in some countries both in the global north and south (BBC News 2013), many African countries continue to support heteronormativity and have laws that criminalise queer sexuality.

Heteronormativity is a term used in gender and sexuality studies to query the promotion of heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual expression in society. Coined by Michael Warner, an American queer theorist in 1991, it is used in queer studies to question the legitimacy of heterosexuality as a standard sexual expression, interrogating how existing social, cultural, legal and religious structures reinforce it in the everyday life of people. The interrogation of the normalisation of heterosexuality exposes the systemic marginalisation of identities outside the heterosexual boundaries. Since the use of the term by Warner in 1991, "it has come to be increasingly common in discussions about the politics of sexuality" (Bell 2009, 387). It has also become useful in sociological discourses that "seek to expose the

embedding and reproduction of heteronormativity in social structures and social relations” (Bell 2009, 387). In Western discourses, heteronormativity has often been used to define the white, nuclear family arrangement, however, in the Nigerian context, it defines a socially informed system of norms that privileges heterosexual relationships, procreative marriage, and a clearly defined gender role. These roles are structured through kinship system, religious teachings, customary laws, and communal expectation. This thesis is therefore premised on the understanding that “there is a fundamental link between sexual politics and gender oppression, between sexuality and power” (Tamale 2010, 23). It examines how Nigerian queer narratives resist the reinforcement of heteronormativity in Nigerian literature and unveil how heteronormativity continues to shape and reshape queer lives.

In *21st Century Nigerian Literature: An Introductory Text*, Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu observe that “one cannot convincingly discuss Nigerian literature without bringing into focus the Nigeria socio-cultural, politico-economic, historical, and even religious environment. This is because it is this environment that shapes the content and texture of the literature” (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2009, 51). Nigerian literature, they argue, is shaped by Nigeria's political, religious, and socio-cultural landscape; studying the wider national context reveals much about its literary works. In Nigeria, there are ongoing debates on gender and sexuality, both in public discourse and in academic scholarship. Official gender and sexual discourses in Nigeria privilege heteronormativity and patriarchy, and this perspective is embedded in the nation's political, cultural, social, religious, and legal frameworks. The preference for and adherence to heteronormativity results in the often-violent rejection and criminalisation of queer sexuality. This reinforcement of heteronormativity results in the perpetuation of a gender model that privileges heterosexuality and binary constructions of gender whilst simultaneously disavowing, stigmatising, and erasing alternative sexualities. The strong assertion of heteronormativity in Nigeria and the rejection of queerness is fuelled by the societal perception of queer sexuality as unnatural, learned, and repugnant behaviour, emphasising heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexuality.

In the past, Nigerian literature has primarily reproduced a heteronormative perspective, paying minimal attention to queer narratives. However, the emergence of queer narratives in the last two decades has challenged this position through the portrayal of diverse characters whose gender and sexual identity exceed the binary framework. These narratives open conversations about the existence of queer people and the limitations of viewing gender solely through the binary lens. They adopt a variety of approaches to normalise queerness such as humanising queer identities, challenging stereotypes, portraying queer attraction as a natural human desire and challenging the heteronormative family structure. These narratives insist on the relevance of queerness in gender and sexuality debates.

A Background History of Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous African nation (Statistics Time 2021), and it originally comprised of independent and diverse nations and nation-states with unique cultures, languages and political structures. However, in 1850s, Britain established a presence in Nigeria as part of its colonial expansionist agenda and signed the first formal treaty with Lagos in 1869 before creating two separate protectorates in the northern and southern territories of the landmass. In 1914, against stiff resistance from the indigenous peoples, the British colonialists merged the southern and the northern protectorates for administrative convenience. Nigeria gained independence from British rule on 1 October 1960 as a sovereign country with over 250 ethnic groups and about 520 languages (Ethnologue n.d). Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba are three of the major ethnic groups, corresponding to the major languages spoken. The middle belt region, located almost in the centre of Nigeria, serves as a meeting point for the Southern and Northern regions, and has a mix of the cultures and languages of both regions. Nigeria also has a mixed population of traditionalists, Christians and Muslims. Although there is no monolithic culture that can be described as 'Nigerian culture', cultures from the northern and southern regions in Nigeria push similar ideologies regarding queerness. Nigerian cultures are openly against queerness, deriving their attitude to queerness from the history of the people, culture, norms and religion. Before Christianity and Islam were introduced into Nigeria, indigenous Nigerian cultures, which were heteropatriarchal in nature, denounced

queerness because of the premium placed on marriage and reproduction. Islam and Christianity in Nigeria continue to hold similar negative views about queerness. The collective anti-queer perspective of Nigerian cultures has made living and identifying as queer difficult.

Criminalisation of Queer Sexuality and Queer Visibility in Nigeria

In “British Colonialism and the Criminalisation of Homosexuality”, Enze Han and Joseph O’Mahoney claim that Britain, influenced by its own Victorian values and legal codes, criminalised same-sex relationships under sodomy laws in its colonies. They argue that the sodomy laws were meant to protect the sexual propriety of British officials from the assumed loose sexual practices of the colonies. Heterosexual subjects were continuously affirmed and reinforced within British colonies, creating “long-term barriers to decriminalisation” (Han and O’Mahoney 2014, 8). Like other former British colonies, Nigeria inherited a legal code that contains the sodomy laws. After independence, colonial laws were appropriated into the legal system of the postcolonial state and continued to regulate sexual behaviour until 2014 when criminalisation was expanded to include same-sex marriage. Up until 2014, sexual minorities lived in relative peace in Nigeria because although homosexuality was officially criminalised, homosexuals were hardly ever prosecuted (Onishi 2021). However, in rejection of the increasing acceptance of queer rights globally, particularly the American support for a global gay movement, the already extant sodomy laws in Nigeria were expanded to stall the spread of queer rights which were no longer restricted to acceptance of homosexual identities but also marital rights (Onishi 2021).

Homosexuality is considered immoral and grouped under ‘unnatural offences’ in Nigerian criminal code and appears alongside laws governing rape and abortion (Nigerian Criminal Code 1990). But the sodomy laws were expanded to include the prohibition of same-sex marriage in 2014. The Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Bill (SSMPA), popularly known as the anti-gay bill, was first introduced under President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006. It passed Senate approval in 2011, and, after going through third and final readings in May 2013, was signed into law by President Goodluck Jonathan (Human Rights Watch 2014). Building upon existing sodomy laws, this legislation criminalised expressions of queer identity and

relationships. The new bill allowed for imprisonment of up to 14 years for same-sex relationships and up to 10 years for organisations promoting and supporting queerness (Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act 2014). Northern Nigeria implements even more stringent legal measures because of the strong influence of Islam. For instance, twelve out of the nineteen northern states adopted Sharia law in 1999 and the 2000s. Sharia law criminalises queer intimacy with the maximum penalty being death for men and whipping and/or imprisonment for women. The severity of the punishment for women is further compounded by the marital status of the people involved, as lesbianism among married women is viewed as adultery, which, upon conviction, may carry a death sentence (Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act 2014).

The 2014 law sparked state-sanctioned violence and persecution of queer identities. Many queer subjects went underground while others were forced to migrate to the global north where sexual orientation is recognized as grounds for asylum (Selim et al 2023). On the individual and collective level, it heightened the trauma that had hitherto characterised the existence of sexual minorities in Nigeria (Human Right Watch 2016). The law intended to further limit queer expression and was conceived by majority of Nigerian people as a reinforcement of Nigerian culture of heteronormativity, challenging the global relevance accorded to queer sexuality (Arimoro 2019, 257).

Although the bill was designed to counter queer rights in Nigeria, since its passage, Nigeria has witnessed an increase in queer activism and literary interventions that challenge the erasure and criminalisation of queerness. Rather than perpetuate limited agency and invisibility for queer identities, the law has provoked an intense debate around queer rights, championed by human rights organisations, lawyers, activist groups, writers and the queer community. In their writing, they call for social justice for queer people, recognising the right to freedom of sexual and gender expression as a fundamental human right. Arinze Ifeakandu, a Nigerian author, who identifies as queer, remarked in an interview that the intent of the law was to "cage us" but it fostered queer visibility and agency "because there was a lot of rage and anger" (Greenhalgh 2023). This supports Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's observation that,

“same-sex desire only surfaces in the iteration of its prohibition” (Osinubi 2016, 176), as well as Eno Blankson Ikpe’s argument that “whenever there is domination there is opposition and resistance” (Ikpe 2004, 5). Although the passage of the SSMPA did not initiate queer repression in Nigeria, it nonetheless brought queer discourse into public debate. By intensifying legal sanctions against queer people through criminalisation of same-sex marriage and, by implication, queer existence, the act inadvertently created conditions for resistance and solidarity.

In the literary scene, the law acted as a significant catalyst for the emergence of narratives that feature queer subjectivities, unsettling the prevailing heteronormative position in Nigerian literature. Apart from Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, published in 2005, the literary works examined in this study were all written after 2014 and might therefore be regarded as direct responses to the SSMPA. Robo Cobo-Piñero argues that “the study of the body of literature produced in Nigeria, the country with some of the most draconian laws against homosexuality on the continent as well as some of its most noted literary voices, sheds light on how the literary community critiques prevailing discourses of homophobia and explores the everyday fears, desires, pleasures, and anxieties of those who experience same-sex attraction” (Cobo-Piñero 2023, 283). My project contributes to this discourse by examining how Nigerian queer literature spotlights the lived experiences of queer people – their everyday fears, joy, desires, and resilience. But most importantly, this study explores the narratives’ resistance to heteronormativity, and the way in which these texts counter the prevailing negative and biased portrayals of queer subjects in Nigerian literature.

There are many texts that interrogate queerness and contribute to the queer corpus in Nigeria such as Iweala Uzodinma’s *Speak No Evil* (2018), Eloghosa Osunde’s *Vagabonds* (2021), and Bukky Papillon’s *Ordinary Wonder* (2021), Nnanna Ikpo’s *Fimi Sile: Heaven Gave it to Me* (2017). However, I have selected five emblematic texts - Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* (2005), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018), *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2022), and Ani Kayode Somtochukwu’s *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023) for my study specifically in order to chart evolving responses to

heteronormativity across two decades of Nigerian queer fiction. These texts are therefore relevant to the argument I make in this thesis – that these authors write in ways that engender critical questioning of heteronormativity, and I chose these texts for various reasons. *Walking with Shadows* and *Under the Udala Trees* are historically significant: *Walking with Shadows* inaugurated queer visibility through its narrative of the first queer male protagonist, while *Under the Udala Trees* extended the discourse into Nigerian postcolonial war memories whilst featuring the first female queer protagonist. *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* offers an emotional depth and political timeliness through its depiction of queer survival amidst oppressive laws. Its focus on class activism brings an innovative and interesting dimension to queer struggles in Nigeria. Dibia, Okparanta, and Ani's novels directly address the political, legal, social, and religious frameworks that reinforce heteronormativity, questioning heterosexual citizenship and queer invisibility. Emezi's *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* are selected for their epistemic innovation. Both novels question the heteronormative gender framework through a recourse to precolonial Igbo spirituality. The protagonists in both works embody gender fluidity, multiple subjectivities and temporalities, defying heteronormative boundaries. The novels' preoccupation with the experiences of male queer characters, female queer identities and gender fluid/multiple identities ensure the representation of diverse queer identities. They unveil multiple and layered subjectivity allowing for a comparative analysis across gender and sexual identities in Nigeria. Collectively, they form a theoretically rich and thematically layered tapestry for critically exploring how queer narratives resist and reconfigure heteronormativity.

These texts do not only unveil Nigerian sexual diversity but also contest systemic homophobia, legal frameworks, religious teachings, and cultural norms that affect queer individuals. They challenge the heteropatriarchal structures that entrench heteronormativity, offering a more sympathetic and humane representation of queerness. The chosen texts counter homophobia through a meaningful engagement and interrogation of heteronormativity as the foundation of queer suppression. They also serve as a general exemplar of narratives of queerness and allow for a diachronic exploration of queerness.

I recognise within these literary works what I term a balanced representation of queer lives, marked by the narratives' attention to queer vulnerabilities, affirmative queer intimacy, and resistance. Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro and Vasu Reddy caution that "African queer sexualities should not be reduced to the representation of symptoms of suffering, pain, mourning, and despair. Pleasure, celebration, and affirmation, as well as the positive expression of erotic desire, prevail despite ongoing pathologisation, marginalisation, and persecution" (Matebeni, Monro and Reddy 2018, 2). The novels thus depict the everyday lives of queer people – their joy, pain, fear, resilience and defiance by showing not only the precariousness of living as a queer subject, but also the courage of living in dissidence. The surge of queer narratives since the last decades lays credence to the fact that "these identities are repressed, minimized, and contained, but never completely silenced" (Matebeni, Monro and Reddy 2018, 3). In general, this thesis responds to the growing interest in global sexualities and the ongoing discourses within Queer African Studies, focusing particularly on the emergent queer writing in Nigerian literature "as a new strand in the discourses on Nigerian literature" (Oladiran 2020, 7). These novels are significant additions to what could be termed Nigeria's queer literary corpus. They serve as a confirmation of Chibuihe Obi's assertion that "The queer body is healing and rising and coming out of the dark places where it has for a long time been confined. The queer body is crawling out of obscurity" (Chibuihe 2017).

Research Problem

The prevalence of heteronormativity in Nigerian literature has historically marginalised Nigerian queer narratives, leading to less recognition of queer stories and the casting of queer subjects as stereotypes. In view of the above, it becomes imperative to explore how queer narratives elevate queer discourse, highlighting the experiences of "those who have no part" (Jacques Ranciere, qtd in Courtois 2022, 176). Critical responses to the selected texts to date have explored areas and themes such as - the incompatibility of same-sex desires with Nigerian culture (Okpiliya 2021; Chukwuma 2015), comparative study of queer portrayal in two Nigerian novels (Okafor 2016), intersection of gender and sexuality (Wilkins 2018;

Nwokeabia 2014), lesbian love (Navas 2021; Courtois 2018) lesbianism and legitimization in Christianity (Frateur 2018); transgenderism as 'remembering' (Newgas 2019); self-identity and life writing (Zlámálová 2020); receptivity and rethinking gender norms (Umezurike 2021); class and sexual politics (Adenekan 2012); queer literature and the conflict in morality (Oladiran 2020); among others. Other scholars such as Oyebanji (2022) have explored how Nigerian queer subjects construct their identities on social media and Nnanna Ikpo interrogates the use of storytelling to advance queer rights (Ikpo 2022).

Olorunshola Adenekan's *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* examines the portrayal of class and sexual politics in the digital space by contemporary Nigerian and Kenyan authors. Adenekan's study aims "to present a new generation of modern African writers as people engrossed in using literature in cyberspace to reimagine and reframe class and sexual identities, in their position as cultural ambassadors" (Adenekan 2012, 1). Adenekan's analysis pays attention to how queer representation in the digital space challenges earlier depiction of 'the figure of the homosexual and the prostitute' but does not directly interrogate heteronormativity. Peter Chukwuemeka Umezurike's "Receptive Subjects: Gender and Sexuality in Novels by Igbo Authors," examines gender relations in four Nigerian novels – Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005) and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). Umezurike argues that "the novelists delineate ways to rethink assumptions about manhood and womanhood by contesting the valorisation of social identities and emphasising the human desire to live and thrive. In redefining what it means to be a man or a woman in the African imaginary, Nigerian novelists challenge a culture that discriminates against its citizens based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation"(Umezurike 2021, 12). In a context where queerness is not given much attention and literary agency, Umezurike contends that *Walking with Shadows* and *Under the Udala Trees* redefine masculinity and femininity by challenging societal biases against queer identities. Umezurike's study unveils the novels' reimagination of gender

through receptivity but does not also critically engage with the broader framework – heteronormativity.

In *Morality and the Advent of Queer literature in Nigeria*, Victoria T. Oladiran examines the “emergence of queer literature as a category of gender discourse” (Oladiran 2020, 4). Using *Walking with Shadows* and *Under the Udala Trees*, Oladiran analyses how Nigerian queer literature exemplifies the conflict between the “Individual” and “Group” perceptions of morality (Oladiran 2020, 4). Oladiran also argues that the evolution of queer narratives in Nigeria mirrors the “shift in the discussion of gender from heteronormativity to homophilia” (Oladiran 2020, 4). Oladiran's study reveals the “complex realities that shape moral positions within Nigerian society as they relate to homosexuality” (Oladiran 2020, 4), suggesting that the emergence of Nigerian queer literature is rooted in the “divergence of moral positions in post-colonial Nigerian society” (Oladiran 2020, 4). Furthermore, In “Using Indigenous Storytelling and African Commission Soft Law In Nigerian Law Classrooms To Advance Queer Rights”, David Nnanna Ikpo “argues for the inclusion of indigenous storytelling as an advocacy tool relevant to advancing the human rights and queer-sensitive law and attitudes” (Ikpo 2022, 2). Ikpo’s thesis explores how storytelling can offer a potential for queer advocacy.

My thesis builds upon existing critical literature outlined above, expanding the debates about how Nigerian writers are spotlighting queer stories to break the stereotypes, biases and negative attitudes towards queerness. Expanding the existing studies of Nigerian queer literature, my thesis examines ideological shifts in the select novels, highlighting how the texts punctuate the dominance of heteronormativity with queer voices. While early Nigerian writing gave queerness the outsider status, the contemporary narratives situate queer stories as a valid component of Nigerian literature deserving attention and recognition. Most importantly, the narratives question and subvert heteronormativity as a dominant framework that has shaped legal, cultural, religious and socio-political discourses in Nigeria. This thesis thus recognises the emergence of queer perspective as a subtext of Nigerian literature in line with Chibuihe Obi’s position that: “queer literature is a legitimate component of Nigerian, nay African, literature. Queer literature is a subtext of the whole. Queer literature is part of the

story, part of the struggle, part of the style and syntax. Queer literature matters, and queer writers and artists matter equally within the Nigerian literary community” (Chibuihe 2017).

The thesis pursues four central research questions: how do writers of queer subjectivity construct queer identities and desires in Nigerian fiction?; how do queer characters represented in the selected works navigate and negotiate the tension between personal identity and social expectations of heteronormativity?; in what ways do these queer representations reflect or challenge the societal, legal, and religious stigmas associated with queer sexualities in Nigeria?; and how do Nigerian queer narratives contest or subvert heteronormativity?

Terminology Used in this Thesis

The words commonly used to talk about queerness come from Western cultures and reflect their viewpoints. As a result, terms like lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual or homosexual face significant resistance in non-Western contexts such as Nigeria. The use of these terms to describe queer people in Nigeria has sparked heated debates and resistance toward nonconforming identities in Nigeria, where many view these labels as Western constructs. These western identity categories are also believed to belie identity difference, elevating one identity over the other. Matebeni, Monro, and Reddy argue that “the L and G impose limits in African contexts as categories of naming all struggles by sexual minorities under a single banner. Naming also oversimplifies differences and tensions among groups by privileging some identity struggles over others” (Matebeni, Monro and Reddy 2018, 4). In other words, the LGBT as a term does not only erase differences, but it also decontextualises queer struggles through a western-based naming system which does not neatly describe non-western queer subjects.

In this thesis, I will frequently use the word ‘queer’, and other terms such as nonconforming identities, genderfluid, genderqueer, non-normalising, non-heteronormative identities and same-sex desiring subjects interchangeably and where necessary to discuss and define Nigerian queer identities in a way that is neither prescriptive nor limiting. The term ‘**queer**’ is used in this study as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of sexual

and gender identities that refuse traditional gender categories and as a term for political resistance. This is in line with Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas's assertion in *Queer African Reader* (2013) that queer is often used by individuals and communities who "embrace gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal frameworks" (Ekine and Abbas 2013, 3). It is a term that challenges heterosexual constructs of identity because it "frames not only sexuality but also calls into question the binary-gendered regimes that constitute identity" (Matebeni. Monro, and Reddy 2018, 3). In this sense, I use queer to represent both identities that defy the binary constructs of gender and sexuality as well as the narratives that undermine heteronormativity.

These terms are essential because, in Nigeria, there are men who desire other men but do not identify as homosexuals. They may see themselves as heterosexuals, even if they engage in same-sex relationships. Furthermore, terms like 'same-sex desiring subjects' are more descriptive than prescriptive, allowing for a broader understanding of identity without confining it to rigid Western labels. These terms are central to the investigation of how Nigerian literature responds to and disrupts heteronormativity, particularly as a decolonial study that interrogates queerness in a strict African sense. The use of these terms reflects a theoretical and political stance that embraces fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to fixed categories of gender and sexuality. In addition, indigenous terms such as 'male daughters, female husbands, 'ogbanje' which exist outside the western understanding will be explained when used in the study.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis employs Queer, Postcolonial theory as a critical framework. One major tension within both theories is the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Essentialism debates view identity as fixed, stable and rooted in some universal cum innate essence. In contrast, anti-essentialism considers identity as something that is socially constructed, fluid and negotiated within historical, cultural and political systems. Queer theory, which emerged in the late twentieth century, rose within the anti-essentialism

discourse and coincided with the broader critiques of identity politics and universalist claims in the West. It developed at the conjunction of psychoanalysis, feminism, and lesbian and gay studies and is defined by the postulations from critics such as Michel Foucault (1976), Judith Butler (1990), Eve Sedgwick (1990), Julia Kristeva (1982), and Michael Warner (1993). In *Queer Theory, An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose defines queer as “those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (Jagose 1996, 3). Jagose contends that the word ‘queer’ resists definition and by so doing, it opens a space for new ways of understanding and expressing identity and desire beyond normative labels. She further posits that, because the word “queer” is “unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions” (Jagose 1996, 2). In this case, it is profitable for examining identity tensions in Nigerian postcolonial state.

Queer theory rejects the essentialism of gender by feminist, gay, and lesbian studies, and distinguishes itself through its focus on sexuality (Campbell 2000, 159). Queer theory refuses the idea of a fixed and stable sexual identities, instead emphasises fluidity, performativity and the unstable nature of categories such as “gay”, “lesbian, or “heterosexual” and the constructed nature of sexuality and gender. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* for instance, argues that gender is not innate or fixed but realised through repeated actions that are shaped by social norms and power relations. Similarly, Eve Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* exposes how the binary frameworks such as heterosexual/homosexual inform Western thinking, limiting the understanding of sexuality. Also, in *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault, demonstrates that sexuality is not a given but something that is produced through discourse, knowledge and power. Queer theory thus draws attention to how heteronormativity is a social construct that disciplines bodies and identities using social, legal, religious and political systems. The focus on sexuality offers the opportunity to critique the impact of heteronormativity on queer lives in a way that exposes

the dynamics of gender, sexuality, and power relations. Sylvia Tamale rightly notes that a major challenge facing African scholars is how to adapt theories developed elsewhere in ways that accounts for the particular social and cultural contexts within which these sexualities are constituted (Tamale 2011, 48). In response, this thesis acknowledges the origins of queer theory while arguing for its usefulness – especially when combined with postcolonial theory – in examining queerness in African contexts. This is because queer theory offers a meaningful framework for understanding African sexualities because “queer theory’s most basic insight into sexuality as a socio-cultural construct draws attention to the variety of sexual and gender expressions in precolonial African societies” (Van Klinken 2023).

Queer theory’s anti-essentialist position resonates strongly with Postcolonial thoughts, particularly in its engagement with cultural difference, subjugation, and exclusion. Postcolonial theory critiques the Eurocentric ideologies that shaped colonial encounters and examines how formerly colonised societies resist and redefine themselves under ongoing colonial and neocolonial pressures. Postcolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon (1968; 2008), Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (1994), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have examines the legacies of colonialism, addressing cultural domination, identity reconstruction and resistance to colonial power structures. Bhabha is particularly significant for his rejection of fixed identities, emphasising instead hybridity, ambivalence and the constructed nature of subjectivity in colonial contexts. His concept of hybridity challenges the idea of a pure and authentic cultural identities, aligning with queer theory’s rejection of fixed sexual identities and enabling an understanding of identity as fluid and negotiated. Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* pays attention to how marginalised voices are silenced within dominant discourses, a concern that resonates with the misrepresentation and silencing of queer subjects in postcolonial contexts. She argues that in contexts dominated by privileged majorities, the voice of the marginalised is rarely prioritised.

Queer and Postcolonial theories thus offer the theoretical framework for understanding identity and resistance in postcolonial contexts. This combined framework allows for the unpacking of debates within queer, postcolonial contexts particularly the

historical construction of heterosexual identities as the standard identities, the universalisation of identity categories and the need to explore queer subjectivity within its cultural milieu. In “Intersections in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory, and Hermeneutical Spin-Offs”, Jeremy Punt observes that “queer theory’s link with postmodern and postcolonial thought already emerges when it engages the social order from the underside of the society, and necessarily questions patterns which are presented as conventional, normal, traditional, or established” (Punt 2008, 3). Furthermore, in “Decolonizing Queer modernities: the case for queer (post)colonial studies in critical/cultural communication”, Godfried Asante and Jenna N. Hanchey argue for the recognition of the Queer Postcolonial theory in critical/cultural communication because exploring the interconnectedness of both theories can give agency to sexually marginalised postcolonial queer subjects. Asante and Hanchey posit that “queer (post)colonial studies can unveil the subjugated knowledges of those whom modernity engages through the violent silencing of their voices” (Asante and Hanchey 2021, 213). In other words, queer postcolonial theory can account for the peculiar experiences of queer subjects living in postcolonial contexts who are marginalised by colonial and postcolonial hegemonic systems; it offers a framework for examining Nigerian cum African-based sexualities

This thesis therefore adopts Queer Postcolonial Theory as a critical framework for analysing Nigerian queer literature. Nigerian queer narratives reject the monolithic construction of identity, and the dominance of heteronormativity. Queer Postcolonial theory accounts for the colonial imprints that influence identity, sexuality, and gender in postcolonial Nigeria such as religion and law, offering a critical lens for interpreting Nigerian queer literature’s resistance to fixed binaries and hegemonic gender and sexual norms. It enables a critical examination of how heteronormativity operates in postcolonial Nigeria and how it is resisted without expecting such resistance to reproduce Western Identities and politics. This way, it allows for the illumination of how Nigerian queer characters navigate dominant heterosexual norms and craft alternative forms of intimacy, belonging and selfhood. Butler’s gender performativity helps analyse how characters ‘perform’ heterosexuality in public while

expressing queerness in private spaces. Concepts such as hybridity and cultural negotiation are also useful as they provide the lens for analysing how characters inhabit in-between spaces and struggle to assert their identities amidst indigenous practices, religious influences and globalised identities. In addition, the focus on who can speak can be helpful in articulating how the queer subjects are historically silenced and marginalised, but also how they assert their identities within the selected narratives. Together, both theories show how sexuality is influenced by intersecting forces of colonialism, cultural norms, legal frameworks, religious teaching and global discourses. It also allows for the analysis of the way the characters negotiate visibility and belonging and how the narratives change dominant discourses through voice, representation and form.

Indigenous Knowledge Framework: Ogbanje and Reincarnation

This thesis also draws from the Igbo belief in reincarnation and ogbanje to interpret the gender fluid characters which Akwaeke Emezi creates in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* as the protagonists in both works are conceived beyond the confines of a Eurocentric framework. Ogbanje and reincarnation emanate from the Igbo beliefs rooted in the “continuity and contiguity of all parts of the cosmos” (Matera, Bastian and Kent 2012, 17). In Igbo cosmology, the invisible and visible worlds exist in unity, occupying the same “conceptual space” (Matera, Bastian and Kent 2012, 17). While the spirit realm is governed by Chukwu, the supreme being believed to inhabit the sky or ‘eluigwe’, the physical world (earth/solid ground) is guarded by the Ala, the earth goddess. Humans are believed to embody a spirit and human nature. While Chukwu gives humans a spirit self, a ‘Chi’, one’s physical body is gotten by one’s parents. However, a child’s form or ‘onunu’ is derived from the earth goddess, Ala/ani (Matera, Bastian and Kent 2012, 17).

On the one hand, reincarnation is the belief that a person's spirit returns to the human world after death to continue their existence. It is seen as “the re-embodiment of the total ethereal soul in a physical body” (Okwu 1979, 21). It is rooted in the understanding of life as cyclical and something that “does not end in death” (Kanu 2014, 20). Ancestors are dead relatives who are believed to exist in the spirit realm as guardians of the family lineage. It is

believed that when anyone who lives a culturally acceptable life¹ dies, they join the ancestor cult where they wait for reincarnation. They guide, protect, and shape the course of events in the physical world. They are usually understood as morally upright individuals” (Eruka 2023, 128). The reverence of ancestors is grounded in the understanding that the living and the dead are part of a larger spiritual universe. Hence, the interaction with ancestors helps to mediate personal destiny. If a child is suspected to be a reincarnate, people look for signs or “evidentialization realities” (Eruka 2023a, 127) such as birthmarks, scars, and character traits associated with the dead relative before the child’s reincarnated identity could be accepted. Knowing the identity of the reincarnated child is important to the identity and future of the child (Kanu 2014, 21).

Reincarnation is considered gender consistent. Names are culturally assigned in recognition of the child’s current gender as one is expected to take on the responsibility of their current gender even if their reincarnated identity is acknowledged. Igbo names such as “*Nnamdi, Nnanna, Nnamabia*” refers to a boy-child who returns as the incarnate of one’s dead father or grandfather, and “*Nnemdi, Nnenna, Nneka*” is given to a girl-child believed to be reincarnate of one’s mother or grandmother. However, there are also cases of gender inconsistent reincarnations. Such reincarnation is not linguistically recognised as the child is expected to embrace their current gender even if contradicts their gender in their previous existence. *The Death of Vivek Oji* uses gender inconsistent reincarnation as a framework for exploring the cross-gender identity of the protagonist, Vivek Oji.

On the other hand, ogbanje also known as abiku in Yoruba mythology is a belief found in the myth of Mami Wata in Igbo culture (Osinubi 2016, 172). It denotes a spirit child caught in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, typically as a means of punishing its parents and causing perpetual suffering. This unending cycle of death brings intense memories of pain, loss, and trauma for the family. Ogbanje is mischievous and troublesome (Achebe 1980) and represents a deviant form of reincarnation and identity in Igbo culture (Eruka 2023b, 94).

¹ This includes living within the responsibility of one’s gender, seeking community good, building and maintaining a positive family legacy, hard work among others

An ogbanje has a conflicted, liminal and dual identity – it is part human, part spirit and simultaneously exists in both the spirit and human realms.

An ogbanje is part of a spirit cohort that pledges allegiance to a life of perpetual death and rebirth. Before birth, an ogbanje agrees to a pact with its spirit cohort. This pact known as 'iyiwa' defines its life span in the human world. The 'iyiwa' is symbolised by disparate materials or stones and is kept separate from its host, and hidden in strange places such as thick forests, or under the ground and other inaccessible places, and only known to the ogbanje's cohort. When an ogbanje overstays their lifespan, the cohort usually visits to remind an ogbanje of its pact and such visits result in "convulsion or trance-like state" (Kanu 2014, 25). Because of the premium placed on marriage and procreation, an ogbanje is usually tethered to the human world through some ritual practices. This involved finding and destroying the iyiwa which severs it from its spirit cohort.

When a child is suspected to be an ogbanje, a dibia² is often summoned to ascertain its identity. If a child is confirmed as an ogbanje, the iyiwa is found and destroyed to prevent the child from joining its spirit cohort. The spirit identity of an ogbanje exerts greater control over its human identity and explains its power to disrupt life in the physical world. An ogbanje does not perpetuate the human family as it dies before sexual maturity.

An ogbanje's gender and sexuality are not fixed; an ogbanje can change gender at every cycle of rebirth, but when tethered to the human world, an ogbanje loses its liminality and lives within the binary gender system. Ezinma, the daughter of Okonkwo's younger wife, In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is one of the earliest ogbanje figures in literature. She returns each time in a different gender (Osinubi 2016, 182). Ben Okri's *The famished Road*, Wole Soyinka's *Abiku* and J.P Clarks's *Abiku* explore the ogbanje identity. Although some scholars have studied ogbanje as a case of infant mortality caused by sickle sex syndrome (Nzewi 2001), and Christianity has eroded some of indigenous Igbo belief system, ogbanje remains a cultural presence that resonates with the Igbo and Yoruba culture.

² In Igbo indigenous spirituality, a dibia serves as a spirit mediator, traditional healer and custodian of knowledge. A dibia is often believed to have mastery of mysteries.

Emezi harmonises the Igbo belief in reincarnation and ogbanje to construct a spiritual framework that transcends binary and linear understanding of life and identity. What Emezi explores in *Freshwater* is the idea of a living, liminal ogbanje who resists rigid gender classification through embracing their multiple selves. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi examines what it means to transgress rigid gender binary of male and female through a reincarnate identity. In *Freshwater*, Ogbanje represents multiplicity and spiritual resistance, while in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, reincarnation emerges as a quiet, affirming continuity of life. The belief in ogbanje and reincarnation allows Emezi to articulate a notion of self that is fluid, cyclical and challenges the heteronormative concept of linear and binary identity.

It is possible among non-Africans, especially Western audiences, to attempt a reading of Emezi's works through the lens of magical realism. This is because, often, in anthropological, ethnological, and sociological studies, "Igbo culture is seen from outside as a thing, and not from within as an experienced reality" (Anyanwu 1984, 85). Emezi's *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* introduce spiritual and supernatural elements like ancestral spirits in reincarnation and the presence of the brothersisters in ogbanje concept. However, reading the novels through the lens of magical realism will ultimately misrepresent the cultural and thematic import of the narrative. This is because, magical realism, which has its root in Latin American traditions, usually introduce supernatural elements in a work of art and treat such presence as a fantasy. But the spiritual identities in Emezi's works are not fantasies but real presences grounded in the indigenous cosmology and treated with immense cultural and emotional truth. Reading them as magical realism completely flattens the novel's exploration of identity, fluidity, and queer embodiment. In addition, Emezi's identification as an Ogbanje further situates the identities described in the novels within a lived reality. Hence, Emezi's foregrounding of identity within indigenous spirituality is both a decolonial move and proposes a more expansive and culturally grounded approach to identity.

Queer African Studies

Nigerian queer narratives are a part of a wider interrogation of heteronormativity in the continent as there has been a long-standing debate about the status of queerness in the

African continent. Debora Amory's essay "Homosexuality in Africa: major issues and debates" (1997) provide academic and political debates surrounding queerness which focus on the existence or otherwise of queerness in precolonial Africa and its relevance in postcolonial nation states (Amory 1997). Colonial accounts of African sexuality wrongly claimed that queerness was absent in Africa; instances of same-sex behaviour found among some cultures in Africa were dismissed as circumstantial. This is due to the colonial construction of Africa as a heterosexual continent (Epprecht 2008) as well as the privileging of heterosexuality within African societies. After independence, the legacy of colonialism, including the denial of queerness in Africa and sodomy laws, continued into the postcolonial era, resulting in the rejection and denial of queer identities. African leaders continue to enforce sodomy laws by constructing queerness as a foreign identity, using this position to resist perceived Western cultural dominance and assert their sovereignty. This has led to increase in legislation against queerness. For instance, 31 out of the 54 countries in Africa criminalise consensual same sex relationships (BBC News 2023), and political leaders like the late Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria have openly denounced queerness. However, this position by African leaders has been challenged by scholars interested in African sexuality. Scholarship on African sexuality seeks to address the historical silencing of queer identities and the postcolonial framing of nationhood that excludes nonconforming identities; this has been undertaken using two different approaches. One approach, primarily by non-African researchers, seeks evidence of queerness in precolonial Africa to support the idea of universal queerness, while another, led by African activists and scholars, examines postcolonial queer identities (Amory 1997). This has led to the emergence of the field of Queer African Studies.

Queer African Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to foster visibility and agency of queer identities in the continent. Queer African Studies aims to decolonise queerness and uncover the complex, intersectional ways in which queer African identities are embodied (Asante 2022), critically engaging with the social, cultural, historical, religious and

political forces that shape queer lives in Africa. It argues that early colonial sources created the conditions for the rejection of same-sex practices and by extension homophobia in Africa and contests the basis for the various laws that continue to make queer lives impossible. It challenges the portrayal of Africa as a predominantly heterosexual continent and elevates queer perspectives in African gender discourse. It responds to the invisibility of queer discourses both on the global stage and within postcolonial African contexts where discourses of gender and sexuality have previously been subsumed in the discussion of the West's claim of universal queer identity and African homogenous identity.

One of the problems Queer African Studies sought to tackle was the construction of Africa as a strictly heterosexual continent, the framing of queerness as un-African, and the resulting historical erasure of queer identities in literature and other discursive spaces of power—religion, culture, politics, and law. The 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of many critical works on African sexuality which extensively deal with queerness. These works trace the existence of queer identities and diverse sexual and gender relations across precolonial Africa and in postcolonial states. In the seminal work *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe contend that colonial texts like Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781) attempted to erase queerness in Africa by depicting Africa as a sexually homogenous entity. Gibson remarks upon arriving in Africa: "I believe, and hope, that the negroes, in their own country, were exempt from this moral pestilence [i.e. homosexual 'vice']" (Murray and Roscoe 1998, xxvi). Richard Burton would later re-echo this position when he asserts that Africans were "untainted by sodomy and tribadism" (Murray and Roscoe 1998, xxvi). In the same vein, some ethnographic researchers who documented instances of same-sex relations suggested that queerness in Africa stemmed from contact with outsiders, such as Arab traders and raiders (Murray and Roscoe 1998). In negation of this colonial position, Murray and Roscoe document evidence of diverse sexual and gendered practices across Africa – in the Horn of Africa, in Sudan, among the Zande people, East Coastal Africa, Bantu groups, the Interlake regions among others. Against colonial statements denying queer existence in Africa, these scholars assert

that queerness existed in pre-colonial Africa and therefore not an imposed identity or western perversion and construct Africa as a site of multiple sexualities.

Nevill Hoad in *African Intimacies, Race, Homosexuality and Globalisation* (2007), explains how colonial and global forces have reshaped the meaning of diverse sexual practices in Africa and produced the modern claim that queerness is un-African. Hoad proposes an understanding of queerness that considers the relationship between race, global capitalism and the postcolonial conditions: "African Intimacies argues that attention to questions of desire, affect, and experience suggests the contested and palimpsestic nature of Africa under the time-spaces of colonialism, decolonialisation, postcoloniality and now globalisation" (Hoad 2007, xv). Hoad posits that Africa of today is shaped by multiple overlapping histories and experiences which cannot be properly grasped without paying attention to how people feel, love, live and relate to each other within these histories.

In *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004), a collection of essays edited by Signe Arnfred, Arnfred emphasises the plurality of African sexualities, foregrounding the need to analyse sexuality through local and socio-cultural contexts while paying attention to gendered power dynamics. Arnfred claims that "re-thinking necessitates a double move of deconstruction and re-construction, developing an analysis whereby, through critique of previous conceptualisations, attempts are made to approach materials in new ways, coming up with fresh or alternative lines of thinking" (Arnfred 2004, 7). Similarly, in *African Sexualities: A Reader* (2011), Sylvia tamale provides a broad interdisciplinary foundation by assembling a wide range of voices to show that African sexualities are diverse, complex and historically grounded and must therefore be studied across history, politics, law and everyday lives of people. Tamale's work challenges the colonial roots of contemporary homophobia, arguing that many anti-queer laws and attitudes in Africa are products of imperial influence. Tamale contends that "ideas about and experiences of African sexualities are shaped and defined by issues such as colonialism, globalisation, patriarchy, gender, class, religion, age, law and culture" (tamale 2011, 2). Tamale instead advocates an intersectional and decolonial

approach that pays attention to the entanglement of sexuality, gender, class and political power.

Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas' *Queer African Reader* (2013), is also another collection of essays that goes beyond academic interpretation to centre African queer voices, activism and lived realities. It provides first-hand accounts of queer African experiences and resistance, critiquing state repression, religious conservatism and the influence of Western NGO organisations on African queer lives. *Queer African Reader* emphasises self-representation and political struggle, shifting power to queer Africans and grounding theory in real-world activism and experience. Ekine and Abbas highlight that "Queer African Reader breaks away from the homogenisation of Africa as the homophobic continent to highlight the complexities of LGBTIQ lives and experiences with contributions that explore issues of identity, resistance, solidarity...global politics, intersections of struggle, religion and culture, sex and love" (Ekine and Abbas, 2011, 3).

S. N Nyeck's *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation* (2021) provide theoretical insights and practice. Reviewing S. N Nyeck's *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation*, Wesley Macheso notes Nyeck's call for queer scholarship to integrate into African studies: "queer scholarship can no longer lurk at the margins of African Studies and that, instead of queering Africa, there is need to Africanise queerness in inclusive ways that nullify gendered and geo-political boundaries" (Macheso 2023, 57). Nyeck suggests an African-based form of queer practice that moves away from Western right-based approaches and focuses on negotiation – showing how queer Africans navigate hostile environments through negotiation, ethics and everyday strategy. John Hawley's *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (2001) brings postcolonial theory and queer theory into dialogue, showing that both are concerned with power, identity and resistance and can be applicable in African based contexts. Chantal Zabus' *Out in Africa: Same-Sex desires in Sub-Saharan Literature and Culture* (2013) turns to literary and cultural production to examine the representation and negotiation of same-sex desire in African texts. Collectively and within a context that actively represses and obscures nonconformity, scholars of African

sexuality have employed diverse strategies towards bringing visibility and agency to nonconforming subjects. Over the years, Queer African Studies have continued to distinguish itself as a strand of African studies, integrating queer perspective into African discourse.

Emerging queer narratives in Africa therefore reject the construction of Africa as a site of fixed sexual identity and address colonial legacies that impinge upon the expression of queerness. These narratives portray queer characters who embrace their identity despite anti-queer legislation and rigid gender norms. In “Representing African Sexualities”, Desiree-Lewis observes that African writers of sexualities are beginning to challenge official discourses by creating characters that transcend and undermine the inflexible gender norms in society while negotiating their own identities. Lewis further categorises such narratives as “transgressive” because such works attempt to “to extricate African sexuality from binaries that define heterosexuality as normatively African and homosexuality as deviant and Western. They have also questioned the usefulness of exploring sexuality, gender and sex in terms of dualisms and binaries” (Lewis 2011, 209). Within these narratives, the queer characters are no longer depicted as foreigners but as everyday people negotiating their identities amidst social, cultural, legal, and religious barriers.

Nigerian queer narratives, like their counterparts in Africa, confront cultural norms and colonial legacies that limit queer identities as well as postcolonial structures that reinforce them. The selected authors depict characters who are queer and Nigerian, rejecting the impossibility of queer lives. The novels imagine Nigeria as both a place of queer oppression and a potential space for queer futurity. According to John Hawley, “such futurity, one might say, is the work of literary art as a precursor to political reform” (Hawley 2017, 123). By telling stories that bring heteronormativity into scrutiny, Nigerian queer narratives contribute to African sexuality as well as link to the broader field of Queer African Studies. Nigerian queer narratives thus take on the anti-essentialist position in queer postcolonial theory by resisting fixed labels and presenting identity as fluid, context-based and intersectional. This position aligns with Hoad’s emphasis on relationality and Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. Moreover, the art of self-representation evident in these narratives shows that the subaltern subjects have

begun to speak to the power structures that silenced them. Situated within this emerging field of discourse, Nigerian queer narratives serve as critical interventions that expand how sexuality, identity and power are understood and negotiated in postcolonial contexts.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the field of African literature and queer African studies for several reasons. There is a noticeable gap in scholarly works that examine the literary development of queer writing in Nigeria, particularly in its nascent form. This thesis therefore serves as a valuable contribution to the development of queer writing within Nigerian literature. Secondly, this research interrogates the way in which contemporary Nigerian novels engage with the concept of queerness in a manner that has not been previously done, either within Nigerian literature or the broader African literature. It offers a broad lens through which we can both accept and question how queerness is represented in literary texts. This is remarkable because most studies on Nigerian queer literature have been polemical. In deliberate contrast, my work is the first to critically probe *why* queer writers justify queerness in their narratives and how they have presented – or argued – this in their writing. The writers I have chosen for this study present male and female queerness and fluid subjects as valid and legitimate identities contrary to traditional forms of presentation or customary literary antecedents. The writers offer new perspectives on gender and sexuality that create a pathway for the acceptance of queerness within a patriarchal culture that continues to privilege heteronormativity. The thesis' focus on the literary development of queer writing, the concept of queerness and heteronormativity and the interrogation of *why* and *how* queer writers approach the theme of queerness will greatly benefit scholars of African literature, Queer African Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Feminist Studies, human rights groups, the queer communities and the public. It will be of immense value to Nigerian audience specifically because it highlights important conversations around inclusion and gender equality, alongside the current debate regarding queerness and the legal imposition and interpretation of the term and practice in Nigeria. This research also has the potential to engender attitudinal change in Nigerian society in line with Elizabeth West's observation that

“queer Nigerian literature encourages readers to reflect on the treatment of the LGBTI community, particularly when it offers new ways of thinking to challenge anti-LGBTI discourse” (West 2023). Furthermore, in the light of the ongoing debates about the inclusion of queer subjectivities in spaces where they had been previously excluded and the human rights discourse, this thesis offers potential for such conversation.

Delimitation/Scope of the study

This research is limited to the study of Nigerian literature published within the last two decades that explores queerness; the scope of the work is confined to the analysis of *Walking with Shadows* (2005), *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), *Freshwater* (2018), *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2022) and *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023). The novels published between 2005 and 2023 are selected for their thematic exploration of sexuality, identity, and resistance and their innovative approach to the disruption of heteronormativity. While this study offers an in-depth analysis of the selected texts, it is limited by its focus on a small number of authors. Specifically, it examines four authors from the same ethnic group, reflecting the novels' limited geographical scope and leaving other important voices out. Nonetheless, these works engage the shared colonial, and postcolonial legacies that shape queer lives in Nigeria, regardless of region, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Thus, although the authors come from the same ethnic background, and Emezi, for instance, draws on Igbo culture to articulate a localised queer identity, the experiences depicted in these works resonate more broadly with those of queer subjects in Nigeria.

In addition, while the political, social, religious, and cultural contexts are acknowledged and foregrounded, they are outside the direct scope of this investigation, which restricts itself to the environment depicted in the novels. The study pointedly references, where necessary, earlier works that have addressed similar themes and lends a perspective covered by these works that are liminal in the texts studied in this research.

Queer postcolonial theory serves as the critical framework for this study; however, this research does not delve deeply into broader queer theoretical concerns such as intersectionality (e.g., race and class). While these concerns may intersect with

heteronormativity, the primary aim of this study is to understand how the selected texts use queer narratives to resist and challenge heteronormativity as the dominant or 'normal' mode of existence. The study also focuses exclusively on the novel genre and does not include other genres such as poetry, short stories, film, drama, but refers to them where necessary.

Several aspects of these novels are left unexplored because they do not align with the research questions. These include reading queerness on its own terms, representations of sexual violence, societal misunderstanding of queerness, stigmatisation, targeted killings, and suicide driven by hostility towards queer people. These issues are evident in the novels, but merit sustained analysis elsewhere. More broadly, Nigeria queer narratives are rapidly growing across genres, including poetry, visual art, and film, and offers opportunity for the exploration of their richness and diversity. Given the above, this thesis does not claim to capture the full range of queer expression within Nigerian literary landscape.

Chapter Overview

This thesis comprises six chapters and a conclusion. The novels are organised thematically rather than chronologically, tracing a cumulative argument in which each chapter progressively disrupts heteronormativity, culminating in the most radical intervention, *Freshwater*. Chapter One situates the study within the dominance of heteronormativity in Nigeria's cultural, social, political and religious systems. It examines how this dominance is reproduced in literature and argues that the disavowal of queer sexuality provides the conditions against which emerging queer narratives intervene and reimagine gender and sexuality. Chapter Two examines Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, arguing that it breaks queer invisibility through its protagonist, Adrian. It traces Adrian's movement from enforced concealment of his identity to self-acceptance and disclosure, positioning his affirmation as an early literary disruption of heteronormativity and a shift towards humanising queer subjectivity in Nigerian fiction.

Chapter Three turns to Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, showing how it redirects female sexuality away from heteronormative expectations. It explores the novel's intervention in feminist discourse, its challenge of religious and cultural constructions of

femininity, and its reconfiguration of Biblical interpretations. This chapter reads Ijeoma's embrace of queer intimacy over a heterosexual marriage as a redefinition of womanhood and a claim for queer female subjectivity. Chapter Four analyses Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, focusing on how it critiques heterosexual masculinity, patriarchy and patrilineality. It examines how the relationship between August and Segun unsettles gender norms, engages the violence enabled by the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014), and calls for collective resistance through alternative forms of solidarity and community.

Chapter Five examines Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*, arguing that its cross-gender subject, Vivek Oji, destabilises binary frameworks of gender and sexuality. Situating Emezi within a decolonial framework, the chapter shows how indigenous cosmology, queer embodiment and alternative community formations reconfigure identity and belonging beyond the heteronormative limits. Chapter Six extends the argument made in chapter Five through Emezi's *Freshwater*, foregrounding its most radical disruption of heteronormativity. It reads the novel's engagement with colonialism and Transatlantic slave trade as events that displace indigenous epistemologies, before demonstrating how the re-centring of Ala cosmology and the figure of the ogbanje decentre the body and destabilise binaries such as male/female, human/spirit, and heterosexual/queer.

The argument of this thesis is thus in two parts: the first three novels make the argument for queer inclusion by stating that queer people are deserving of all rights, recognition and visibility accorded to heterosexual subjects. The characters in the first three novels retain their gender identity but disrupt heteronormativity through the expression of their sexuality. However, the last two chapters based on Emezi's novels disrupt both gender and sexual norms and offer a release of different possibilities, becoming a fountain of voices and showing different ways of being in the world that surpasses normative expectations. The thesis concludes with a conclusion section which synthesises the cumulative readings made throughout the chapters.

Chapter One: Contextualising Gender and Sexuality in Nigerian Society

1:1 Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the key argument made in this thesis—that Nigerian queer narrative contests the prevailing heteronormative perspective in the literature that originates from the country. It examines how the collective understanding of queerness – formed through religion, law and socio-cultural norms – perpetuates and reinforces heteronormativity. This chapter foregrounds heteronormativity, traces its prevalence in early Nigerian literature, highlighting how early women’s writing challenged patriarchal structures and opened the space for the later critique of heteronormativity in queer narratives. It also considers evidence of queerness in Nigerian cultures, charting evolving responses to it, and the shifting representation of queerness – from marginalisation in earlier texts to increasing visibility in contemporary literature. Nigerian queer narratives push and expand the limits of Nigerian subjectivities by centring queer voices, echoing Peter Umezurike’s assertion that “an inclusive way of thinking about gender must encompass a variety of subjectivities” (Umezurike 2021a, 36). This chapter thus contextualises heteronormativity and uncovers its rootedness in Nigerian society and the emergence of queer narratives that disrupts its dominance.

1.2. The Practice of Heteronormativity in Nigerian Society

Although there is no monolithic Nigerian culture, there seem to be common understanding and expectations of gender in most Nigerian cultures. This common understanding of gender and sexuality is fostered by and underpinned by religion, laws, social norms, and cultural practices. As a collectivist society (Triandis 2021), the different cultures in Nigeria often expect an individual to conform to the group expectations of gender and not express an identity that disrupts the existing gender system. In individualistic cultures, personal autonomy and self-expression are often prioritised over that of the group; however, this is not the case in collectivist cultures. Citing Mills & Clark (1982), Triandis points out that “in collectivist cultures people are interdependent within their in-groups (family, tribe, nation etc),

give priority to the goals of their in-groups, shape their behaviour primarily on the basis of in-group norms, and behave in a communal way” (Triandis 2001, 909), such as what happens in Nigeria. An individual is defined through their relationship with others and the gender roles they play in Nigeria. In Nigeria, relationship is important as social behaviour is strongly moulded by group expectations and individuals are encouraged to act in ways that benefit family, community and society. Individuals are encouraged to make life choices that foster social harmony, cohesion, and mutual support with emphasis on interdependence, collaboration, conformity, and shared responsibility. Society thus places a lot of emphasis on collective values, which seem to trump individual desires and aspirations.

Group expectation is mostly built around gender roles, which in themselves are organised around biological differences. These roles and expectations influence how individuals are perceived, how they see themselves, and how they interact with others in society. Both Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani cultures have similar ideas about sexuality, gender and marriage and encourage collectivism, community and gender conformity (Alaba 2004; Yusuf 2005; Izugbara 2004). Gender and sex norms in these cultures reinforce society’s heteronormative view.

Within the heteronormative system, gender is strictly defined as binary (male and female) and gender identity and sexual desire are required to align with heterosexual norms. One’s sex at birth determines one gender and role in society and heterosexuality is viewed as the standard from where other forms of sexuality are adjudged as either normal or abnormal. From an early age, society compartmentalises individuals into distinct gender roles and expectations. Men are expected to express masculinity by embodying attributes such as physical strength, authority, leadership roles, provider and protector, dominance, emotional restraint. Women, on their part, are expected to marry, bear children and take care of the home – cook, clean, and do chores; be submissive to their husbands, and live under male authority through their positions as daughters, wives and mothers. Although gender roles might be fluid, gender identity is static. For instance, men are not expected to change their gender to become women and vice versa. In other words, individuals categorised as either

male or female based on their biological features are expected to identify as such and fulfil the cultural, religious, legal and social demands of their gender. However, both men and women can switch into different gender roles permitted within their cultures – a man can cook sometimes, and a woman can become the main income earner in the home. These roles do not undermine their gender identity.

Above all, men and women are expected to contract heterosexual marriages and perpetuate the family name. Heteronormativity dictates that sexual relationship, and union should only occur between opposite sexes, thus enforcing the link between sex, gender, and desire. Sexual expression is not permitted outside heterosexuality, and there are sexual taboos in place to check deviance (Ikpe 2004b, 5). These cultural roles are geared towards perpetuating the family institution through marriage and procreation and reinforcing patriarchy. Heteronormativity thus dictates what are appropriate and acceptable gender and sexual behaviours for men and women in society. Since gender and sexual relations are organised around the binary, most individuals grow up aligning with the normative roles and the expectations of heteronormativity, and deviance is considered a moral crisis that needs to be corrected. *twerk*

1.3 Marriage and the Heteronormative Family Unit

Marriage, reproduction, and family institution hold immense cultural and spiritual significance in Nigeria because Nigeria recognises only the heteronormative family, which could either be monogamous or polygamous. The heteronormative family unit is formed through heterosexual marriage, and the family unit is regarded as the foundation of society and essential for human continuity. The cultural importance attached to marriage and the family institution is linked to the spiritual significance of marriage. It is believed in most Nigerian cultures that marriage is the avenue through which the living, the dead and the unborn mingle, ensuring the healthy interaction and harmony between the physical and spirit worlds and the perpetuation of the human society. Commenting on the importance of marriage in African cultures, John S. Mbiti, in *African Religions and Philosophy* explains that beyond the physical family, the family institution also involves the unborn who are locked in the loins of the living

as the “buds of hope and expectation, and each family makes sure that its own existence is not extinguished. The family provides for its continuation and prepares for the coming of those not yet born. For that reason, Africans parents are anxious to see that their children find husbands and wives, otherwise failure to do so means in effect the death of the unborn and a diminishing of the family as a whole” (Mbiti 1989, 105).

In the precolonial and postcolonial Nigerian society, marriage and reproduction are given utmost importance. Anthropologists and ethnographers in the early twentieth and twenty-first century recorded varied marriages and relationships that were strictly heterosexual among cultures such as the Tiv, Igbo, Hausa, Ibibio, Yoruba (Talbot 1923), (Downes 1969), (Uchendu 1965), (Meek 1925). In the contemporary times, scholars have also examined the sustained importance placed on marriage and reproduction among the three major ethnic groups - Yoruba (Oni 1991), Igbo (Chinwuba 2016), and Hausa-Fulani cultures (Yusuf 2005). Because of the importance placed on marriage, reproduction, and family, society expects individuals to fulfil this role, as it is both a personal and societal responsibility. Refusal to marry or procreate is considered a gross disservice to oneself and society. Through marriage and reproduction, families, communities, and society are maintained. Even when a couple is childless, it does not delegitimise the heteronormative family because although such marriage may fall short of social expectations, it still conforms to the heterosexual framework. Hence, refusal to marry is construed as a deliberate act of sabotage against the perpetuation of humanity:

For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born... marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a lawbreaker, he is not only abnormal but ‘under-human’. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return. (Mbiti 1989, 130)

Because it is commonly believed that marriage between a man and a woman ensures the continuation of life, they consider marriage sacred and view reproduction as its natural and positive outcome. Families whose children refuse to marry lose both their family name and legacy and are believed to also be disconnected from their ancestors.

The dominant understanding of marriage in society thus moulds Nigeria's political, social, economic and legal frameworks. Within this context, same-sex sexuality is conceived as anti-family because it does not align with the heterosexual norms which perpetuates family continuity through sexual reproduction. Marriage and procreation through heterosexuality is thus important in the Nigerian context and explains why an individual's refusal to commit to heteronormativity is considered a moral and spiritual failure. Societal pressure to conform to these cultural expectations is immense, and nonconformity often attracts shame, ostracism, stigma, and sometimes violence.

1.4 Patriarchy and Heteronormativity

Patriarchy is a longstanding social system where male dominance is institutionalised, and women and other identities are considered subordinate to heterosexual men. Patriarchy creates different gender roles for men and women. While men dominate and assert authority in the home, women are considered solely within their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, which invariably positions them as secondary to men. Queer men are not considered men in the same way as heterosexual men due to their gender and sexual expression. The heterosexual family in Nigeria is patriarchal in nature as men are essentially the heads of families, primary decision makers and symbols of authority and perpetrators of the family name and wealth. While men's authority is visible in the home, cultural norms reinforce it. For instance, patriarchy creates a system of inheritance known as patrilineality where family descent is traced through the male line and wealth is passed from fathers to sons who are considered rightful heirs of such inheritance.

To ensure the perpetuation of the family name and wealth, every family desires to have sons who carry on the family legacy. As a result, male children are preferred in the home more than female although every family would desire a mix of the sexes. In Igbo culture, for

instance, the birth of a male child is often celebrated with great fanfare and considered an achievement for both the parents and an extended family (Smith 2003, 510); and names are most times given in recognition of the importance (Izugbara 2004). The lack of male children, particularly after several daughters, is often viewed as a source of shame or failure. Thus, while children are often counted as a sign of fulfilment in marriage, a complete and successful marriage is one that has a male child. Marriage between a man and a woman is therefore regarded as 'incomplete' if male children are lacking. In addition, marriage is important for the maintenance of the family unit and men are responsible for perpetuating the family institution through seeking out potential wives and contracting marriages with the opposite sex. Moreover, men oversee many rites and ceremonies in most cultures in Nigeria such as traditional marriage rites, burial rites, chieftaincy titles, masquerade festivals, divination, and burial rites, making them indispensable to the dominant social fabric.

Women, on their part, do not maintain the family name in the same way as men as they are usually married off to other families, which they become a part of. Across a significant number of Nigerian cultures, the primary societal expectations of women centre on marriage and this is reinforced through socio-cultural norms. A woman's value is often assessed by how much she fulfils her traditional roles as daughter, wife, and mother. However, in the absence of male children, in a home with many daughters, a daughter can become what Ifi Amadiume terms 'a male daughter'. A male daughter is a female child who is accorded the status of a male child in the community due to the lack of a male child. Such daughters live in their father's house and raise children to perpetuate the family name and legacy. They are accorded most rights of biological male children and are also allowed to marry younger women who bear children for her (Amadiume 2015, 34). Similarly, a wealthy woman, who may either be barren, unmarried or have only daughters, can become a 'female husband' by marrying a younger lady in her name who would produce children either for her or for her husband (Amadiume 2015, 47; Okide 2016, 1381)). In both situations, the younger wives seek sexual relationship with biological males, however, the children born from the relationship belong to either the 'male daughter' or the 'female husband' as the case may be.

Both marital arrangements are not to be confused with the lesbian relationship as both serve the interest of patriarchy through the focus on procreation and the pursuit of the concept of masculinity.

Furthermore, in most Nigerian cultures, marriage is emphasised as a sign of responsibility for men. So, while children are generally treasured, sons are preferred for the purposes already stated. This cultural expectation places tremendous pressure on men to prove themselves by fathering sons and passing their wealth and name to them. The continuous preference for male children evident in society today helps to perpetuate the importance placed on heterosexual masculinity, family, heterosexuality and community. Together, patriarchy and heteronormativity entrench a rigid gender system that reinforces traditional views of gender and sexuality. Both play a huge role in shaping gender roles and sexual identity discourse in Nigeria.

1.5 Support for Heteronormativity in Nigerian Society

As already noted, Nigerian cultures strongly reinforce heteronormativity culturally, religiously, politically, socially, and legally, leaving no room for fluidity in gender identity and sexual expression. Cultural practices, traditions, and social norms reinforce gender hierarchies that favour men and enthrone male dominance, sidelining women and other identities. For instance, the patrilineal system in place downplays the role of women, highlighting the male position in society. It conceives men as leaders and providers and women as nurturers and subordinates. The expectations for women to remain submissive, nurturing and supportive of their husbands and the division of roles of men and women reinforce male dominance both in the public and private spaces. In addition, the emphasis on marriage as the basic goal for women and the framing of men and women's status around marriage and family leads to the stigmatisation of women and men who choose to remain single or explore other models of gender. The cultural idea of masculinity and femininity and the early grooming of men and women ensure continuation of an unbroken cycle that emphasise traditional roles of men and women. As a result, Nigerian culture does not recognise any deviation from the existing sex-gender norms.

Religion is another institution that plays a significant role in moulding gender and sexual discourses in Nigeria. Christianity and Islam, the two foreign religions in Nigeria, have had a profound impact on identity construction. Nigeria has the highest number of church denominations and church buildings in the world (Omilusi 2021, 49) and Nigerians have strong religious ties to Christianity and Islam. Being a Christian or Muslim, therefore, shapes one's perception of gender and sexuality as well as informing one's opinion when gender and sexuality become topics of public debate. Both religions interpret gender in a way that supports traditional gender roles. Many interpretations of the Bible and Quran assign men authority as heads of the family, while women's roles centre on submission, motherhood, and homemaking. Sexuality is considered important in maintaining social order. This understanding of gender and sexuality within Christianity and Islam helps to reinforce heteronormativity in Nigeria.

Besides perpetuating traditional gender roles, religion also plays a key role in shaping societal attitudes to same sex sexuality. Charmaine Pereira & Jibrin Ibrahim observe that "religious discourse in both Christianity and Islam treats 'sex drives' as 'natural', channelling them towards marriage and reproduction, while vilifying homosexuality as well as sexual relations outside marriage"(Pereira and Ibrahim 2010, 922). Christianity and Islam teach that heterosexuality is the natural form of sexuality ordained by God/Allah, who is regarded as the creator of all things. Both religions consider Adam and Eve as the model of the standard human relationship, teaching the significance of marriage and procreation. In "Africanising the Discourse of Homosexuality: Challenges and Prospects" Ezra Chitando and Pauline Mateveke point to how: "within Christianity, most of the prejudices against homosexuality are based on biblical teachings according to which God created heterosexual beings, and that to divert from heterosexuality is sinful" (Chitando and Mateveke 2017, 128). Similarly, in Islam, "everything outside of an explicitly sanctioned union between a man and a woman is prohibited. This includes anal intercourse (Yaqueen Institute 2025). Christianity and Islam thus reject same-sex sexuality, viewing it as self-destructive, pointing to the story of divine judgement against Sodom and Gomorrah for engaging in same-sex behaviour. Similarly, in

both religions, queerness is portrayed as a corruption of the human body and a transgression against the divinely ordained principles of human sexuality. Sexual acts are considered sacred and must be conducted in accordance with divine guidelines, which invariably refers to heterosexuality. Any sexual expression outside of heterosexuality is condemned as an offense against God's will, a perversion of natural law, and an affront to the divinely ordained sexual standard.

Both faiths uphold heteronormativity, emphasising heterosexual families, male dominance, female subordination, and the condemnation of queer identities. The Biblical idea of human sexuality informed the position taken by the Anglican Communion in Nigeria when the first gay bishop was ordained in Europe in 2004 (The Irish Times 2003). Speaking against the recognition of queerness in the Anglican church in Europe, the primate of the Anglican communion in Nigeria, Archbishop Peter Akinola, cites the Bible as the basis for the Nigerian church's rejection of the recognition and ordination of queer priests: "we claim that we are Bible-living Christians. We cannot be seen to be doing things that are clearly out of the boundaries allowable by scripture" (The Irish Times 2003). Christianity and Islam thus unite regarding same-sex sexuality, rejecting and even pronouncing death on anyone indulging in it.

Nigeria's legal framework also reinforces heteronormativity as Nigerian laws on marriage, social relations, citizen's rights and duties are framed around heteronormativity and recognise only the heteronormative family unit (Nwaogwugwu 2014). Nigeria's postcolonial legal system which draws extensively from colonial laws continues to reinforce heterosexual marriages through its recognition of statutory, customary, and Christian marriages, all of which are based on heteronormative ideals. The sodomy laws, which were a direct effect of Victorian values in Britain in the eighteenth century, continue to influence Nigerian legal and criminal codes. The existence of sodomy laws within the Nigerian Criminal Code, and their expansion through the 2014 SSMPA (Arimoro, 2018), underscore society's emphasis on heteronormativity. The extant laws thus prohibit queer sexuality. The Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) of 2014 strictly outlaws any form of marriage between people of the

same sex, as well as bans any association or membership of any queer-related organisation or activities.

Beyond outlawing queer sexuality, Nigerian laws also support patriarchy. It upholds male dominance and the heterosexual nuclear family and enforces a strict sense of gender and sexual norms that create hierarchies where queer identities are excluded. The conservative nature of Nigerian society thus makes deviation from traditional gender or heteronormative norms difficult for queer individuals as well as creates a hostile environment for the expression of queerness. However, norms are shifting in postcolonial Nigeria from strict traditional sense of gender towards liberality and fluidity and queer perspective represents one of the most tangible forms of that shift.

1.6 The Presence of Queer Sexuality in Nigerian Society

Scholars interested in Nigerian sexuality have highlighted the presence of queer subjects and practice in Nigeria in rejection of the argument that queer people do not exist in Nigeria. Earliest work on Nigerian queerness was carried out by Rudolf P. Gaudio, an American Scholar, in Kano, northern Nigeria. Gaudio details the existence of the *yan daudu* and the *karuwai*, who are members of a subgroup within the conservative Hausa community notorious for their gender and sexual fluidity. *Yan daudu* refers to men who have feminine tendencies or cross dressers in Hausa and *Karuwai* are women who are either divorced or live independent of male control in the home. *Yan daudu* have sex with men as well as undertake women's roles, like cooking, use feminine pronouns and receive gifts from male clients. They are also believed to work as pimps to the *karuwas*, arranging male clients in return for favours. *Karuwai* and *yan daudu* usually live together, and this setting provides cover for men who seek sex with *yan daudu* (Gaudio 1996; Pierce 2016). Although most *yan daudu* have wives and children, one striking part of their identity is that they adopt a gendered behaviour that runs contrary to the norm.

Similarly, George Olusola Ajibade provides another evidence of same-sex sexuality in Yoruba oral literature or the Ifa mythology. He cites sections in the Ifa corpus that reference same-sex sexuality, albeit derogatorily:

Obìnrin se é basùn jokùnrin lo
 Okùnrin se é sùn tì jobìnrin lo-5
 B. ókúnrin bá n' b.ókùnrin ín sùn
 Bí i kókó, bí i oówo ni
 Bí ikù, bí àgbààrín
 Bóbìnrin bá n' bóbìnrin ín sùn
 Bí èpètè, bí òórùn-10
 Bí eròfò, bí èérí

"It is pleasant for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman
 It is pleasant for a woman to have sexual intercourse with a man-5
 If a man is having sexual intercourse with another man
 It results into lumps, boils and yaws It results into various diseases
 If a woman is having sexual intercourse with another woman
 It results into murk and foul odour, -10
 It results into mud and dirt (Ajibade 2013, 975),

Ajibade argues that the reference to same-sex sexuality negates the popular idea that queerness is a foreign construct. Instead, it is documented among the sexual practices recorded in the preliterate period of Yoruba history. Furthermore, Chimaraoke O Izugbara's research in a rural Ngwa community in Southeastern Nigerian mentions the existence of a medicine man who was a homosexual. His longevity and the potency of his cures were attributed to his sexuality (Izugbara 2011, 544). The reference to same-sex sexuality in Yoruba Ifa corpus and the existence of a medicine man at a rural Ngwa community are evidence of the presence of queerness within Nigerian society and supports Sylvia Tamale's observation that "historical accounts of African sexualities are alive in folklore, traditional

songs, dance, folk art, body markings, clothing, jewellery, names and naming systems” (Tamale 2011, 14). Even though queerness does not enjoy any form of support or legitimacy within Nigerian society, these cultural expressive mediums thus document both normative and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, showing both the dominance of heteronormativity and the existence of queer sexuality. Together, these studies provide evidence of same-sex intimacy in precolonial and postcolonial Nigeria, providing a framework upon which postcolonial queer critics theorise identity in the contemporary times.

1.7 Responses to Queerness in Nigeria

Since the de-pathologisation of homosexuality in the 1970s, there has been progressive queer activism, resulting in the legalisation of queerness in some countries in the global north and south like the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom, South Africa, Kenya, Angola, Botswana, Portugal, Canada, Iceland, and Norway. The trickle effect is seen in the activism among queer communities in both Western and non-Western cultures. This is largely due to the recognition of gender identity and sexual orientation as a marginalised identity by the United Nations, which remains at the forefront of the call for decriminalisation and legalisation of queerness. In addition, the UN’s creation of the office of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expert, whose role involves promoting queer rights across the globe, contributes to the visibility and recognition of queer rights.

There is visible tension in queer discourse in Nigeria, resulting in the existence of two opposing positions: one which pushes for legal rights for queer people and another which rejects the recognition or legitimisation of queer identity on grounds that it contradicts cultural beliefs and norms. In *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship and Activism*, Matebeni et al observe that “the tension between legal protection on the one hand and the cultural beliefs on the other hand remain a serious challenge to the ongoing fashioning and mobilisation of African queer identities” (Matebeni, Monro and Reddy, 2018, 2). Arguments in rejection of queerness focus on many issues. First, it highlights queer sexuality’s negation of heterosexuality and reproduction which is crucial to human survival. If queer people cannot embrace heterosexuality, then society considers them as cancer that threatens society which

needs to be eliminated for society's health and progress. Second, queerness is understood as a sin and a moral failure due to the teachings of the two major imported religions – Christianity and Islam. Such an understanding of queerness creates a moral panic, which is often one of the major reasons for violence against queer people. Third, it is equally considered a Western perversion and a contradiction of normative identity. Given the support that queerness enjoys in the global north and the specific outrage from countries like America and the United Kingdom when Nigeria's anti-gay bill was passed (The Guardian 2014), Nigerian people consider queerness an imported identity. Fourth, queer sexuality is considered incompatible with Nigerian culture because whereas heteronormativity entrenches a strict sense of gender and sexual norms and do not allow alternative gender expression, queer sexuality insists on gender and sexual fluidity. Moreover, the political, social, religious, and legal ramification of heteronormativity makes it difficult for the expression of queer sexuality, sanctioning violence, and exclusion of queer people. Thus, the traditional understanding of gender and sexuality both excludes queer subjects and upholds damaging stereotypes. The incompatibility of queerness with heterosexuality makes queer people targets of societal recrimination and violence. Evidence abounds of violence against queer people, especially police violence (Giwa et al. 2020).

In contrast, positions that support queerness stress that everyone is not heterosexual nor fits into the male-female paradigm and argue for the recognition of the rights of anyone whose gender and sexuality differ from heteronormativity. Arguments supporting queerness view queerness as an intricate part of human sexuality, which has been excluded from Nigerian history because of the dominance of heteronormativity. Previously, societal shame and rigid gender expectations prevented people from showing or accepting queer sexualities as valid identities. However, arguments in favour of queerness draw from the human rights perspective (Kuwa 2014), (Arimoro 2018), (Omilusi 2021), and claim that queer identity is a private experience and should be protected as an inalienable human rights. This is because the major hurdle which queer people face in Nigeria is the criminalisation of their identity which invariably excludes them from state protection. So, to challenge this, pro-queer

discourses draw attention to how Nigerian laws infringe on the rights of queer people such as right to life, right to privacy, right to self-expression and association among others. These rights have been recognised by the United Nation, of which Nigeria is a part, and account for the increase in countries that have decriminalised queerness in the global north and south. The focus on queer rights as human rights thus creates a space for the legitimisation of queer identity in Nigeria by focusing specifically on the status of queer people as humans who possess sexual and gender rights that should be respected.

1.8 Heteronormativity in Early Literature Written by Men

Nigerian literature has historically reproduced the heteronormative perspective. From the works of early male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka Cyprian Ekwensi, J. P Clark, Niyi Osundare, Elechi Amadi, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara, up until the contemporary writers, heteronormativity is the unquestioned standard. These writers explored themes of colonialism, traditional African values, Western influence, sociopolitical tension, and traditional gender roles, among others.³ However, they reinforced heteronormativity in their works. For instance, early Nigerian literature emerged as a powerful response to colonial representations of Africa in works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. The colonial texts positioned African men as inferior beings to white men and reduced women to passivity and domesticity. In reaction, Achebe and his contemporaries challenges the distorted image of Africa contained in colonial narratives, having "a firm belief in the 'truth' of the nation, a 'truth' rooted in the people, their culture, and traditions" (Garuba 2005, 59). The truth encapsulated in their works borders on the unique civilisation of African people, evident through their robust sociocultural practices, language, political structure and legal framework.

Writers like Achebe depicted Umuofia, a community in southeastern Nigeria, and their unique culture which was dismantled during colonial contact. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) portrays the clash between traditional Igbo culture and the colonising forces in the

³ Example include Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), *The Interpreters* (1965), Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) and *Jagua Nana* (1961), and Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

Umuofia community, southeast Nigeria. While representing the violent culture contact and reimagining Umuofia in the light of the colonial distortion, Achebe also reinforced the existing gender system. The society in Umuofia is heteronormative - Okonkwo, Achebe's protagonist, has three wives, is wealthy, and rises to prominence by following society's ideals of masculinity and success. These values include physical strength, hard work, male dominance, toxic masculinity, the pursuit of wealth and personal achievement, leadership, and authority. Okonkwo treats his wives as appendages to his towering masculinity, beats and acts aggressively towards them, reflecting the dominant view of women as inferior to men.

Florence Stratton argues that Achebe's work models the dominant view of gender where women are silenced, displaced from spaces of power and confined to the domestic sphere: "Achebe's women are, indeed, 'down on one knee', if not both, before their menfolk and they are regularly making an exit, no doubt 'in their proper order', from all the spaces in which power, economic or otherwise, is exercised" (Stratton 1994, 25). Similarly, Kwadwo Osei-Nyame argues that "Achebe's story depicts the organization of the Umuofia community and its control of authority within the specific context of a gendered ideology and politics" (Osei-Nyame 1999a, 152). Kwadwo Osei-Nyame further posits that In Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, "masculine traditions operate as forms of consciousness that act foremostly to legitimize specific ideals and values and to distribute and restrict authority within Umuofia" (Osei-Nyame 1999b, 150).

Achebe's depiction of Okonkwo, and other characters in the novel reflects the heteronormative idea of masculinity and femininity in precolonial Nigeria: in Umuofia, women are marginal and authority rests with heterosexual men. These norms regulate gender relation, endorsing male identities over others. Stratton further stresses that "Achebe himself generally avoids questioning the hierarchical nature of gender relations in Umuofia society, an indication of his attitude toward the status quo of male domination" (Stratton 1994, 28). Most importantly, Achebe did not pay attention to queerness in his work.

In the same vein, Wole Soyinka, like Achebe, models the heteronormative view of gender in his works. In *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), Soyinka creates two male characters who embody varied shades of heteronormative masculinity (Onuoha 2024). Soyinka's characters, Baroka and Lakunle, are heterosexual men who express a form of masculinity that conforms to the gender norms. Like Okonkwo, Baroka's masculinity is deeply rooted in heteronormativity; his polygamy exemplifies a dominant masculinity characterised by power, authority, and sexual control. He maintains his position as the "lion" through cunning and brute power. Baroka is threatened by Lakunle's identity and interest in Sidi, whom Lakunle is equally sexually attracted to. The tension between the men in the novel stems from their differing conceptualisations of heterosexual masculinity. The women in Soyinka novel are portrayed in stereotypes, lacking thoughtfulness and agency. Such portrayal aligns with the dominant understanding of gender in place.

Soyinka and Achebe's works feature narratives of gender that celebrate male dominance and heteronormativity. Other authors such as Elechi Amadi, Ben Okri, Festus Iyayi, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide, T. M Aluko, Amos Tutuola equally portray the heteronormative family unit. These works did not question nor challenge the heterosexual family structure or society, instead, they reinforce it by portraying heterosexual masculinity and marriage as integral to society. Early Nigeria literature by men thus consolidated the identity of the postcolonial Nigerian nation through reinforcing heteronormativity. Within the gender system they portray, men are the head, women are subordinate to men and queer desires are almost invisible. One major impact of this reinforcement of dominant gender is that it paved the way for the contestation of gender and identity in Nigerian literature. Although works such as *Things fall Apart* challenged colonial narrative and reinforced heteronormativity, it nonetheless laid the foundation for the questioning of gender roles in women's writing and later heteronormativity in queer narratives.

1.9 Opposition to Traditional Gender Roles in Early Women's Writing

Early Nigerian female writers were the first to question gender roles in Nigerian literature. Unlike in men's writing where heteronormativity and patriarchy was depicted as the norm,

Nigerian feminist writing challenged patriarchy and how it limits women. Writers such as Zulu Sofola, Flora Nwapa, Tess Onwueme, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, and Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo engage with the gender politics promoted by male writers, challenging the depiction of women in male authored works as well as critiquing the cultural, religious, political and social norms that relegate women to the background.

Issues such as gender inequality and patriarchy, marriage and women's autonomy, education and women's empowerment, financial independence and social mobility, traditional gender roles, child marriage, female solidarity and community were at the forefront. Flora Nwapa was one of the foremost female voices in Nigeria to challenge patriarchy. In *Efuru* (1966), and *One is Enough* (1992), Nwapa confronts the harsh realities women face under patriarchy. The eponymous novel chronicles the experiences of the protagonists, Efuru, as she navigates the patriarchal system (Sibanda 2014, 123). In *One is Enough*, the protagonist, Amaka, attempts to free herself from the traditional belief in marriage and motherhood (Osinubi 2018, 678). Nwapa's work reflects the tension between women's roles as mothers and their desire for independence. She creates characters who transcend the domestic sphere to become agents of change, though within the heteronormative framework.

In *Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta satires motherhood as a safe space for women through portraying the difficulties Nnuego, the main character, undergoes to meet societal expectations of her gender. After birthing the children that she so desperately desired, none of them were at her side as she dies on the roadside. The picture Emecheta paints is that motherhood does not always bring joy to women – it could be a source of a woman's sorrow or even death. In "African Feminism in Nigerian Context: A House of Affirmation and Denials", Issa Omotosho Garuba argues that the focus on the negative aspect of motherhood in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* is a testament to the fact that "marriage is secondary; that is, an optional institution for women... the tragic flaw of the protagonist lies in the fact that she is abandoned by both her sexist husband and her sons who should rather assume the symbols of her "joys of motherhood" (Garuba 2021, 117). *Second Class Citizen* examines the subordinated status of women in patriarchal society, and through Adah the protagonist, it

captures the preference for male children characteristic of the Nigerian cultures and disadvantaged position of the girl child (Oladipo and Ogbeide-Ihama 2018). Emecheta's work thus draws attention to the ways in which patriarchy dehumanises women and divests them of their individuality through emphasis on marriage and reproduction.

Like Nwapa and Emecheta, Alkali's writings, particularly *The Stillborn* (1984), explore the patriarchal pressures on women and the emotional and physical toll of restrictive gender roles. These writers challenged western and postcolonial writing that stereotyped women, defining them strictly within biological and domestic sphere. In "Models in the construction of female identity in Nigerian postcolonial literature", Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju & Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju argue that women were constructed in colonial and postcolonial literature solely as daughters, wives, and mothers, who must aspire to marriage and motherhood to the detriment of their individual needs and desires. Women were also negatively portrayed and cast in stereotypes in men's writing. In contestation of the norm, women writers questioned the negative, essentialist and stereotypical depiction of women in western and postcolonial male-dominated literature (Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju 2013), advocating the dismantling of a patriarchal system that limits women's freedom and agency.

Furthermore, localised feminist theories encourage the negotiation of women's position in society whilst emphasising the negative impact of patriarchy. Theories like Catherine Acholonu's Motherism, Mary Kolawole's Womanism, Akachi Adimora-Ezigo's Snail-sense Feminism, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, Chukwunye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism, and Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism articulate a model of female identity that is considered unique to African women. One feature that cuts across all the theories is the interrogation of patriarchy and the ways women can actively engage with it whilst maintaining gender complementarity, family, marriage, and motherhood as core to a definition of African femininity. Motherism celebrates motherhood as natural to women and essential for human and environmental survival (Ashaolu 2021), establishing women's primary role in child-rearing and family building. Snail-sense feminism stresses a strategic, non-confrontational approach towards achieving equality with men, advocating

gradual and harmonious progress rather than overtly antagonist methods of challenging the patriarchal system. It emphasises the maintenance of social cohesion and pursuit of gender equality in a way that prevents the alienation of men. Stiwanism, 'Social Transformation involving Women in Africa', calls for African women's inclusion in socio-political transformation, contending that African feminism is not "oppositional to men... [nor] about adversarial gender," and that women need not forsake their biological roles (Ogunyemi 2007, 549).

Ogunyemi's African Womanism underscores the importance of family, community, and collaboration between genders. It emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals within families and communities, promoting the idea that both men and women must work together for social transformation. Pivotal to African womanism therefore is the position of women as nurturing figures who contribute to the collective wellbeing of society. Like Snail-sense feminism, Nego feminism, advocates negotiation and compromise as strategies for navigating patriarchal systems (Garuba 2021, 108). Nego-feminism argues that negotiation with the patriarchal system is key to creating spaces of agency and empowerment for women. Nego-Feminism, which stands for "No-ego feminism" and "negotiation feminism" thus encourages women to adopt flexible strategies for confronting patriarchy whilst maintaining cultural continuity and social cohesion. These theories collectively highlight the need to engage with patriarchy in a distinct and culturally sensitive manner. Although feminist criticism focused on helping women extricate themselves from patriarchal constraints, the theories underscore the importance of family values, marriage, and motherhood in society.

Hence, although early women writers were also influenced by the prevailing heteronormative norms and focused on the struggles of heterosexual women to the exclusion of queer perspective (Osinubi 2018, 677; Azuah 2005), their works laid the foundation for the criticism of gender and sexual roles in society. Sjodin posits that "the challenge that the feminist movement poses for patriarchy, as well as the freedom movements of the 60s and the sexual emancipation they demanded, helped to pave the way for gay-culture and the lesbian movement. This, in its turn, calls into question heterosexuality as a norm" (Sjodin

2004, 264–65). Works that thematise queerness thus extend the criticism of patriarchy by questioning heteronormativity as a social order that has enabled the silencing of queer voices in literature, and in society.

1.10 Presentation of Queerness in Early Nigerian Literature

Queer identities have either been visibly absent or cast in stereotypes in Nigerian literature. Before Joe Golder, Soyinka's queer African American history professor, appeared in *The Interpreters* (1965), Nigerian literature lacked a visible queer presence. However, while queer identities remained absent in early Nigerian literature, society already deemed certain identities as 'queer' or 'out-of-place with-the-norm' because of how they viewed them in relation to dominant gender codes. For instance, society often ostracised and othered men and women who, despite being heterosexual, performed gender and sexuality differently from the socially prescribed way. For instance, individuals who exhibited behaviours attributed to the opposite gender were considered abnormal and less of their gender (Izugbara 2004, 11). A typical example is Unoka Okonkwo's father. In Achebe's *Umuofia*, men who fail to exhibit traits of dominant masculinity are described as 'women, effeminate, agbala or efulefu'. Osei-Nyame notes that Achebe's society is heteronormative and denigrates anything that deviates from its norm:

Umuofia's selective traditions and Okonkwo's masculinist assertions converge to marginalize the women, efulefus, osus, agbalas, and others within the community... the Igbo word agbala is not only another name for women, but it also refers to weak and lazy men such as Okonkwo's father, Unoka. In inventing its traditions and linking Okonkwo's feats with them, Umuofia's authoritative discourse consciously omits other representable values and ideals and Okonkwo's own exclusion from his worldview of, among other things, "gentleness" and "idleness," is a position that Umuofia's fabricated traditions sanction (Osei-Nyame 1999b, 151).

Unoka, Okonkwo's father in *Things Fall Apart*, for instance is considered a woman because he does not meet the masculine behaviour required of his culture - he is considered weak, lazy, and in debt in a culture that valorises hard work, male dominance and physical strength. These traits contradict Umuofia's understanding of a real man. So, when Okonkwo

comes of age, his key desire was to reinvent himself, dissociating himself from his father and everything he represents.

The earliest mention of same-sex sexuality in Nigerian literature is attributed to two sailors adrift at sea in J. P. Clark's *The Raft* (1964). When their conversation touched on sexual pleasure, reference was made to white men who do it to keep sane, as well as "Ado's and holy fathers who do it on their boys" (Umezurike 2021a, 130). Such portrait presented queerness as a foreign identity and an act of sexual violence since it is something that is "done on their boys" and not consensual. Also, knowing that the Holy fathers refer to priest from the Roman Catholic Church, which itself is introduced into Africa from Europe, the idea of queerness as a foreign identity is reinforced. Before the contemporary queer narratives, Joe Golder, the protagonist in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) is the most recognisable queer character in Nigerian literature. He is an African American professor of history, yet his sexuality excludes him from real men in society. He is also cast in a stereotype – he is a foreigner and is considered "lecherous and predatory" (Green-Simms 2016, 140), attributes which portray queerness as a harmful identity and a threat to society. Although sexual queerness was largely absent in early Nigerian literature, the rare instances where it was explored often reflected the prevailing bias. However, contemporary twenty-first century Nigeria literature has changed the landscape in the representation of queer sexuality in Nigerian literature.

1.11 The promotion of Queerness in Contemporary Nigerian literature

The representation and visibility of queer identities in literature experienced a significant shift in the works of contemporary twenty-first century Nigerian writers. These writers moved away from the traditional depiction of queerness as foreign and a negative identity to a positive, sympathetic humanisation of queerness as an important identity in postcolonial Nigeria. Like other identity-based movements, such as feminism, which began by rewriting the historical subordination of women in male-dominated literature, writers of queer subjectivity recognise the politics of representation and the need to rethink the position of queerness in Nigerian literature. They use their writing to challenge societal bias, and stereotypes and to question

the heteronormative norms responsible for the persistent rejection of queerness. Writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uzodinma Iweala, Jude Dibia, Chinelo Okparanta, Unoma Azuah, Lola Shoneyin, Chris Abani, Nnedi Okoroafor, Buki Paillon, Arinze Ifeakandu, Eloghosa Osunde are included in this movement, marking the departure from negative depiction of queerness to an affirming, sympathetic portrayal.

In the collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2004), Adichie features queer characters in three short stories – “On Monday of Last week”, “Jumping Monkey Hill” and “The Shivering”, giving them voice and space without judging their desires. Chris Abani also features a queer character, Elvis, in his novel, *The GraceLand*. Other writers like Lola Shoneyin and Promise Okekwe have also experimented with queerness. Lola Shoneyin’s collection of short stories “A Woman in her Season” (1997) and Promise Okekwe’s “Rebecca”, a chapter in her novel, *Women from the Crystal Deep* (2002) portray same sex desiring woman (Azuah 2005). Works such as Nnanna Ikpo’s *Fimi Sile: Heaven Gave it to me*, Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, Unoma Azuah fiction, *Edible Bones* (2013), her lesbian memoir, *Embracing my Shadows: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* (2020), and the collection of queer stories she edited, *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of LGBT Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender* (2016) are important contributions to Nigerian queer literature. Frank Edozien’s *Lives of Great Men*, the first gay memoir, Romeo Oriogun’s *Nomad* which won the Brunel International African Poetry prize, Arinze Ifeakandu’s collection of short stories, *God’s Children are little Broken Things* (2022), and Azeernarh Mohammed, Chitra Najarajan and Rafeat Aliyu’s *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria’s Queer Women Speak* (2018) - a collective memoir which documents the experience of 24 queer women and also won the Dylan Thomas Prize - are important additions to Nigerian queer literary oeuvre.

Furthermore, the establishment of an online magazine – *Brittle Paper* by Ainehi Egoro in 2017, has also been central to queer activism and visibility in Nigeria. Brittle Paper’s first collection, *We are Flowers* was published in 2017. It also published Chibuihe Obi’s widely read essay “We are Queer, we are Here” in the same year. In the essay, “We are Queer, we

are Here”, Chibuihe Obi, draws attention to the historical erasure of queer Nigerian subjectivity and the motivation for his own writing:

I’ve longed to find the queer body in Nigerian literature documented with dignity, with respect. To find the queer body portrayed as being wronged, as deserving justice. For to search for oneself in literature and not find it or to find it perpetually twisted and shunned and vilified is also violence. Nigeria’s literary scene has not been fair to the queer body. It has not been fair to the queer narrative. There are holes and gaps, gullies even, that no one is willing to close. Queer themes and issues are rarely incorporated into literary discourses (Chibuihe 2017).

Brittle paper celebrated its second anniversary in 2018 through a Facebook Discussion titled “Un-silencing Queer Nigeria: The Language of Emotional Truth,” which brought writers, editors, and founders of queer initiative to discuss queer issues in Nigeria. Brittle Paper’s second collection, *The Inward Gaze*, was published the same year. In direct response to the 2014 Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, Brittle paper published its first volume named *14: An Anthology of Queer Art*. 14 is a response to the 14-year jail term stipulated in the 2014 anti-gay bill. Nigerian writers of queer subjectivity try to change the negative representation and invisibility accorded to queerness in mainstream literature by humanising the queer characters in their works, and refusing to portray queer sexuality as a strange, unhealthy, abominable, and abnormal desire. In this way, they offer an alternative perspective to the dominant view of queer sexuality.

In the essay “Emergent queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century”, Green-Simms (2016) labels contemporary twenty-first century writing or ‘third generation Nigerian writing’ as ‘emergent’ in the same way that Raymond Williams, a cultural critic, imagines the word, arguing that ‘emergent’ refers to the “social or cultural forms that exist in relation to the dominant or hegemonic, forms that are excluded from the dominant and that resist incorporation into it” (Green-Simms 2016, 142). Green-Simms further argues that “What twenty-first century Nigerian writing often does, then, is to resist the dominant in ways not previously done before and to tell diverse stories about same-sex desire that are neither monothematic nor moralistic” (Green-Simms 2016, 142). The depiction of marginal

queer characters by contemporary writers such as Adichie and Abani has clearly helped to establish a queer presence in Nigerian literature, but Jude Dibia's portrait of Adrian revolutionised the image of queerness in Nigerian literature and can be read as a major break from the early Nigerian literature's engagement with queerness.

Nigerian queer literature validates and incorporates a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, challenging the gender system through depicting individuals whose identities diverge from heteronormative expectations. Such works encourage the embrace of nonconformity and living outside the normative framework in line with Triandis assertion that not all persons in a collectivist culture conform to the norms of such society. In a discussion of the traits of individuals living in both collectivist and individualistic cultures, Triandis warns that "it should not be assumed that everybody in individualistic cultures has all the characteristics of these cultures, and that everyone in collectivist cultures has the characteristics of these cultures" (Triandis 2001, 909). What Triandis is saying in effect is that although individuals may be a part of a society which organises culture in a way that dictates behaviour of people, such cultures also have within them identities that deviate from these norms. The expression of queer sexuality within Nigerian cultures represents how individuals challenge collective identity and negotiate identities outside existing gender and sexual norms. This is because, "from the individual's point of view, society is a large group of individuals who agree to necessary but undesirable social institutions – undesirable because they provide control and limit individual freedom" (Ma and Schoeneman 1997, 262). Queer identities desire to live free of societal constraints, and by so doing challenge heteronormativity by their nonconformity.

Nigerian queer narratives contest the idea that same sex sexuality should remain in the closet and sequestered to the cultural silence over sexuality. Rather, it brings the debate of sexuality to the open, challenging both the historical construction of Nigerian society as strictly heterosexual as well as recognising the right of queer identities to express themselves. The works selected for this study are therefore important additions to a burgeoning literary movement that aims to give queerness and queer identity a place by interrogating the way in

which heteronormativity has enabled the silencing and marginalisation of queer stories and disrupting that silence by centring queer experience. Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi's works give visibility to queerness, and challenges the norms that have enabled queer erasure in the past, broaching the silence around the subject of queerness and queer invisibility, and transforming the silence "into a polyphony" (Green-Simms 2016, 141).

1.12 Summary and Implications

This chapter has critically delineated the foundational structures of heteronormativity, providing the framework for analysing its disruption in Nigerian queer narratives. It has shown how the collectivist values that prioritise group expectations over individual aspirations, the privileging of heterosexuality, and the emphasis on marriage and reproduction sustain its dominance, reinforced by patriarchy and patrilineality. Despite widespread denial, evidence affirms the presence of queerness in Nigeria, even though it remains socially marginalised. The chapter further traced the dominance of heteronormativity in Nigerian literature, challenges of gender norms in early women's writing and its increasing contestation in queer literature. By mapping the shift from feminist to queer narratives, this chapter underscores the ongoing rethinking of gender and sexual norms. The chapters that follow examine how the selected texts resist heteronormativity, tracing how their characters negotiate identity and imagine alternative ways of being Nigerian.

Chapter Two: Breaking the Silence: Writing Queerness and confronting the idea of Normativity in Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how Dibia's portrayal of the first recognisable queer male protagonist and the open exploration of his sexuality dismantles the silence that has surrounded the concept of queerness in Nigerian literature. Published in 2005, shortly before the Nigerian senate's introduction of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* is a landmark novel that opened the conversation about the reality of queer people in Nigeria and how heteronormative expectations affect their lives. It tells the story of Adrian, formerly Ebele Njoko, a married but closeted queer man as he navigates the exposure of his sexuality in the urban city of Lagos, Nigeria, where he works with DialPlus, a telecommunication company. Adrian is outed by Tayo Onasanga, a vindictive colleague, who was indicted in a criminal investigation into their organisation. Tayo's actions cause Adrian's life to spiral downward - he loses his job, marriage, career, and social status. As Adrian's marriage, job, and family relationships collapse, he is forced to confront the consequences of being queer within a society that celebrates heteronormativity and stigmatises queerness. The story largely focuses on Adrian's navigation of the workplace, religious, socio-cultural, and legal minefields, moving between current events happening in Adrian's life and memories of his childhood. *Walking with Shadows* dramatizes the cost of queer visibility in Nigeria but most importantly, it broached the almost impossible discussion about the existence of queer people in Nigeria by exploring Adrian's sexuality, and his search for acceptance and inclusion in the heteronormative Nigerian state.

Jude Dibia hails from Delta State in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria but was born in Lagos on 5 January 1975. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree (B.A) in Modern European Languages (German) from the University of Ibadan. Dibia's second novel, *unbridled* (2007), examines gender, patriarchy, and incest, winning the 2007 Ken Saro Wiwa prize for prose in Nigeria. *Blackbird* (2011), Dibia's third novel, explores themes of romance,

revenge, and justice. Dibia co-edited the queer nonfiction anthology; *Love Offers No Safety* in 2023. The anthology chronicles stories of queer men in Nigeria struggling with acceptance. Following the signing of the SSMPA in 2014, Dibia moved to Sweden where he works as a writer-in-residence at Malmo city of Refuge under the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) for fear of being attacked for his novel. In the sections that follow, I will examine how *Walking with Shadows* challenges heteronormativity through the reimagination of the queer subject in literature and the ways in which the protagonist asserts his identity despite the existing and repressing heteronormative culture.

2.2 Becoming Adrian: Suppressing the Shadows

Walking with Shadows critiques the ways in which heteropatriarchal structures like religion and family perpetuate queer erasure. Dibia's novel illustrates that the Nigerian society uses religion and traditional ideas about gender to repress queer desire, making queer people to feel ashamed of their sexuality which forces them to live a double life. Throughout his life, Adrian struggles to make his family and society to accept him because living as a queer subject in Nigeria comes with self-denial and a constant rejection of one's identity hence Dibia carefully narrates Adrian's struggle with his identity and the pressure to conform to heteronormativity. Dibia uses the idea of a 'shadow' to depict Adrian's entanglement with his sexuality despite his attempt to repress it. Adrian's self-denial and desire to conform, as witnessed in the prologue, does not happen in a vacuum; it arises from the emphasis on heteronormativity in society. Adrian was always aware of his sexuality since he was seven years old but represses it due to the society's perception of queerness and his family's insistence on rigid gender roles: "He is gay. He knew this ever since he started having sexual urges as a child. He knew he was different from his brothers and other boys" (Dibia 2011, 24). This awareness is demonstrated when he shares a bath with Ekene who comes to pass the night with his family and "as they sponged each other laughing and squealing, he felt a closeness to Ekene that was not entirely platonic" (Dibia 2011, 24). Also, when Adrian and his family are driving downtown for the baptism, Adrian is attracted to the young boy among the vendors mobbing their window for attention. He is "drawn to the fine line of his silhouette

as he shoves the other sellers aside to be ahead of the pack” (Dibia 2011, 15). Furthermore, Adrian’s desire for intimacy with Obinna, Chiedu’s friend, is emphasised to highlight the fact that his sexuality is not circumstantial but an intricate part of him.

However, Adrian learns early that he needs to conceal this desire and live in the shadows. His attempt to repress his sexuality is aptly captured at the opening scene, in the prologue, when he is set to undergo a baptism with hundreds of other congregants. His father drives him to the venue and while they are on the way, Adrian thinks about his queerness and how the baptism will ensure he buries his ‘old self’ which is associated with his sexuality and adopts a new identity which will be acceptable in society. Though known as Ebele Njoko, he is expected to renounce his given name and adopt a new identity. He tells himself:

Ebele was going to die today.

He knew it. He was simply going to let it happen so that Adrian could be born.

He only hoped it would be painless.

It should be painless; after all he was surrounded by hundreds of black angels in gleaming white robes, just like him, waiting to be reborn though most of them didn’t know it yet. This was a day for rebirths (Dibia 2011, 13).

The pastor, a burly man, and two of his younger colleagues conduct the baptism to exorcise those submitting for baptism of every form of evil inherent in them. The pastor’s methodology and mission are described: “His huge heavy left hand pressed on the submerged chest while the Bible wielding right was raised up in celestial suspension as he screamed out prayers and banished all the evil that may have once possessed the new child of God” (Dibia 2011, 13). Here, Ebele, which represents the protagonist’s queer self must ‘die’ to allow Adrian, his socially acceptable identity to ‘be born’. Ebele is a constant reminder of an identity that will alienate him in society. As a result, this spiritual exercise, which is often celebrated in Christianity as an act of redemption, is depicted as a form of sacrifice characterised by loss and forced assimilation. Ebele must undergo self-erasure and take on the identity of Adrian which would provide the mask he needs to live a ‘normal’ life. The concept of his rebirth thus serves as a violent suppression of queer sexuality, masked as spiritual purification.

In another instance, Dibia graphically illustrates how religious doctrines and religious figures are instrumental to queer erasure and dehumanisation. After the disclosure of Adrian's sexuality to his family, Chiedu, Adrian's elder brother, recommends that Adrian seek spiritual cleansing as a cure to his sexuality, echoing the lived experiences of queer identities who are often made to go through deliverance to heal their queerness. Chiedu arranges with Pastor Matthew, Chiedu's pastor, to organise a deliverance session for Adrian. The prayers centre on banishing the devil from Adrian's heart and keeping the body holy as God's temple: "banish the devil from your heart... and accept God in your life ... the flesh is the Lord's temple. Keep it clean and holy" (Dibia 2011, 175-6). The deliverance session ends traumatically for Adrian as he is savagely beaten by the pastor and his associates; however, he is rescued by his brother, Chika, who feels a sort of sympathy and understanding for Adrian.

Raised Catholic in southern Nigeria, where Christianity is prevalent, Dibia's writing challenges the religion's views on queerness. Christianity teaches that the body is the temple of God which must be kept 'holy' through living within the divinely accepted sexual order. So, queerness is viewed as a form of demon possession and a departure from the divine design for human sexuality. It portrays queerness as a sinful desire, a disease and a spiritual condition that needs to be cured. Religion in this novel becomes an institution of control and dehumanisation, exposing how Christianity in Nigeria is complicit in queer erasure. Naomi Richman's essay, "Homosexuality, Created Bodies, Queer Fantasies in a Nigerian Deliverance Church," provides a detailed analysis of the theological basis for the practice of deliverance prayers used to attempt to change the sexualities of queer people. Citing Mountain of Fire (MFM), a church that preaches deliverance and prosperity sermons in Nigeria, Richman explains that Pentecostal churches in Nigeria conduct deliverance sessions for queer subjects because of the theological framing of the human body as a site of fierce spiritual warfare between God and the devil. God and the devil are depicted as being in perpetual conflict for the control of the human body and soul and any deviation from the original use of the body is interpreted as a handiwork of the devil. Richman's work provides

significant insight into the theoretical basis of deliverance ministries, a bedrock of Nigerian Pentecostalism:

The Christian body itself is imagined as a site of spiritual warfare where demons wrestle with the Holy Spirit for control of the person. As such, it becomes techniques that are designed to deliver the subject from evil. Deliverance is in fact the name given to spiritual practice designed specifically to empty the individual self of negative forces” (Richman 2021, 254).

Dibia uses Adrian's experience to expose religion's complicity in the suppression and dehumanisation of queerness. In the two instances where Adrian encounters religious figures, he is left with a near-death experience. During the baptism - while being submerged in water - Adrian “became panic-stricken” (Dibia 2011, 16), “felt himself truly fading away” (Dibia 2011,17) and experiences a kind of “drowning sensation” (Dibia 2011, 17). Similarly, as the pastor whips him during deliverance, “Adrian sensed himself drifting out of consciousness...other times he drifted off with no sense of coherence” (Dibia 2011, 175). Jonny Marcell Wilkins argues that “the Pastor figure in *Walking with Shadows* represents societal piety in the sense that he is an agent of a belief that is accepted with unthinking reverence. In short, the pastor is a zealot. As such, he is an agent of gender policing in Adrian’s community” (Wilkins, 2018, 165). Wilkins further states that “Zealotry is perfidious because it is a tool that can be used in the service of political hegemony. Dibia constructs the character of Adrian Ebele Njoko to critique this connection to social piety and political hegemony” (Wilkins 2018, 167). Chiedu, Adrian’s elder brother who arranges Adrian’s deliverance, is also portrayed as an extension of Christian fanaticism or zealotry. Dibia thus uses the deliverance scene, and the violence enacted on Adrian because of his sexuality to subvert the idea that queerness is a form of violence against society. Instead, he shows that what is most shocking is the violence of the Church. In other words, the Christian doctrine constructs queerness as a scandal – a shameful identity, a contamination of the body, and a moral failure. So, by focusing on the violence done to Adrian, Dibia repositions the scandalous from Adrian’s sexuality to the brutality of religious authority.

Dibia also reveals the family as the key unit and a site for the enforcement of normativity - where heteronormativity takes root and queerness is punished. The expectations of masculinity, heterosexuality and religious obedience are introduced in the home, and Dibia exposes how the family unit serves as an agent of moral surveillance: constantly watching, correcting and disciplining. While the prologue immediately introduces religious complicity to queer erasure, Adrian's denial of his identity does not begin in the church; it is incubated in the home, where his assumed sexual alterity is a source of rejection and violence. Adrian learns early in his childhood that gender deviation, whether in the way he speaks, talks, dresses or plays is met with ridicule and punishment. Adrian's father does not fully accept him as his son because he behaves differently from Chika and Chiedu, embodying the kind of masculinity that threatens heteropatriarchy where masculinity is associated with sexual assertiveness, aggression, non-pettiness with physical looks, lack of emotion and physical strength among others. Unlike his brothers, Adrian is fearful, cries a lot and loves feminine games - "ringa-ringa roses/A pocket full of posies" (Dibia 2011, 13). This game excites him - "the running around in circles, singing and chasing his shadow. But he had been told that he was not supposed to like it. It was not a manly game, and he was often laughed at when he played with the girls" (Dibia 2011, 15). He is constantly expected to act like a man and warned against girlish tendencies; his preferences are framed within a heteropatriarchal context as feminine behaviours that boys must reject to achieve masculinity.

Adrian's father behaves critically different towards him, loving his other sons and scapegoating Adrian when something goes wrong at home because their understanding of gender is based on heteropatriarchal ideals. So: "they loved him to some degree, he knew that much, but not like Chiedu who was his mother's favourite or Chika who was his father's champion...Adrian was the middle child, who was always ill and was extremely shy as well" (Dibia 2011, 45-6). Being queer, Adrian experiences family alienation and loneliness because unlike his brothers, he "was not the ideal son" (Dibia 2011, 180). His life is filled with struggles and internal conflict. To conform, Adrian represses his desires and even makes up stories of imaginary girlfriends to feed his family's expectations and eventually forms a relationship with

Ada, with whom he spends six years in marriage. Adrian's journey towards embracing heteronormativity thus involves marrying Ada and raising a daughter, Ego. However, this move does not prevent him from the repercussions of being sexually different. Dibia shows how conforming to heteronormativity does not offer queer people the security they desire nor obliterate the stigma and violence attached to queerness.

In an interview, Dibia describes the difficulty of being queer in Nigeria, explaining that society gives queer people few choices but to continuously deny who they are in exchange for respectability, protection, and acceptance:

Being gay in Nigeria is so funny because you cannot admit to it. You have to pass as something else and create a different persona and live that persona. And, sometimes for some people, they end up being married and they have families, and they try to suppress who they are. But there is a lot of depression and struggles there (Schlein 2014).

The comment of Adrian's mother when she visits him after his sexuality is exposed and after his brutalisation during deliverance is revelatory of the family as a site of control and queer suppression. Amid tears, she tells Adrian: "we didn't bring any of you up like this", she cries, we instilled in you all strong Christian values. What do you want people to think about our family?... We tried to harden you when we noticed you were weak ... We did everything to make you normal" (Dibia 2011, 182-3). Her emotion reveals how society places the burden of gender socialisation on the family but also how the family is inevitably unsuccessful in policing gender – while Adrian's family ensured he turns out heterosexual; his sexuality continue to disrupt the life that society expects him to live. Similarly, the story of Nkechi, a character who is enraged at her son for showing gender nonconformity, provides another example of the home as a site of gender surveillance. Like Adrian, Junior, Nkechi's son, is reminded that "boys don't play with dolls" (Dibia 2011, 99). Nkechi is distraught at the news of Adrian's sexuality and is angry that her son finds girls' toys attractive and is worried about her son turning out queer like Adrian. As Kamdi, Nkechi's daughter draws her attention

to her son's behaviour, her comment reflects society's belief about the origin and signs of queerness:

Something in Kamdi's comment triggers an alarm in Nkechi, she had never taken much notice of this prior to now, but it is now quite clear. Her son is always playing with her sister's doll even though he had his own toys and football. "He didn't have much interest in his toys and is usually too quiet and withdrawn. Was this how it all began? Was this how, if left unchecked her son could become an Adrian?" (Dibia 2011, 99).

In panic, Nkechi expresses her concern to her husband:

"Have you ever wondered about how many homosexuals there are out there? If we as parents don't monitor our children and guide them in the right path, they could make the wrong choices later in life" (Dibia 2011, 101).

Although Adrian temporarily suppresses his sexuality to embrace heterosexuality, the novel seems to suggest that the family unit cannot prevent the emergence and expression of queer identity. For instance, as Adrian is preparing to board a flight to London to escape the hostility that the knowledge of his sexuality has engendered, he encounters a little boy and his mother, and the boy is "humming a tune that was familiar to him. Ringa-Ring-Roses, A-pocket-full-of-Roses" (Dibia 2011, 204). The boy's preference for the girly games immediately identifies him as gender nonconforming and the fact that he is with his mother underscores the fact that he belongs to a heteronormative family which would never accept him. However, Dibia's reference to the boy shows that although queer people are dehumanised and that queer identity is stigmatised, queer sexuality would continue to be a part of human sexuality. for instance, while Adrian is moving away from a society that suppresses queerness, more queer subjects are spouting like tiny seeds. Dibia thus interrogates how heteronormativity suppresses queer people, forcing them to repress their identity as well as run to queer-friendly countries to escape violence. To counter this, Dibia allows Adrian to affirm and embrace his queerness as an act of defiance to break queer invisibility.

2.3 Embracing the Shadows – Self-acceptance and Reclamation of identity

Dibia sets the conflict in the novel as the tension between living under the heteronormative mask and openly owning one's identity in a moment of personal crisis. Dibia uses Adrian's

story to showcase the devastating effects of societal bias toward queer sexuality, demonstrating its capacity to disrupt queer lives. Also, it reveals how embracing one's shadows is a liberating and self-affirming act in a context where queer identities are constantly struggling for acceptance. *Walking with Shadows* shows Adrian's journey to self-acceptance as he confronts the conflict between his identity and societal pressures to conform to heterosexuality because "he had been afraid to accept himself" (Dibia 2011, 51).

At the beginning of the novel, Adrian seeks to conform to heterosexuality – he is married to a woman, has a daughter, Ego, and works with a multinational company; in short, he lives within the expectations of society. However, his life is filled with anxiety, guilt, self-loathing and a sense of otherness over the repression of his sexuality. Through monologues and flashbacks, Dibia unravels the disconnect which Adrian experiences due to society's hostility towards his sexuality. At the point that the novel begins, Adrian is already torn between denying his sexuality to keep his marriage or admit it and break the thirty-six years of silence which society had forced him to endure due to the emphasis on heteronormativity. The outing of Adrian's sexuality plunges him into an existential crisis – he is abandoned by his wife, rejected by his family and ostracised at workplace. Being forced to confront the truth about his identity, Adrian begins a journey towards self-acceptance and a renegotiation of societal attitudes and moral standards.

As Tayo reveals Adrian's sexuality to his wife and family, the reader follows Adrian from childhood to the present moment of his life as he navigates acceptance. Although Adrian is queer, and has had queer relationships, he had prioritised social accommodation over his identity:

it was all about acceptance after all. It always had been for him ... He wanted to fit in and not have people whispering about him behind his back, making assumptions. He also didn't want to be pitied by anyone. He had his fill of rejection as a child, and of not being the perfect son or brother as expected of him" (Dibia 2011, 45, 77).

So, to reconnect to his sexuality, Adrian must undergo personal introspection by revisiting his past and retrieving the identity he had once buried in the shadows and silenced, in the search for Nigerian "normativity".

The reader learns that Adrian has had intimate relationships with men; the last before his marriage to Ada, being Antonio, a Spanish national, whom he meets when his company organised an end-of-the year event. Adrian and Antonio began a sizzling romance, as he “had been happiest with him” (Dibia 2011, 194). But their relationship did not last, as Antonio cheats on Adrian, an act which led to their breakup. Adrian would later marry Ada to repress his sexuality, conform to societal expectations and build a ‘normal’, secure life:

He had tried to erase from his memory his relationship with Antonio and had tried to pretend that he could lead what many termed a normal life with a wife, and the false sense of security it offered. But deep inside he knew that the only person he was fooling was himself. He had found some peace with Ada and Ego, but there had always been the nagging feeling that something in his life remained incomplete (Dibia 2011, 199).

In this excerpt Dibia makes a damning assertion – that queer people involved in heterosexual relationships are living in delusion because embracing heterosexuality will never rid them of their sexuality, which is depicted as their genuine sexual identity. The peace which Adrian finds in his six-year marriage to Ada was ephemeral, false and a mask of a deeper search for acceptance, echoing Brenna Munro’s assertion that Adrian’s story could be read “as a reflection on the difficult negotiations stigmatized people make with respectability” (Munro, 2016, 133). The greater part of the novel shows Adrian’s search for acceptance, first with himself and later with his family and society. To achieve this, Adrian first needs to deconstruct society’s pathological framing of queerness by embracing it as an identity rather than a disease.

The first step that Adrian takes after he is outed is to visit his queer friends in an act of reconnection, and perhaps reclamation. Abdul and Femi had lived together as a couple for ten years and Adrian seeks advice from them on how to navigate his identity. Dibia depicts Abdul and Femi as radical characters who refuse to internalise society’s construction of queerness nor assimilate into the heterosexual frame. They serve as a model of queer resistance because, although they do not openly parade themselves as queer lovers, “Abdul and Femi seem to possess what Adrian thought impossible: respectability without

heterosexual marriage”(Green-Simms 2016, 149). Abdul teaches Adrian self-love because embracing his identity is the only way he can finally negotiate acceptance with family and society. Abdul advises Adrian that accepting his identity is the true path to freedom and the reader learns how Abdul had disclosed his identity to his family years back and now lives with Femi, his partner, in Lagos. He tells Adrian how he navigates societal disapproval of his identity: “I love myself and my life, and I love Femi. This is all that matters” (Dibia 2011, 29). To Abdul, self-acceptance will compel family members and the society to recognise and accept Adrian’s sexuality. He tells Adrian: “I can’t tell you what to do. But you must be true to yourself, for once in your life. If you can only think of what the worst thing is that can happen, then you will be fine. Your family will learn to love you for who you are, and life will go on” (Dibia 2011, 33).

Through Abdul and Femi, Dibia illustrates the embrace of one’s identity as a model of resistance to social oppression. Their refusal to bend under the weight of heteronormativity is telling and offer an alternative path for Adrian. Also, their visibility contradicts the belief that queerness is imported, showing instead that it is an identity that is silenced yet present in society. Adrian’s discussion with Abdul becomes a turning point for him as he first deals with his own internal contradiction and later comes out to his family.

After Adrian’s family learns of his sexuality, he is relieved that the burden of exposure has been taken away “he could not analyse their reaction, but sharing this intimate part of his life with his brother made him feel better. He had been forced to carry the truth about himself alone for thirty-six years. Suddenly he felt as if a huge weight had evaporated. This must be that inner peace that Abdul had alluded to” (Dibia 2011, 50). Although his marriage with Ada collapses and his parents and elder brother, Chiedu, disapprove of his queerness, Dibia renders their position as irrelevant and secondary to Adrian’s reclamation of his identity.

Towards the end of the novel and as he departs to London to start a new life, he is no longer the miserable man running away from his shadows and seeking acceptance in all the places that matter: “He is no longer that scared lonely child who did not understand why his father would not throw him up in the air and catch him. He no longer wondered why he could

never enjoy the games his brothers played. He knew who he was, and he found the acceptance he has once craved within himself” (Dibia 2011, 204). Instead, Adrian now boldly reasserts the identity he previously denounced, telling a uniformed lady at the international airport to address him by his former name, Ebele Njoko. This is because: “That was his name. It was who he was... he has allowed Ebele to lie dormant for far too long, and now it was like a resurrection, being addressed as Ebele by everyone once again” (Dibia 2011, 201). Here, Dibia inverts the baptism scene at the beginning of the novel and appropriates the Christian language of resurrection to articulate what has happened to Adrian. The baptism scene, which is framed as an act of spiritual salvation, is depicted as an act of self-erasure because Adrian buries his old self (Ebele) to embrace a new identity. However, Dibia shows that the ‘resurrection’ of the name at the end of the novel is the true act of redemption – it means the revival of the very self that Christianity tries to suppress. In a way, the second rebirth corrects the first.

Adrian’s identity therefore develops through confidence and the willingness to question societal norms. Instead of continuing the search for validation from family and friends, Adrian validates himself by admitting and embracing queer identity which he tried so much to repress. Ebele symbolises his queer identity, the one he rejects at the beginning, and reclaiming it at the end becomes a way of undoing the heteronormative rejection of his identity.

2.4 Negotiating Stigma and Charting Compassion and Tolerance of Queerness

Peter Uchechukwu Umezurike contends that “for any individual to identify with another, they first must be open to taking in the very idea and presence of otherness” (Umezurike 2021, 21). Dibia uses minor characters like Ada, Chika, Iheoma, and Abdul to shape the emotional depth of the novel and negotiate compassion and tolerance. Dibia uses Chika and Ada to show how the family can support and show compassion, solidarity and tolerance towards queer family members. Iheoma and Abdul offer ways of negotiating stigma and shame associated with one’s identity.

After Adrian's outing, Ada and Chika respond with compassion and support, underscoring the family's role in helping queer individuals come to terms with their identity; since the home is a key site of gender surveillance, tolerance and acceptance begin from the homefront. Ada internalises societal gender norms, and as a wife and mother, embodies traditional womanhood; her marriage to Adrian reinforcing ideals of success, stability, and morality. However, Adrian's outing shatters this illusion, and her reaction – anger, shock, confusion, betrayal, and fear - initially reflects not just personal hurt but also society's response towards queerness. Ada expresses a deep concern about her own social identity once Adrian's queerness becomes public because her status is not only determined by her gender but also tied to the status of her husband. She continuously worries about her HIV status, what people will say, how her family will be treated afterwards, and how the exposure of her husband's sexuality could negatively affect her in society. This is because as a spouse to a queer man, she must deal with the stigma associated with his queerness as well as the emotional devastation of learning that a once perfect marriage is a sham. She is acutely worried about "what people are thinking and saying" (Dibia 2011, 104). Shame and fear are key issues she must negotiate as she is afraid of "becoming one of the new outcasts, women rejected by society and scorned through no fault of theirs. And her daughter would have to also bear the stigma and the mocking of other children. These were the real issues Ada has to come to terms with" (Dibia 2011, 104). Ada thus processes her personal loss, betrayal, and disappointment with Adrian's actions. Through Ada's pain, Dibia articulates the human cost of secrecy and the damage caused by the rigid gender norms which forces people like Adrian to live a lie. While Ada's anxiety is real and reflects her current state of mind, it is an emotion that is grounded in the internalisation of society's perception of queerness. The exposure of Adrian's sexuality however offers a way for Ada to reassess her assumptions about queerness and her wider morality:

Adrian was a Nigerian, an African man. Being gay was certainly not in African culture. The whole idea was so foreign, so unnatural. But while everyone knew it existed; the probability it would be so close to home was one she would never have imagined. There has been people in school she

suspected of being gay, and she had always believed she was tolerant of their lifestyle and sexual choices. She could hardly call herself tolerant now! Now that it was her reality (Dibia 2011, 36).

Despite expressing negative attitude towards queerness, Ada is not portrayed as a static character – she navigates her hurt and begins to probe societal assumptions that shaped her attitudes to queerness. Ada's transformation happens out of three encounters. First, she meets other women married to queer men, as well as a lesbian woman during a meeting at Carol Obosi's house. In the meeting, she learns of women living with queer men and women negotiating their same-sex sexuality within a heterosexual mask. Carol is married to a former major general in the army, Hajiya's husband is a special adviser to the minister of petroleum and Temi's husband is a high-ranking judge. They all know about their husbands' sexuality but choose to remain with them for many reasons. For instance, Temi is a queer woman and marries her husband Bayo, who is also queer, to hide her sexuality. She informs Ada: "I am not into men, at all. I like women myself and by marrying Bayo, who knows of my preference. I am free to have my lovers while he has his. I don't care much for children" (Dibia 2011, 130).

After the meeting, Ada becomes more self-aware and introspective: "it seemed scales had been scraped from her eyes. It was like she began to see things in their true, stark colours: not simply black or white, but all the grey as well... she took notice of the little things she normally took for granted; the way people dressed, spoke and carried themselves suddenly seemed so western and sexualised" (Dibia 2011, 133). Ada is amazed because "the world had indeed evolved around her and she had missed it all" (Dibia 2011, 133). The discovery of a group of women who are married to gay men like her brings a sense of relief to her. Further, the services she provides to her customers as an interior designer who shops from major countries of the world also offers her an opportunity to reassess how globalisation is shaping culture and "the irony of the services she provided and the cultural values she wanted so desperately to hold on to... while embracing the aesthetics of these places, she was not willing to adopt the parts of the culture that challenged that which she held dear as traditional African values" (Dibia 2011, 135). Finally, Ada's introspection is completed after

she has a conversation with Nkechi who fears her son might turn out queer. Nkechi's tells Ada she would not love her son less if he turns out queer and this becomes a defining moment for Ada who afterwards chooses to support her husband as he navigates his queerness. These moments of encounter shape Ada's later reaction to Adrian's sexuality, and her gradual change is grounded in empathy and love.

The way Ada and Adrian's bond overcomes shame, stigma and fear is important to the social meaning of the novel. Although Ada and Adrian divorce, their bond continues to thrive and Ada promises to raise Ego, their child, to understand, love and accept Adrian as her father, and Adrian's identity. Whilst worried about how Ego will perceive his sexuality when she grows up, Ada tells Adrian: "Then we tell her the truth. I will make sure she is brought up with love and tolerance, so she doesn't discriminate against people irrespective of their beliefs and lifestyle" (Dibia 2011, 190). Rather than reinforcing societal biases, Ada begins to see Adrian as a victim of societal expectations, a perspective which humanises Adrian and transforms Ada from a judgmental and traumatised character to a loving, supportive and compassionate spouse. Through Ada, Dibia creates a character who can rethink her assumptions about sexual taboos and boundaries. Umezurike argues that "her transformation midway through the story is significant because it buttresses how familial support, even from a spouse, is essential to queer flourishing" (Umezurike 2021, 149). Dibia uses Ada's introspective and eventual acceptance of Adrian's truth to engage with Nigerian society, offering a more nuanced, evolving perspective - one that transcends judgement and gestures towards love and tolerance. Green-Simms avers that "What Dibia seems to be doing with the character of Ada is giving the average Nigerian a character with whom to identify in order to alleviate some of the fears and concerns they may have about an issue they know of mostly through stereotypes" (Green-Simms 2016, 150).

Furthermore, Dibia explores how other minor characters in the novel like Iheoma, Abdul and Femi resist heteronormative expectations, serving as a reference point for Ada and Adrian. Iheoma is a single mother and is presented as a character who transcends societal stigma by choosing to live on her own terms. In some Nigerian cultures, having a

child out of wedlock is not unacceptable, and is stigmatised particularly because premarital sex is considered immoral, like adultery. So, when a child is produced out of such relationship, it not only exposes the woman and her family to scorn, it also de-legitimises the identity of the child. Such atmosphere creates a sense of alienation and isolation for the stigmatised individual. However, in this novel, Iheoma is assertive and self-aware and refuses to fit into the mould prescribed by the society but rather takes responsibility for her action. Ada describes her as an emancipated woman who has managed to break social limitation, humiliation, and the repugnance of her family. Ada therefore considers her a character whose resilience and strength is unparalleled and useful in her present crisis. This is because unlike most unmarried women who are forced to marry the father of their unborn babies, Iheoma “had never married the father of her child and had braved the stigma of being looked upon as a loose woman. She has even survived the disapproval of her family” (Dibia 2011, 43). When Ada inquired how she had managed the negativity surrounding her identity as a single mother, Iheoma expresses a strong personal conviction that defines her character.

Let me tell you a bit about why I never married Osita's father. He didn't know what he wanted, and he let his family and friends dictate his life, he may have loved me, but not enough to ask me to be his wife. He never knew I was pregnant when I left him and that was the whole point. I was not going to trap him with a baby, and because I knew being pregnant is not a good enough reason to get married (Dibia 2011, 43).

So, in a society where premarital sex and single motherhood is criticised and stigmatised, Iheoma affirms her individuality and chooses a different path she considers more authentic and fulfilling. She neither shies away from her mistakes nor allows society to decide her actions: “the way she chose to live her life was very non-conformist, an expression still unwelcome in their society” (Dibia 2011, 134). For her, finding happiness and fulfilment is paramount. Thus, Iheoma advises Ada to sort her marriage. Through Iheoma, Dibia deals with social stigma, a problem which appears to be Ada and Adrian's biggest concern. Dibia empowers Iheoma with her own voice amidst differing and discriminatory opinions thus re-imagining the possibilities for Ada too. This is clear considering Ada's dramatic change over

the course of the novel - she transforms from an angry and unsympathetic character to an understanding and supportive spouse.

In addition, while society chooses to judge and condemn Adrian, Abdul and Femi are not judgmental. They are the first to show solidarity towards Adrian's sexuality, being queer themselves. When Adrian meets them after he is outed, he expects to be vilified for abandoning them, but Abdul and Femi rather show understanding and support. So, having expected and "dreaded the familiar *"I told you so"* (Dibia 2011, 31) attitude, Adrian is shocked to observe that Abdul neither exhibited any "sign of triumph nor accusation" (Dibia 2011, 31). Rather, he demonstrates "only love and understanding" (Dibia 2011, 31). Abdul and Femi understand how society views them, yet they choose to live their lives beyond society's normative boundaries. By showing Adrian love and understanding, Dibia argues that a society can only build a just and tolerant society through love and understanding. So, while Abdul and Femi show Adrian how to be queer in a heteropatriarchal society, Iheoma models an alternative way forward for Ada. This echoes Green-Simms' assertion that "what makes *Walking with Shadows* a much more complex novel is the way in which the minor characters challenge Adrian's assumptions about what it means to be gay both in Nigeria and in the West and challenge the reader's assumptions about African homophobia" (Dibia 2016, 148).

In the same vein, Dibia uses Chika's response to Adrian's queerness to mirror how family support might be the first step towards societal acceptance of queerness. Umezurike posits that "Dibia presents Chika as a figure of solidarity, offering him introspective moments to contemplate questions about alterity and solidarity" (Umezurike 2021, 145). Chika serves as a transitional figure, representing a shift in generational mindsets. He is first confused by the revelation of Adrian's sexuality, however his eventual receptivity to Adrian's queerness signals the possibility of change. Chiedu and Adrian's parents are agitated and traumatised by the disclosure of his sexuality, and their reaction symbolises traditional attitudes to queerness, which include seeking religious interventions and expressing anger and rejection. But Chika reacts differently— he shows love towards Adrian without trying to judge him nor fully understanding his identity: "truthfully, I wish you were not gay because I don't understand

how you can be. I don't know what went wrong. But that's just my saying. It doesn't mean I will not stand by you and support you if this really is who you are" (Dibia 2011, 178-9). Chika would profess his unconditional love to Adrian. Dibia makes Chika's promise to love Adrian unconditionally and the response of Abdul and Femi crucial to Adrian's journey, shaping his experience:

In his heart he had an overwhelming feeling of joy and happiness and yet he could not stop the tears from coming. All his life he had waited for a moment like this, when someone from his family would say those very words to him. And with Chika saying them, Adrian did feel lighter in his heart. He knew then that he would be all right and that it didn't matter what anyone thought about him, what he would cherish and keep was the knowledge that in this world of hate, prejudice and pain there were still people who loved him. People like his good friends Abdul, Femi ... people like his brother Chika (Dibia 2011, 185).

Chika's support after finding out about Adrian's sexuality contradicts the reactions from other family members, signalling a progressive and affirming approach to queerness. His empathy, openness and refusal to judge Adrian through his sexuality offer a model of acceptance rooted in familiar understanding and compassion and imaginatively illustrates how family members of queer people can help dismantle bias against queerness. His unwavering support creates a safe space in which Adrian can find love and support. Using Ada and Chika's responses to Adrian's sexuality, Dibia positions the family as crucial to queer flourishing. creatively models the family as crucial to queer flourishing.

Dibia thus claims that understanding, love and tolerance of queer people is a sure path to building a fair and accommodating society. Dibia summarises his social vision thus:

People like Ebele/Adrian exist in every society and Nigeria is no different. Like every human, they have a right to life and to live their lives. There are some things that cannot be fully explained or understood, but that does not necessarily make them evil or criminal. What is criminal and evil is allowing an atmosphere of hate and hate crimes thrive in any society. So, while writing this book, I was conscious of some of the common fears and questions we have in relation to homosexuality in Nigeria. I proffered no answers by the way but instead tried to

advocate tolerance. And this is all I ask from every reader – Tolerance (qtd in Okolo 2016, 137, Emphasis Author's).

2.5 Pioneering Queer visibility and reimagining the Queer Subject

Challenged by the absence of literature with positive queer stories as well as the dearth of queer African literary heritage to draw from, Dibia found strong inspiration from works by authors from the global north. He was particularly inspired by the works of E. Lynn Harris, an openly queer black American writer whose works resonated with his experiences as a queer man. Harris mentored and inspired Dibia with the words of Toni Morrison: “If there is a book that you want to read that has not been written, you must write it” (Dibia 2014). Recognising that “all writing and art are political” (Dibia 2014), Dibia decided to provoke a deep conversation that ventilates and questions the overall social perception around same-sex desiring Nigerians by centring Adrian’s life within a predominantly heterosexual culture. Olorunshola Adenekan asserts in “Gay, African, Middle-Class & Fabulous: Writing Queerness in New Writing from Nigeria & South Africa,” that “what young writers who are bold enough to write about fictional homosexual characters are showing is that African literature is now at the genesis of the localisation of queerness” (Adenekan 2018, 72). Dibia represents an avant-garde of the move to give queer people a place in Nigeria.

Walking with Shadows addresses silence around queerness at two different levels—internally and externally. Dibia shows how heteronormative norms enforce silence around queerness, compelling individuals to lead double lives, conceal their identities, and enter heterosexual marriages to conform. Internally, queer people silence their sexuality by constantly denying and repressing their desires and identity to survive in Nigeria. Externally, the silence points to the lack of open and positive conversation about queer people in public discourse. Due the dominant perception of queerness, queer people are victimised, and queer-related issues are treated as non-existent. For instance, a year before the publication of *Walking with Shadows*, Bisi Alimi had admitted to being queer on a television programme hosted by Funmi Iyanda in 2004, becoming the first openly queer man in Nigeria (Global Citizen 2018). He cited the official position of Nigerian government - that there were no queer people in Nigeria - promoted by the political and religious leaders, as the major motivation for

his openness about his sexuality (Hirsbrunner 2017). This denial of queerness in public spaces follows similar arguments across Africa that queerness is un-Africa and therefore non-existent on the continent. Such denial seeks to erase and delegitimize queer subjects and reinforce a national identity based on traditional, heterosexual patriarchal values, bolstered through criminalisation, ostracization, stigma, fear and family shame of those who do not conform to them. Most especially, it shaped the way and manner queer people are depicted in literature.

The silence which Dibia's work confronts is not simply the fact that queerness is almost unspoken in Nigerian society, but also the strategic mechanism which ensures its control and suppression, and which makes it invisible. Dibia's narrative thus confronts the external and internal silencing of queerness by showcasing Adrian as a queer man living in Nigeria and making him admit to his queerness. The novel's focus on the outing of Adrian disrupts the silence regarding queer sexuality and identities, unveiling the inherent sexual diversity in Nigeria and confronting prevailing ideas of what constitutes "normal" gender and sexuality.

At first, Dibia could not find a publisher for his novel locally because Nigerian publishers were reluctant to publish queer-themed texts due to the prevailing attitudes to queerness in society. When it was eventually published, bookstores and libraries refused to stock it. He resorted to taking his novel on tours, festivals and exhibitions where he marketed it by word of mouth. Although the novel received mixed reviews, it succeeded in creating awareness around the subject of queerness and fact that queer people exist in Nigeria, bringing their experiences into focus. Dibia writes:

...at the time when it came out just the word "gay" was already scary to even mention. Just to say that word was such a difficult thing. So, what I did was to go for book festivals and readings, and I would always take hundreds of books along with me. This book always created a sense of curiosity and in many ways started a critical conversation around the topic of being gay and Nigerian. People said the writer was brave to tackle such a subject. Of course, some people also thought it was gay erotica, which it is not. All these conversations created awareness for the book (Hirsbrunner 2017).

Walking with Shadows was adapted into film through the collaboration of Funmi Iyanda – the producer of the Television programme New Dawn – and Olumide Makanjuola, the director of The Initiative for Equal rights (TIERS). Iyanda and Makanjuola are queer rights activists who use their platforms to promote queer-friendly discussions. Iyanda featured Bisi Alimi in New Dawn where he openly admitted to his queerness, becoming the first Nigerian to do so. TIERS on the other hand, seeks to change the social perception about queer people “in part by changing the overwhelming negative representations in the media and in mainstream Nollywood films” (Green-Simms 2021). The adaptation of *Walking with Shadows* helped to support this agenda, highlighting a different perception of queerness in the society. The film aroused a lot of curiosity in its audience due to the theme it explored. But most importantly, it engineered a bold conversation about the concept of queerness in Nigeria.

Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* disrupted the negative representation of the queer subject in Nigeria and the broader African literature. Before the publication of *Walking with Shadows*, queerness was a marginal topic in Nigerian literature and queer identities were cast in negative and harmful stereotypes. Nigerian writers avoided exploring queerness because of its status in society – it was a taboo topic and a stigmatised identity. This same attitude was evident in literature from the continent. In the seminal essay “Wheyting be dis? Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature” (1989), Chris Dunton analyses the representation of queer identities in African literature and how the African writers depict queer subjects unsympathetically and through stereotypes. Dunton observes that writers like Wole Soyinka who featured Joe Golder, a queer character in *The Interpreters* (1965), replicated the dominant attitude of the period: that queerness is un-African and incompatible with African culture. In an extension of Dunton’s argument, Green-Simms notes that critics such as Neville Hoad, Chris Dunton, and Gaurav Desai are of the view that Joe Golder mirrors the typical queer character in African literature: “He is lecherous and predatory—he’s implicated in the death of the young boy Noah who jumps off a balcony—and he’s a Western character whose outsider status seems to confirm the idea that homosexuality comes from a foreign source” (Green-Simms 2016, 140). The dominant impression of a negative stereotype on the idea of

queerness, and literature becomes a vehicle for the perpetuation of queer invisibility, silence and disempowerment.

Dibia remarks in an interview that the reluctance of Nigerian writers to portray queer identities in their literature and film harms queer people and reinforces stereotypes: “Because we are so scared to show LGBTI people in our literature and our film, it gives those people all the advantages to portray gays as something that they are not, for example as those who spread disease or paedophiles for example. Every time I see a gay person being mentioned in African media it’s almost always in relation to being a paedophile. And that gets to a point where even the unsuspecting people begin to buy into that false and misleading narrative” (Hirsbrunner 2017). Since representation is crucial to identity politics, Dibia constructs an affirmative image of queerness through the character, Adrian, upending the dominant conceptualisation of queerness in Nigeria, utilising literature as a vehicle for humanising, and normalising queer sexuality and identities.

Dibia counters the denial of the existence of queer people in Nigeria by depicting Adrian as a Nigerian whose identity emerges within its social and cultural contexts. He spends his childhood in Nigeria and does not encounter any foreigner prior to the emergence of his queer sexuality. He lives and works in Nigeria, and his struggle to live authentically emanates from Nigerian heteronormative culture and expectations. Dibia shows Adrian as a character with rich interior life, and grants readers access to his thoughts, emotional struggles and memories. Unlike previous queer characters in literature such as Wole Soyinka’s Joe Golder, Adrian is not associated with queer stereotypes - he is not infected with HIV, he is not a paedophile, a criminal, or a foreigner. He is also not solely defined by his sexuality – he is a father, a husband, a son, and a professional data analyst. Dibia portrays him as a middle class, respectable and lovable family man who has an impeccable record of excellence in his workplace and a great working relationship with his colleagues. He inhabits a respectable space, mirroring the positive values in society – hard work, marital fidelity and stability, good work ethics and a strong interpersonal relationship. He is admired in his workplace for his “steadfast professionalism, honesty, and candor” (Dibia 2011, 76). Until Tayo discloses his

sexuality, by all indices, he is a successful and hard-working Nigerian man, committed to his family and living the heteronormative - cum - Nigerian dream – get married, have children, become an authority as the head of your household and have financial stability. The disclosure of his sexuality means “he was going to lose his family. He was going to lose his life; a life that has taken him a long while to build” (Dibia 2011, 20).

Dibia also imbues Adrian with moral integrity throughout the novel – powerfully countering the idea of queerness as a corruption of the human body. He is a conscientious character who is not perfect but is introspective, responsible, and emotionally honest. We learn that he never visits his queer friends during his marriage to Ada, nor explores his queer desires. After the disclosure of his sexuality, he explains to Ada his commitment to their relationship:

I was a lot of things before I met you” Adrian says. “I dabbled in all sorts before I fell in love with you. But meeting you changed a lot of things for me, and then we had Ego... (Dibia 2011, 23)

Representing Adrian as a morally upright subject counters Nigerian society’s treatment of queerness as a consequence of moral failure. Dibia presents Adrian as a character who embodies the ethical high ground, suggesting instead, that the real failure lies not in Adrian’s sexuality, but in a society that punishes truth and rewards conformity. For instance, Adrian did not understand why he is being punished for his sexuality despite doing everything right regarding societal expectations of his gender: He muses to himself: “had he really committed a crime for loving a woman and creating a beautiful family with her? Perhaps. What was he really punished for? Being gay? Betraying his sexuality? Going straight? Being a committed husband and father? Exposing fraud at his workplace?” (Dibia 2011, 26).

It is therefore interesting that Dibia reveals Adrian’s personal qualities through an exploration of how society ridicules and strips him of the life he had worked for simply because of his sexual alterity. Dibia thus affirms queer legitimacy by portraying Adrian as a full human subject – flawed yet resilient, conflicted yet self-aware, marginalised yet loveable and respectable. Presenting Adrian in this way helps to humanise queerness, showing queer

people as everyday people, living their lives and contributing to society, in contrast to early depictions that portray them as social nuisance and threat to society. Dibia's focus on revealing Adrian's interiority helps contest stereotypes about queer people and makes him an important character, not despite his queerness but because of it. This is a daring move for the recognition of queer subjects as an integral part of Nigerian society.

Dibia unveils how Adrian's internalisation of homophobia shapes his understanding of self, exposing the psychological injury which denouncing oneself could have on one's identity: "He had bought into the heterosexual idea that he was not normal and should be ashamed of his orientation. But his sexuality was not a habit, like picking your nose in public or farting indiscriminately. He knew it was biological, somehow. He had always been this way" (Dibia 2011, 53). The reference to the heterosexual idea reveals that the self-loathing which Adrian feels is not innate but imposed by society which conceives heterosexuality as normal and queerness as a deviant identity. So, to chart Adrian's acceptance, Dibia first makes the reader see the shame that he feels around his sexuality as something that is socially engineered. This realisation becomes a transformative moment for Adrian and the beginning of the reclamation of his identity.

In addition, Dibia deliberately juxtaposes socially inappropriate behaviours like 'picking your nose in public and farting indiscriminately' to challenge the reductive ways of reasoning which views queerness as a behavioural flaw and not something innate. This is a moment where Adrian begins to acquire more agency over his sexuality, rethinking and redefining it on his own terms. The comparison of queerness with these wrong habits is an attempt to invite readers to rethink the absurdity in treating an integral aspect of one's identity as if it was a failure of behaviour. Also, Dibia constructs Adrian's identity as something inherent in him, not something learned or chosen. This understanding of queerness as innate is transformative and revolutionary as it offers an opportunity for Adrian's self-awareness and the beginning of emotional liberation because in a society that tries to erase or correct queerness, defining Adrian's identity as something he is born with becomes an act of

resistance. This change in thinking manifests at the point where Adrian attempts to explain to Ada what being queer means:

I have come to learn, he began, that being gay has nothing to do with the physical action of sex or a person's sexual preference, be it with the opposite sex or same sex. Sleeping with a man or woman will always remain the individual's choice. I am gay because it is who I am. It is the way I see the world. It is the way I reason and live. It is waking up in the morning and going to bed at night. It is listening to music and loving it. It is watching a movie and wanting to see it over again. It is laughing when I am happy and crying when I am sad. It is appreciating the simple things of life and not the act of sexual intercourse. Sex on its own is a physical expression of love or lust. I could love a woman because of the qualities she possesses and still be gay. A man can be gay all his life without actually sleeping with another man (Dibia 2011, 191-2).

Adrian attempts a basic theorisation of queer sexuality, moving away from the understanding of queerness as simply a sexual act, to articulating a radical and deep understanding of identity that resists narrow definitions of queerness often used to dehumanise queer people. Instead, he conceives of sexuality as all encompassing – a way of being, of seeing and existing in the world. Depicting queerness in this way allows Dibia to normalise queerness and portray it as something deeply human. Adrian also argues that his queerness is not invalidated by his choice of partner or sexual intimacy or compromised by loving in multiple ways. This is a departure from the dominant ideas of queerness as an identity that is solely defined by sexual activity. By refusing to define Adrian solely by his sexual preferences, Dibia reframes queerness as something deeper and complex and transcends beyond the physical act of sex. Rejecting the moralistic and heteronormative discourses that views queerness as perverse and hypersexual activity, Dibia repositions queerness, not as what one does but by who they are. Again, Adrian has expressed shame, confusion and self-denial at the beginning of the novel, however towards the end, Dibia depicts him as one who is no longer questioning his identity but reclaiming it.

The success of Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* as a positive portrait of queerness has been emphasised by many critics who have noted its significance both for queer advocacy

and for reimagining queer subjects through literature. Lindsley Green-Simms writes that *Walking with Shadows* is “the first to explore what it means to be gay and closeted in Nigeria, in a fairly straight-forward tale of self-acceptance”(Green-Simms 2016, 148). Similarly, in “Homosexuality in *Walking with Shadows* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*” (2016), Henrietta Ifeoma Okafor compares the treatment of queerness by Soyinka and Dibia, acknowledging that *Walking with Shadows* embodies the shift from unsympathetic and pejorative representation to a sympathetic and nonpejorative narrative of queerness (Okafor 2016). Moreover, Umezurike explores how the novel explores the humanity of queer people rather than the stigma attached to their sexuality, arguing that “*Walking with Shadows* shows the shifting, contingent, and multiple dimensions of human identity, complicating our understanding of what it means to be a homosexual as well as a man” (Umezurike 2021, 128). In a society that enforces queer invisibility through stigma, negative portrayal and stereotype, Dibia’s novel becomes a touchstone in queer representation in Nigerian literature. It marked a shift in prevailing conceptions of queerness and constituted and first attempt at breaking queer invisibility in literature.

2.6 Summary and Implications

In this chapter, I examined how Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* disrupts heteronormativity by centring a male queer protagonist at a time when queerness was widely denied in Nigeria, marking the first intervention in the discourse of heteronormativity. I showed how cultural and religious discourses shape Adrian’s identity, compelling its suppression, until his outing forces a confrontation that leads to self-acceptance and disclosure to family and friends. I read this as a significant challenge to heteronormative dominance in literary representation. The chapter also analysed how Adrian navigates stigma and shame within a culture that disavows queerness, and how Dibia’s portrayal reconfigures the figure of the queer subject. The next chapter turns to Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, examining how it extends this disruption by re-routing female sexuality beyond heteronormative expectations.

Chapter Three: Re-routing Desire: Female Same-Sex Intimacy and the Undoing of Heteronormativity in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)

3.1 Introduction

In chapter two, I examined how Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* breaks queer invisibility as the first novel to provide a detailed portrait of a queer man's navigation of his sexuality in Nigeria. *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), published ten years after Dibia's novel, continues the contestation of traditional gender roles begun in *Walking with Shadows*. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, the first novel to portray a queer female protagonist, challenges heteronormativity by foregrounding the experiences of a female protagonist who disrupts traditional gender by rejecting heterosexual marriage and prescribed womanhood.

Set in Southeast Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s during and after the Biafran war,⁴ *Under the Udala Trees* follows the story of Ijeoma, a young Igbo girl who navigates her queer sexuality amidst the backdrop of the war. After her father dies in an air raid, Ijeoma moves to Nnewi to live with a childless couple, the grammar schoolteacher, and his wife. While living with them, Ijeoma encounters Amina, an orphan Hausa girl from northern Nigeria, who lost her family during the same war. They form a strong bond that later evolves into a romantic and sexual relationship. Living in a society that disavows same-sex relationships and constructs female sexuality strictly within heteropatriarchal expectations, Ijeoma and Amina struggle to name what they feel for each other. The schoolteacher discovers their relationship, and both girls are separated - while Amina remains with the schoolteacher, Ijeoma goes to Aba to live with her mother. Ijeoma's mother subjects her to numerous Bible study sessions to 'cure her' of her sexuality, citing Biblical condemnation of same sex desire. However, this marks the beginning of Ijeoma's internal conflict and journey towards embracing her identity. At first, Ijeoma tries to conform by marrying Chibundu, a childhood friend, and they have a child together, Chidinma. However, Ijeoma is emotionally distant and unresponsive to

⁴ Biafran war is also known as Nigeria-Biafra War or Nigerian Civil War. I am using this term because of its resonance and invocation in Okparanta's novel.

Chibundu because she keeps reliving the intimate memories she shares with Ndidi, a female schoolteacher she meets at Aba, and who later becomes her partner. Okparanta constructs Ijeoma and Ndidi's relationship as a deeper, more affirming union that rekindles the queer desire that Ijeoma tries to suppress. At last, she abandons her marriage and reunites with Ndidi. Instead of leaving for the West like Adrian, Ijeoma challenges traditional gender roles and negotiates acceptance in postcolonial Nigeria.

The novel brings the experiences of a queer woman - a historically absent voice - into the gender and sexuality discourse. In a society where queer desire conflicts with society's expectations for women, the novel portrays a character who disrupts heteronormativity and asserts agency by re-routing her desire and rejecting compulsory heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich, in the essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience", interrogates dominant assumptions about sexuality and argues that heterosexuality is not always a natural outcome for women, but a system imposed on them to reinforce patriarchy, urges feminists to recognise lesbian experience and the broader lesbian continuum as core of women's emancipation (Rich 1980). Okparanta shows how Ijeoma's quiet resistance to the pressure of conforming to heteronormativity helps her to discover and embrace her identity. By examining how the novel challenges heteropatriarchal control over female sexuality, this chapter reads *Under the Udala Trees* as a continuation and a deepening of the conversation begun in *Walking with Shadows*.

In the sections that follow, I will explore how earlier Nigerian feminist literature largely ignored queer perspectives, and in doing so, reinforced heteronormative ideas of womanhood and sexuality. However, this began to shift with the emergence of the contemporary writers. I will also examine how Okparanta's novel brings queer perspective into the feminist canon as well as how she uses the backdrop of the Biafran war to engage and negotiate the idea of queer citizenship. Using Ijeoma's relationships with Amina and Ndidi, I interrogate how Ijeoma's queer desire and relationships are used to contest heteronormative construction of female sexuality as something that must serve the interest of patriarchy. I interrogate how Okparanta subverts religion, often a backdrop and an

ideological tool of heteronormativity, by offering a theological counter interpretation that allows Ijeoma to create a safe space for the reconciliation of her sexuality and faith. I also highlight how her mother's initial rejection and subsequent acceptance of her sexuality mark a turning point in the search for acceptance. I read *Under the Udala Trees* as a radical feminist response to heteronormativity: Ijeoma redirects her sexuality away from the Udala tree – a symbol of female sexuality and traditional gender roles – and embraces her queerness.

3.2 Bringing the Voice of Same-Sex Desiring Women into Gender Discourse in Nigeria

Before the appearance of contemporary writers, female same sex desiring characters remained under-theorised in early feminist writing in Nigeria. Early feminist writers used their works to respond to the dominance of the male perspective in literature, by reimagining the subordinated position of women within patriarchy (Laurea 2023, 57; Ogunyemi 2018). While challenging patriarchal control, their writing reinforced traditional gender roles and stressed the significance of women as wives, mothers, and daughters - primarily because motherhood is valorised and mythologised in African culture (Akujobi 2011, 2; Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju 2013). Writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta also emphasised motherhood while criticising patriarchy and cultural expectations of women. In "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture", Remi Akujobi argues that "Buchi Emecheta dwells on the concept of motherhood in most of her books, especially in *Joys of Motherhood* and *Second Class Citizen* and Flora Nwapa mirrors this concept in her *Efuru*, where childlessness and failed marriages mandate a literary criticism that mirrors the importance of children in the African family" (Akujobi 2011, 3). These early Nigerian women writers produced works that critique patriarchy but did not challenge the idea of heteronormativity. In other words, although Emecheta's uses the experiences of Nnuego in *Joys of Motherhood* to critique patriarchal emphasis on motherhood as the only destination for women and Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) examines female emancipation, neither writer explore same sex desire as an option for women.

Similarly, localised feminist theories like Catherine Acholonu's Motherism, Akachi Ezeigbo-Adimora's Snail-sense feminism, Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism,⁵ Chukwunenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism, and Obioma Nnaemeka's NEGO-Feminism emphasise gender equality, collaboration with men, and motherhood as the core aspects of African femininity (Okafor 2018; Ebunoluwa 2009). These theories challenge the patriarchal subjugation of women yet emphasise traditional gender roles within heteropatriarchy in disregard of the experiences of queer women. Taiwo Osinubi highlights this point in "The Promise of Lesbians in African Literary History" where he argues that African feminism advocated women's freedom against patriarchy while overlooking the struggles of queer women: "although African feminist scholars and women writers critiqued Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the argument can be made that African feminisms smoothened its ascendance to literary and scholarly authority, in part, by disavowing same-sex desire" (Osinubi 2018, 677). In a critique of African feminism, Dobrota Pucherova echoes the point made by Osinubi in her essay "What Is African Woman? Transgressive Sexuality in 21st-Century African Anglophone Lesbian Fiction as a Redefinition of African Feminism". Pucherova, argues that while African feminism failed to acknowledge sexuality as a route to female emancipation, it is "by recognizing that sexuality is a primary arena of political struggles for power—that women can fight against patriarchy, tradition, neocolonialism, and any other -isms that fetter them down" (Pucherova 2019, 107). The studies above have shown that early female writing in Nigeria, and by extension African feminism, did not consider sexuality as an organising frame for women. This is because the critique of gender roles by feminist writers did not bring a complete liberation for women, given that they are still bound by the demands of patriarchy. Instead of critiquing just patriarchy, contemporary writers bring queer perspectives into gender discourse (Adenekan 2012; Amodu 2024, 3) because questioning heteronormativity will largely disrupt the framework that sustains the gender and sexuality binary.

Unoma Azuah, a lesbian, postcolonial scholar, traces the emerging lesbian perspective in Nigerian feminist writings whilst challenging earlier feminist works for

⁵ Social Transformation Involving Women in Africa (STIWAnism)

disavowing queer subjects. Azuah posits that African feminism neither proposed a radical stance towards men nor acknowledged sexuality as a ground for female oppression. However, she argues that feminist literature has experienced new interventions because of the introduction of queer perspective into feminist literature. She observes that the emerging subjectivity is “a voice that is very different from existing feminist writings and positions” (Azuah 2005, 131). Contemporary writers, unlike early feminist critics, address the different spaces in which women are oppressed, including gender, sexuality, and race.

Contemporary female writers, Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi argues, engage not only gender issues but “navigate the past, present and the future to present in their writing the full spectrum of oppressions women experience as gendered subjects. Similarly, they explore in their fiction the multiple spaces within which women experience these oppressions” (Ogunyemi 2018, 131). One of the identified spaces of female oppression is their sexuality. Recognising sexuality as a site of women’s subordination allows for the inclusion of the lived experiences of queer women which have historically been silenced in Nigerian women’s writing. Narratives featuring queer women promote non-heteronormative options for women to dismantle patriarchy and established ideas about femininity. For instance, Azuah observes that “Popular terms such as ‘feminism’, ‘womanism’, ‘motherism’, and ‘stiwanism’ are used by prominent Nigerian feminist scholars to designate various interpretations of how women are asserting themselves; however, none of these terms addresses sexuality or sexual independence as a form of empowerment” (Azuah 2005, 131). In a critique of these theories, Azuah accuses older feminist writing in Nigeria of being exclusionary. She contends that the focus on motherhood, which Acholonu’s Motherism espouses, is problematic because it “alienates not only women who cannot bear children but also women who choose not to be mothers” (Azuah 2005, 130). She also adds that women writers who view men as allies negate the fact that African men “consider empowered female sexuality as a threat and regard terms like ‘feminism’ with great suspicion” (Azuah 2005, 130). While this claim draws attention to the way in which patriarchy is institutionalised and how it constraints women, it could also foreclose the possibility of seeing men as allies. Hence, while Azuah’s statement

reflects historical resistance to women empowerment in patriarchal societies, it ought not to dismiss the potential for collaboration with men. The statement therefore underscores the tension between distrust and alliance in feminist efforts to challenge entrenched power structures. Within the existing feminist literary canon, Okparanta's work represents a break from the historical depiction of female sexuality.

Before the publication of *Under the Udala Trees* in 2015, Okparanta published a collection of short stories entitled *Happiness like Water* (2013) that features a same sex female character. Her work can be considered in dialogue with other works that portray female queer characters such as Lola Shoneyin's "Women in her Season" (1997), Promise Okekwe's "Rebecca" (2002), Unoma Azuah's "The Rebel" (2008), and Chimamanda Adichie's "On Monday last Week" and "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2009). The authors listed above are pioneer voices who wrote about female same sex desire but used the short story genre as an expressive medium (Azuah 2005, 131). However, Okparanta's novel makes female queerness a critical issue by using the novel genre and centring a queer protagonist, breaking decades of limited visibility of queer women in Nigerian literature. In her essay "Out in Africa: Queer Desire in Some Anthropological and Literary Texts", Chantal Zabus asserts that literature, among other forms of expression, has provided the most effective space for exploring queerness as a lived identity (Zabus 2009, 252). *Under the Udala Trees* sets itself apart as a critique of feminist norms whilst addressing the specific struggles of queer women. Its narrative is "at odds with the apparent context of heteronormativity and emphasis on reproduction" (Zabus 2009, 252). Azuah further posits that queer narratives have not only challenges the norms but have also established "new ground" (Azuah 2005, 131).

Hence, while works such as *Joys of Motherhood* highlight the limitations of women in traditional roles, Okparanta's work subverts the idea of creating a fixed sexual identity for some women, addressing the desire for personal agency among queer women. The novel represents the changing notions of femininity in contemporary Nigeria society, contesting traditional gender norms and opening the conversation about equal citizenship for queer women. While *Under the Udala Trees* contributes to the broader field of Nigerian queer

studies, its focus on the liberation of female sexuality from heteronormativity “is nonetheless shaped by feminist politics: the desire for women to be able to make sexual choices freely, to exist outside the institution of marriage, and to have worth without being mothers” (Munro 2017, 192). Put differently, *Under the Udala Trees* represents another way of legitimately being a woman in Nigerian society.

3.3 Biafran War and the Negotiation of Queer Citizenship in Post War Nigeria.

Okparanta uses the backdrop of the Biafran war to open a conversation around queer citizenship. The Biafran war (1967-1970) happened as a result of ethnic, political, economic and religious tensions and involved two major parties – the Igbo-dominated eastern region and the Nigerian government. The Biafran region sought independence from the Nigerian state, but the latter rejected their agitation for statehood, forcefully clamping down on the region. This culminated to a brutal three-year war which reshaped the political and literary landscape of Nigeria. While both sides of the war, especially the eastern region, were devastated physically and psychologically, the war also exposed the fragility of the new postcolonial nation that had recently obtained its political independence from Great Britain in 1960. After the war, the Nigerian state adopted the slogan “No Victor, No Vanquished”, and introduced the three R initiatives - Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation – which was a superficial attempt at national reconciliation and inclusion of the seceding Eastern region. However, this rhetoric masked the ongoing ethnic discrimination and suppressed the trauma of the Igbo people.

The Biafran war exposed the conflict of nationalism and writers like Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Chukwuemeka Ike, Flora Nwapa, and Akachi Ezigbo-Adimora have narrated the war as a period of national devastation and trauma. But Lasse Heerten and Dirk Moses observe that there seems to be a resurgence of the theme of the Biafran war in Nigerian literature, especially in works like Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Achebe’s *There was a Country* and Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, arguing that “this resurgence of memorisations of the conflict in the literary and cultural sphere dovetails with the currently growing interest in issues of trauma and memory raised by the conflict” (Heerten

and Moses 2014, 171). These writers from Igbo ancestry centre the experiences of Igbo people during the war from both personalised and fictional perspectives. However, Okparanta diverges in her narrative of the nation by privileging the experience of a queer character. Ijeoma is eleven years old when the war breaks out in 1967, and by the end of the war she is a same sex desiring woman seeking acceptance in a war-torn postcolonial Nigerian state.

The pre-war and postwar Nigerian state had no space for queer people as they were not considered as bona-fide citizens due to their identity. The war was never seen from a queer perspective as many accounts of the war were presented by writers who subscribed to traditional gender and who reinforced the existing gender relations in their works. While the war caused temporary disruptions in family structure and gender relations and roles, it did not fundamentally disrupt the heteronormative order. The heteronormative family structures were reasserted as the foundation of Nigeria society through deliberate reproduction of existing gender relations in war narratives, leading to the exclusion of queer people from the narrative of recovery, belonging and citizenship. In response, Okparanta re-creates the war, accentuating the call for the rebuilding of the nation and presenting the Nigerian state as a nation in dire need of inclusivity and acceptance of all subjects. Okparanta thus uses the convalescing period after a natural trauma to revisit Nigerian heteronormative citizenship: she intertwines Ijeoma's emerging sexuality with the renegotiation of national identity, imagining queer citizenship as a possibility.

While the war forms the background of the story, the narrative attention shifts to a young girl's search for identity and belonging after the death of Uzo, her father, a symbolic patriarchal figure, as his absence allows for the renegotiation of heteropatriarchal codes. As a young girl navigating war, Ijeoma experiences her first trauma when Uzo dies in an air raid after refusing to hide in the bunker. His death leaves her mother devastated and as the war continues, Adaora, Ijeoma's mother is unable to singlehandedly provide for herself and her daughter, leading to Ijeoma's separation from her mother. Ijeoma is literally displaced by the war, but her displacement is also metaphorical – as the war dislocates her from her home and family, it also creates a space where traditional expectations are suspended. For

instance, during the war, women took on male roles, providing for their families and settling into leadership roles, the war temporarily dismantled patriarchy and created a liminal space where the notion of family and gender are disrupted, allowing for the emergence of Ijeoma's sexuality. So, as the novel documents the changes brought about by the war, Ijeoma admits that "there were to be more changes" (Okparanta 2016, 13). Ijeoma, thus, narrates the war and her father's death as a significant event in her journey for self-discovery:

There is no way to tell the story of what happened with Amina without first telling the story of Mama's sending me off. Likewise, there will be no way to tell the story of Mama's sending me off without also telling of Papa's refusal to go to the bunker. Without his refusal, the sending away might never have occurred, and if the sending had not occurred, then I might never have met Amina. If I had not met Amina, who knows, there might be no story at all to tell (Okparanta 2015, 13).

In highlighting the importance of the war to the progression of the story, Josephine Delali Ofei argues that: "It appears that, the civil war that occurs at the initial stages of the narration, remains an important theme whose memory is transformed into an apparatus that Ijeoma uses to justify her actions and preferences in the story" (Ofei 2020, 63-64).

Ijeoma's relationships with Amina and Ndidi thus becomes not only a personal story but also the blooming of a disavowed desire that disrupts national and cultural expectations. Okparanta thus used the war as a condition for the emergence of Ijeoma's sexuality. In other words, the temporary crack caused by the war provided an opening for Okparanta to inscribe the queer voice into discourses of national belonging. Ijeoma's recurrent dream about the war emphasises its importance as a critical moment for the renegotiation of citizenship: "Gowon had said in his speech: The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation" (Okparanta 2015, 366). Okparanta uses the call for a new nation to broaden postcolonial Nigeria subjectivity and include queer citizenship, which was absent in the pre-war Nigerian state. In *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in Postcolonial Nation*, Elleke Boehmer highlights the significance of the nation in facilitating discussions on citizenship for women:

The nation has historically not only offered important ways of recovering self and reclaiming cultural integrity after colonial occupation but has also remained an important ground for transforming political and economic conditions, forging identity and achieving social justice. Not only Janus-faced but protean, adaptative and affiliative rather than derivative, taking on different forms at the hands of different groups and classes, the nation continues to exert a hold on emergent geopolitical entities in quest of self-representation. Despite its 'en-gendering', its liberatory potential remains compelling, also to women (Boehmer 2009, 4).

Boehmer's statement emphasises that the nation does not only offer the opportunity for individuals and groups to negotiate identity and citizenship, but it also allows groups to form alliances and seek justice, especially, in postcolonial societies, becoming a site of possibility. This is because most nations are founded by excluding 'others' who are outside their borders – be it cultural, political, religious, social, or economic. However, as exclusive as it may be, it nonetheless offers the language, space and institutions needed for oppressed groups to demand recognition, rights and belonging. Boehmer argues that women can find the act of reshaping national identity as an opportunity for inserting their own histories, experiences, and rights. In this case, Okparanta's portrayal of same sex desiring women becomes a way to reshape the history of the Nigerian nation, which has been founded strictly on heterosexuality and patriarchy. Okparanta directly references the existence of a queer community who are silenced by society when she states that her novel "attempts to give Nigeria's marginalised LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history" (Okparanta 2016, 375). In addition, where the Nigerian state failed to fully reconcile and reintegrate the Igbo people after the war, Okparanta imagines a different kind of reconciliation – one that includes queer people and rethinks the foundations of the nation state. By the end of the novel when Ijeoma leaves her marriage to live with her partner, her choice becomes not only an act of self-discovery but also a claim to queer citizenship – to live, love and belong like everyone else in a society that denies such rights.

It is clear therefore that previous writers of Nigerian war literature did not see diversity in the way that Okparanta has done but by bringing the Biafran war into focus, Okparanta

problematizes the nation as presently constituted and “equalizes the injustices Nigerian people face regardless of their sexuality, tribe, or class” (Lockwood 2022, 2). More than this, her novel seeks to inscribe a full range of citizens, including queer people, so that the nation cannot be built upon their invisibility and exclusion. This intersection of Ijeoma’s identity journey with the stories of the nation allows *Under the Udala Trees* to critically re-evaluate questions of belonging, gender, identity, and self-expression for queer people in the ‘reconciled, reconstructed and rehabilitated’ postcolonial Nigerian state.

3.4 Queer Desire as a Disruption of Heteronormativity

Puchevora posits that female same sex narratives aim “to redefine the idea of African femininity, the African family, and African society away from heteronormativity” (Puchero 2019, 110). Such contemporary narratives achieve this, she argues, through advancing a “feminist individualism” (Puchero 2019, 110) that challenges the traditional conceptualisation of African female sexuality. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta renders female same sex desire not only as a private and personal experience of identity and love, but as an act of resistance to the predominant heteronormative culture. Using Ijeoma’s same sex relationship with Amina and Ndidi, Okparanta constructs queer desire as both a subversion and a mode of survival. Ijeoma’s relationships challenge society’s argument that women can only find fulfilment in heterosexual marriages and motherhood. Instead, it portrays a character who pursues intimacy outside of traditional, religious, cultural, and heteropatriarchal structures. Breaking away from the normative understanding of female sexuality, the novel explores Ijeoma’s sexuality beyond the confines of traditional gender roles - “away from under the Udala Trees” (Lockwood 2022).

Formations of sexuality and gender go hand in hand in Nigerian society and throughout the novel, Okparanta shows how both are interlinked in society, especially, in relation to female sexuality. Ijeoma struggles with understanding the discourses of female sexuality highlighted under heteronormative and religious discourses. Both systems of power reinforce gender binarism, heterosexual marriage, and gender hierarchy. Traditional and

Christian views of marriage in Nigeria conceive it as an obligation, a divine commitment and the different discourses emanating from these institutions reinforce its sacredness (Paul-Kolade et al, 2022). As a young girl growing up in the war-torn Ojoto, Ijeoma experiences the gendered system in society- she is socialised early into gender by her devout mother, Adaora and educated on the need to align with the dominant gender expectations, which in this case is marriage. This is because when a young girl refuses to embrace marriage in Nigerian society, she creates a moral panic because marriage is seen as a duty to one's family and society.

As an only child and a female in a culture that treasures male children for family continuity, Adaora is already disadvantaged for not having a male child hence Ijeoma is expected to fill the gender role of a wife and mother to ensure Uzo and Adaora's bloodline continues. However, Adaora's attitude is emblematic of heteronormativity's emphasis on traditional gender expectations which privilege heterosexuality because she is unaware of her daughter's queer sexuality. It is therefore not surprising that when Ijeoma is reluctant to socialise and mingle with men, even after Amina her first queer lover has been married off to a man far north, Adaora pairs her with Chibundu, Ijeoma's childhood friend. As far as Adaora is concerned, a woman's beauty must be used to attract a spouse, and a woman who has reached a marriageable age cannot choose to be single or refuse a heterosexual marriage:

A woman without a husband is hardly a woman at all. You won't be young forever. Even that girl has gone and found herself a husband. Why won't you do the same? ... time is passing. You need to get out there and find yourself a husband. Time waits for no one... if you are not careful, you'll find yourself like that candle, all burnt up and nothing to show for it... 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 continues, "A 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?" ... A word to the wise: go out, socialise. How will the young men even know that you are available if you spend all your time moping around at home? ... Some people, you wonder if God was

sleeping when he made them. But you, you are beautiful. God was definitely not sleeping when he made you. A girl as beautiful as you! You are nineteen, almost twenty, and yet no young man has so much as come for you. *Chineke bi n'elu!* God in heaven! How can this even be (Okparanta 2016, 213).

The last comment in the quotation encapsulates the notion of female sexuality – it is unbelievable for a woman not to desire a man or to not have a man who is interested in her either for her beauty or other qualities. This highlights the centrality of marriage in heteronormative setting and the power imbalance it engenders - it is a bicycle with two wheels where one wheel is dependent on the other. The man represents one part of the wheel – the leading, dominant part - and the women the other. She argues that none of the wheels can function effectively without the other as marriage is defined in relational terms. It is the arrangement of the heteronormative family that perpetuates gender hierarchy and ensures men hold power over women. Whereas men take the lead, women play submissive and subordinated roles as wives and mothers. So, the idea that the other wheel of the bicycle must align and glide in the direction of the lead wheel emphasises a lack of female agency. Moreso, while men's worth and importance exceed the marriage institution, a woman can hardly define herself outside it. By implication, a male-driven society often reduces the social and economic power of women, making them perpetually dependent on men. The drawback to the overt dependence of women in heteronormative marriages is that women oftentimes do not imagine a life outside the strictures of heteronormative culture. This is because the formation of the heterosexual nuclear family reinforces the belief that a woman's worth and sexual fulfilment can only be realised within the marriage framework, through her role as a mother and wife. So, Adaora recognises the importance placed in the family institution and pressures her daughter to conform. By echoing that “a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all,” (Okparanta 2016, 213), Adaora reinforces the belief that women who pursue desire outside the heteronormative norms are cultural outlaws.

In contrast to the normative view of female sexuality, Okparanta creates a character who rejects heteronormativity to pursue queer intimacy. While *Under the Udala Trees* does not reject the existence of reproductive heterosexuality, it challenges its hegemony by

creating an alternative option for women whose sexuality does not align with heterosexuality. Ijeoma's identity underscores the fact that marriage and motherhood might constitute the periphery of self-definition for some women against the cultural and religious dialectics that make them central in the lives of women. The novel argues that while reproductive femininity is acceptable to some women, it can be exclusionary and incompatible with the desires of queer women. When Chibundu meets Ijeoma the first time since the end of the war and proposes to marry her, his logic for seeking Ijeoma's hand in marriage comes from the heteronormative assumption that "every man needs a wife, and every woman needs a husband" (Okparanta 2016, 249). This belief reinforces the cultural and religious premium placed on marriage as a social role. However, Ijeoma stresses the strength of individual will against religiously and culturally prescribed roles by insists that "yes, *some* women would do well to have a husband" (Okparanta 2016, 249). The emphasis on the word 'some' introduces a break from the normative tradition and provides an understanding of the individual nature of identity. Ijeoma's comment thus signals an alternative sexual option for women which does not prioritise heteronormative perspective.

Ijeoma's discovery of her sexuality unfolds during the formative period of her adolescence, at the shack behind the compound of the grammar schoolteacher's main house at Nnewi where she lives with the schoolteacher during the war. Ijeoma is isolated, traumatised, and lonely, with little interaction with the schoolteacher and his wife. Attracted by their shared trauma of the war, Ijeoma and Amina's bond gradually builds and transforms into a physical, emotional, and later sexual intimacy. Their sexual intimacy occurs at a liminal space – a shack behind the grammar schoolteacher's house – significantly outside the direct surveillance of adults and by implication, heteropatriarchal institutions. This affirming space allows the girls to imagine an infinite world of queer possibilities where societal expectations are suspended.

Ijeoma had never met Amina prior to encountering her under an Udala tree on her way back from an errand for the Grammar Schoolteacher. An Udala tree, a tropical fruit tree found in southern Nigeria, culturally symbolises reproductive femininity. Women looking for

children usually converge under it because it is believed to have spiritual potency for fertility: it is believed in Igbo culture, where the novel is set, that “the spirits of unborn children waiting to be conceived are ever present at the Udala tree” (Ephraim-Chukwu 2021, 38). An Udala tree is thus a physical representation of cultural codes surrounding gender and sexuality – it evokes ideas of sanctioned femininity. As a girl, Ijeoma is expected to align with the culturally sanctioned femininity defined by the Udala tree. Instead, the Udala tree becomes a symbolic site: a place for the disruption of sanctioned womanhood by a taboo love. Being culturally a symbol of fertility and womanhood, Ijeoma and Amina’s meeting under an Udala becomes both symbolic and strategic: it reflects Okparanta’s engagement with gender disruption in a way that is culturally grounded. But most importantly, it shows how a culturally limiting norms can also be rearticulated in a way that is expansive and accommodating of different desires and identity. In other words, whereas Udala tree represents heteronormative femininity, Okparanta problematises this by making the Udala tree a site for the remaking of female sexuality. Ijeoma describes her first meeting with Amina, which occurs under an Udala tree, as an emotionally charged encounter:

we moved our plastic-slipped feet around the muddy earth, we looked down at the ground as we did, but I sneaked peeks at her, and I am sure she did at me. A bird flew from Udala trees, its wings beating hard through the air. We tilted our heads and watched, finally, we gathered the courage to look into each other’s faces. The moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her (Okparanta 2016, 126).

The importance of this encounter lies at the heart of Okparanta’s narrative: the novel reimagines the Udala tree, a historical site of traditional femininity, as a place for the emergence of Ijeoma’s non-heteronormative desires. This challenges traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations of motherhood and heterosexuality for all women. I thus argue that whereas traditional female sexuality emphasises reproduction and heterosexuality, queer sexuality detaches from it, refocusing female sexuality from the realm of culture to that of individual desires and mutual intimacy. Within this non-heteronormative formation, neither men nor reproduction-focused femininity is prioritised. Instead, it is a strictly

girls-based space where sex and gender roles are defined strictly in a non-normative way. Ijeoma's queer identity hence becomes a way in which the novel disrupts heteronormativity.

Ijeoma and Amina first express their love in daily routines like laundry, cooking, eating, plaiting their hair, and spending time together. Ijeoma narrates how they seamlessly blended close companionship into their daily routine: "That evening, Amina, and I peeled the yams together, rinsed them together, our fingers brushing against each other others' in the bowl. I doused the wood with the kerosene and lit the cooking fire, and she set the pot of yams on top to boil" (Okparanta 2016, 128). Okparanta's portrayal of the love between Ijeoma and Amina as something that develops from daily routine is deployed to contest the idea that same sex relationships are strictly defined by sexual attraction, instead of deep emotional connections. The memories the girls share later metamorphose into a strong affection for each other which is later expressed through sexual acts. It was not difficult to consummate their love because, as Ijeoma notes, "wood already touched by fire isn't hard to set alight" (Okparanta 2016,140).

Ijeoma describes their first sexual encounter as exhilarating: "In the near darkness, our hands moved across our bodies. We took in with our fingers the curves of our flesh, the grooves. Our breaths mingled with the night sounds. Eventually our lips met. This was the beginning; our bodies being touched by the fire that was each other's flesh" (Okparanta 2016, 141). The burning fire is emblematic of Ijeoma's queer desire and the intimacy that eventually develops between them. Okparanta thus uses Amina to awaken and unfold Ijeoma's queer desire. Pucherova claims that "Amina is not just a friend but a possibility for her to discover her own identity in the absence of a mother" (Pucherova 2019, 116). Since Adaora is an enforcer of heteronormativity, her displacement at Ijeoma's formative years becomes an important one that allows for a difference to come into being. In this moment, desire becomes an unspeakable yet undeniable force which disrupts the borders of what is officially permissible regarding gender. Queer intimacy therefore becomes not just an affront to heteronormativity but a disruption of the traditional expectation for young girls – obedience, heterosexual marriage, and motherhood.

While Ijeoma's queer intimacy with Amina serves to uncover her hidden queer desire, Okparanta uses her relationship with Ndidi, which occurs after she returns with her mother to Aba, to further subvert heteronormativity. Ijeoma's relationship with Ndidi happens in her adulthood and comes with greater risks and awareness. Like the relationship with Amina, Ndidi and Ijeoma's love is mutual; both revel in the company of each other, "just staring and giggling at each other like small girls" (Okparanta 2016, 321). While Ijeoma and Amina do not conceive of their love as abominable because, prior to being outed by the grammar schoolteacher, they "didn't think anything of it" (Okparanta 2016, 154). By the time she meets Ndidi, Ijeoma understands the consequences of her desire as well as its political possibility as a tool of activism. Ijeoma and Ndidi attend an underground gathering of other queer women navigating their sexuality amidst the heteronormative control. The women use an underground church as a meeting point and must keep their meetings secret "because mentioning it to anyone can cost some of us if not all our us our lives" (Okparanta 2016, 223). This scene offers a rare moment of collective solidarity where the queer women understand the dangerous nature of their desires yet choose to express it albeit clandestinely.

This scene is important for two reasons – it shows that queer intimacy is not an isolated desire affecting a few individuals, but rather an identity that disrupts heteronormativity yet defines a community of people suppressed by society. Here, Okparanta extends Ijeoma's struggle to highlight a community of women hidden under the surface of heteronormativity – while a church sermon that disavows queerness rings out in the day, queer women meet underneath it at night to connect and explore queer desire. Second, the existence of the underground queer community suggests that despite heteronormative suppression, queer desire is a rallying force for strong community and collective resistance. Although the queer community experiences a homophobic attack in which the leader of the group, Adanma, is killed, the presence of the queer women suggests that queer intimacy is not simply a personal choice but a political challenge to the heteronormative norms about morality, womanhood, and family. Showing a community of queer women, living, and

navigating their sexuality becomes a way through which the novel offers queer resistance to the national story of heteronormativity.

Another way that the novel disrupts heteronormativity is the way in which Nnidi and Ijeoma's relationship exist entirely outside male influence and control. Their relationship challenges traditional gender expectations and positions queer love as a redemptive and liberating experience for women. Ijeoma and Nnidi are not tied to the heteropatriarchal culture but pursue a relationship that prioritises female pleasure and bonding over heterosexual coupling. Living in a society where a woman's worth is contingent upon her ability to become both a wife and mother, Ijeoma initially succumbs to the normative standards due to societal pressure but turns away from them in defiance. Ijeoma is pressured to marry Chibundu, her childhood friend, however, their relationship is short-lived because Ijeoma does not find fulfilment in her marriage, which is portrayed as forced, emotionally draining, and damaging to her.

Ijeoma's marriage to Chibundu is constructed as a burden as she describes her first night with Chibundu as a traumatic time: "This is how our first night together went: imagine a snail protected by its hard shell. Imagine a snail when it is alarmed. Imagine a snail retreating into its shell" (Okparanta 2016, 273). Ijeoma considers her marriage a prison where she is forced to withdraw and live in self-denial and fear. She is initially reluctant to consummate the marriage, but when Chibundu insists, Ijeoma surrenders to him, but only in the belief that motherhood would cure her of the desire for other women: "perhaps by making me a mother, he would save me. Maybe motherhood would make me feel more invested in the marriage. Maybe motherhood would cause me to forget Nnidi" (Okparanta 2016, 281). After the birth of her daughter, Chidinma, Chibundu requests another child - a son who would continue his family name (Okparanta 2016, 317). This desire for a son underscores the heteropatriarchal emphasis on reproduction and on giving birth to male children as the only way a woman can be useful within patriarchy. Although Ijeoma tries to have a son and experiences a miscarriage, she concludes that remaining in marriage with Chibundu would rob her of her identity as well as endanger the future of her daughter. So, after she dreams about Chidinma

hanging in a noose under the Udala trees while reading the Bible as well as seeing Chidinma's child choking in her arms amidst a war background, Ijeoma decides to save herself and her child from the compulsory demands of heteronormativity. Ijeoma offers a strong interpretation of the dream: "Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, the weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends" (Okparanta 2016, 362).

Ijeoma leaves her marriage and resumes a relationship with Ndidi. Ijeoma's disparate dreams and the specific mention of Udala trees, the Bible and the Biafran war bring together the way in which culture, religion, and violence shape queer lives. Okparanta brings these elements together to show how Ijeoma's identity is formed in conflict, societal expectation, and self-discovery, whilst also showing how she quietly resists systems that marginalise queer lives. Ijeoma's experience in a heterosexual marriage serves as a way in which the novel addresses the dissonance between Ijeoma's desires and gender expectations.

In contrast, Ijeoma's relationship with Ndidi gives her agency and fulfilment, serving as a way in which the novel contests the roles assigned to women in Nigerian heteronormative culture. Although Ijeoma and Chibundu have a child together, her desire for Ndidi continues as she writes her letters daily confessing her love to her. Influenced by her mother, Ijeoma's marriage, also endorsed by religion, reveals the manipulative and coercive power of patriarchy in defining and confining female sexuality strictly within its boundaries. However, Okparanta uses their relationship to argue that women can reject male-centred sexuality and still experience love and sexual fulfilment. This is because their relationship is not male-centred but strictly woman-focused and allows her more agency and control over her desires. Okparanta thus depicts queer women as full subjects, capable of deciding their object of desire and not as passive subjects waiting for male attention and approval. Okparanta also portrays their love as something that is not only natural but deeply fulfilling, contesting the idea that women must embrace heterosexual intimacy to find pleasure and happiness.

By refusing to show Ijeoma's desire as a transgression or doomed identity, *Under the Udala Trees* undoes the heteronormative construction of heterosexuality as the only option available to women. Instead, it shows the empowering nature of queer love - as something that engenders new epistemologies of womanhood, love, and family. As Ijeoma ponders on her desires and choices, she imagines a life free from societal expectation or male validation; one built on mutual affection and selfhood, achieved only through queer intimacy.

3.5 Reinterpreting the Bible: Reconciling Queer Sexuality and Faith

Under the Udala Trees shows how Christian religion plays a significant role in strengthening heteronormativity through its estrangement of the queer subject. Like *Walking with Shadows*, Okparanta centres Christianity in her work because it is the dominant religion in Southeastern Nigeria where the novel is set. Christianity is depicted not simply as a personal belief system but as a powerful institution that seeks to regulate desire, impose conformity and uphold heteronormative standards. As an organised system, it serves as a source of trauma and alienation for queer people because of its conceptualisation of queerness as a sinful, abominable, immoral and a highly reprehensible act.

Throughout the novel, the Bible is portrayed as a moral weapon, co-opted by the authority figures in Ijeoma's life - her mother and the Grammar schoolteacher – to enforce and uphold rigid gender standards that suppress queer sexuality. Adaora acts as a gatekeeper of heteronormativity, policing Ijeoma's behaviour and eventually her sexuality. From childhood, Ijeoma's life is regulated by Biblical teachings that try to bend her will and guide her into total conformity with the dominant norms. Every Sunday, at the Holy Sabbath Church, she "sat on the parallel wooden benches that ran in even rows, listening to Bible Sermons" (Okparanta 2016, 20). The weekly sermons are meant to serve as a moral compass for her. Even when her mother sends her away to live with the teacher during the war, the only gift Adaora gives to Ijeoma is "Papa's old Bible, the one he used to read from every Sunday at church" (Okparanta 2016, 63). All her life, the Bible serves as a source of authority and guide. It is therefore not surprising that when Adaora finds out about Ijeoma's

emerging queer sexuality, she uses the Bible as a disciplinary tool, reinforcing how religion bolsters heteronormativity. This becomes evident in the many Bible study and deliverance sessions which Adaora conducts to cure Ijeoma of her sexuality. Adaora pressures Ijeoma to renounce her sexuality, pray fervently and read her Bible daily to normalise her.

Already a victim of heteronormativity, Adaora internalises the dominant framing of female sexuality. She believes that “there is a natural link between female sexuality and reproductive futurity, and the female is meant to be male-oriented, pro-natal, and family-centred” (Umezurike 2021, 176). She uses religion to justify her attempt to control Ijeoma’s sexuality, revealing the connection between religion and heteronormativity and showing how both unite to regulate female sexuality and suppress difference. Although motivated by love for her only child, Adaora is constrained by the Biblical teachings about queerness, weaponizing it to correct Ijeoma’s sexuality. She argues that queer sexuality is forbidden and abominable to God; a position which the Grammar schoolteacher echoes when he discovers Ijeoma and Amina making love in their room. Focusing on the creation story in Genesis, Adaora explores the significance of Adam and Eve’s creation as the first humans, believing that Adam and Eve represent divine models of human sexuality because “God intended it to be man and woman” (Okparanta 2016, 91). She quotes other Biblical passages from the books of Genesis and Mark to reinforce binary gender as well as verses from Old Testament, the book of Leviticus and also from the Letters of Apostle Paul to the Romans that condemn queer sexuality: Leviticus 18:22 condemns queerness through the direct instruction: “thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is abomination” and Romans 1:26-32 explains how queerness is a direct punishment to humans for abandoning God’s ways. These verses show queerness as not only morally wrong but divinely prohibited. She also uses the sexual encounters involving Lot, his daughters, the men of the city, and the Levite and his concubine to reinforce the sacredness of heterosexuality. Lot chose to offer his daughters to the men of the city who came to demand to sleep with his male visitors. Also, the Levite, who is returning with his concubine and is attacked by violent men at Gibeah, offers his concubine to be raped by the men which results in her death. Adaora informs Ijeoma that despite the

violence depicted in the story of the Levite and his concubine, the central message is that heterosexuality needs to be maintained at all costs: “Don’t you see? If the men had offered themselves, it would have been an abomination. They offered up the girls so that things would be as God intended: man and woman instead of man and man. Do you see now” (Okparanta 2016, 97). Adaora deploys these biblical injunctions to shame, guilt-trip and coerce Ijeoma into conformity.

Ijeoma learns about a God who hates queer people and wants to destroy them for their sexuality. As the Bible lessons with Adaora begin, Ijeoma experiences nightmares: she is “confronted with mama’s scolding face, her reprimanding finger wagging at me, threatening to poke 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 sins.” (Okparanta 2016, 235). Through Bible study sessions, prayers, confessions and a physical deliverance session, Adaora teaches Ijeoma to suppress her desires and embrace heterosexuality, and Ijeoma learns that rejecting femininity is not only sinful but a failure of womanhood. Since Ijeoma is still forming her understanding of self and spirituality, the experience is emotionally damaging and perpetuates the belief that religion is a tool used for psychological coercion and a source of internalised homophobia. Ijeoma describes the impact of heteronormative control on her identity: it was “a case between what I felt in my heart and what Mama, and the grammar schoolteacher felt” (Okparanta 2016, 99). In addition, she claims that while she feels no guilt about of her sexuality, “mama voice was the source of all my turmoil” (Okparanta 2016, 230). Adaora hence serves as a lens for how religion is used to uphold traditional gender norms and as a source of guilt. However, to reconcile her faith and sexuality, Ijeoma subverts dominant interpretation of the Bible by offering an alternative reading that opens a pathway for queer inclusion and visibility. To achieve this, Ijeoma approaches the Bible as a literary critic, seeing it as a piece of writing that can offer infinite possibilities and meanings if read both literally and figuratively. She commences by reading Biblical scriptures about love and rereading the basic verses used for queer disavowal.

One important way in which Ijeoma negotiates her sexuality and finds faith is through invoking Bible verses that speak about God's love. She rediscovers the Bible by searching for verses that offer hope for queer people and reads in learns that God loves everyone equally irrespective of their identity. She learns in John 3:16 that God loves the world and uses God's unconditional love for humanity as a leeway to challenge heteronormative and religious exclusion of queer people. Ijeoma's personal spiritual reconnection allows her to share the idea of a loving God with Amina, who is already feeling guilty and afraid of an angry God who is waiting to punish her for expressing queer sexuality. However, Ijeoma informs her about the nature of God, as captured in John 3:16, which speaks about how God loves all his creation and gave his only son to die for them. She reminds her about the unconditional love of God: "God loved us all ... he didn't put any qualifiers on his love. Not even when he Said to love your neighbour as yourself. He didn't say don't love the thieving neighbours, or don't love the adulterers, or don't love the liars or the cheats or the disobedient children. He simply said, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Okparanta 2016,186). Her spiritual affirmations directly contradict religious teachings that condemn queer people. It instead represents a religious resistance as Ijeoma refuses to abandon her faith and rather chooses to practice her faith – one founded on compassion, empathy, and personal truth, rather than fear.

The idea of a loving God who welcomes all is echoed in the use of the underground church for queer meetings. The underground church has two inscriptions: "Friends in Jesus Church of God" and "Fountain of Love" (Okparanta 2016, 224). Both inscriptions emphasise the core of Christian doctrine: friendship and love for others. This underground venue could be read as a representation of the limited space and visibility accorded queer identities, but also as a subversive space where queer people also lay claim to God's unconditional love, despite being excluded in mainstream religion. This is because while sermons denouncing queerness ring out from the church during the day, an alternative discourse of friendship in Jesus is used as a rallying point for same-sex desiring women at night. Ijeoma's conviction that God is love offers a way for her to claim queer legitimacy and practice her faith. This reconciliation of faith and sexuality in the novel offers a crucial representation of religious

belonging for queer people given the impact which spiritual alienation has on queer subjects, including an increased rate of suicide. In their study of religion and suicide among queer people, Jeremy J. Gibbs and Jeremy Goldbach observe that “identity conflict that comes from dissonance felt between religious beliefs and LGBT identity was associated with higher risk of suicide” (Gibbs and Goldbach 2015, 483). So, embracing the idea of a loving and compassionate God, rather than an angry and implacable one, becomes for Ijeoma - and by implication the queer community, an act of salvation.

Another strategy that Ijeoma uses to disrupt religion comes through her appreciation of allegory, a reading strategy she learns from her father, Uzo - described as a man who “liked to wallow in his thoughts. Sometimes he seemed to get lost in the wandering of his mind” (Okparanta 2016, 94). His introspective nature enables him to question surface reality – a trait he passes on to Ijeoma. Uzo defines allegory as a ‘symbol of something’ and explains that “a dove can be quite literally just a bird. Or it can be a symbol of peace, and sometimes a symbol of more than peace” (Okparanta 2016, 94). Through this reading strategy, Uzo teaches Ijeoma to challenge dominant assumptions and examine truths through connotative as well as literal lenses. Although Uzo occupies the position culturally assigned to patriarchy, Okparanta writes him differently - he empowers Ijeoma to resist heteronormativity. His intellectual legacy - critical and imaginative thinking - endures in Ijeoma, sparking a silent and quiet resistance that empowers her to reread scriptures in a way that validates rather than condemns her sexuality. This is because the inner conflict which Ijeoma experiences about her identity is not a function of her unbelief but rather due to a belief system that forecloses her existence as a queer subject. So, reading the Bible allegorically proves useful for Ijeoma in countering internalised fear and guilt. This is because whereas Adaora’s Biblical references highlight religious support for heterosexuality, Ijeoma shows how those Bible verses can reveal deeper truths about human relationships and connections beyond literal readings. For instance, when Ijeoma questions Adaora on why queer sexuality is considered ‘abomination’, ‘disgusting’ and ‘disgraceful’, Adaora informs Ijeoma: “the fact that the Bible says it’s bad is all reason you need ... The Bible is the Bible and not to be questioned. What we read in it is

what we are to take out of it” (Okparanta 2016, 91, 97). This suggests that Adaora does not have a personal conviction about her beliefs but relies completely on the unquestioned positions of the bible.

Ijeoma’s alternative reading first focuses on decentring the Biblical emphasis placed on the account of Adam and Eve, as the first humans and the importance placed on their gender, rendering their story as a specific knowledge system of a particular people and culture:

The thought occurred to me: yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But *so what* if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that got in the Bible? Why did that have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities are forbidden. Just because the Bible recorded a specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? Infinite possibilities, and each one of them perfectly viable (Okparanta 2016, 100).

This rereading of the Bible as an account of a specific culture, a people and an event repositions it from being an absolute truth. The novel relativises Biblical truths, suggests they can be read differently by bringing into focus the existence of other truths, cultures, and sexual mores, ‘each of them perfectly viable’. This approach shifts the focus away from the Bible’s position as the only source of knowledge in Christianity. Also, it constructs both same sex love and heterosexual intimacy as valid means of expressing human sexuality. This strategy of reading the Bible differently becomes transformational and liberatory for Ijeoma who is disturbed by the Bible’s uncritical reception. To further counters Adaora’s emphasis on the Biblical reference to ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as the only acceptable sexual relation, Ijeoma de-emphasizes Adam and Eve’s gender identity, using them figuratively to illustrate companionship and intimacy. She asks: “What if Adam and Eve were merely symbols of companionship? And Eve, different from him, woman instead of man, was simply a tool by which God noted that companionship was something you got from a person outside of

yourself? What if that was all it was? And why not?" (Okparanta 2016, 100). This alternative reading takes the focus away from heteronormativity as the only acceptable form of human relationship.

Ijeoma also makes a similar intervention in the stories of Lot and his daughters and the Levite and his concubine which have been historically used to condemn queer identities, recognising its contradictions and inconsistencies with societal views on violence. In both stories, the hostility of a group of men towards strangers is recounted - one in Sodom and Gomorrah, and the other in Gibeah. In both stories, the men - Lot and the Levite - willingly offer women close to them to strangers for violent sexual encounters. The men in Lot's case rejected his daughters and instead demanded to sleep with the two strangers seeking refuge in his house until the visitors, who are angels in disguise, strike them with blindness. In the account of the Levite and his concubine, the men of the city violate the concubine until she dies from exhaustion. The Levite would further desecrate her corpse by cutting her in pieces as a sign of anger against the men of the city who raped her.

Both stories highlight the heteropatriarchal objectification of women and the gendered violence enacted on their bodies. Ijeoma's mother highlights the heterosexual nature of the rape incidents instead of the violence enacted in those encounters, but Ijeoma stresses its scandalous and inhumane nature: "the men offered up the women because they were cowards and the worst kind of men possible. What kind of men offer up their daughters and wives to be raped in place of themselves" (Okparanta 2016, 97). To Ijeoma, offering a woman for rape to pacify a heterosexual system is more repulsive than an open expression of same sex desire. Adaora and Ijeoma's responses to the stories show the distinctiveness of their viewpoints: whereas Ijeoma's mother condones sexual violence because the sexual act aligns with the heteronormative ethos, Ijeoma condemns all forms of non-consensual sexual acts against individuals irrespective of the form of sexual encounter. Focusing on the violence of the act instead of the mode of the sexual expression problematises heteronormativity. In this way, Ijeoma turns the Bible from a weapon of oppression to a tool of liberation and personal redefinition, challenging heteronormative hegemony over queer sexuality. Whereas

Ijeoma's queer desire upsets normative gendering, providing opportunity for the reimagination of her life outside its boundaries, the reinterpretation of the Bible - another crucial instrument of queer control - offers Ijeoma the opportunity to reconcile her faith and sexuality against society's disavowal.

Through this critical interpretation of the Bible, Ijeoma discovers that she is not losing her faith but redefining it. She describes the joy she feels at discovering alternative readings: "I was excited by my thoughts. From the time our Bible studies began, I'd had the feeling of a person wandering lost and aimless and thirsty in the desert. But now I had stumbled upon a tap of water. The joy of my discovery washed over me" (Okparanta 2016, 101). Whereas Adaora cites many Bible verses to dissuade Ijeoma from pursuing her same-sex desire, Ijeoma facilitates an alternative reading to decentre religious authority and engender a more inclusive interpretation. Importantly, Ijeoma does not abandon her faith but navigates its teaching to find space for herself within its framework. Through portraying the idea of a loving God who welcomes everyone, including queer people, Okparanta's writing offers a reading of the Bible that is welcoming of queer people. This echoes Amber Frateur's assertion that "the Bible forms an important guide for Ijeoma's personal development as a Christian and as a woman with a queer sexuality" (Frateur 2019, 43). Okparanta thus uses Ijeoma's experience to distinguish faith as a personal conviction and religion as a heteronormative instrument of control, suggesting that while the latter can be oppressive, the former can potentially liberate. This re-encounter with Bible teachings allows Ijeoma to reclaim faith on her own terms. It also offers opportunity for her to gain agency through engaging alternative truths in the Bible. Through making space for a more pluralistic social vision, Ijeoma negotiates acceptance, regains agency, and envisions a queer spiritual future.

3.6 Negotiating Acceptance, Reclaiming Agency, and Reimagining the Future

Okparanta negotiates queer acceptance and agency for Ijeoma through depicting queer love as an empowering desire. Okparanta shows how Ijeoma's relationship with Ndidi serves as a source of emotional and intellectual empowerment for Ijeoma to find agency and afterwards

negotiate acceptance. While Ijeoma's relationship with Amina offers an opportunity for her to discover her sexuality, her encounter with Ndidi plays a crucial role in her emotional and intellectual transformation- a pathway towards her self-acceptance. This begins after she meets Ndidi at her mother's shop in Aba and she invites Ijeoma to her house in the evenings. It is through such visits that she introduces Ijeoma to the world of literature, and to European authors like Agatha Christie, Charlotte Bronte, as well as Nigerian authors such as Flora Nwapa, Amos Tutuola, and Chinua Achebe.

The Nigerian writers in question wrote in the early period of Nigerian literature; their perspective on same-sex desire is orthodox. However, Ijeoma immerses herself in these books, gaining greater insights into the world of literature and constructing her identity in response to these canonical texts. Although Ijeoma has read Achebe before meeting Ndidi, rereading Achebe in Ndidi's library flags what Osinubi calls "the drive toward alternative reading protocols in Okparanta's novel" (Osinubi 2018, 676). Put differently, rereading Achebe signals the rethinking of discourses of gender and sexuality which the novel embarks on, especially since Achebe is one of the foremost writers whose works reinforce traditional gender norms. Also, Osinubi claims that *Under the Udala Trees*' "turn to earlier novels by Nigerian women rekindles stalled conversations about lesbian representations and African literary feminisms" (Osinubi 2018, 675) as it "broadens their representations of sexual desire and the family" (Osinubi 2018, 678). In other words, while early writers focused on heterosexual womanhood and family, Ijeoma's re-encountering of these established authors becomes a way to interrogate their position. Using Ijeoma's relationships with Amina and Ndidi, Okparanta stages the difficult trajectory which Ijeoma must traverse to gain acceptance, showing a movement from shame and fear to that of acceptance and affirmation. According to Osinubi, Amina and Ndidi exemplify different attitudes to queer love: "Amina's relationship is marked by trauma and prohibition, while Ndidi's relationship promotes healing and affection" (Osinubi 2018, 680). Both relationships expose society's intolerance towards same sex relationship and hostility towards non-heterosexual sexualities.

In addition to introducing her to wider literature, Ndidi connects ljeoma to other queer women to build solidarity, community and bonding knowing that queer desire cannot thrive in isolation. Introducing ljeoma to other queer women gives her a sense of belonging and bolsters her confidence in affirming her identity. The hidden church provided a conducive space for ljeoma to express her desire, and she admits to the liberating nature of their relationship during a dance with Ndidi at the underground church: "I felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known" (Okparanta 2015, 227).

Another way the novel achieves legitimacy for ljeoma's identity is through transforming the family unit – from a place of fear and rejection to a site of support and receptivity. The heteronormative family - the bedrock of heteronormativity - is the basic unit of society and the foundational site for queer suppression. However, Okparanta makes the family unit receptive to queerness through portraying a receptive husband, mother, and daughter. The highpoint of change in the novel occurs when Adaora, who initially refuses to accept ljeoma's identity, embraces her after she abandons her marriage with her husband, Chibundu. Her statement at the final part of the novel underwrites this. She tells ljeoma: "God who created you, must have known what he did. Enough is enough...*Ka udo di, ka ndu di*...let peace be. Let life be" (Okparanta 2016, 374). Adaora's comment underscores a change in attitude towards ljeoma's sexuality and a level of understanding about ljeoma's identity that transcends her initial interpretative approach to the Bible. At the beginning, she upholds heterosexuality and binary gender as a given for everyone and uses the Bible to justify this. But her statement above shows a shift from that position. She accepts that ljeoma's sexuality cannot be changed or cured by heterosexual marriage and this creates a level of empathy which allows her to prioritise ljeoma's humanity over societal norms. Recognising the inherent nature of ljeoma's identity over societal expectation represents the novel's progressive approach towards reimagining queerness within the Christian faith. Moreover, Adaora's change of heart anticipates society's capacity for change through revolutionising the family unit.

The continuation of Ijeoma and Ndidi's relationship amidst societal restriction and violence demonstrates queer resistance to, as well as acknowledgement of, heteronormative norms. To evade suspicion about their sexuality, Ijeoma and Ndidi live separately from each other yet maintain proximity, making it easier to continue to see each other. Ndidi and Ijeoma's closeness to Adaora and the fact that Adaora's house is where Ijeoma "with the help of mama...wound up raising Chidinma" (Okparanta 2016, 371) portrays a future where queer Nigerians are accepted by their family members and allowed to thrive. It also refers to the broader need for acceptance and inclusion within heteronormative system which Adaora embodies. Although Ijeoma and Ndidi pass as friends to evade public scrutiny knowing that "there can be no marriage between us [because] relationship like ours is still dangerous a thing, let alone marriage" (Okparanta 2016, 371), Ijeoma admits that she and Ndidi "feel ourselves every bit a couple" (Okparanta 2016, 371).

Ijeoma and Ndidi mirror the type of queer resistance explored in Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005) where Abdul and Femi live together and negotiate their identity, having first disclosed their sexual identity to their family members. Lindsley Green-Simms argues that "While Western readers, especially those immersed in queer theory or politics, might not see Abdul and Femi as particularly resistant, what Dibia seems to be claiming here is that to be in a same-sex relationship in Nigeria is a queer act of resistance" (Green-Simms 2016, 149). Like Dibia, Okparanta approaches queer futurity with a sense of caution as well as possibility: although she allows Ijeoma and Ndidi to live as couple and permits Adaora to accept their sexuality, both characters keep their relationship a secret whilst patiently waiting for a change in society. Ndidi dreams about a town "where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, men and men, and women and women" (Okparanta 2016, 372). Ndidi imagines a society where there is no distinction or exclusion based on how one chooses to love. Also, by refusing to forcefully make her characters out themselves, the novel reflects the lived reality of queer subjects whilst anticipating a more tolerant and inclusive society.

Writing toward this inclusive vision, Okparanta portrays Chidinma, Ijeoma's daughter, as a heterosexual subject who is receptive to her mother's queerness. She understands and

accepts her mother's nonconforming relationship with Ndidi. She graduates and becomes a teacher and a queer activist, defending and protecting queer people from violence. She is described as "that particular new generation of Nigeria with a stronger bent towards love than fear" (Okparanta 2016, 368). Osinubi argues that the portrayal of a lesbian mother and a heterosexual daughter reflect two generational attitudes towards queerness: "one mother's formation obstructs a transgenerational conversation about same-sex desire while one daughter's formation points to a radical recognition of same-sex love in the future" (Osinubi 2018, 683). In addition, Okparanta portrays Chibundu as a receptive husband, whose acceptance of Ijeoma's nonconforming sexuality allows her to live the life she chooses. Like Adaora, Chibundu keeps Ijeoma's relationship with Ndidi secret, even though her queer desire is the reason for their estrangement. Chibundu and Ijeoma live apart and after thirty years of their separation, and "through all of it [Ijeoma] was indebted to him, because he was at least considerate enough to keep from revealing to his parents any information about [her] and Ndidi" (Okparanta 2016, 369). Although their separation devastates him, Chibundu's silence over Ijeoma's sexuality can be read as a form of support and an act of kindness that fosters queer intimacy. Through transforming Adaora from a homophobic to an accepting and loving mother, as well as positioning Chibundu as a receptive husband, and Chidinma as a queer-affirming daughter, the novel suggests family members of queer people can allow them to flourish by understanding their sexuality as an intrinsic part of their existence. Adaora's receptivity creates a conducive home for nurturing Ijeoma's heterosexual daughter and the opportunity for Ijeoma and Ndidi to live a closeted life - thereby articulating a queer future even if on socially compromised terms.

Furthermore, the novel's idea of a queer future is promoted through the conceptualisation of change as a divine and natural principle and an intrinsic feature of the human world, showing how religion, law, heteropatriarchal nation state, and the family institution – all sites of queer suppression - can transform into queer affirming spaces. Change is conceptualised as a necessary part of God's "aesthetics, part of his vision for the world" (Okparanta 2016, 46-7), and the change begins first with Ijeoma's understanding of

the Bible as a living text whose meaning is subject to context yet adaptable to diverse interpretations and change. In a moment of introspection, Ijeoma ponders on the nature of God and his idea of change:

Sometimes I sit with my Bible in my hands, and I think to myself that God is nothing but an artist, and the world is His canvas. And I reason that if the Old and New Testaments are any indication, then change is in fact a major part of His aesthetic, a major part of His vision for the world. The Bible itself is an endorsement of change. Even biblical covenants change: In the New Testament, no longer the need for animal sacrifices. Change. No longer the covenant of law, but rather the covenant of grace. Change. A focus on all mankind rather than a focus on the Jews. Change. So many other changes, if a person were the list-making type (Okparanta 2016, 373).

Ijeoma refuses to internalise the idea of God as a punitive authority whose laws are unbending, an idea of God often portrayed in religious teachings. Instead, she views change as part of God's design and reimagines God as a being who maintains dynamism in creation through endorsing change as a form of growth. Through Ijeoma's belief that "the Bible itself is an endorsement of change" (Okparanta 2016, 371), Okparanta constructs change as an integral part of the human world. This idea of change as a natural principle allows Ijeoma to challenge fixed norms and embrace her identity, permitting queerness to exist within and not beyond her faith. Okparanta does not portray Ijeoma's life as a moral failure but as a journey of change – one which moves from shame to acceptance of her sexuality. This way, Okparanta shows Ijeoma's trajectory as a moral and spiritual maturation and not a deviation from divine purpose. Ijeoma admits that "It is a comforting thought when I reason it like that" (Okparanta 2016, 373). Ijeoma also reflects on how religious and cultural laws that are used to disavow queerness could be transformed in the light of love, justice and humanity:

Hebrews 8: God made a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that He made with their fathers. If that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been made for the second. With that new covenant, He made the first old. And that first one was allowed to vanish away. It is this verse that fills my mind these days. This, it seems to me, is the lesson of the Bible: this

affirmation of the importance of reflection, and of revision, enough revision
to do away with tired, old, even faulty laws (Okparanta 2016, 372-3)

Discouraging uncritical obedience to static and inherited laws and emphasising instead the importance of reflection and moral growth, Ijeoma envisions a shift away from the legal, religious, cultural, and political dialectics that frame queer identities as deviant subjects, to a deep consideration of their humanity. The reference to ‘old, tired, faulty, laws’ directly addresses Bible laws and cultural practices used in suppressing queerness. The tired laws could also refer to the extant sodomy laws in Nigerian Criminal Code, section 214, which criminalises queerness as “sins against the order of nature,” as well as the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act passed by Nigerian government to clamp down on queer marriage. Okparanta encourages the interrogation of Biblical and cultural laws and practices which exclude queer people as they no longer serve the ethical demands of the present. Ijeoma’s transformation from a passive and fearful subject to an active and reflective reader becomes a way through which she asserts agency over heteronormativity.

3.7 Summary and Implications

This chapter analysed how Okparanta’s portrayal of Ijeoma as a same-sex loving woman undermines the privileging of heteronormativity. The novel’s depiction of the first female queer protagonist disrupts decades of queer women’s invisibility in Nigerian women’s writing and by extension Nigerian literature and repositions the queer woman within its literary canon. I showed how the setting of the story during the Biafran enables a discussion of queer citizenship, while the reinterpretation of the Bible – an instrument of heteronormative control – allows Ijeoma to reclaim queer humanity and reconcile faith and sexuality. Ijeoma’s rejection of heterosexual marriage in favour of same-sex intimacy is read as an act of resistance, as is her negotiation of the stigma attached to her identity. The next chapter turns to Ani’s *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, examining how it challenges heteronormativity through its critique of heterosexual masculinity, patrilineality, and the anti-gay legislation, whilst calling for collective action.

Chapter Four: Contesting Heterosexual Masculinity, Homophobia and an Oppressive Legal Framework through Class Activism in Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers how Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's bildungsroman debut novel, *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, hereafter known as *He Sang a Lullaby*, depicts a character who defies Nigerian traditional and socio-cultural norms predicated on heteronormativity. Set during the period of the signing of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), the novel focuses on the experiences of August Akasike, a closeted queer, young university student as he struggles with self-acceptance in a society that privileges heterosexual masculinity. The plot focuses on August's transformative relationship with Oluwasegun (Segun) Aberemangigha Adeniran, a fellow university student who is openly queer and politically active. Their relationship unravels amidst a hostile environment defined by heteronormativity and reinforced by a heteropatriarchal legal framework. Segun's political consciousness and commitment to justice become a catalyst for August's emotional and political awakening expressed through embracing queer masculinity and class activism. Narrating August and Segun's experiences, Ani explores how heteronormative ideals shape queer lives and choices, and the impact of heteronormative legal codes on queer identities. The novel depicts how heteronormativity operates in postcolonial Nigeria and the way in which the queer characters resist the erasure of their identity. *He Sang a Lullaby* thus explores the connection between queer identity, political consciousness, and resistance to queer oppression in Nigerian society.

Like Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, *He Sang a Lullaby* targets two audiences: the queer community struggling to reconcile their identity with societal expectations, as well as the wider Nigerian society that exhibits intolerance towards queerness without acknowledging its impact on queer lives. The novel is narrated in the omniscient perspective and takes readers on a journey that exposes them to the varied emotions expressed by the

characters - from hate and shame, to love, rage and hope. The narrative is crafted to make the readers vicarious participants in the struggles the queer characters go through to survive within heteronormative Nigerian society. August's experiences render the intricacies of navigating family and societal expectations, as well as the struggle to embrace one's identity in a religious and conservative society, whereas Segun's journey shows both queer vulnerability and resistance.

Ani not only continues the contestation of heteronormativity begun in the last two chapters by portraying characters who embrace their queerness despite the constraints placed on their identity but also explores the human journey of what happens when intense homophobia and state-sponsored violence is met with defiance and resistance. Ani's work not only captures the attitudes circulating before the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014, but also the violent environment that followed the signing of the Act, exposing how the Nigerian legal system – a heteropatriarchal framework - harms the characters. The novel appears to answer a question that is central to Nigerian queer narratives: how can queer subjects confront and transform a society governed by strict heterosexual norms and repressive legal system?

Ani Kayode Somtochukwu is a 23-year-old Nigerian queer activist who seeks to uproot the systems and institutions that enable queer violence and exclusion. While living in Nigeria, he participated in protests for good governance, fought for queer rights, and demanded an end to violence against non-conforming individuals. He is part of the editorial team of the Socialist Workers and Youth League (SWL) and personally founded the Queer Union for Economic and Social Transformation (QUEST9ja), a movement that champions queer liberation in Nigeria (Laxfield 2023). In an interview, Ani explains that his debut novel, *He Sang a Lullaby* probes “the way the burden of masculinity can follow us from even before we are born, shaping every facet of our life, our desires, our chance at happiness” (American Booksellers Association 2023). Contesting traditional gender norms, Ani's writing explores how conformity to heteronormative culture limits queer lives. In a continuation of Dibia and Okparanta's search for queer legitimacy and rights examined in previous chapters, Ani's

narrative emphasises the importance of the queer individual's rights over the expectations of the heteronormative family and community. This insistence on recognition of individual identity over community is also demonstrated in the author's name order which subverts the naming convention in the Igbo culture in Nigeria. In most Nigerian cultures, a person's first and middle names come before the family name, which indicates and emphasises family identity over the individual. However, the author puts his first and other names after his surname. By re-ordering the names, the author relegates his family identity - a trademark of heteropatriarchy - and centres his individuality against existing convention.

The following sections explore how the queer characters subvert traditional masculinity, contest homophobia and the oppressive legal framework, resist assimilation, and embrace queer love and social justice. This chapter argues that *He Sang a Lullaby* not only disrupts heteronormativity but also exposes the intersection of queer rights with class struggle, calling for resistance through class action.

4.2 Challenging Heteronormative Family Structures

One important way in which *He Sang a Lullaby* challenges heteronormativity is by disrupting the heteronormative family structure founded on heterosexuality, reproduction and patrilineality. Ani explores how family names are used to control identity. In Nigeria, naming is a symbol of ownership, belonging and inheritance, both material and social, centring the authority of men and fathers. Children inherit their fathers' name - girls give up their father's name and adopt their husband's name after marriage but boys carry on the family name. Such naming systems highlight bloodline and gendered hierarchies of power, privileging masculinity, heterosexuality, and asserting lineage, gendered binarism, and heteronormative authority. Through naming, the family structure attaches much significance to male children as a symbol of ownership and family legacy whose loss portends the loss of generations and spirituality. Ani uses the character, August, to show how queer men embody and internalise the conflict of heteronormativity.

August is a closeted queer, professional athlete, and the only son to an Igbo parents - Mr and Mrs Akasike. He is raised in a conservative and religious household. Born after the

parents had already had three daughters, August occupies an important position in his family – he is an answer to years of longing and hope for a male child. His life is already set in stone: he must pass on the family name to ensure its succession. The family dynamics portrayed in the novel mirror the broader societal expectations. August's relationship with his family members is laden with societal expectations. His mother's absence, due to her death at August's birth, and the subsequent imposition of her ideals by his sisters create a complex web of emotional obligation for August that conflicts with his emerging queer identity. August's sisters – Uzoamaka, Chinyere and Peculiar - and his grandmother constantly remind him of the importance of his patrilineal responsibility of carrying on the family name as an only son. His grandmother names him Afamefula, an Igbo name which means 'may my name never be lost' and at around six years old, she reminds August of the need to live in a culturally accepted way, which involves investing in the collective family identity: "You live not just for yourself, Afam. You live for us all. For Akasike. Always remember" (Ani 2023, 11). The family's insistence on August's adherence to heteronormativity originates from a cultural framework that equates masculinity with the number of children, especially sons, a man sires and supports a patrilineal system that limits and imposes generational inheritance to male offsprings.

The family system is depicted as an oppressive institution that dehumanises individuals in a way that society has failed to acknowledge. Its privileging of heterosexual masculinity produces the desire to conform in a way that endangers everyone –heterosexual men, women, and queer people. Women are perpetually confined to their domestic position as wives, mothers and daughters, and men's masculinity is defined through the number of sons they father. Using August's parents as example, the novel demonstrates how heteronormativity, operating through heteropatriarchy, harms everyone physically, emotionally, and psychologically through its demand for unquestioned conformity to gender roles. As a mode of social organisation, it creates generational anxiety: Akasike, August's father, for example, was also an only son whose masculinity was only proven by fathering August, despite having several daughters before him. People called him "a weak man who

could not father sons” (Ani 2023, 8), until he had August. Despite his apparent contentment with three daughters, society pressures August’s father to birth a male child to validate his masculinity – a birth which costs the death of August’s mother. As a result, August’s father finds himself haunted by the weight of societal expectations and family honour, despite his initial indifference to it: “He remembered the letter his mother sent him telling him how people were calling him a weak man who could not father sons. Why would an only child not remarry? It had bruised him. Especially because he knew his mother could not write. She had dictated that letter to someone else” (Ani 2023, 8). Mr Akasike’s anxiety comes, not from within, but from a society that honours men who father sons and questions the masculinity of other men who are unable to reproduce male children.

In the same vein, August’s mother is portrayed as a victim of heteropatriarchy and the novel shows how her decision, role and choices are shaped by societal expectation of gender, sexuality and family. Segun recognises that “we live in a patriarchal society that hates women” (Ani 2023, 170). In Nigeria, the utility of women is contingent upon their fulfilment of reproductive responsibilities. Barren women and those who have only daughters are often ridiculed for failing to birth sons who will continue the family name. Consequently, society compels women to prioritise childbirth, even at the expense of their own health and safety. August’s mother, who remains unnamed throughout the text, is portrayed as voiceless, invisible and devoid of agency. She goes to great lengths to fulfil patriarchal expectation, putting her life at risk to give birth to August because within the patriarchal system, she “had a point to prove, a duty to fulfil” (Ani 2023, 9). Her identity and choices are defined by her desire to have a son, which itself is imposed on her by heteropatriarchy. Her demise occurs as she tries to conform to societal gender expectations, leaving her husband profoundly affected and unable to overcome the resulting trauma: “August’s birth broke his father. It somehow robbed him of the strength to continue living. The man August grew up recognising as his father was a ghost for whom life held no more surprises, or disappointments, no pain, or happiness” (Ani 2023, 7). Instead of feeling joyful at the birth of his son, Mr. Akasike is overcome with grief due to the emptiness left by his wife’s death.

Critiquing the way in which patriarchy remains unquestioned, August is upset at his mother's choice of sacrificing her life to serve patriarchy. Despite being constantly reminded of his mother's sacrifice, he feels that her death is pointless because "it makes no sense dying to give birth to a child you won't even be alive to raise" (Ani 2023,170). By witnessing the destructive effects of heteronormativity and patriarchy in both his family and society, August challenges the cultural norms and institutions that uphold it. Living for cultural validation feels like a burden to August and in an act of resistance, he critiques the importance placed in family names in reinforcing heteronormativity:

The more he thought of it, the more it felt like a burden, this name he had to keep alive, this name he had to live for. He thought how stupid it was that such primacy was bestowed on names and blood, something he knew no one else cared for. And it seemed the weight of it, of keeping something aflame when the rest of the world didn't, made it an even heavier burden. August sometimes fantasized about his own death, perhaps a car accident or a stray bullet. He could fall asleep and not wake up again, and everything would have been in vain. He remembered his grandmother's words: You do not live for you alone. He did not want any of it. He wanted to be free, to live just for himself, to be his own person" (Ani 2023, 156).

August's statement specifically frames reproduction as the means of passing the name, like a torch, to the next generation. August's second name, Afamefula, given to him by his grandmother, embodies the traditional expectations of heteronormativity and his rejection of this culturally assigned name marks a significant moment in the novel's disruption of the family structure. It is a name invoked as a prayer for the continuation of the family lineage through successive sons who will safeguard the name and legacy from extinction. While the novel captures the significance of August's name, August does not embrace it as it will bind him to the heteropatriarchal system. So, despite being haunted by the name and what it portends: "the name never made it to his birth certificate" (Ani 2023, 10). So, to upend the intrusive influence of heteronormativity on August's identity, the novel first weakens the heteronormative family setting: August's mother dies after childbirth, and his father is devastated and traumatised by her death to the point that he remains emotionally distant from August throughout the novel. Thus, having witnessed firsthand the devastating impact

of heteronormative norms – the death of his mother and its impact on his father, August subverts its norms by rejecting his culturally assigned name, and heterosexuality.

Due to the death of August's mother during childbirth and the absence of his father during his birth, August is named by the nurse who delivered him in the labour ward. Instead of naming August based on the circumstance of his birth or in recognition of his expected masculinity, the nurse chooses a name that recognises August's individual identity over family identity - August: "She picked the name for its promising meaning. Awe-inspiring. Majestic. Venerable... Knowing that August's mother had no son and had been told by the doctor not to have more children, the nurse saw him in an almost heavenly light" (Ani 2023, 3). So, whereas *Afamefula* signals August's future role as a symbol of heteropatriarchal masculinity, August's given name emphasises his personal rather than the traditional identity. August's rejection of his cultural name therefore becomes a way through which the novel decentres the significance attached to names in heteropatriarchal culture. In the context of August's culture, choosing one's identity becomes a political act of resistance against a naming system that subsumes individuality within the heteropatriarchal family and cultural identity.

In contrast to August's family, Segun navigates the family relationship in a more relaxed way, showing a strong sense of autonomy. Although he faces societal judgment of his sexuality, his family is portrayed as a place of refuge. For instance, whereas August's sisters reinforce heteronormative expectations, Segun's parents – especially his mother – show little concern about his identity and do not pressure him to conform to traditional gender norms. They never speak about his sexuality but rather "leave it in the realm of ambiguity" (Ani 2023, 200). Segun would later die because of a homophobic attack, leaving his parents devastated, however, his mother does not lament the loss of a family legacy, rather she expresses the desire to understand her son through the books he had read while alive. She tells August when she came to pack Segun's stuff from school: "I want to know what he was reading, what he was thinking... I want to know my son" (Ani 2023, 285). Using August and Segun's experiences, the novel critiques the heteronormative family setting as a site of

repression but also as a space that can allow queer masculinity to emerge - while one family supports, the other represses queer identity.

4.3 Subverting Gender Norms and Patriarchal Expectations

Another way the novel contests heteronormativity is by rejecting Nigerian society's dominant emphasis on heterosexuality and marriage. Raised by overbearing and overprotective sisters, August was socialised into traditional gender and, as the sisters constantly remind him of the need to embrace heterosexuality, he internalises heteronormative masculinity and refuses to express his same sex attraction. August's sisters "shielded him as much as they could from concepts like hate, things that could hinder a beautiful boy from growing into a beautiful man" (Ani 2023, 12). Beauty, in this context, does not refer to his physical looks but to heterosexual masculinity. The novel portrays August's sisters as enforcers of heteronormativity, confirming the role which the family unit plays in policing queer sexuality. Their emphasis on heterosexual masculinity shapes August's identity and forces him to repress his desires, leading August to experience inner conflict between his emerging queer desire and societal expectation, thus laying the foundation for the conflict of identity that the novel examines.

At first, August lives in denial and fears disappointing his family as both a man and a son. He suppresses his attraction to other boys, even attending church to silence his feelings. He later pursues social respectability in a heterosexual relationship with Betty, a fellow athletic champion, which begins when they meet at the Student Union Government games hosted by their school. Their relationship is portrayed as performative because being with Betty "got him closer to the man he was supposed to be" (Ani 2023, 154) - but not the man he wants to be. Initially delighted with the idea of becoming a socially acceptable son, August considers the idea of heterosexual marriage and how it will ingratiate him to his sisters: "The idea of introducing Betty to his sister excites August, as did the thought of having a date to a wedding" (Ani 2023, 154). But August's unwillingness to accept his queerness unveils the internalisation of heteronormative norms which prescribes what is acceptable regarding

gender, as well as society's policing of queer sexuality which is disavowed as unnatural and unmasculine.

Segun, in contrast, is portrayed as more overtly challenging to heteronormativity. An only child to Yoruba parents, Segun refuses to cower under heteronormative norms, living openly, and engaging politically with social justice to become a figure of resistance to oppressive norms. Segun is described as "a boy who naturally attracted attention. The way he walked, the way he talked, his gesticulation. So out of place was he, in a place full of boys trying to establish dominance over their peers, that he immediately became a target" (Ani 2023, 33). Despite being targeted for his queerness, Segun displays an open acceptance of his identity. He loves boys and seeks queer relationships with Tanko and later Trevor. Segun's open acceptance of his identity deconstructs heterosexual masculinity as a given and offers an open critique of heteronormativity that views masculinity strictly through the heterosexual lens. His queer identity represents the possibility of an alternative masculinity that does not conform to the norms. In this way, August and Segun are shown to have different needs: August is in search of self-acceptance and Segun desires real emotional connection. After Segun meets August, their evolving relationship becomes a way through which the novel challenges heterosexual masculinity. It is only after August begins to embrace his identity that Segun guides him on a journey towards acceptance.

Segun's relationship with August begins at the university and as it gets deeper, August learns how to overcome his fear and embrace his identity as the novel constructs closeted queerness as having a psychological ramification on August. At first when August meets Segun, he feels threatened by Segun's openness about his sexuality having lived in denial of his own queerness. When they share their first kiss, August pulls away from Segun, and informs him: "I don't know how to live this life" (Ani 2023, 183). However, Segun understands that August's struggle emanates from societal conditioning: "We are socialised to despise ourselves, it's not his fault" (Ani 2023, 184). Segun's comment addresses one of the major issues at the heart of Nigerian queer community – the fear of being known openly as queer. Many queer people live in hiding and are afraid to openly embrace their queerness in Nigeria

because queerness is portrayed as sinful, shameful and deviant behaviour and attracts violence. The novel thus highlights how heteronormative norms affect queer identities, having a direct effect on the possibility of queer affirmation and intimacy, and leading to assimilation and repression of queer sexuality.

Ani also shows how discourses that disavow queerness not only draw from the heteropatriarchal culture but also religion. Traditional Christianity views non-heterosexual sex as a sinful indulgence that opposes the biblical command to multiply, rule, and populate the earth and this shapes how August responds to his desires. For instance, August refuses to commit to a relationship with June, a boy he meets on 2go, due to the condemning words of a pastor who preached at the Catholic church he worships in. The pastor shouts: “homosexuals, God knows. Even if you hide from the world, God knows”. It struck something in him. God became for him, not an abstract, omnipotent force, but a personal one, hoping on him to do the right thing ... August’s friendship with June died there” (Ani 2023, 98). So, August is haunted by the image of a threatening God, and lives in fear of using his sexuality wrongly, or in June’s voice, “becoming a dirty worldly thing” (Ani 2023, 96). Despite being attracted to June, August perceives his attraction as “something completely external to himself. It was the only way he could make sense of it, seeing it as separate, a foreign feeling in a boy’s chest” (Ani 2023, 96). The definition of his sexuality as something external or that results from an outside influence is rooted in the dominant discourses of queerness in Nigeria and Africa. African discourses of gender link same-sex attraction to external influences, and according to Dunton (1989), many African fictions portray characters embracing nonconforming identities after migrating to the West or interacting with foreigners. In this way, queerness is depicted as an identity external to Africans. Such discourses could lead to violence against queer people or even death, thus forcing queer people to hide their identity. To counter this, the novel shows August’s identity as something that develops from within, without any external influence. Hence, rather than amplify his fears, Segun “showed him how to overcome his fears” (Ani 2023, 186), and challenge assumptions that continue to make queer lives impossible.

August's relationship with Segun disrupts heterosexual masculinity: rather than direct their desire to women, they crave each other's affection. Their first moment of intimacy unlocks August's desires and he "felt like knowing himself for the first time" (Ani 2023,190), not in the way society expects but in the way that makes him feel true to himself. When Segun commits suicide after a vicious homophobic attack, August finally recognises the futility in hiding under the heterosexual mask, embraces his identity, and comes out to his sisters. August admits that coming out to them "felt as though he had declared himself to the world" (Ani 2023, 241). Coming out to his sisters is important in deconstructing the heteronormative family structure and its influence on heterosexual masculinity. Seeing Segun's suffering – and his eventual suicide - August comes to understand that conforming to heterosexual masculinity cannot end queer violence. For him, breaking free from family and societal expectations becomes paramount.

August and Segun's relationship challenges traditional gender roles, and by living openly as queer they contest heteropatriarchal masculinity. Their relationship which is marked by openness and vulnerability highlights the limits which rigid gender norms impose on gender and sexuality and how emotional openness and mutual affection can undo these norms, paving the way for an alternative masculinity that is both inclusive and liberated from the rigidity associated with heteropatriarchy, underscoring the importance of challenging hegemonic systems.

4.4 Exposing homophobia and the Impact of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act

Matebeni et al argue that "the "greatest threat to being queer in African geopolitical contexts is the withdrawal of rights by the state, resulting in renewed violence against African queers" (Matebeni et al, 2018, 2). Prior to the rise of queer literature, Nigerian society had normalised violence against queer people because queer identity is widely considered an affront to heteronormativity. Because of entrenched heteronormativity, Nigerian society constructs queer people as non-humans and cultural outcasts, justifying oppression and violence against them. The law banning same-sex marriage in 2014 shows how discrimination against queer people is rooted in heteronormativity, leading to violence and silencing. *He Sang a*

Lullaby unveils society's ingrained violence against queer people before the SSMPA law but specifically how the law aggravated violence against queer people, making queer lives almost impossible. August is afraid, not only to love, but to even speak about it; but Segun's character offers a bolder portrait of queer resistance and the political will to confront queer oppression. The novel uses both characters to sketch the difficult life of queer people within a heteropatriarchal system, bringing society face to face with the way the queer community filters their experience within a homophobic culture – a perspective which was previously absent in literature.

As already stated, religious, legal and socio-cultural norms which disavow queerness create an enabling environment for the circulation of negative attitudes towards queer people. Before the bill, these biases enabled the scapegoating of queer people. However, the SSMPA bill provided state-sanctioned legitimacy for discrimination and violence against them by criminalising the public expression of queerness, membership of queer organisations, and pro-queer gatherings. The law deepened the culture of fear and silence surrounding queer sexuality in Nigeria, and subsequent to the bill, "it became almost a form of suicide to be homosexual in Nigeria" (Ayeni 2017, 206). The Nigerian state had denied the existence of queer people in the past yet simultaneously enacted a law that presupposes their existence. For instance, while the SSMPA was under debate in the Nigerian senate, Nigerian foreign minister, Ojo Maduekwe, denied the existence of queer people during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Nigeria held in Geneva in 2009:

As we have indicated in our National Report, we have no record of any group of Nigerians, who have come together under the umbrella of 'Lesbian, Gay and Transgender' group, let alone to start talking of their rights ... During our National Consultative Forum, we went out of our way to look for the Gay, Lesbian and Transgender group, but we could not come across Nigerians with such sexuality. If they are an amorphous group, then the question of violence against them does not arise, let alone negotiating special rights for them (Ayeni 2017, 207)

Such double standards towards the queer community in Nigeria have both encouraged queer violence and legitimised queer invisibility. In his novel, Ani draws attention to the devastating impact of Nigeria's heteronormative legal framework on queer people's physical,

psychological, social and emotional wellbeing. Portraying the experiences of August and Segun in the years leading up to the passage of the bill, the novel examines how their lives are impacted by the dominant construction of gender and sexual norms. The novel shows August and Segun as characters who are not only negotiating the emotional burden of queerness in society but also struggling against a society that denies their humanity and enacts laws that further endanger their lives. While August does not initially experience much violence because he is closeted and passes as heterosexual, extreme homophobic violence is portrayed through Segun. In a culture that measures masculinity based on the normative ideals, Segun's open expression of his identity automatically marks him as an othered subject.

All through his life, Segun is constantly forced to fight for his very existence. During his days as a primary school pupil, the reader learns that "his classmates were not very kind" (Ani 2023, 28). His classmates continuously harass and bully him for looking different. Initially, Segun avoids them by refusing to engage in any activity that will put him in the spotlight: "He tried everything to make himself unseen, to never speak, to never offer to do anything with them" (Ani 2023, 28-9). However, avoiding any communication or interaction with other pupils does not protect Segun from the numerous attacks he experiences: "they saw him. And regarded him with nothing but cruelty. Sometimes they just taunted him and did it to him in a way that could hurt a little boy. Other times, they pushed him to the ground and rubbed his face into the grass" (Ani 2023, 29). Documenting Segun's experience right from childhood underscores the novel's argument that queer people are treated with disdain and hate simply for who they are, a position which has continued to erode their rights as humans and citizens. Segun's experience at the university in Enugu further exposes the ingrained homophobia in society. The novel depicts Segun's struggle with intense homophobia after moving from Lagos to Enugu for university education. Segun's classmates and roommates are a constant source of terror to him. On his first day at school, his roommates "loathed him and made their animosity clear" (Ani 2023, 67) and they are quick to make a derogatory comment about his identity. Francis, one of his roommates, remarks: "Are you sure you didn't mean to go to the

female hostel” (Ani 2013, 68). In another instance, Dike, another student in the university, comments on Segun’s girlish mannerism and how he looks ‘breakable’, and he references how a queer son is a misery and disappointment to his parents: “just looking at that guy, he is probably a gay and his parents will be at home thinking they have a son” (Ani 2023, 159). Francis’ comment is influenced by the fact that in Nigeria, masculinity is viewed only in relation to heterosexuality; so, a queer son becomes a fundamental loss in a culture that celebrates male children, marriage and reproduction. The violence which Segun experiences is therefore linked to the heteronormative ideals which specify gendered behaviour and entrench patriarchy. Segun’s identity thus visibly challenges the normative ideals of masculinity in society, making him a target for attacks.

While the novel depicts experiences of the queer characters before the 2014 SSPMA, it vividly portrays the escalating violence, bullying, and sense of uncertainty that characterised the lives of the characters after the promulgation of the Act. Against the backdrop of an existing and pervasive violence in society, the law grants people the power to hunt down queer individuals and scapegoat them for being different. The novel focuses on how Segun becomes even more anxious when the law passed its first reading in the senate, fearing it would worsen the situation for people like him who are nonconforming. When the bill is eventually signed, supposedly in defence of Nigeria’s heteronormative culture, Segun expresses a different opinion regarding the reason for the bill’s passage into law: he believes Nigerian president at the time, Goodluck Jonathan passed the bill, not as a defence of culture, but to secure local support for his re-election, capitalising on societal prejudice to boost his chances for a second term.

You could look at it like this. Jonathan has, in just a few years, managed to end fuel subsidy, privatised electricity distribution and generation as well as other key industries, incur even more job losses, increase poverty, while all the people in his cabinet grew fat on our national cake. He needs to sign this bill to help ingratiate himself to people, by appealing to their bigotry, and their religion and their nationalism. Now he’ll be the strong man who stood up to David Cameron and Obama” (Ani 2023, 197).

August is initially ignorant of the bill's ramification on queer lives, but Segun diligently reads and analyses the contents of the law to help August - and by implication the novel's readers - to fully understand it. He also engages in debates with supporters of the bill and highlights the bill's insensitivity to the already precarious existence of queer people: "Who was talking about gay marriage in Nigeria? Who was even thinking about it? Absolutely no one. We're just here trying to not get killed, and the Senate is here working to make sure millions of Nigerians are in more fear" (Ani 2023, 196). Segun's comment draws attention to the vulnerability of queer individuals, who do not have protected rights, leading them to prioritise safety and survival over the legal recognitions. At the same time, this close engagement with the bill serves a pedagogic function in educating the readers about the detail of the law and the state's hostility towards queer people. The excerpt is a direct critique of the Nigerian Senate for prioritising legislation that increases fear and oppression of its citizens rather than addressing more pressing issues affecting the general population.

At first, the violence against Segun at the university appears to be merely verbal with no physical assault. However, the novel demonstrates how intense hatred for Segun's sexuality intensifies after the passage of the bill, resulting in a brutal assault which permanently disrupts his life. Although Segun has experienced physical violence and near-death experiences during the formative years of his life, the violence climaxes at the university in Enugu. In the beginning, Segun does not take the threat of physical assault seriously, but in a cruel act of violence, his roommates assault him and leave him half dead at their hostel – the Njoku Hall. August arrives and takes him to the hospital but even though Segun survives the attack, he suffers from psychological and physical trauma. After the attack, Segun's "life broke in two. A before, when he knew what he wanted and the type of world he wanted to see, or at least try to help build, and the certainty of self with which to sustain himself no matter how alone he became. And then, an after" (Ani 2023, 247). Segun becomes thinner, unable to connect with people, including August, his close friend. He experiences disorientation, and a fractured identity, leading him to resort to suicide as the only escape from the violence and feelings of trauma and alienation. Segun's ordeal

highlights the physical and psychological trauma which queer people experience and the devastating consequences for their mental health. Segun's trauma results from society's support for violence against queer people; Ani uses Segun's death to signpost the fatal impact of society's insistence on heteronormativity, reinforced through legislations that endorse violence against queer people. Segun's life as an openly queer character is portrayed as a cultural dissent and a tool of advocacy to draw attention to how homophobia, which often goes unnoticed in society, threatens queer lives.

Besides the precarious existence of queer people in public spaces like school, the novel exposes the online harassment and humiliation queer individuals also face. To reduce exposure to society's violence, the queer community often and actively seek safe online spaces to network, build strong community and arrange sexual encounters. Unfortunately, these spaces are depicted as dangerous places for queer individuals, as they face stalking, harassment, and even violence. For instance, Tanko, Segun's first lover, experiences mob action that devastates him. Unlike Segun who is openly queer, "Tanko was the type of boy who never aroused suspicion, who so easily blended in, who passed" (Ani 2023, 59). However, Tanko's closeted identity does not protect him from homophobic attack as his classmates chat with him anonymously, pretending to be interested in a relationship, while planning an attack on him. Suspecting his sexuality, his classmates attempt to unmask him to punish him for his identity. He agrees to meet an anonymous contact from 2go, only to discover that the person is one of his classmates. Tanko is afterwards subjected to dehumanising treatment after his classmates storm his house, assault and humiliate him before dragging him to the police. After the incident, Tanko becomes traumatised. When Segun learns about the assault and visits him, Tanko is so traumatised by the violent encounter that he is unable to emotionally connect with Segun anymore: "the attack had shut down something in Tanko, broken his spirit fundamentally, so that all that was left was a shell" (Ani 2023, 55). The detailed narrative portrait of Tanko and Segun's experience after attack shows how violence against queer people does not only harm them physically, but it also breaks their spirit and fragments their sense of self. It shows that while openly queer people

like Segun are targets of violence, closeted queer identities, who choose to keep their sexuality a secret, are also at risk of violence.

In addition to the risks faced by queer subjects on social media and in discreet virtual queer spaces, the novel shows how private spaces are also at risk of invasion. The assault on Segun at Enu Njoku Hall and Tanko, at his residence, underscores the prevailing violence that queer people navigate daily, and the text argues that there is no safe space for queer people in Nigerian society. Segun's death happens after the bill was passed into law and Ani highlights how the law promotes fear, violence and discrimination, probing the government's role in oppressing its citizen. It emphasises that the government's efforts to criminalise nonconforming individuals increases the vulnerability of millions of queer Nigerians. The result is a climate in which nonconforming individuals feel compelled to hide their identities and live in constant fear of persecution.

Ani dramatizes the experiences of August and Segun before and after the bill is passed into law to critique the normalisation of violence against queer people, drawing attention to how heteronormativity undermines queer subjects as citizens. The novel graphically engages with homophobia to let readers know that while Nigerian society appears to frown at open queerness, the problem lies in the fact that being queer, whether open or closeted remains dangerous for queer people. By exposing homophobia and queer violence, Ani draws attention to the precarious existence of queer people, breaking the normalisation of violence against them and instead reinforces their humanity. The novel shows that although Nigerian society targets openly queer people, being openly queer or closeted does not save queer identities from violence. To combat queer violence, Ani proposes class activism.

4.5 Class Activism and Formation of Alternative Community

In *Queer in Africa: LGBTIQ Identities, Citizenship and Activism*, Matebeni et al observe that "Queer identity formation in Africa is also intimately concerned with advancing a human rights strategy that works with reinforcing solidarity by building strategic coalitions with rights-based organisations across class, race, and gender lines" (Matebeni et al, 2018, 2). The authors

make this assertion because in most African societies, queer sexuality is commonly considered as acts and behaviour that should be disavowed on account of being at variance with authentic African culture. To challenge the normative thinking and advance queer rights, Matebeni et al believe that building solidarity and coalitions across class, race and gender lines, could benefit, not just queer people, but oppressed groups more generally.

As already outlined, Ani departs from the other authors under study here by the way his novel embraces class activism, recognising the interconnected nature of oppression and how group solidarity could be the pathway for liberation of not just queer people but other marginalised identities. Queer activism in Nigeria has primarily focused on procuring legal protection for queer people by emphasising their humanity through health-based advocacy. In this regard, it has recorded some progress, although dominant social attitudes and the ingrained heteronormative values continue to slow queer activism (Salako 2014). The ingrained values are further used to create moral panic in society by emphasising how queerness threatens the moral, cultural, religious and social fabric of society, leading to heterosexual versus homosexuality debates. These debates occlude the formation of collective action against oppression.

For instance, in Nigeria, marginalised groups like the working class tend to focus on the moral panic created in pro-normative gender discourses, while overlooking the intersecting nature of their oppression. This lack of awareness around collective suffering has been responsible for the lack of solidarity among oppressed people because heteronormative subjects typically perceive class and queer oppression as isolated struggles. In “Political Discourses of Queer Activism and Class in Africa,” Lyn Ossome, a feminist critic, emphasises this point when she argues that “heterosexist solidarity has been used to obscure class differences much to the detriment of poor people of all cultural identities” (Ossome 2013, 34). In other words, Ossome opines that the common identity built around the idea that heterosexuality is the norm, or the privileged sexuality is often a mask that shifts attention from the real material struggles, such as class inequality which affect both heterosexual and queer people, preventing the emergence of meaningful class struggles. So, framing queerness as a moral transgression often serves as a way through which the political class

garners support from the working classes and distracts them from the main issues which affect their lives such as access to education, healthcare, housing, laws, jobs and bad governance, which are hardly addressed. However, the novel departs from the heterosexual versus queer fault lines promoted in dominant discourses in Nigeria and focuses instead on how the working class can unite and resist the suppression of their rights and privileges.

As a deeply political novel, *He Sang a Lullaby* adopts a Marxist-based ideology in its critique of heteronormativity. This is because, class-based activism recognises society as mainly constituted by two major groups of people - the oppressor and the oppressed – and challenges the unequal power dynamics at play in their relationship to each other. One of the ways the novel connects queer activism to class struggle is to demonstrate that the SSMPA that outlaws the expression of queer sexuality emanates from the same upper/political class whose policies and reforms have been oppressive of the working-class. Ani portrays the SSMPA not simply as a law against queer people but as one that serves ideological purposes: it is utilised by the political class to unite people from different cultures, religion and ethnicity under a common ‘moral’ cause, while ignoring the worsening economic condition that collectively impacts them. The law is depicted as a weapon to suppress dissent and prevent solidarity among oppressed groups – which was already weakened because at the time the law was promulgated and passed, queer people were living in hiding, with no legal protection and fearful to demand their rights. Ani’s novel presents an alternative reading in which the politicization of homophobia in Nigeria is not about protecting Nigerian culture and religious belief but rather a ploy to protect the interests of the upper class.

August, Trevor, Segun and Segun’s mother serve as the lens through which the author exposes the multilayered yet intersectional nature of oppression in society. Ani links feminist, queer and class struggle through the experiences of August’s mother, Segun’s mother, August and Segun, showing how women, queer and working-class people are oppressed by the same hegemonic system. Segun already remarks how patriarchy dehumanises women and the novel proceeds to show how the heteropatriarchal system orchestrates hate against women - demanding reproductive rights over personal safety and compulsory heterosexual marriage. Ani draws a parallel between the system that insists on

reproduction of a male child from women such as August's mother, the regime that pursues policies that dehumanise the working class and the system that enforces traditional norms that stifle queer identity.

Ani recognises that the subordinate position of women has remained constant in heteropatriarchy and has become a reference point for constructing othered identities such as queer people. This is because while heterosexual men are taken as the standard gender, queer men are derogatorily labelled as 'women' and therefore relegated to the assumed subordinate position. In one instance when Julia, Segun's classmate, defends Segun against homophobic comments from a course mate who describes Segun's thin long arms being 'like woman own', Julia rebuts by asked why having a female appearance is considered derogatory: "you don't know how to mind your business, or you hate women so much that it pours over the rim unto effeminate men" (Ani 2023, 68). Because women are framed as inferior and secondary to men, comparing Segun's arm with that of a woman becomes a way through which society emasculates male queer people. By highlighting this association, the novel underscores the need to build an egalitarian society that affirms an individual's identity irrespective of their gender.

The first portrait of activism in the novel is Segun's mother. Segun's father is politically indifferent, but his mother is an activist who instilled and nurtured Segun's desire for justice. She is described as one who was always "angry at something and hers was the embittered type of rage" (Ani 2023, 58). Throughout the story, the reader encounters her spirit of activism. For decades, she has actively participated in protests in the former Eastern region to fight against the government's exploitative policies, earning her multiple arrests and detention at Kirikiri prison – one of the maximum-security prisons in Nigeria. Segun's mother's unwavering commitment to social justice is evident in her critique of President Olusegun's handling of the Niger Delta crisis⁶ and her protests of the insensitive policies of the Lagos Government.⁷ The

⁶ Niger Delta Area is the region that produces the oil which constitutes Nigeria's major commercial export. Niger Delta crisis thus refers to the longstanding conflict where local communities protest environmental degradation, poverty and lack of development despite the region's wealth. The crisis involves kidnappings, attacks on oil facilities and clash with government forces. The aim is to demand resource control and social justice.

⁷ Lagos State is a state in southwestern region of Nigeria, known as the country's economic hub. Due to the economic potential, it attracts people from diverse regions who see it as a site of multiple economic possibilities.

oil extracted from Nigeria's Niger Delta region is utilised both domestically and in various western and African countries, yet the Indigenous people, whose lives are adversely affected by foreign oil corporations, endure a state of deprivation. In their quest for improved living conditions and resource control, restive youths from the Niger Delta resort to armed resistance against the government. However, rather than address the concerns of the Niger Delta people, Obasanjo insists on "*crushing the people's right to subsistence on their land with state power*" (Ani 2023, 28 emphasis author's). Segun's mother justifies youth restiveness in the Niger Delta: "How will they not fight? How do you crush people into the earth and expect them to just lie there and take it? (Ani 2023, 27). Criticising Obasanjo's imperiousness, Segun's mother takes side with the oppressed instead of being indifferent to injustice.

In another instance when the Lagos government targets the Ajina market for demolition, Segun's mother gathers market women to protest the oppressive policies and defend the market that has served the people for over one hundred years. She believes that the government should renovate the market rather than demolish it and render families helpless. In fact, she sees through the lies peddled by the government, arguing that Fashola, the governor of Lagos state at the time, wanted to "sell Mushin Ajina to TVIS" (Ani 2023,71). In other words, the governor did not plan to demolish the market to offer an alternative that could better the lives of the people who had sourced their livelihood for decades from the market. Rather, he wants to sell it to a private corporation that would pay to displace the women as well as enrich the government's purse through kickbacks. Although Segun's mother and other women could not stop the market demolition, her activism exposes the determination of the oppressed to resist oppressive systems.

Segun's mother also condemns the government's failure to provide essential services such as electricity, proper roads, effective healthcare, and the general welfare of the population. For example, when Goodluck Jonathan assumes office after Obasanjo, he starts with what he termed the transformation agenda, which involved privatising electricity and

creating millions of jobs. Segun's father, who had worked for twenty years at NEPA,⁸ Nigeria's power holding company, lost his job, worsening the family's financial situation. She attributes the continuous existence of oppression to the inability of the masses to challenge those in power:

This country is evil to its core and there has never been a time when it wasn't so. Maybe that's why we are so used to it, so complacent. If people get light, they relish it. If not, they stay in darkness, or they use their generator if they have money for fuel. But no one questions the legitimacy of a state that gives its people's lands to oil companies to destroy and yet cannot provide electricity. Who will think it? Light is just a trivial thing. To us, it's no big deal. It's just light. And that is what we do to ourselves, we devalue ourselves. Strip ourselves of entitlement because otherwise, it will be obvious how little power we wield over our own lives. We tell ourselves we're not entitled to light, to food, to houses we can afford. To doctors, unless we have money. Only by rejecting this logic can we retain our God-given value as dignified human beings (Ani 2023, 73-4).

Adebayo Quadry-Adekanbi argues that "some queer people are emotionally invested in liberation because of the specific ways that the violence queer people experience affects them (Quadry-Adekanbi 2023). Segun's activism is thus shaped by two strong influences – his mother and Trevor, one of the queer friends he meets on campus. Segun inherits his mother's activist nature, fuelled by rage, anger, and angst. Segun's name Aberemangigha means 'He who fights his battle' and his mother will always encourage him to fight for his rights and for a just society because: "this world is rotten. Abe. To better it, we must fight it. We must resist its violence, or it will crush us" (Ani 2023, 38). Rage fuels all forms of activism and Segun views rage as "the result of deprivation of happiness" (Ani 2023, 73). So, growing up under an activist mother and later meeting a politically activist queer lover, Segun becomes invested in seeking justice through revolution. He "did not want to just believe in

⁸ NEPA stands for National Electric Power Authority – a government corporation that handled power distribution in Nigeria. It was renamed to Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) and later privatised.

revolution, he wanted to participate in building it” (Ani 2023,141). When Segun begins a relationship with Trevor, he admits that “Trevor reminded him of his mother, the way he was eternally preoccupied with oppression” (Ani 2023, 71-2). Trevor approaches social justice with an intellectual and political mindset, exposing Segun to literature that explores ethnic, religious, and global politics, as well as resistance. The novel is explicit and pedagogic in relating how works such as Nnoli’s *Ethnic Politics* (1978), Ake’s *Social Science of imperialism* (1982), Onimode’s *A Political Economy of the African crisis* (1988) and *IMF, The World Bank and African Debt: The Social Impact* (1989), a book edited by Onimode and other titles like *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* provide Segun with deep insights into the politics of identity and the West’s contribution to African underdevelopment. The reference to books and a liberation library suggests that Ani undertakes a similar kind of action as Okparanta⁹ in modelling a queer relationship that is educative, showing the importance of connecting with those who are in same struggle, rather than being pitted against each other.

Segun discovers the potential of challenging systemic oppression through Marxist literature like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the *Communist Manifesto*, as well as through the influence of African liberation figures such as Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, and Kwame Nkrumah. In a world where justice feels unattainable, Segun’s mother’s unflinching quest for justice and Trevor’s books inspire Segun with hope for possibility, justice, and freedom. As Ani tells us, “If Segun’s mother gave him righteous anger and moral clarity, Trevor’s books gave him the language with which to articulate that anger, and in doing so, understand it” (Ani 2023, 72). When Segun finds the Socialist Students’ Forum fliers, he sees a chance to actualise his passion for social justice and change and believes he has found a safe space for articulating his activism.

The Socialist Students Forum (SSF) is a student-led activist group that meets every Saturday afternoon to deliberate on politics and resistance, sensitising its members to challenge the injustice around them. It comprises students from all disciplines and sexual orientations, and the focus of the group is on challenging oppression of the working classes.

The aim of SSF is to eradicate injustice and violence in Nigeria by raising awareness about the pervasive existence of systemic oppression and the imperative to fight for liberation among its members. Heavily influenced by Marxist ideologies, the SSF's activism revolves around educating its members in socialist principles and social justice issues. The emphasis on education is meant to empower members by equipping them with the intellectual skills to question the existing norms and imagine alternative futures.

The SSF serves as a vehicle for students to explore the idea of class struggle, political activism, and social justice. It takes inspiration from resistance movements such as the South African movement against Apartheid and the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, driven by influential figures such as Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias and Miriam Makeba.¹⁰ Drawing inspiration from Marxism, both liberation movements encourage revolution as a resistance to injustice. Giving representational space to these organisations and individuals, the novel opens a path for an apprehension of global oppression and resistance, contextualising it as a detailed depiction of the homophobic Nigerian state.

The SSF's anthem, termed 'The Internationale', a chant with these captivating words: "Away with all your superstitions. Servile masses, arise! Arise! We'll change henceforth the old traditions" (Ani 2023, 143), capturing the revolutionary nature of the group. The group's closing chant of 'Amandla' and the corresponding response of 'Awethu' are Xhosa words from South Africa that mean 'Power' and 'It's Ours' respectively and was frequently used by Nelson Mandela while fighting against apartheid and injustice in South Africa. The SSF directly challenges the SSMPA bill by printing and distributing fliers which read "Socialism or Barbarism; Homophobia or Revolutionary Consciousness" (Ani 2023, 206), aimed at arousing the critical consciousness of students to the repressive nature of the bill. While facilitating the conversation on the bill, Segun asks pertinent questions that highlight the class implication of the bill:

¹⁰ Miriam Makeba and Hugo Chavez were revolutionary figures who fought against systemic oppression and imperialism in South Africa and South America, respectively. Makeba fought through cultural activism and solidarity with the oppressed while Chavez embraced socialism aimed at redistributing wealth and empowering the working class. Both became an enduring symbol of resistance.

I want us to ask ourselves, this bill, this moral panic our society is being whipped into, how does this better our struggle against oppression? Who really benefits from this? ... We must always ask ourselves, regardless of our personal prejudices, what the political objectives of the elites are and where that leaves us as revolutionaries... “The question of *Why?* The question of *For whom?* In *whose interests?* These are crucial questions” (Ani 2023,188).

However, Ani recognises that revolution can only take place when the people involved truly unite and see themselves as one: “Revolution is the solution, but the people have to first reach that conclusion. They have to overcome false consciousness of religion, tribalism, sexism, all of that. We have to help them question and get to that conclusion by themselves” (Ani 2023, 284). Following an assault on Segun by his roommates after the SSMPA bill was passed, the group hold sessions on “mob violence, Colour Revolution, and Occupy Nigeria (Ani 2023, 249-250), emphasising the importance of activism within their ranks. The group shows collective support for the oppressed by visiting Segun in the hospital after he is attacked, fostering community and solidarity. The novel describes how the SSF believes that true social change can only be achieved through the collective action of the oppressed majority, underscored by the commitment to class struggle.

One benefit of SSF is how it engenders personal transformation among the characters. The forum gives members a sense of purpose and belonging, enabling them to express opinions and reconsider convictions. Characters’ personal growth is evident as they navigate relationships, confront societal expectations, and develop a deeper understanding of social justice. By joining SSF, Segun gains insight into the true source of oppression and becomes empowered to stand up for his beliefs, because fighting “was the only way he knew how to convince himself of his value” (Ani 2023, 73). Despite his previous encounters with students who consistently show hostility towards him, Segun is astonished by the group’s tolerance and inclusivity:

joining the SSF opened him to so much he did not know he was ignorant of, songs that lifted his spirits, histories he was shocked he was not taught in

schools, books that felt like they were for him, to answer all his questions, to fan his whittling fire in his heart. And he soaked it all in, the despair that weighed on him lessening and lessening, hope blooming and blooming” (Ani 2023, 143).

With time, Segun becomes a facilitator in the group, guiding discussions. This experience empowers him to confidently express his strong opposition to the SSMPA, fearlessly engaging with students who support the bill. For instance, Segun argues that the anti-gay bill aims to “crush poor people into the dust...[and] shore up [the upper/political class’s] hold on power, by inciting hatred” (Ani 2023,198), among the marginalised working-class people in Nigeria. He explains to August why the SSMPA bill is injurious to queer people and how it is directly a class war: “It’s just that I’ve come to terms with the fact that my life means nothing to these people. Class war is actual war, with real-life casualties, and the ruling class knows this, and they do not give a fuck” (Ani 2023,199). In other words, recognising that the upper class will always prioritise their interest rather than improve the living condition of the working class is a meeting ground for class solidarity.

Segun’s involvement with August and the SSF also affects August, leading to a transformation in his indifference towards oppression. Whereas Segun’s activism starts early in the novel and sets the course of his life, August does not fully join the activist group until after Segun’s death when he truly embodies the same anger and frustration towards the oppressive system. While Segun’s involvement with the SSF increased his belief, August’s connection with Segun not only aids in accepting his identity but also ignites a passion for social justice. Initially, August’s knowledge about social justice is limited and he does not immediately see the danger when the bill is passed into law because he “passed, he did not have to suffer this bill, not the way he, Segun, did” (Ani 2023, 205). However, Segun’s death makes August realise the precarious lives of queer subjects. August “was angry at everything, angry at the world, angry at the school, angry at God” (Ani 2023, 284). His intense rage leads him to join the SSF group, which he had previously only attended as a visitor, to completely dismantle the oppressive system: “He had never considered himself a comrade, not really. But now, increasingly, the SSF made sense. Sometimes things were so unredeemable that

only destruction was suitable” (Ani 2023, 285). August’s active membership in the group underscores the novel’s argument that: “Revolution is the solution, but the people have to first reach that conclusion. They have to overcome false consciousness of religion, tribalism, sexism, all of that. We have to help them question and get to that conclusion themselves” (Ani 2023, 284). In many ways, the novel itself allows the reader to engage in a mode of questioning and a journey to the same conclusion.

In *He Sang a Lullaby*, Ani does not portray a liberated society, rather he presents one in which the seed of activism has been planted and is taking root. The novel points to the fact that revolution can only happen when the working class recognise their shared oppression and unite against it. Through the formation of a student union, the Socialist Students Forum (SSF), the novel advances a form of activism that blends collective action with political education as a means of dismantling oppressive systems. This approach shows the transformative power of collective resistance and how a focus on material conditions could shape class consciousness in Nigeria.

The novel is a wakeup call for all marginalised people to continue to fight for a society where injustice, oppression and violence is completely dismantled. Furthermore, the focus on the SSF allows the reader to see the formation of an alternative community. At the beginning, the novel talks about the importance of the individual’s identity, almost in opposition to the traditional Nigerian identity, but by the end, the reader is presented with another form of community building - the coming out and the SSF. The relationship between individual and community shifts as it is talked about in these two different contexts. The SSF relies on acts of solidarity and community survival; so, there is an establishment of the individual against the traditional heteropatriarchal community to build another form of community, and a suggestion that the individual can only flourish if an alternative form of community built on solidarity and co-survival happens.

4.6 Summary and Implications

This chapter examined how Ani’s *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* directly challenges the heteronormative family structure and patrilinear descent that underpin the persistence of

heteronormativity in Nigeria. It has also shown how the characters August and Segun, subvert gender norms and masculine expectations. Ani foregrounds the dangers of homophobia, offering a direct critique of the 2014 Same-Sex marriage Prohibition Act as a form of violent legislation that criminalises queer intimacy and effectively sanctions harm against queer people. The novel further challenges heteronormativity through the formation of an activist community that galvanises collective action. It does so by raising awareness of shared oppression that cuts across class, gender and sexuality, encouraging solidarity and resistance. Through the experiences of August and Segun, the novel illustrates how rigid gender norms impede queer lives and how the characters navigate these pressures. Most importantly, it highlights the capacity of marginalised groups to challenge heteronormativity through solidarity and a strong sense of community. The development of such an alternative community is explored further in the next chapter, where the disruption of heteronormativity continues through an engagement with queerness as a precolonial identity.

Chapter Five: Subverting Heteronormative Gender and Sexual Norms through a Reincarnate Identity in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter extends the argument around the literary disruption of heteronormativity by exploring Akwaeke Emezi's 2020 novel, *The Death of Vivek Oji*. It is set in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, and the events occur in Ngwa, a small market town; Owerri, a town in Imo State; and an unnamed village. The story centres around Vivek Oji, a gender fluid character whose identity as a reincarnate of Ahunna, his grandmother, refuses the binaries and boundaries of heteronormative society. As the only child of an Igbo father, Chika, and an Indian mother, Kavita, Vivek is burdened by traditional gender expectations. Born as a reincarnate, Vivek's dual identity as a boy and a reincarnate of a woman clash with the binary understanding of gender. The heteronormative Igbo culture also makes Vivek's life impossible linguistically as it recognises only gender-consistent reincarnation. In a critique of the rigid and sexual norms in place, Emezi narrates the search for cultural and linguistic recognition as the core of the conflict of the novel. Vivek's journey of acceptance hence involves both a physical and linguistic recognition of his gender fluid identity. To imagine Vivek's subversive identity, Emezi draws from an ontological framework that allows fluidity of existence.

The Death of Vivek Oji utilises a fragmented and retrospective narrative structure, as well as multiple perspectives - a third-person narrator, Osita (Vivek's cousin), and Vivek's posthumous voice. Each perspective is given critical importance. The third-person perspective offers a critique of the heteronormative society and Vivek's relationship with it. It spotlights societal rejection of Vivek's identity, and the resultant atmosphere of hostility and tension stemming from societal responses to his gender nonconformity. Additionally, the omniscient point of view reveals the positive attitude of the alternative community to Vivek's queerness. Osita's voice provides a personal and private account of familiar and queer intimacy. Vivek's posthumous voice allows intimate insights into his mind, making him a lively

and important part of the story, and offering unique perspectives from his outsider and spirit positions. The novel investigates the intersection of spirituality and cross-gender identity, presenting a narrative that contextualises gender fluidity within an Igbo spiritual framework and contests discourses that portray queerness as an identity situated outside Nigerian social, cultural and spiritual boundaries.

Emezi's works are pivotal to this study because of the unique angle they bring to the framing of a queer (literary) Nigerian discourse within Igbo indigenous frameworks. Like Dibia and Okparanta, Emezi's work is groundbreaking because they are the first Nigerian novelist to feature a non-binary, gender fluid or cross-gender protagonist. As already stated, Dibia, Okparanta, and Ani explore queer identity in terms of sexual orientation, desire and social struggle for acceptance through an appeal to the universal human rights frameworks. More specifically, Dibia's narrative explores the internal and psychological struggles of living as queer, Okparanta's female character re-negotiates queerness lived under religious and cultural repression, and Ani details queer resistance and solidarities of struggle within contemporary queerphobic Nigeria. While these three writers show how a traditional Nigerian identity that is rooted in heteronormativity oppresses the queer subject, Emezi turns to Igbo culture as a source of queer possibility and therefore dismisses and undoes the argument that Nigerian and queer are somehow mutually incompatible.

Emezi imagines queerness as an ontological state of being, portraying identity as potentially fluid and multiple – one in which individuals move between lifetimes and embodiments. The identity they explore through literary works is deeply spiritual - rooted in Igbo cosmology, metaphysical, existing beyond the gendered categories in society, and precolonial in being detached from the western queer frameworks. This approach contrasts with the dominant understanding of identity as fixed, binary and confined to the rigid categories including male/female, man/woman, life/death, heterosexual/homosexual. The novel shows how a cross-gender identity which provides an alternative, localised sexual possibility is already embedded in Nigerian society. In the sections that follow, I analyse how the framing of the protagonist's identity around reincarnation, a decolonial approach to

gender discourse, enables Vivek to subvert the existing sex-gender norms. I also examine how Emezi queers heteronormativity, and how the formation of an alternative community allows Vivek to express his identity as a fluid subject and gain societal acceptance, though, posthumously.

5.2 Decolonising Gender: Framing Vivek's Identity within the Belief in Reincarnation

The African LGBT Manifesto/declaration made in Kenya on 18 April 2010 posits that one of the ways to insert queer rights in Africa is through the “reimagination of [the lives of non-normative identities] outside neocolonial categories of identity and power” (Ekiné and Abbas 2013, 52). Decolonial thinking has remained a hot debate in African scholarship; it seeks to dismantle colonial legacies in knowledge production, identity construction and cultural representation. The surge in the decolonial move in Africa is “provoked by the reality of continued entrapment of knowledge production in Africa within Euro-North American colonial matrices of power” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 8). It challenges knowledge within Africa as grounded in western knowledge, which was as a result of the ‘coloniality of power’ – a situation whereby knowledge from non-western cultures is subordinated and Eurocentric views are treated as universal truths (Mignolo 2012, 16).

During colonialism, knowledge production in Africa was silenced and undervalued, and the western ideas imposed on Africans included a rigid gender binary. Ifi Amadiume argues that some linguistic terms in the Igbo language system have no gender distinction: “Igbo non-distinctive subject pronouns allows a more flexible semantic system, in which it is possible for men and women to share attributes... [this] makes it possible for men and women to play some social roles which, in other cultures, especially, those of the western world, carry rigid sex and gender association” (Amadiume 2015, 89). Also, in *The Invention of Women* (1997), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí posits that gender as a rigid binary is a colonial legacy. Oyewumi argues that in western thoughts, the body is given prominence because “biological explanations appear to be especially privileged over other ways of explaining differences of gender, race and class” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 1). Oyewumi notes that the body is constantly brought into view because of a privileging of sight in western thoughts, over other ways of

knowing or making sense of the world. Being brought into consistent gaze, Oyěwùmí argues, the body is constantly discussed in terms of differentiation and difference based on categories such as sex, and skin colour. Oyewumi however argues that to comprehend reality in non-western cultures, there is need for an understanding of “epistemological differences between societies” (Oyěwùmí 1997, 2). So, understanding that there are valid existences outside the western framework is the first step towards making sense of reality from other cultures.

Historical evidence shows that Africa’s indigenous philosophy served as an organising frame for African existence before colonialism. Quoting Wole Soyinka’s critique of the colonial narratives which celebrate the ‘discovery’ of nations and places, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni buttresses the fact that “African has a long history that predates its encounter with Europe... and has its own rich knowledge that kept it alive” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 2). However, Africa was colonised leading to devaluation of knowledge from Africa and a loss of localised epistemologies. With the contemporary clamour for greater African-centred knowledge frameworks, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues for a decolonial or epistemic freedom – the “right to think, theorise and interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 3). In other words, the form of decolonial freedom that Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests is one that does not prioritise western philosophy and scientific forms of knowledge but one that embraces different knowledges and ways of knowing that are African based. Examples of such decolonial knowledge frameworks include the ogbanje and reincarnation beliefs. These indigenous cosmologies portray gender as fluid, creating a space for a discussion of queerness that cannot be accommodated within a binary framework.

This in turn aligns with Walter Mignolo’s thinking in “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-colonial Freedom” that marginalised knowledge should be reclaimed to challenge the hegemony of western epistemologies. This is because colonial knowledge has been used to define and marginalise non-western cultures and people, and decolonial efforts involve “de-linking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge (theo - and ego-politically grounded) from disciplinary management” (Mignolo

2009, 20). Colonial structures of power and dominant heteronormative systems, which rigidly define identity within the binary lens, as well as through coded western identity labels such as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, have a significant impact on Nigerian and, by extension, African queer subjects. Emezi resists Eurocentric assumptions about gender and identity by centring African epistemologies, offering fluid and alternative ways of being that exist outside the colonial and heteronormative frameworks.

Akwaeke Emezi is a decolonial Nigerian writer and filmmaker based in the United States who identifies as trans/nonbinary and uses the pronoun “they” to express their gender fluidity. Emezi's novels include *Freshwater* (2018), *Pet* (2019), *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), *Dear Senthuran: A black Spirit Memoir* (2021), *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* (2022) and *Little Rot* (2024). *Freshwater* is powerfully shaped by Emezi's own experience as a nonbinary subject. In *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi presents gender fluidity within a localised context, and both novels explore the intersection of gender, identity, sexuality, and Igbo spirituality by emphasising the role of precolonial Igbo spirituality in facilitating understanding, empowerment, and agency for queer identities. Emezi reclaims Igbo precolonial spirituality, which was sidelined by colonialism, presenting an indigenous understanding of queerness that frames it not as a western construct but as an identity already rooted in Nigerian and African epistemology. The focus on reincarnation as a concept for framing Vivek's identity serves not just as a spiritual motif, but as a metaphysical challenge to heteronormativity.

As discussed in Chapter One, reincarnation is the belief that deceased individuals are reborn into new physical forms to continue their earthly existence. It is predicated on the belief in the interconnectedness of the physical human world and the existence of the ancestor cult – a company of dead and morally upright discarnate spirits who wait to be reborn. The belief in ancestor cult is grounded in the cyclical notion of human existence beginning at birth, advancing to death, and concluding with rebirth. In this worldview, ancestors are powerful presences in the human world, and individuals are reborn within their

family tree. It is vital to identify a deceased family member correctly to preserve their earlier identity. Ian Stevenson observes:

Proper recognition of the deceased person who has reincarnated may also help the new baby to avoid inadvertently breaking taboos that the deceased person had observed; such violation of a taboo could make the infant ill. For these reasons, most parents wish to learn as soon as they can of whom a newborn baby is the reincarnation" (Stevenson 1985, 19).

Rooted in pre-colonial Igbo society, this belief system symbolises more than the return of ancestors; it represents the continuation of life after death. Reincarnation is conceived as gender consistent in Igbo culture and names are given to mark reincarnate identities. Vivek's cross-gender identity is explored in the novel through a gender-nonconforming reincarnation that transgresses the linguistic framework of the Igbo culture but retains the conceptual integrity of rebirth. This is why despite seeing the obvious mark which confirms Vivek as Ahunna's reincarnate, Chika and Saachi initially reject Vivek's identity because it contradicts the heteronormative identity and naming system in place.

Emezi deliberately avoids marking Vivek within the western naming framework like "transgender woman" or genderqueer which dominates identity politics. Instead, the novel imagines Vivek's identity within a cultural and spiritual lens, grounded in a Nigerian belief system and Emezi's own understanding of reincarnation – an embodied identity that signposts a previous existence. Biology serves as the basis for assigning either male or female gender to children in Nigerian society and this serves to maintain a kinship system based on heterosexual reproduction. However, reincarnation upsets this logic – Vivek is not solely a product of his parent's intimacy – his soul is connected to an afterlife that transcends biology. Ahunna was a woman in her previous existence, but her soul is currently reborn in Vivek. Reincarnation thus gives Vivek a sacred, fluid and otherworldly identity beyond rigid heteronormative standards and colonial language.

Vivek's identity is portrayed as one which is connected to a previous existence through the reference to the scar - "a dark brown patch shaped like a limp starfish" (Emezi 2020, 5). The scar is identical to the one on Ahunna's feet which was as a result of a

previously healed wound at the in-step of her feet. After her death, a day before Vivek's birth, the scar is mysteriously transferred to Vivek. Emezi uses the scar to mark Vivek as Ahunna's reincarnate, in line with the cultural practice of identifying the deceased relative through marks or scar to preserve the uniqueness of their identity. The scar confirms Vivek as a reincarnate and allows Emezi to present identity as a continuum, a loop into the past, instead of a linear existence that must fit into the rigid gendered expectations of society. The connection to Ahunna emphasises a spiritual lineage that exceeds the conventional and chronological understanding of identity and existence as one that comprises birth, childhood, adulthood, and death. It is also an existence that transcends biology, disrupting the heteronormative notion of a linear and binary understanding of gender, identity and kinship. Reincarnation is therefore neither linear nor confined to the rigid gendered expectations of society.

In essence, the novel shows how Vivek's gender at birth does not represent all there is to his identity. Although born male, Vivek carries a female identity, a spirit identity which allows Emezi to present Vivek as existing beyond the fixed categories of male/female, challenging the heteronormative assertion of a stable and binary identity. So, instead of pitching Vivek's identity within the binary gender framework, Emezi shows Vivek's identity as one that is rooted in a spiritual, cyclical indigenous cosmology that has innate queer possibility.

Reincarnation also allows Emezi to portray identity as a deep spiritual journey towards authenticity, by showing how Vivek's identity is significantly shaped by frequent journeys into the spirit realm, known as fugues or blackouts. In these periods of unconsciousness, which Vivek describes as "short absences... small mercies" (Emezi 2020, 89), he loses awareness of his surroundings. These short but spiritually charged journeys are rendered in the novel as moments of identity reinforcement. The fugues counter the alienation and violence which characterise his lived experiences in a heteropatriarchal society where he is constantly pressured by family and society towards gender conformity. The fugues are moments of relief, "Like finally getting to rest after having your eyelids forced open for days" (Emezi 2020,

90). Vivek returns after each blackout with stronger conviction about the authenticity of his identity. Vivek's soul journeys disrupt the heteronormative boundaries in society and help Vivek to navigate a liminality that is unattainable in society.

The spiritual connection which Vivek has is further illustrated through a dream encounter between Vivek and Ahunna. In Vivek's dream, Ahunna confirms that Vivek's identity is connected to her former life. In a dialogue with Osita, Vivek discusses the nature of his connection with Ahunna and its spiritual significance to his identity:

"I dreamt that I was our grandmother," I tell him. "I looked in the mirror, and she was there, just like the pictures, and she spoke to me in Igbo."

"What did she say?"

"Hold my life for me." I wait for his laugh, but it never comes. "Do you believe in reincarnation?" I ask him.

"I'm not sure my belief matters," he says. "If it is, it is, whether I believe it or not" (Emezi 2020, 160-1).

In the conversation above, Emeki connects Vivek's identity with Ahunna's as a way of legitimising his current identity as a reincarnate, emphasising the integral relationship between Vivek and Ahunna's previous existence as a woman, and establishing a concept of life that extends beyond a single existence. Vivek's dream, in which his grandmother asks him to hold her life for her, hints at Vivek's connection to a past life, but most importantly to the fact that Vivek is carrying an ancestral identity that needs to be carefully preserved in its original form. This shows that his identity is not fully represented in his current gender because he embodies a spirit identity that transcends gender and time. By rooting Vivek's identity in ancestral memory, Emeki narrates queerness, not as a deviation, as often portrayed in conventional discourses, but as a return – a continuation of life that exists beyond the normative concepts of identity. Although Vivek dies before the novel begins, Kavita speaks about his existence among a spiritual continuum, emphasising the understanding of life as an eternal, enduring existence that transcends the decay of the physical body: "At least he was not alone. They were together, the generations before and after, gone from the here and now, leaving the rest of the family floating in life" (Emeki 2020, 224).

The framing of Vivek's identity within the Igbo belief in reincarnation, thus, allows Emezi to reclaim indigenous narratives from colonial frameworks that disavow queerness and enforce rigid binaries. Emezi shows that the scar on Vivek's feet is more than a physical mark but a symbol of an inherited identity, ancestral memory and a spiritual self. By decolonising gender through depicting a mode of being derived from an indigenous knowledge framework, Emezi queers indigenous belief system.

5.3 Disrupting Gender Binaries through Embodiment

Vivek subverts heteronormative binaries of male/female, spirit/human, absent/present, heterosexual/queer, he/she through his embodiment. As a reincarnate of a woman, Vivek is drawn towards femininity; his gender fluidity is expressed in his hair styling, his choice of clothing and the use of pronouns, offering an engaging critique of heteronormativity. Emezi depicts Vivek as a character whose identity cannot be fully captured by the gendered system in place in the official Nigerian state where the body is presented as the site of identity because identity is solely defined by biological sex. The novel establishes one major conflict, the lack of recognition of Vivek's identity due to the rigid binaries in place. The first time the reader encounters Vivek's posthumous voice, he expresses his distress at society's misgendering and incomprehension of his dual identity:

I'm not what anyone thinks I am. I never was. I didn't have the mouth to put it into words, to say what was wrong, to change the things I felt I needed to change. And every day it was difficult, walking around and knowing that people saw me one way, knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them. It didn't even exist to them. So: If nobody sees you, are you still there? (Emezi 2020, 38).

This reflection captures the psychological impact of living in a society that is inflexible to gender fluidity as Vivek feels that his embodied identity is not only misunderstood but unseen, raising questions about the relationship between visibility, recognition and existence. While Vivek knows deeply who he is, society projects on him an identity that does not fully capture his entire existence. His gender and spiritual self are unseen and this disconnection and invisibility cause Vivek to question his own reality. Vivek's monologues reflect the experience

of many gender fluid subjects in a gender system that leaves no room for the fluidity and multiplicity of existence. Knowing that identity is relational – dependent on others' recognition – Vivek begins a journey of transformation that shatters his invisibility and disrupts gender boundaries.

As a reincarnate of Ahunna, Vivek is constantly pushed towards femininity. The growing of his hair and the wearing of female accessories, dresses and lipstick are signs that his identity exceeds his societal biological gendering. In Nigeria, long hair is a mark of femininity, while short hair is often associated with masculinity. When Vivek is first presented to the reader, his gender-nonconformity is evident:

picture: the boy, shirtless, placing necklaces against his chest, draping them over his silver chain, clipping his ears with gold earrings, his hair tumbling over his shoulders. He looks like a bride, half-naked, partially undressed" (Emezi 2020,10-11).

His long hair, which is given much attention in the novel, serves as a powerful symbol of his resistance to the traditional expectations of masculinity. At first, Vivek struggles with reconciling society's gender norms and his emerging identity. His family and community interpret his long hair as a marker of deviancy and mental instability; however, the narrative reveals its significance to his identity as a reincarnate, representing a crucial aspect of his self. This is because despite societal pressure to conform, his past life continues to influence his physical appearance. Vivek speaks about how the fugues lead to the growing of his hair and mark a significant point in his identity journey:

The fugues were short absences that I became grateful for, small mercies. Like finally getting to rest after having your eyelids forced open for days. I hid them from my parents and grow out my hair, thinking that the weight dropping from my hair would lighten the one inside of me. It worked – not by making anything lighter, no, but by making me feel more balanced, like one weight was pulling the other and the strain on me had been lessened. Perhaps I had just become the fulcrum, the point on which everything is hinged, the turning. I don't know. I just know that I hurt a little less with each inch of hair I refused to cut (Emezi 2020, 89-90).

As an only son in a heteropatriarchal setting, the pressure to embrace heterosexual masculinity is immense: he is the only means through which his father can perpetuate his family name and legacy. So, choosing femininity over masculinity positions Vivek against a strict social order that thrives on heterosexual masculinity. When Vivek begins to grow his hair, his father, who is already distraught at Vivek's nonconforming masculinity, conceives this as a mark of insanity. Chika tells Mary, Osita's mother, about the change in Vivek's appearance: "Do you know he stopped cutting his hair? If you see him now, just looking like a madman ..." (Emezi 2020, 53). But Vivek is merely expressing himself in the way that best defines him because whereas society marks his gender as male, Vivek refuses to be named solely by biology, culture or societal roles. His connection to Ahunna requires that he grows his hair and look feminine to fully express his full identity. Growing his hair thus demonstrates the adoption of an identity that goes against traditional norms; it is not a sign of mental breakdown, but a window into his embodied and emerging identity, symbolising an inner transformation.

Vivek's choice of dress undoes the idea of only two genders due to the strictly gendered dress codes prevalent in Nigerian society. In the photographs taken by Juju, one of the daughters of the Nigerwives - foreign women married to Nigerian men - and Vivek's closest friend, Vivek's gender fluidity is clearly depicted. In the different photographs, Vivek is dressed in male clothes, typical of men from Northern Nigeria: "a pale blue traditional, a caftan that swallowed him. His eyes were lined in black" (Emezi 2020, 213), but also: "sleeveless one, short tight ones, loud printed ones, his lips painted red or pink or just glossed till they shone, eyes always lined, sometimes with a bright splash of eyeshadow" (Emezi 2020, 215). Such fluidity in dressing blurs the sartorial boundaries between what is gendered male and female. Dressed as a woman, Vivek regularly strolls to the market, and his appearance is indistinguishable from heteronormative women. Using the scene of the conversation between Ebenezer, a mechanic, and two clients working in a bank, Emezi demonstrates how Vivek blurs gender boundaries of femininity:

The woman gave him a nasty look, and the man completely missed it, his attention diverted by yet another woman, this one walking past Mama Ben's canteen across the street. She was tall with long mammy-water hair in two plaits down her back, wearing a flowered dress that cut off at her calves. Her sandals were plain and brown, but her toes had been painted a bright red. She walked like a model and looked like one, thin arms and sharp cheekbones (Emezi 2020, 149).

The male banker's failure to distinguish Vivek from the woman who 'gave him a nasty look' reveals the disruption of heteronormative gender binaries as the lines between male and female blur, giving a sense of gender fluidity. The scene further exposes how the banker makes amorous comments about Vivek, finding 'her' sexually attractive: he had "ogled her, then made noises at her, puckering his lips... he shouted, "tall babe! Come make I climb you small" ... is that your hair?" (Emezi 2020,149). Being seen as a woman and propositioned shows how Vivek's body blurs gender lines. Ebenezer's later description of Vivek clearly shows his subversive identity: "In the weeks that followed, he saw the tall girl a few times. Once she was returning from the market with polythene bags filled with vegetables; another time she was going to Mr Biggs at the junction. Once she just seemed to be going for a walk, listening to a Discman in her handbag... she looked like the kind of girl who just liked to walk everywhere." (Emezi 2020,151). In this way, the novel shows how society's sense of 'natural' gender binaries is undone by a gender-fluid subject.

The use of multiple pronouns and names further destabilises fixed understanding of gender. In most of the narration, 'he' is used to address Vivek, reflecting how others perceive and misgender him based on society's expectations and gender assigned at birth. But as the novel progresses, Emezi switches to the use of 'she' to portray Vivek's identity as a woman. The use of 'she' affirms his identity as 'Nnemdi' in recognition of his reincarnate identity. In the many times he dresses like a woman or like Nnemdi, Emezi switches from 'he' to 'she'. The novel strategically employs these pronouns to highlight Vivek's gender fluidity and to challenge traditional gender categories. This multiplicity of identity is not portrayed as a confusion but as clarity, showing that it is society that lacks the language and spiritual imagination to comprehend Vivek's embodiment and not Vivek himself.

So, while pronouns 'He/she' linguistically represent the binary self, Vivek's gender fluidity and transition are shown in the way both pronouns are used to describe him. This is illustrated when Vivek's friends, the children of the Nigerwives, visit Kavita after Vivek's death to reveal his identity to her. Following a review of the photographs depicting Vivek's transformation, the children inform Kavita that Vivek uses gender-fluid pronouns to express his identity: [Vivek] "said we could refer to him as either she or he, that he was both" (Emezi 2020, 217). Vivek's identity undoes the connection made between gender and sex as his identity is not tied to his body, instead, the multiple pronouns used reflects his shifting and fluid identities. These constitute a strong symbol of resistance to the prevailing heteronormative order. Vivek's physical transformation throughout the text – his long hair, dresses and lipstick is portrayed not merely as a performance of femininity but a reclamation of the self and an insistence in a society that seeks to erase queer identities. The outward visibility and use of pronouns are acts of resistance as Vivek does not attempt to secretly pass but lives openly as a queer subject despite the risk.

5.4 Queering Heteronormativity

In a review of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Apoova Mittal claims that Emezi "presents queerness as a personal, liminal space completely free of heteronormativity" (Milano 2020). My reading here is interested in how all the queer characters in the novel move between heterosexuality and queer intimacy, completely disrupting the sexual boundaries in place. Osita and Elizabeth's display of affection, along with those between Osita and Vivek, and the profoundly symbolic sexual interaction involving Osita, Juju, and Vivek's posthumous presence serve to critique the heteronormative regulation of gender, sexuality, and acceptable sexual practices. Emezi employs queer intimacy to subvert normative expectations, as demonstrated by the characters' transgression of conventional boundaries between homo /heterosexual eroticism. As only children of their parents, Vivek and Osita as well as Juju and Elizabeth live within a culture where sexuality is expected to align with heteronormativity and perpetuate the heteronormative family institution, yet they embrace queer intimacy in defiance of these rigid sexual norms.

The relationship between Vivek and Osita shows how the characters' sexual fluidity undoes the rigid binaries and sexual norms in society. Osita is raised under heteronormative pressures yet struggles with his attraction to Vivek. When his mother pressures him to conform to traditional gender expectations through contracting a heterosexual relationship, Osita invents imaginary girlfriend to satisfy his mother's expectations of an only son who must perpetuate the heteronormative family because "her happiness was too great for me to deflate it with the truth" (Emezi 2020, 64). The truth, however, is that Osita embodies a queer identity – he is in love with Vivek, his cousin, and both consider themselves lovers. The feelings they have for each other defy cultural and normative expectations.

Initially, Osita engages in heterosexual sex with Elizabeth but as his relationship with Vivek deepens, they move from brothers to lovers, crossing the social boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Osita is constantly drawn towards Vivek whom he describes as "my cousin, my brother, the love of my sinful life" (Emezi 2020, 191). While Osita's relationship with Elizabeth may be interpreted as an attempt to conform to traditional masculinity and repress homosexual tendencies, it expresses also an aspect of his identity – he is interested in both men and women. Although his relationship with Elizabeth is short-lived, his relationship with Vivek and later Juju shows that desire does not fall under the fixed categories of hetero/homo.

At first, Emezi represents Osita as inhabiting the same space as Dibia's protagonist, Adrian, and Ani's main character, August – he is afraid to embrace his sexuality because society defines it as a disavowed identity. Osita's internalisation of homophobia first leads to guilt, shame, and fear. The secret erotic moments he shares with Vivek are fraught with tension as Osita both desires and fears what he feels for Vivek. What the novel highlights the most is the moments of intimacy between Vivek and Osita and how it offers temporary glimpses of emotional and physical release. The first time they have sex, Osita comments on how liberating it feels: "it felt as if we had stepped out of everything we knew before and into something else entirely. As if what had just happened couldn't have happened on the other side, only on this side" (Emezi 2020, 127). Emezi shows Osita's lack of guilt after the lovemaking with Vivek as a testament to the fact that queer love in itself, is not inherently

wrong and that queer people do not feel shame out of their own volition. Rather, it is disavowal of their identity, and the shame and stigma attached to it that leads to self-shame. Furthermore, the description of Vivek taking on a feminine position during sex with Osita offers a radical subversion of heteronormative ideals to which they are pressured to conform:

I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things; ugly words. Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly, too. I'd heard it since secondary school, and I knew what that night was supposed to make me. Less than a man—something disgusting, something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway (Emezi 2020,131).

Vivek's statement here represents a resistance to prescribed masculinity and gender roles. Acceptable masculinity is synonymous with heterosexuality and sexual dominance of the opposite gender. However, Emezi uses Vivek and Osita's expression of queer intimacy to critique these norms and offer a model of masculinity that is completely outside the binary framework. Although their love exists in secret, it remains a symbol of resistance in the form of desire and love.

Another subversive moment of queer intimacy involves the scene between Osita, Juju and Vivek's spectral presence. Vivek's death brings grief, a sense of loss, and confusion to his friends, the children of the Nigerwives, and to Osita as they were "all connected by Vivek" (Emezi 2020, 180). However, the sex scene between Osita, Juju and Vivek's spectrality serve both as a reinforcement of queer love and as a uniting force. After Vivek's death, Osita, and Juju engage in sex as a form of emotional connection and memory of Vivek. But although Vivek is already dead, Osita and Juju feel his presence at the moment of lovemaking: "I imagined Vivek behind her, his legs mixed up with mine, his mouth against her back; I imagined I could reach beyond her and meet his forearms, pull him closer until we are all pressed against each other" (Emezi 2020, 192-3). Here, queer intimacy functions as a bond that powerfully unites the three characters, a strong reinforcement of the continued existence of queer love outside the heteronormative framework and a blurring of the boundaries

between homo/heterosexuality. While Osita and Juju, deeply affectionate toward Vivek, perceive this scene as a figment of their imagination, the novel incorporates Vivek's viewpoint to validate Osita's sense of his presence during the sex scene: "He was right. Of course, I watched them – they were so beautiful together. I put my hands on the small of her back and on the solid stretch of his chest. I kissed the sweat of her neck and his stomach. They were keeping me alive in the sweetest way they know how, you see" (Emezi 2020, 195).

Vivek's spectral presence, which is felt, seen and experienced by Osita and Juju, defies normative understanding of sexuality, time, and existence, and infers that queer intimacy transcends beyond the physical world and death itself. Even in death, Vivek remains loved, desired, and alive in the memories of his loved ones. This sense of an enduring queer love and desire contrasts with the heteronormative erasure or pathologisation of queer intimacy. The sex act between Osita and Juju and Vivek's lingering presence at the scene becomes a powerful act of resistance, which keeps Vivek alive "in the sweetest way they know how" (Emezi 2020, 195). In the same vein, Juju's involvement in this act of intimacy as a same-sex desiring woman, disrupts heterosexuality's binarism of sex. The coming together of Osita, Juju and Vivek defy normative sexuality, depicting instead an embrace of sexual fluidity and the transcendence of queer love beyond heteronormativity. By empowering the characters to make alternative choices that do not reinforce heteronormativity, Emezi upsets the heteronormative emphasis on heterosexual marriage and reproduction.

5.5 Alternative Community

In *He Sang a Lullaby*, Ani builds the idea of an alternative community that is protective of the oppressed and socially disavowed people in society through the SSF – Socialist Students' Forum. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the traditional community has been shown to be oppressive of queer identities, yet the notion of a supportive community is fully developed in Emezi's work as a space where Vivek is nurtured, protected and accepted. This circle, made up of the children of the Nigerwives – Olunne, Somto, Juju, and Elizabeth as well as Osita, is depicted as a new form of community that perverts the traditional community: instead of endorsing heteronormativity, it becomes a place where queerness can thrive without

explanation or justification. *The Death of Vivek Oji* portrays the idea of an alternative receptive community as critical to the actualisation of Vivek's identity in a heteronormative society that limits queer expression. In this novel, as in Ani's *Then He Sang a Lullaby*, a community that provides a blend of emotional and psychological support against society's hostility, becomes a bubble of possibility - a private, safe space for the expression of queer identity. The novels use this parallel queer community to critique the constraints of heteronormativity, the traditional community and family.

Emezi uses queer characters to critique the heteronormative concept of family as solely defined by consanguinity or biological factors as the characters create a sense of a chosen family that defies traditional family structures. Biological families are portrayed as sites of oppression, suppression, surveillance, and pressure. Vivek's biological family and the extended family members pressure Vivek to conform to gender norms. His family is a site of anxiety, psychological torture, and conflict between his emerging identity and the rigid traditional gender system. It is Vivek's estrangement from his biological family that necessitates his pursuit of an alternative community. Vivek initially seeks refuge in the natural environment: "he climbed the plumeria tree in their backyard, cradling himself in its broad branches" (Emezi 2020, 92). To bring Vivek out of isolation, Kavita and Rhatha plan a meeting between him and Olunne and Somto. During the meeting, Olunne and Somto show receptivity towards Vivek's identity in a way that wins Vivek's trust. Rather than reinforce the need for gender conformity, the girls affirm Vivek's identity; the meeting would later offer Vivek an opportunity to build an alternative community that is central to the realisation of his identity.

The Nigerwives children take turns to invite Vivek to their houses. While there, Vivek is neither judged nor pressured to conform. Instead, Vivek's friends affirm his identity against the heteronormative society that pathologise and suppress it. The alternative community formed by the children of Nigerwives is a more affirming and supporting space, completely separated from the heteronormative ideals and traditional sense of community where the Nigerwives are all drawn together due to marriage. The alternative community is built on mutual trust, love and acceptance of each other's identity. It is a complex and sexually diverse

community, a counter to the rigid and binary community. In addition, Juju's comments at the point of the revelation of Vivek's identity, contesting Kavita's claim to Vivek on biological grounds, directly challenge the heteronormative family structure built around parental ownership over children, especially regarding gender and sexuality:

You keep talking as if he belonged to you, just because you were his mother, but he didn't. He didn't belong to anybody but himself. And the way you are behaving now – that's why we couldn't tell you. That's why he lived the last months of his life as a secret. That's why he couldn't trust you. You think you own him, when you didn't know anything that was going on in his life (Emezi 2020, 217).

Juju's statement uncovers the ways in which the heteronormative family assumes control over children, especially regulating gender and sexuality. The novel shows how such a system is repressive of queer children whose identities transgress family expectations. Kavita's grief for her son is portrayed as arising from a sense of entitlement linked to her blood relation with him. While Kavita is heartbroken by her inability to know her child, her personal tragedy subverts the novel's emphasis on the conformity and control typical of traditional families as she admits: "He was hiding in everyone else's house as if he didn't have a home. We didn't know anything about our own child" (Emezi 2020, 224). In a way, Vivek refuses to fight the heteronormative system but instead expresses himself exclusively in the community that affirms him.

Another way that the receptive queer community emerges is through the construction of private safe spaces where the queer protagonist can momentarily escape the gaze and judgment of society. Vivek leaves the main building and moves to the boys quarters where his identity journey begins. Boys quarter- a colonial legacy, is a block of house, detached from the main house in a compound. It is a place reserved for servants, or domestic staff. It is physically separated from the main house and symbolises privacy, liminality and marginal space. While living in the boys' quarter, a building meant for domestic staff detached from the main house, Vivek's constant fugues spiritually connect him to his identity. The boys' quarter and the private rooms of the girls also serve as a space of freedom and queer expression in

contrast with the oppressive heteronormative environment. Vivek's psychological detachment from his parents and society and the relocation from his family's main house to the boys' quarter is symbolic – it signals a rejection of normative control and a search for a new space where his identity will blossom and not be suppressed. The 'boys quarter' serves as a private, safe space for Vivek to escape society's scrutiny and surveillance and express his cross-gender identity freely. Whereas the main family house is a space that reinforces strict gender norms of masculinity, the boys' quarter offers Vivek a safe space as Vivek was "never as relaxed as he'd been in the boys' quarters" (Emezi 2020, 24).

The boys quarter is also a place of significant personal transformation for Osita. It is a space where he experiences sexual intimacy, first with Elizabeth, and later with Vivek. The fact that these moments of discovery occur in the boys' quarter rather than at the family house buttresses the home as a site of queer repression and the need for a more inclusive space where queerness is unfettered. Similarly, Juju, Olunne and Somto's rooms serve as safe spaces where Vivek is free, and happy to live his gender fluidity. At the moment of the revelation of Vivek's identity, Vivek's friends inform Kavita about how they simply provided an opportunity for him to express a full sense of self: "Vivek said it was just a part of who he was, that he had this inside him and he wanted the opportunity to express it, so that's all we gave him, that opportunity... I wish you could've seen him. He was happier than he'd ever been since Uncle Chika brought him back" (Emezi 2020, 216). The rejection of heteronormative community thus allows for the flourishing of queer-friendly communities. In many ways, the alternative receptive community constitute a powerful site of resistance and queer survival.

5.6 Recognition through the Extension of the Existing Naming Convention

Tayo Lamidi and Romanus Aboh argue that naming is crucial to identity formation in 21st-century Nigerian novels, as it shapes identity. They contend that names possess considerable practical value and can be used to construct, reconstruct and negotiate identity (Lamidi and Aboh 2011, 36). In Nigeria, naming is emblematic, usually having cultural, religious and gendered connotations. As a mark of identity within Nigerian culture, naming

also allows marginalised identities to assert themselves and negotiate acceptance. In this novel, Emezi highlights the power of naming, exposing it as a site of power and control as well as subverting it by asserting Vivek's cross-gender identity within a culture that gives no room for cross-gender naming. Throughout the novel, Vivek's identity is a constant source of conflict: while the name Vivek is accepted as one that captures the character's male identity, his reincarnate identity is denied. While the name Vivek has an Indian origin, Nnemdi, the Vivek reclaims at the end, has an Igbo origin. Vivek's mixed heritage shows he is neither entirely Igbo nor entirely Indian: he is hybrid. Such hybridity carries a deconstructive implication – it destabilises fixed categories in ways that parallel queerness. The name Vivek could be interpreted as the way in which the novel distances the character from Igbo gendered expectations and positions him as a fluid and unbounded identity rather than one fixed within a single cultural framework. In this way, hybridity, like queerness, disrupts binary structures and opens a space for identities that exists in-between, resisting the constraints of heteropatriarchal and culturally prescribed norms.

Although Vivek's first name does not generate much conflict in the novel, it also does not fully define his identity because his reincarnate identity remains unacknowledged. In Chapter One, I established that Igbo culture maintains gender consistency in reincarnation, linguistically reflected in their naming conventions. The confirmation of Vivek's identity, evidenced by the starfish birthmark, requires an expansion of this conventional understanding of gender and reincarnation to encompass his gender-fluid identity. Ekene wanted to give Vivek a name that breaks away from traditional norms, but Chika prefers to stick with tradition. But after Vivek's death, Kavita remembers how Ekene and Chika had disagreed over what name to give Vivek and calls Ekene on phone:

“Do you remember when Vivek was born?”

... “And you said we should give him an Igbo name, at least as a middle name?”

“I remember. Kavita, what -”

“What was the name you said we should give him?” ...

“Nnemdi. It's not a common name, but it was for Mama. Because they had that same scar on their feet ... “If it were our father who'd had the scar, he would

have been named Nnamdi, you know? But Chika didn't agree. If Vivek had been a girl, maybe he would have agreed (Emezi 2020, 221-2).

Their conversation reflects the conflict that exists between holding on to rigid norms and embracing expansion. For Vivek's parents, especially his father, Vivek's reincarnate identity does not need acknowledgement because it contradicts heteronormative naming. Although his mother, who is more open, struggles to understand Vivek's fluidity, Chika's denial of Vivek reincarnate identity mirrors the heteronormative erasure of queer identity, and the power of naming through language. This is important given that naming confers power and acceptance because "When you name something, it comes into existence" (Emezi 2018, 65). But, within the alternative community, acknowledging Vivek's reincarnate name is crucial to understanding and validating his identity.

After Vivek's death, Kavita is "made of nothing but questions, hungry questions bending her into a shape that was starving for answers" (Emezi 2020, 85). She could not understand who her child was, but most especially, why he died such a tragic death: she discovers his lifeless body on their front door, covered in blood. So, while everyone, including Chika, Vivek's father moves on after his death, Kavita's persistent search for answers becomes a way in which Emeki addresses the refusal to acknowledge Vivek's queer identity linguistically. Vivek's friends call him 'Nnemdi' which means 'My Mother is back', 'My mother is alive' in recognition of his cross-gender identity. They inform Kavita how much Vivek cherished his Igbo name because they believe it will help Kavita be more receptive to Vivek's identity, being the only person interested in unravelling the mystery behind Vivek's death.

Even though she is initially surprised and angry at the revelation, Kavita ultimately accepts that she did not fully comprehend her child's identity, especially since Vivek's knowledge of his reincarnated name disproves Kavita and Chika's earlier belief that he is not Ahunna. After his friends leave, Kavita calls Ekene to confirm if he mentions Vivek's reincarnate name to him at any point during his brief lifetime. Confirming Vivek's unawareness of Nnemdi—the suggested reincarnation name - Kavita and her husband initiate the memorisation and acceptance of Vivek's identity. She convinces Chika to rename

Vivek's grave to reflect his identity as a cross-gender subject, because it is "better late than never" (Emezi 2020, 28). This act marks the recognition of Vivek's full identity through the rewriting of his headstone, and confirms Karolina Zlamanova's assertion that "having a name, choosing a name for oneself, or being named and naming is a fundamental element of the formation of one's identity" (Zlamanova 2020, 9).

The acknowledgement and recognition of Vivek's identity is demonstrated in the renaming of his headstone to 'Vivek Nnemdi Oji,' a name which acknowledges his identity as a reincarnate, queering the naming system in place. Further to this is the symbolic use of the headstone, which became a Christian tradition around "mid-1600s... in churchyards and cemeteries" (Milano 2020). Headstones are erected as a form of memorisation of the dead, and "represent the permanence of a person's legacy, which helps surviving family members and friends deal with the difficult mourning process, as they have a place to visit their loved one" (Milano 2020). Vivek's death represents the end of animosity and rejection towards his queerness. Also, dying or death becomes both the end of a distressing moment of life and the beginning of an era of possibilities.

Apart from using the act of naming to claim Vivek's identity, the inclusion of photographs in the novel serves as another powerful symbol, operating as a site of memory and revelation. Emeki both commemorates and asserts Vivek's identity by including photographs that unveil the tensions between public and private selves, especially, regarding gender identity. Prior to introducing Vivek through photographs in the beginning of the novel, photographs had already become a tool of heteronormative repression. During Vivek's funeral, the pictures that were selected for the programme of events deliberately exclude the ones that capture his transformation as a cross-gender subject:

The programme was full of pictures of Vivek as a small boy, a baby, none of them looked like him now. It was as if whoever has selected the pictures has decided to end the timeline before Vivek had grown his hair out. Kavita didn't know whether to be relieved that he was frozen in time this way, or

annoyed that they wanted to pretend he was someone else (Emezi 2020, 207).

The refusal to include pictures of Vivek wearing his long hair symbolises the refusal to acknowledge queer identity. However, by the time Vivek's friends visit Kavita to reveal Vivek's identities, photographs become a way of memorising and asserting Vivek's full identity. As Kavita brings out pictures which Vivek's friends share with her, she "pored over it for hours when Chika was out of the house, trying to find the child she's lost, trying to commit to memory the child she'd found" (Emezi 2020, 228). This singular act signals acceptance and memorisation. Afterwards, Vivek's headstone which initially bore his socially accepted name - Vivek, is modified to represent all his identities as a gender-fluid subject. The novel thus reconciles his identities and the institutions that have denied his existence - the church, family, and society at large - through the action of his parents. This is important because at the outset of the novel, Vivek's family and society resist and decline to name Vivek, serving as a representation of the heteronormative establishments that dictate gender standards. But the reappearance of Vivek's parents at the end of the novel as reformed agents who choose to rename Vivek in line with the new discovery, given their knowledge about him, demonstrates the acknowledgement of his disavowed identity and the accordance of its place in society. The narrative underscores the transformative potential within the heteronormative family, arguing that the family structure, while capable of perpetuating queer oppression, can also facilitate societal acceptance of queer identities. Moreover, the reformation of Vivek's headstone which occurs only after confirmation of Vivek's reincarnate identity underscores the importance and transformational potential of indigenous knowledge and spirituality in understanding identity.

The Death of Vivek Oji espouses the ambivalent idea of a strange yet queer hope and future possible through death; a narrative which varies greatly from Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2006) which depicts a character who embodies fear and fatality, and who runs away from society owing to the disclosure of his identity. Unlike the typical portrayal of death as a traumatic end, it is depicted it as a crucial passage toward new beginnings. In a way, Vivek's life adheres to the Igbo belief in the cyclic human existence, which commences with

birth, death, and rebirth. His existence as a reincarnate is premised on the fact that he has lived before, died, and existed in the spirit realm as a discarnate body. His death and promise of return made at the end of the novel, therefore, completes the cycle of life and heralds the possibility of a queer futurity. He confirms the spirituality of his journey as a reincarnate: “I was born and died. I will come back” (Emezi 2020, 245), and his return is tied to the continued embodiment of queer identity as expressed by the alternative community. In the sex scene between Osita and Juju, the hope of a return is hinted as Vivek, who observes them posthumously, remarks: “they were keeping me alive in the sweetest way they knew how, you see” (Emezi 2020, 195). After the scene of rebirth and in the final chapter, Vivek’s voice is audible, affirming his inherent existence as an integral member of his community: “Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive” (Emezi 2020, 245). Emezi thus subverts both the idea that death is the end of queerness, especially given that queer people are violently attacked and even killed in society. Instead, Emezi portrays death as a transitory phase that does not signal the end of queerness but its renewal and continuity.

5.7 Summary and Implications

This chapter has examined how Emezi challenges the dominance of heteronormativity by featuring a cross-gender character who subverts traditional gender and sexual norms through embracing their reincarnated identity. I argued that Emezi’s innovative approach to the identity question is a decolonial move that seeks to conceptualise identity within a strictly indigenous framework, and that Vivek’s identity as a cross-gender subject disrupts gender binaries. I further unveiled how the novel unsettles heteronormativity by queering heteronormativity, blurring the boundaries between hetero/homosexual relationships, depicting queer intimacy not only as a symbol of desire, affirmation and emotional connection, but also as a powerful emblem of resistance against the limits of heteronormativity. Emezi’s characters form an alternative community where heteronormativity is completely blurred. In addition, the posthumous recognition of Vivek’s identity through the extension of the existing naming convention in Igbo culture serves as a powerful disruption of heteronormativity. The

next chapter continues the exploration of queerness by depicting a subject who destabilises known heteronormative binaries and structures through their multiple identity.

Chapter Six: Transcending Biology: The Ogbanje Identity and the Undoing of Gender Binarism in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I raise the importance of how Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018), a groundbreaking novel, continues the subversion of heteronormativity by challenging the material and biological constraints of gender through the portrayal of a character whose identity transcends the conventional gender categorisation. *Freshwater* tells the story of the Ada, a character inhabited by multiple spirits. Gendered female at birth but unaware of her embodiment, the Ada struggles to silence the many spirits living within her as she experiences a troubled childhood, characterised by psychological tension and erratic behaviour. While studying Veterinary medicine abroad, the Ada discovers she is an Ogbanje and her name, Akwaeke,¹¹ signals that she is also the child of Ala, the earth goddess - a discovery that puts her fragmented sense of self, frequent self-harm, and suicidal tendencies in perspective. Being both an Ogbanje and the child of Ala, the Ada cannot be marked by the limiting conventions of a gender binary system because she embodies a spirit self that exerts more control over her identity than her biology. By the end of the novel, the Ada undergoes a mastectomy to make sense of her in-betweenness as neither male nor female. She embraces her complex identity through a return to Ala worship, a return which helps her to integrate the many identities living within her. *Freshwater* challenges gender binary as the protagonist struggles to negotiate her embodiment away from the existing gender system, experienced as limiting and inadequate.

The protagonist in *Freshwater* shares several aspects of Akwaeke Emezi's own life, which has led some critics to read *Freshwater* as an autobiography. Both the Ada and Emezi are named Akwaeke, come from Southeastern Nigeria, identify as Ogbanje, undergo surgery to alter their bodies, and have lived and studied in the United States of America. Emezi uses the plural pronoun 'they' to address their sense of self. In an interview, Emezi describes

¹¹ It literally translates to the 'Egg of a Python'. A python is the visible representation of the earth goddess and so its egg is considered the child of Ala.

themselves as existing beyond the binary, rejecting gender binarism, and the label of a 'woman'. Instead, they embrace gender fluidity. Omosirize Obi-Young comments on Emezi's identity: "She is not a man in a woman's body; she is not just a woman. She realised this five years ago and has since undergone surgery to remove her uterus" (Obi-Young 2018). Emezi has also described *Freshwater* as an autobiography, calling it "a breath away from being a memoir" (Akbar 2018). Alexander Naima Smith further claims that "Emezi's use of fictional narratives to reflect, filter, and otherwise mediate their lived experiences while emphasising the fundamental truth of these narratives is simultaneously a strategy of sensual worldmaking and of the genre of autofiction" (Smith 2021a, 143). These references thus position the Ogbanje identity within a recognisable experience. However, *Freshwater* stretches the ogbanje subjectivity to its ontological potential by imagining the possibility of a living, liminal, and fluid ogbanje; an identity which is not recognised in Igbo culture.

In the previous chapter, I examined how Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* disrupts the normative ways of thinking about gender by reimagining indigenous spirituality as a queer-affirming space and in this chapter, *Freshwater* becomes the focus of analysis. Although both texts appear to undertake the same project of reimagining gender using Igbo spirituality, they do so through distinct frameworks and narrative strategies. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi undoes heteronormative visibility through communal queerness and gender transgression. Queerness is shown as an identity rooted in visibility, bodily expression and societal recognition, showing how Vivek navigates a violent and gendered society as a cross-gender subject. Vivek's queerness is not presented as a metaphysical rupture but as a continuity of a previous, lived existence, where the return of Nnemdi, his grandmother, is unseen, misrecognised and erased by the dominant gender in place. The novel thus makes the body central to queer expression and queers the social world by critiquing its rigidity and refusal to see gender fluid identities. But while Emezi portrays Vivek's struggle as grounded in bodily recognition and societal acceptance, in *Freshwater*, Emezi presents queerness as a metaphysical rupture and a reconnection to a spiritual existence outside the human world. It is a narrative that disrupts the binary understanding of selfhood through spiritual multiplicity,

as the protagonist asserts a nonhuman subjectivity that is deeply connected to a precolonial spirituality – the belief in ogbanje and the Ala deity.

Freshwater also departs from *Walking with Shadows*, *Under the Udala Trees*, and *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* in their exploration of physical violence against queer people. This is because the conflict in *Freshwater* is not external but spiritual as the novel centres on the Ada's search for a reconciliation of her multiple self rather than a preoccupation with homophobia. It portrays the Ada as a character who is in conflict with themselves, and one "more concerned with integrating— literally—her body, mind, and spirits, than with seeking reconciliation with the world around her" (Smith 2021a, 138). So, *Freshwater* does not simply express a narrative of gender fluidity but also one in which the human world is subordinated to the invisible world of spirit identities. At the plot level, *Freshwater* is a story of fragmentary existence, self-dissonance, and identity reconciliation. However, rippling out from this internal conflict are repercussions for socially lived lives that are disruptive and transformative.

The heteronormative society is defined by binaries such as male/female, human/spirit, self/others, human/divine, present/absent, sanity/madness, life/death. These binaries are mutually exclusive. However, *Freshwater* blurs these binaries as it is a narrative of holding oppositional things together. The use of multiple narrators – the Ada and the spirits living in her – show a protagonist whose identity is not simply bound by biology but layered and dispersed across realms. The Ada lives at the intersection of multiple binaries –she has a collective and singular identity, male and female identities, spirit of life and the death drive, human and spirit identities and inhabits both the human and the spirit worlds.

This chapter argues that *Freshwater* disrupts heteronormativity by using the Ada's identity as Ogbanje and the child of Ala as a challenge to gender fixity, decentring the body and elevating the spirit voices living in the Ada; it collides the binaries and deconstructs the heteronormative family and kinship. But before putting forward these arguments, I will examine how Emezi problematises colonialism in relation to queerness and how the framing of the Ada's identity as the child of Ala and an Ogbanje serves as a framework for narrating the story of gender fluidity and multiple selves. The novel challenges heteronormative and

colonial constructions of identity by replacing them with an ontological framework where multiplicity, embodiment and spirituality are central to being.

6.2 Colonialism, Christianity and the Erasure of Indigenous Spirituality: Reclaiming the Precolonial Igbo Spirituality

Emezi directly interrogates colonialism and its destructive impact on precolonial Igbo cosmology and on the understanding of gender and the concept of being. In my discussion of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, I situated Emezi as a decolonial author, examining how they challenge fixed ideas of gender by centring indigenous spirituality as a context for understanding Vivek's identity, an approach which departs from the Western framework. In *Freshwater*, Emezi links the Ada's identity to Ala, the earth goddess, and ogbanje phenomenon. Emezi uses this connection to centre the impact of colonialism on ancestral belief systems, to foreground the disavowal of an alternative existence as the outcome of this violent culture encounter, and subsequently to recentre the Igbo belief system as a context for making sense of the Ada's identity.

The transatlantic slave trade is depicted as one of the violent encounters that disrupted indigenous cum African ways of knowing and being in the world. Emezi first points to the destabilisation and the dispersal of cultural and spiritual artefacts of Igbo spirituality through the reference to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, speaking about the time "when the corrupters stole our people, what the swollen hulls carried over the bellied seas, the masks, the skin on the inside of the drum, the words under the words, the water in the water" (Emezi, 2018, 95). Emezi comments on how these religious items survived and entrenched themselves in their new environment. Not only were Africans dispossessed of their religious artefacts and relic, but they also lost several devotees of African deities. Emezi speaks about "the godly stowaways that came along when the corrupters stole our people... the humans who survived, those selected among them, the ones in white, the ones shaking shells and mineral deposits, the ones ridden, the ones chosen, the ones who follow, work, and serve because calls pass through blood no matter how many oceans you drop death into" (Emezi 2018, 95). The humans who survived the violence of slavery - those chosen by spirits or deities, priest who

serve as spirit mediums, devotees, healers, spirit workers and those ridden, a reference to spirit possession - are portrayed as individuals who carry more than a physical life. They are embodiments of spiritual legacies. While Emezi refers to the violence of the slave trade in connection with the shared spiritual cosmology in the Caribbean, hinting at the other descendants of Ala who currently reside in these regions, such as Melana, a friend to the Ada who understands her embodiment, it signifies the initial stages of the erosion of Igbo indigenous beliefs.

Emezi further presents Christianity as another key source of cultural and spiritual confusion, and a hindrance to the understanding of fluid identities like the Ada. During the colonial conquest, Christianity played a critical role in the erasure of indigenous knowledge and the imposition of a gender binarism. Christianity was introduced into Igboland in the 1880s and once it established a presence and garnered initial acceptance among the people, it challenged the indigenous faith and beliefs. It reinforced rigid gender binary which subordinated women and disavowed queer identity, but most importantly, it sidelined and demonised autochthonous religious traditions that did not align with the colonial mission. In Igboland, the key message of the missionaries was the demonisation of Igbo gods as powerless idols. Ifi Amadiume notes that prior to the colonial incursion, Nnobi people, a town in southeastern Nigeria, believed in male and female goddesses because such understanding of the cosmic order ensures power balance in society. While there were male gods like Aho, Idemili, the female water goddess, was powerful and had significant impact in the community of Nnobi. But the coming of Christianity instituted an idea of gender that was strictly patriarchal and erased the matriarchy in place by vilifying the belief in Idemili. Amadiume writes that:

in Nnobi, people were told to stop worshipping indigenous symbols which the Christians interpreted as idols. The Christian doctrine claimed that God created all persons and all things and that, unlike the goddess Idemili, God was a “he” and not a “she”... all activities which centred on the goddess were condemned and replaced by those rooted in the belief in and doctrine of a patriarchal Christian god and his son Jesus Christ” (Amadiume 2015, 121).

Amadiume further notes that “by far the greatest conflict centred on the Christian practice of killing the python, which is a totemic symbol of those who worship the goddess Idemili” (Amadiume 2015, 121). Christianity radicalised local converts whose fanaticism was directed towards the destruction of indigenous spirituality and relics. The result of the rejection of indigenous spirituality was gross contradictions and conflicts of belief. For instance, reincarnation, which explains predestination and the perpetual cycle of life, is rejected within Christianity,¹² and the ogbanje phenomenon, a precolonial identity used in *Freshwater* to represent queer subjectivities, remains unexplained within its theological framework.

Ala, which literally means ground, is the earth goddess and the guardian of the earth – both the surface ground and the underground. Also known as Ana, Ali, Ani, Ala is one of the most visible and powerful deities in the Igbo pantheon. She is a highly revered female goddess, the daughter of Chukwu, and stands as a symbol of fertility, morality, creativity, and life. Her physical symbol is the hard ground, and she encompasses both the solid ground and the subterranean realm beneath it. She is the mother of all living things, including humans and her sphere of influences stretches to every aspect of life as conceived in Igbo culture. She is the earth, the nurturer of life and the womb that holds the dead. So, Ala is considered holy, and “everything that was done in Igbo traditional society had a bearing to the earth” (Kanu 2021, 112). Ala nurtures, protects and guards; Ala is also associated with the female gender. The python and the crescent moon are its symbol, hence the python’s sacredness. Emezi speaks of how important and central Ala was in Igboland before the introduction of Christianity and how Christianity alienated the Igbo people from their beliefs:

Before a Christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile. It is the source of the stream, the flesh form of Ala, who is the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law. On her lips man is born and there he spends his whole life. Ala holds the underworld replete in her womb, the dead fattening her belly, a crescent moon above her (Emezi 2018, 10).

¹² Christianity in Nigeria teaches spiritual/physical death, eternal judgment and eternal life but not rebirth/reincarnation. It does also acknowledge the existence of an ogbanje identity.

The reference to a time before the 'Christ-induced amnesia struck humans' is Emezi's way of signposting a precolonial time when Igbo spirituality was not Christ-based but Ala-based. It is a contestation with the foreignness of beliefs and the disruption of traditional practices. Within that context, Ala was the central figure of authority, the python was sacred, being the 'flesh form of Ala' and the understanding of identity was fluid. Christianity did not simply wage war against precolonial spirituality; it also erased ways of being in the world associated with it. For instance, during the Ada's christening, the church insists that the parents adopt a second name, one which is associated with the Christian God after the Ada's first name, Akwaeke is rejected by the church as paganism: "the church has refused to baptise the child without that second name; they considered her first name unchristian, pagan" (Emezi 2018, 8). Emezi thus draws a parallel between the introduction of Christianity and the production of cultural subjects who are completely alienated from their indigenous belief system.

In *Freshwater*, Saul and Saachi, the Ada's human parents are devout Catholics who are portrayed as being disconnected from their spiritual roots. When the Ada is about three years and a half, a python, believed in Igbo culture to be Ala's emissary, visits the Ada while she is alone. The visit is symbolic as it is depicted as a spiritual event, a summoning and a recognition of the Ada's sacred identity as Ala's child. It is a moment of spiritual affirmation of the Ada's identity and a calling - Ala, the Ada's mother-deity, reaching out and calling her. However, upon sighting the snake, the Ada screams and Saul runs in, takes the child to safety, returns with a machete and kills the snake. Emezi shows Saul's action as originating from a disconnection from his spiritual root: "Saul was a modern Igbo man. His medical training had been on scholarship in the Soviet Union, after which he spent many years in London. He did not believe in mumbo-jumbo; anything that would've said a snake could mean anything other than death" (Emezi 2018, 14). The killing of the python is portrayed as an act of spiritual violence against Ala as "Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and the pieces of flesh; she went back, she would never return" (Emezi 2018, 14). So, the death of

Ala is considered a disconnection between the Ada and her mother – a spiritual bond that has existed before the Ada's current existence.

Saul is depicted as “an impatient man, a blind man” (Emezi 2018, 30) and Emezi presents his action as a rejection of the Ada's identity and her divine lineage as an Ogbanje. The killing of the snake marks a rupture in the Ada's connection to her spiritual identity. Saul's action unveils the tension between colonial religion and indigenous Igbo spirituality as he did not simply disregard a religious symbol; he literally kills the Ada's mother, severing the Ada from the nurturing presence of her spirit mother. Emezi thus uses slavery and colonialism - two important historical moments in Nigeria and African continent - to explore the broader discussion of colonial suppression of indigenous worldviews, especially, those that explain and affirm gender fluidity, multiplicity and spirit possession, which are critical to making sense of the Ada's identity. Emezi's comment that “calls pass through blood no matter how many oceans you drop death into” (Emezi 2028, 95) delivers the core message which the novel seeks to pass across - that spirit identity or queerness/gender multiplicity is inherent and cannot be erased - not even by transatlantic slave trade or colonialism. Its resurgence, through the Ada's identity, is a testament to the survival and resilience of indigenous knowledges and ancestral worship. Emezi suggests that the denial or physical erasure of precolonial spirituality does not stop the existence of a reality rooted in it. Instead, it intrudes into the rigid society, surviving and asserting its presence through identities like the Ada. It is hence within an Ala-based universe that the Ada claims her multiple identity.

6.3 Framing the Ada's Identity within the Ala Cosmology and Ogbanje Phenomenon

One way in which Emezi radically subverts heteronormativity is through the portrayal of the Ada as a child of Ala. Emezi foregrounds the Ada's multiple self within an Ala-based cosmology – a universe that recognises being and existence beyond the rigid binaries in place, offering an ontological space that allows the protagonist to embrace her identity and embodiment. The Ada is the child of Ala, the egg of the python. The python, itself a symbol of the Ala, is a sacred creature:

It was a taboo to kill python and of its egg, they would say you cannot find. And if you find it they would add, you cannot touch it. For the egg of a python is the child of Ala, and the child of Ala is not, and can never be, intended for your hands (Emezi 2018, 10)

By this comment, Emezi asserts the sacredness of the Ada's identity, arguing that the Ada, like the egg of Ala, is not meant to be possessed, controlled or handled by humans. The phrase 'not intended for human hands' infers that the Ada exists outside human authority and control, particularly, the heteronormative, patriarchal and colonial control systems in society; any attempt to control her is considered as a violation of the divine order. As a child of Ala, the Ada belongs to the spirit realm and answers only to divine laws. The Ada's fluidity, multiplicity and queerness is portrayed as divinely sanctioned and Emezi seems to curtail the limit of heteronormativity over queerness by suggesting that: you cannot own, name or fix what is sacred.

In addition to being Ala's child, the Ada is also a living and liminal ogbanje. In *Freshwater*, Ogbanje is not simply a spirit identity but also a framework for understanding gender fluidity. As already explained in Chapter One, an ogbanje is a spirit child that engages in a repeated cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, usually to punish and bring unending suffering to its parents. Its repetitive errand of death inflicts and invokes violent memories of pain, loss, and trauma in the host family. Ogbanje is a symbol of deviance and complex identity because "ogbanje are as liminal as possible – spirit and human, both and neither" (Emezi 2018, 228). This is because it is believed that humans first exist as spirits and are later born into human families. It is believed in the Igbo culture that "an ogbanje has ties with deities or agents of deities who are said to guard the interface between birth and a postulated pre-birth state and who are believed to mediate life processes" (Ilechukwu 2007, 240). This is because an ogbanje has a fluid and unstable identity. Unlike humans, who sever their ties with the spirit world once they are born into a human family, ogbanje do not completely cut ties with either the spirit or the human world but move seamlessly through them and collide the borders of visible and invisible worlds. Ogbanje's complexity lies in their interruption of the belief in the cyclical nature of life - birth, death, and rebirth.

Ogbanje are believed to be spirits enroute to the human world who have significantly altered their destinies and are a deviation from the established course of human life- the idea of birth, death, and reincarnation. Whereas reincarnation is a positive experience in Igbo culture, Ogbanje is perceived as a negative iteration of this phenomenon. An ogbanje's fluidity and liminality enable it to defy strict gender categorisation. In addition, most ogbanje die before sexual maturity; they also exist in cohorts, keeping ties with their spirit siblings, who ensure their oath of unending death and rebirth is unbroken. The Ada refers to this cohort as the brothersisters, "the other children of our mother, the ones who had not come across with us. Ndi otu. Ogbanje" (Emezi 2018, 20). This agreement of perpetual birth and return made by the brothersisters is encrypted in the Iyiwa— translated as "the oath of the world" (Emezi 2018, 20), an item comprising a rock and other disparate items. The Iyiwa is often hidden in strangest places like trees, remote forest, or hidden areas of the house. It is usually distinct from the ogbanje and so can be discovered and destroyed. The primary purpose of destroying an Iyiwa is to rein an ogbanje to the human world, typically to end their interference with the human cycle of life. This is because through death and reincarnation, the continuity of the human cycle is perpetuated, but ogbanje's repeated death truncates it.

An ogbanje is usually reined to the human world by disconnecting it from its spirit cohort through certain rituals performed by a dibia which involve digging out and destroying the Iyiwa. "For by this act, the ogbanje dissociates himself from the evil machination of his spirit kin in a resolution to live a normal life" (Achebe 1980, 37). As a human-looking spirit, still committed to the bond of the brothersisters and the contract with the portal deities, ogbanje is liminal, fluid, and falls outside the dominant sex-gender category. From this cultural standpoint, ogbanje is a fulcrum of complexity that refuses the closure of fixed gender and identity and the insistence within the Igbo culture on binding ogbanje to the human world is in response to their liminality and elusiveness. If successfully separated from the spirit world, a 'cut' or 'tethered' ogbanje (Harlin 2023, 303) is conceived of as a normalised and gender-socialised subject. When disconnected from the spirit cohort, ogbanje loses both its spirit connection and the agency to exist in liminality and fluidity. Most ogbanje die before they

reach sexual maturity. The earliest literary figure of the ogbanje is Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). She undergoes a series of deaths and rebirths, with a gender transition occurring in each instance: "Onwumbiko (boy), Ozoemena (girl), and Onwuma (boy)" (Osinubi 2016, 182). The inconsistency of Ezinma's gender at each rebirth underscores the liminality of an ogbanje. Because the existence of ogbanje is difficult to explain, ogbanje are "elusive, mysterious, and incomprehensible" (Achebe 1980, 33). Furthermore, ogbanje does not only problematise identity, ogbanje represents "the complexities of being human within Igbo culture and spirituality, ...[and] problematizes gender by harmonizing the spiritual (genderless) and the embodied (gendered) spheres of being human" (Magaqa and Makombe 2021, 25).

It is against this ontology that *Freshwater* weaves a narrative of a living liminal ogbanje who defies death and transcends the dominant gender regime. In contrast to the normative ogbanje, the Ada is liminal because her *iyiwa* is inseparable from her body, and she maintains connection to the spirit world yet lives in the physical world. I refer to the cut, fettered or socialised ogbanje as a normative ogbanje and describe the identity which Emezi imagines as a non-normalising subject.

We were not like other ogbanje. We did not hide [the Ada's *iyiwa*] under a tree or inside a river or in the tangled foundations of Saul's village. No, we hid it better than that. We took it apart and we disseminated it... we hid the igneous rock in the pit of her stomach...we put the velveteen inside the walls of her vagina, and we spat on the hide, wetting like a stream. It rippled and came alive, and then we stretched it from one of her shoulder blades to the other, draping it over her back and stitching it to her other skin. We made her the oath. To destroy it, they would have to destroy her. To keep her alive, they would have to send her back" (Emezi 2018, 16).

From the perspective of an ogbanje that dies before sexual maturity, the Ada is markedly different. Her *iyiwa* is woven into the fabric of her being, an act that prevents a clear boundary between her spirit selves and her human body. Also, the lack of separation between herself and the personas inhabiting her, symbolised in the interconnectedness of her *iyiwa*, makes it impossible to determine and position her within the gender system. For

this reason, the Ada's liminality, and subsequent existence beyond the expected lifespan of an ogbanje contradicts the life of a normative ogbanje and obscures her gender identity. By its very nature, ogbanje is destined to die and return - as an ogbanje whose iyiuwa is not discovered is meant to die prematurely and join her spirit cohort. So, the success of ogbanje's trick of repeated death lies in the inability to find the iyiuwa. However, the Ada is unable to fulfil this part of her oath because her iyiuwa is intricately woven into her entire existence: she is both the bridge - the connection between the spirit and the physical realm - as well as the errand runner - who is expected to return to her brothersisters through the bridge. This makes it impossible for her to return and "to destroy it, they would have to destroy her. To keep her alive, they would have to send her back" (Emezi 2018, 16). It is the idea of an ogbanje that defies death and is unassimilated into the normative gender codes that *Freshwater* imagines. Emezi's *Freshwater*, thus, "explores what it means for an ogbanje to live, something that rarely occurs" (Scholes 2019).

Another indigenous framework that shapes Emezi's idea in *Freshwater* is the belief in the duality of concepts. In Igbo thought, duality is fundamental to understanding how the Igbo cosmology works and is often captured by the popular saying: "Ihe kwuru, ihe akwudebe ya", which literally means 'when one thing stands, another must stand beside it'. According to Donald Mark C Ude, duality "is used to highlight the fact that to every argument there must be a counterargument; there is an opposite side to every idea or thing that must be recognised and accorded its full right" (Ude 2021, 41). It also refers to the belief "that everything physical has a spirit counterpart" (Muonwe 2018, 23). The idea of duality exists because there is no clear-cut distinction between the self and the world, body and spirit as well as between the visible and invisible worlds because they are regarded as a united and a dynamic mix (Chukwulozie 1984, 89). In Igbo worldview, individuals are believed to embody both a physical nature (body/Ahu) and a spirit self (nmuo/chi). Ahu is the visible and tangible aspect of a person, "an avenue through which the person is expressed. Through it, the spiritual is revealed in its embodied form" (Muonwe 2019, 22). Nmuo is the spirit manifestation of a person, and chi, is an aspect of nmuo but is often seen as a spark of Chukwu, an aspect of his divine nature which he gifts every human being. Human being

(Nmadu) is thus viewed as having both a spirit and human self, a person is not seen as divided or conflicted as is often conceived in Western thought. Rather, "For the Igbo, the human person is a unit" (Muonwe 2019, 23). Both the body and spirit are considered integral to a wholesome identity.

Furthermore, gods are also believed to have both male and female qualities; both attributes must exist in the right balance for the good of the human world. Chukwu is the giver of law, and Ala is the enforcer; Chukwu is also in charge of creation while Ala is responsible for protecting what is created (Kanu 2018, 130). Both forces must work together for harmony. For instance, Chukwu and Ala must be in agreement for rain to fall and for crops to grow. Imbalance of energies from both deities "causes drought or disease" (Nwoye 2011, 309). Duality is thus directly opposed to the binary lens. Unlike a binarism which sees two things as opposing and mutually exclusive, duality refers to the belief in a complementary and harmonious co-existence, within the same space, of two aspects of a thing. It emphasises interdependence of things and does not see the constituting elements as opposites that must cancel each other, instead they are seen as complementary force that must come together to create a whole. Hence, while binaries are often rigid, polarised and deterministic, duality allows room for fluidity, interdependence and multiplicity as a framework for making sense of the universe and existence. So, whereas the Igbo thought does not literally say that a person can have both a male and female identities, it does embrace a worldview where spiritual and physical identity are fluid and where each person is understood to hold a dynamic mix of what might be called masculine and feminine energies. Throughout *Freshwater*, Emezi employs this philosophy as a subversion of the rigid understanding of identity.

Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe claim that "Emezi does not only appropriate the *ogbanje* to challenge entrenched Western cultural frameworks but also to frame and locate queer identities in African cosmology" (Magaqa and Makombe 2021, 32). They argue that Emezi uses the *ogbanje* identity to challenge western cultural frameworks, locating queerness within African contexts. This is because an *ogbanje* is "an unwelcome deviation that lives in between two different worlds" (Magaqa and Makombe 2021, 25), the cultural acknowledgement of *ogbanje*'s existence is considered an intricate aspect of Igbo ontology.

Hence, ogbanje, "as a narrative framework, ...embodies the plurality and multiplicity of ontology, identity, and sexuality" (Magaqa and Makombe 2021, 27). Ogbanje's existence demonstrates the expansive nature of identity in Igbo cosmology, challenging a Western-centric universe that perceives identity strictly within a binary framework. My thesis extends Magaqa and Makombe's argument by emphasising the cultural relocation of queerness but also focuses specifically on how Emezi mobilises the ogbanje identity to upturn heteronormative idea of gender and identity. This study specifically highlights how *Freshwater* reconfigures normative ideas of gender and identity by presenting ogbanje, not only as a cultural, fluid subject but also as a radical alternative to binary gender and fixed identity categories. I argue that Emezi uses the Ada's non-normalising identity to critique and disrupt heteronormative binaries. To decentre the heteronormative emphasis on physicality and the heterosexual subject, the novel grounds the Ada's identity in the spirit realm where the spirit identities inhabiting her acquire greater agency over her physical body. Her body is not gendered rather a host to multiple identities that live and express themselves through her.

6.4 Decentring the Body and Positioning the Spirit Identities

One of the most important ways that *Freshwater* destabilises the heteronormative framework is through its deconstruction of the body/spirit binary. In normative society, the body occupies a central place in gender and sexual discourse - it is fixed, singular and the source of selfhood and agency, while the spirit is considered abstract and metaphysical, unknowable and secondary to empirical knowledge. Such understanding of the body informs ideas about autonomous individuality, coherent identity and gender but *Freshwater* rewrites embodiment as something that is plural and spiritual through depicting the body as a site of spiritual multiplicity, not binary. This idea replaces the singular, stable body often portrayed in normative discourse with one that is inhabited, contested and shared by multiple selves. In other words, *Freshwater* rejects the idea that there is a fixed, singular and stable identity by portraying the Ada's body as a medium for the expression of spirit identities and shifts narrative authority away from the Ada's human self and towards the spirit voices that inhabit her. This makes her human voice subordinate to her spirit identities.

As an ogbanje and the child of Ala, the Ada “has one foot at the other side at all times” (Emezi 2018, 227), which allows her to live in the human world, yet grounded in the spirit realm where the spirit identities inhabiting her acquire greater agency over her physical body. From the opening chapter, the novel foregrounds the Ada’s multiplicity through the voice of the brothersisters, a collective group of spirits living in the Ada that precedes her birth and narrate significant portions of the story, through Asughara, the Ada’s female identity, Saint Vincent, her male identity, as well as the Ada’s human voice. The Ada names Asughara and Saint Vincent “shadow that eats things and the smoke that hides the mother color from our teeth” (Emezi 2018, 52). The spirit identities narrate most of the chapters, - the collective “We”, the plural personae of the Ada, narrate eleven out of the twenty-two chapters, the Ada’s beast self and female self, Asughara, features in seven chapters, while the Ada’s human voice is dispersed across just four chapters. The collective ‘We’ is regarded as a plural, multiple and collective identity, and not actually depicted as ‘identities or the Ada’s selves’. Though made of multiple spirits, the collective personae comprise multiple spirits which manifests themselves when needed. As a result, I use the singular pronoun to show that despite being multiple, Emezi portrays the spirits as a unified identity.

The collective ‘We’ provides a comprehensive insight into the Ada’s embodiment, narrating her pre-existence as a spirit and the moment they are housed in the Ada’s body. Although gendered female at birth, the Ada’s identity is not defined by her body; instead, “the Ada’s life was a placeholder, an interlude” (Emezi 2018, 29) for the spirits living in her – both male, female and non-gendered spirits. The Ada’s body does not belong to her, it is a threshold, a container, a battleground where the human and the spirit contend for control. The collective self is not limited like the Ada’s human self, instead it is omniscient and “could see everything” (Emezi 2018, 39). For instance, they are present during the Ada’s incubation in Saachi’s womb, witnessing the gradual formation of cells. Following her birth and subsequent struggle with her embodiment, the Ada’s collective self knows she is not mentally unstable but embodied by multiple spirits. Even before birth, while the Ada is still in Saachi’s womb, the spirits see her body not as a person but as a vessel - a container for their presence.

Before being incubated, the spirit cohorts were used to the freedom of spiritual existence, “warm thuds of heartbeats separated by walls of flesh and liquid, used to the option of leaving, of returning to the place we came from, free like spirits are meant to be” (Emezi 2018, 4). Now confined to what they call “the abomination of the fleshly” (Emezi 2018, 5), the Ada’s body becomes a kind of liminal space, where the fluid nature of the spirits can act out their identities, rather than being locked into a single, stable human self. The portrayal of the body as a habitation of multiple spirits fundamentally challenges the heteronormative idea that identity is inherently confined to the body.

The idea that the Ada’s human self is secondary to the spirit self is clearly expressed in the opening line of Chapter Nine, where the reader first encounters the Ada’s own voice: “mgbe nnukwu nmanwu puta, obere nmanwu n’agba oso, meaning that “when the big masquerade enters the arena, the smaller ones run away or hides” (Emezi 2018, 101). In this context, the spirit selves represent the big masquerade - stronger, more dominant forces shaping the Ada’s identity. Before their awakening at the masquerade festival at Umuawa, a community in Umuahia, a town in Southeastern Nigeria, the spirits were latent. But as the spirits awaken within her, they take control of the Ada’s identity, and her human consciousness - the smaller masquerade - retreats into the background, giving way to the more powerful presence of the spirits in her journey toward self-discovery.

The spirits are literal - they are not metaphors, allegory or symbolism. They are real. They can speak, remember, hurt and occupy spaces in the Ada’s mind, which is described as the marble room. The marble room is where the contest for the control of the Ada happens. The marble room shifts the focus of identity from the human world to the mind – this becomes the central setting where the spirits residing in Ada interact, assert their presence, and battle for control of her identity. Unlike the human world where queerness is pathologized, the multiple selves within the Ada, especially, the powerful Asughara and the gentler Saint Vincent, do not view the psychological conflict which the Ada experiences as anything extraordinary to her identity as ogbanje. Instead, as the spirits take the centre stage in the marble room, the Ada’s body and voice are subordinated and the reader hears “a godly

parasite with many heads, roaring inside the marble room of her mind” (Emezi 2018, 45). The subversion of the human body and voice is clearly shown when the Ada’s human self speaks about the fact that the truest account of the Ada’s identity will come from the collective spirits and not the human self:

I don’t even have the mouth to tell this story. I am so tired most of the time. Besides, whatever they will say, will be the truest version of it, since they are the truest version of me... The world in my head has been more real than the one outside... (Emezi 2018, 101)

Here, Emezi renders the Ada’s human self as a voice without any narrative authority. She is rendered voiceless, literally without a ‘mouth’ because the story about her identity, which is heavily reliant on the spirit selves, cannot be told from a singular human perspective. The loss of narrative voice signals the shifting of agency from the body to the spirits. In other words, the truest version of the Ada is not the physical body or the coherent and stable ‘I’ in Western discourses but the multiple spirits – Asughara, Saint Vincent, and the brothersisters – who co-exist in the marble room of the Ada. The spirits do not speak *for* the Ada but *as* the Ada because they do not exist independent of her but are components of a truer and more complete self. In this context, identity is not singular or human centred but dispersed, spiritual and plural. In addition, the final line further displaces the authority of the physical, external world by placing the truth of the Ada’s identity in her interiority and spirit consciousness. In the heteronormative society shaped by colonial and Christian values, identity or truth resides in the physical world and the body. However, in *Freshwater*, it is the inner world of the spirits that holds reality.

The body is also depicted in different phrases that symbolise its disempowerment and limitations - “a bag of skin” (Emezi 2018, 22), “so slow and boring, unfamiliar, and coarse” (Emezi 2018, 5), “a little collection of flesh” (Emezi 2018, 18), “a cage” (Emezi 2018, 52) and “a vessel” (Emezi 2018, 52). The spirits trivialise and de-emphasise the body, directing attention to it only when it is properly “collected, organised, and souled” (Emezi 2018, 5). As the Ada is souled, she becomes a vessel for the gods to express their fluid identity, not a

singular identity as the society would expect. The spirits control and steer the Ada away from society's needs towards theirs.

Furthermore, the Ada is portrayed as a subject with a scattered sense of self as her identity is dispersed across spirit and human realms, disrupting the idea of a singular, coherent self. The spirits often express confusion about where they are or who they are, describing themselves as caught between worlds: they are “ejaculated into an unexpected limbo—too in-between, too god, too human, too halfway spirit bastard” (Emezi 2018, 38). Also, they speak about the gate and how the gods left the gates open after their birth, leaving them with “a net of knowledge snarled around their ankles—not enough to tell us anything, just enough to trip us up” (Emezi 2018, 37). Because of this singular act, the spirits in the Ada are not coherent but scattered and disoriented as they cannot clearly distinguish their past spiritual existence from their current life inside the Ada's body. The Ada becomes “the bridge” (Emezi 2018, 37) - a living conduit between the spiritual and human realms, a portal through which fluid, divine, and scattered identities move freely.

The implication of the body as a site of multiplicity and the Ada's mind as the metaphysical space for its manifestation are striking as the spirits inhabiting the Ada take control of her mind at different times, influencing her action and choices. They shape how the Ada experiences trauma as well as her actions because they are responsible for protecting her since Saachi, her human mother, is unable to protect her after her separation from Saul, the Ada's human father. For instance, following a sexual assault from Soren, the Ada's human consciousness becomes overwhelmed and unable to bear the trauma. At first, the Ada is detached from the incident and unable to comprehend the events:

then slowly information started filtering through, edged with alarm...plain details at first...like he was naked, but she had no idea what she was wearing. Like his penis was out and it was brown like his eyes. Like how she didn't remember taking anything off or putting anything on...she couldn't remember saying yes because she couldn't remember being asked...she couldn't remember anything, like was this the first time, was it fifth, oh god, how long had he been moving unwanted parts of himself in her?” (Emezi 2018, 62-63).

When the Ada finally becomes aware of what has happened with Soren, her scream leads to the birth of Asughara, a powerful hypersexual but protective spirit who emerges in direct response to the rape incident, marking Asughara as “a child of trauma” (Emezi 2018: 80). Asughara’s depiction as a child of trauma is subversive: Emeki uses this to complicate the understanding of desire and trauma in normative discourses. Desire is often seen as something innate, stable and personal that develops as the person matures; trauma is often seen as a psychological rupture, a wound. But Emeki constructs the emergence of the Ada’s female identity, not as something that gradually develops as she makes sense of herself, but a response to a moment of violent sexual encounter. Thus, although the rape of the Ada is marked by pain, it is considered a spiritual event, shaped by survival, that introduces an entirely new consciousness in the Ada. Asughara is birthed in the Ada’s mind, the marble room as she finds herself moving out of the shifting cloud and “condensing into the marble room of the Ada’s mind, with time moving slower for me than for her” (Emeki 2018, 67). From that point on, Asughara steps in to protect her. Asughara does not possess the Ada as this would possibly be interpreted in the human world, rather she becomes a protector and a co-self of the Ada. She stays with the Ada in subsequent encounters and even dialogues with her in the marble room. Similarly, *Freshwater* does not interpret Asughara’s emergence as a psychological dissociation, rather it is presented as a moment of spiritual emergence, showing trauma, not as a force that leads to pain but one that births divinity. As the Ada’s protector and locked in the marble room, Asughara takes charge of the Ada’s body and mind, shaping how she responds and experiences pain. The spirits are not simply living in her, they embody alternative responses to pain, love, and desire, negotiating her experiences and shielding her from suffering and even replacing her during moments of trauma.

Asughara takes over the Ada’s body during violent moments and blocks off memories that are too painful for the Ada to hold onto – she sections the Ada’s mind to prevent her from any direct impact arising from violent encounters because the spirits realise her fragility and vulnerability in the human world. Initially detached from the embodied experiences of the

spirits within her, the Ada's human body is passive as these spirits take centre stage. They "made reality loose for the Ada" (Emezi 2018, 227) by sectioning the Ada's mind:

Sectioning the Ada gave her isolated pockets of memory, each containing a different version of her, there were versions to whom bad things had happened and, therefore, there was also versions to whom these things have not happened. The Ada could look back on her life and see, like clones, several of her standing in a line. This terrified her because if there were so many of her, which one was she? Were they false and her current self real or was her current self false and it was one of the others, lost in the line, who was the real Ada? (Emezi 2018, 229).

Acts of dissociation and the experience of inhabiting multiple realities occur repeatedly throughout *Freshwater*, starting from the Ada's early life. While growing up with her siblings, Chima and Anuli, the Ada experiences one of her first moments of dissociation: Anuli physically assaults the Ada at Chima's command, leaving the Ada bleeding and in need of medical attention. Yet, despite bleeding and receiving medical treatment, the Ada feels disconnected from this event. She even begins to doubt whether it happened at all, because "the Ada has no scar so perhaps this memory is not real" (Emezi 2018, 11). This pattern of detachment continues as the Ada grows older. For instance, during the masquerade ceremony in Umuawa - an important spiritual moment where the spirits awaken in her - the Ada remains physically present but distant, and detached from the interactions happening in her mind, particularly the conversation among the brothersisters.

This emotional distance is a recurring theme as this pattern of emotional and spiritual protection repeats itself later with another disturbing experience involving the Ada's boyfriend, Ewan. After a party, the Ada goes back to his house to sleep, but when Ewan does not wake up to let her in, the Ada breaks the door and lies down beside him. As gossip spreads about that incident and the Ada begins to feel the weight of public shame, Asughara steps in once more, taking "some of that feeling away for her" (Emezi 2018, 118). Even as a child, the Ada is protected from trauma through this same process. After being sexually abused by some neighbours, the brothersisters shield her from the trauma by pushing the memories deep into her subconscious. Emeki tells the reader that "the Ada who was before the sectioning was

not the same child after the sectioning. When she reached back for the memory, it would be as if it belonged to someone else, not her” (Emezi 2018, 228). These moments of disconnection show how the Ada’s identity is shaped by multiple spirits who section her mind, showing how her body and mind become sites for storing pain which her human self cannot always handle. This is because the brothersisters understood the importance of protecting the Ada because after Saachi left Saul, the Ada “knew no one will stay long enough to protect her” (Emezi 2018, 229). So, in the absence of physical protection, Asughara becomes the Ada’s shield, absorbing her pain and owning her, and asserting that “Ada was mine: mine to move, and take and save” (Emezi 2018, 67). In this instance, *Freshwater* removes agency from the physical to the spirit selves of the Ada.

The idea that the spirits ‘section’ the Ada’s mind echoes Western psychiatric notions of sectioning, which involves containing the body because the mind is seen as unstable or disintegrating. It is often framed as care but still operating as a form of control, and at times, violence. However, Emezi reworks this within the Igbo context. Instead of signalling a breakdown that requires containment, the Ada’s multiple selves is presented as constitutive of her identity – the ogbanje do not fragment the Ada; rather, it constitutes how she exists in the world. So, what could be read in the Western lens as a dissociation of self is rearticulated through the Igbo cosmology that recognises plurality as a valid mode of subjectivity. In this way, the novel rethinks trauma, not as a fragmentation of a unified self, but as a reorganisation of subjectivity, where pain is distributed across multiple selves. This challenges Western trauma theory which relies on the mind-body binary, while also exposing how such a framework pathologises plurality and legitimises forms of control.

The Ada’s human self is equally depicted as negotiating her place within the marble room. While the Ada’s human voice occasionally dialogues with her other selves, it remains largely overpowered by the strength and will of the spirits. For instance, Asughara haunts men in the Ada’s body, getting her involved in violent sexual encounters with men such as Hassan, Itohan’s younger brother, Capoeira teacher, Ewan, the carpenter and other random men. The Ada feels shame and guilt after some of these violent sexual encounters, but

Asughara, being spirit rather than human, feels none of it because: “consequences were a thing that happens to humans. Not to me. This was their world. I wasn’t even really here” (Emezi 2018, 82–83). Even when the Ada tries to resist Asughara’s control - attempting to expel her from her mind - the spirit’s hold remains firm. Asughara says to the Ada:

“I am not going anywhere,” I tell her, pulling away from her hands. What could she do? I was stronger than her; this marble was my realm more than it was hers. So, I made myself bigger and bigger, and she was saying something, but her voice was small and tiny, and I was pressed up against the walls of her mind, growing and growing until she was a dot in a corner, and I couldn’t hear her voice anymore” (Emezi 2018, 15).

The fact that Asughara undermines the Ada’s voice and agency, reinforces the idea that the Ada’s body is just a host to the identities living in her and they exert greater control over her. The decentring of her voice allows for the deconstruction of the body as a locus of meaning and the human voice as the authentic representation of self. This dynamic relation between the Ada and the multiple selves shows how the Ada’s body becomes a site of spiritual expression, a space where multiple identities coexist - some more powerful than others. The marble room serves not just as a metaphor for the mind, but as a space where the fluid and multiple aspects of the Ada’s self are revealed, undermining the physical world and its normative laws. The empowering of spirits as protectors of the Ada deconstructs the body/spirit binary and shows how identity transcends the human and physical essence.

6.5 The Body as a Site of Multiple Identities and Desires

In *Freshwater*, Emezi radically queers the body by portraying it as a site of diverse desires - heterosexual, queer and abstinence. Drawing from the Igbo idea of duality, Emezi shows how the Ada is an embodiment of multiple gender and sexualities on account of the spirits that take over her mind and express themselves through her. Emezi conceives gender binary as ‘unnatural’ and limiting showing how Asughara, the Ada’s hypersexual, female self and Saint Vincent, the Ada’s Masculine self are born on the same day in the Ada’s mind. They are portrayed as complementary desires, illustrating the Igbo concept of the duality of things in Igbo cosmology. Representing two sides of sexual attraction, *Freshwater* depicts Asughara

and Saint Vincent's influence over Ada: Saint Vincent's pleasure "was a concentrated burst of light, anchored and distilled in his groin. It was different from what Asughara experienced with the Ada's body – those orgasms would spread in a diffuse wash that drowned her. This separation of pleasure was good: Saint Vincent stayed in our realm and in the marble of the Ada's mind, while Asughara met him in the marble but moved in the flesh" (Emezi 2018, 132). The emergence of both desires is portrayed, not as an abnormality but a completion of the natural order:

Asughara could not be left alone; that would be unnatural. When something stands, something else stands beside it. So, on the day she was born in Virginia, there was another one born with her as she tore through that window. His name was Saint Vincent, because when he sloughed off Asughara's side, he fell with holiness on his hands (Emezi 2018, 131).

Asughara and Saint Vincent are depicted as crucial to defining the Ada's identity. Having existed as fluid selves prior to their embodiment; they utilise the Ada's body as a receptacle for exhibiting their gender and sexual fluidity. The birth of Asughara and Saint Vincent on the same day emphasises the co-existence of gendered selves within the Ada, whose presence complements rather than conflicts the Ada's identity. In addition, the fact that Saint Vincent is born from Asughara's side - not as a separate and opposing force - and the reference to the fact that he 'fell with holiness on his hands' as opposed to Asughara that is described as a 'beastself' is a way in which Emezi blurs the binary of the sacred/profane and male/female and destabilises the binary framing of gender. Most importantly, it acknowledges the co-existence of the force of good and evil in every human. Neither Asughara nor Saint Vincent are used as metaphors for the Ada's identity; they are depicted as actual identities/desires that portray different dimensions of the Ada's being.

In the world that Emezi creates, neither gender nor desire is fixed or rooted in one's biology but rather a dynamic, sacred and multiple experience mediated through spirit embodiment – it is an evolving form of expression shaped by the interaction between the body, spirit, trauma, and desire. The Ada's gender identity is fluid and moves beyond the

binary, expressing elements from both ends of the spectrum and everything in between. From the outset, the Ada does not perform gender in a way that aligns with societal expectations as the multiple identities that inhabit her embody a spectrum of gendered experiences that challenge the binary framework rooted in biology. She is neither strictly male nor female, but both - and at times, neither. Although she is biologically gendered female, the Ada does not match society's idea of traditional femininity as she embodies both male, female and queer identities, and the female, rather than the male self, exerts the highest form of control over her.

Unlike in the heteronormative world where male/men are the custodians of authority, sexual dominance and control, the female identity in the Ada wields the strongest control. Asughara is the most dominant spirit self. She is described as "a self, a little beast... locked inside Ada" (Emezi 2018, 76); her femininity is neither passive nor victimised but empowered, volatile and protective. Similarly, whereas desire and attraction are often portrayed in society as inherently romantic, consensual and emotionally fulfilling, Emezi complicates this by presenting desire as power rather than pleasure - a weapon of control and violence used by the spirits to assert control over others and protect the Ada. When Asughara was born, she announces her arrival: "I was the wildness under the skin, the skin into a weapon, the weapon over the flesh" (Emezi 2018, 72). Asughara is the one who drives the Ada into violent sexual encounters and uses sex as a weapon against men. For instance, Asughara often takes over the Ada's sexual encounters with men to shield her from emotional connection or harm, showing love as an act of domination, an escape and not a moment of tenderness.

Again, sex is viewed not as an experience solely confined to the body, but an embodied spirit experience. Expressing itself through the Ada's feminine body, Asughara's first response is to take control of the Ada's sexuality. So, she "sank [her] roots into [the Ada's] body, finding [her] grip on her capillaries and organs" (Emezi 2018, 67). Taking control of The Ada's body, Asughara takes her into different sexual encounters with men. In each of these experiences, except the rape incident that births Asughara, the Ada is dissociated from them through Asughara's sectioning of her mind and taking over her organs. Asughara protects the

Ada from the full impact of trauma by stepping in to bear it herself. For instance, when Ewan, a Danish Tennis ball champion, with whom the Ada gets sexually involved and briefly marries, engages in sex with the Ada, Asughara does not let the Ada's body respond to this moment of intimacy. Instead, Asughara exclaims I "took my place under skin" (Emezi 2018, 113). Asughara thus shapes the Ada's desire and responses to sexual encounters. To reveal other identities inherent in the Ada, Emezi allows Asughara to step back so that Saint Vincent, the Ada masculine self, can emerge. So, After the Ada's brief marriage to Ewan ends, Asughara withdraws to the marble room so that Saint Vincent can express his desires through the Ada.

In contrast, Saint Vincent, the other spirit in the Ada, is masculine in energy and voice, but gentler and more contemplative than Asughara, serving as a counterforce to Asughara's sensuality. He is "long fingered and cool, with slow and simmering hunger... he was gentle, soft as a ghost...he was no threat to Asughara, he will not compete with her for control" (Emezi 2018, 131-2). Saint Vincent has been a part of the Ada's life since childhood. As the novel puts it, "the Ada had liked being seen as a boy. She felt it fit, or at least the misfit of it fit, wrongness was right... The Ada felt like a trickster, which felt right. She could move between boy and girl, which was a freedom for her and for us" (Emezi 2018,132-133). While Asughara expresses violent heterosexual desires for men, Saint Vincent is drawn towards women, and the Ada embraces that part of herself and "welcomed his delicate masculinity arranging itself in folds inside her" (Emezi 2018,135). Initially hidden in the marble room, Saint Vincent's attraction matches The Ada's embodiment of masculine identity as Vincent "wanted the soft nape of a girl's neck, against his mouth and he wanted it enough that the Ada went to get it for him" (Emezi 2018,135). With Saint Vincent stepping forward in the marble room, her desire shifts towards women.

Although the Ada is rejected by the women she approaches, except Donyen with whom she has a brief relationship, the shifting desires she experiences is reflective of the spirits that inhabit her. The brothersisters will later respond to the rejection of Saint Vincent by hiding him - "he became a secret buried in the marble" (Emezi 2018,136). Over time, The Ada begins to find a sense of balance among her many selves and desires, describing them

as being “distilled into triple hatchling... [and] they were balanced now – the Ada, her little beast and her saint” (Emezi 2018, 136 -137). The merging of these multiple desires as the sign of wholeness for the Ada is a radical reimagining of the binary understanding of gender and sexuality. By the end of the novel, when the Ada must choose between her many sexualities, she ultimately remains with Asughara, who by then has become older, less brutal, but still “effective” (Emezi 2018, 241).

The novel suggests that identity is not either/or but a presence of diverse but complementary energies. Asughara and Saint Vincent are not the only identities and desires resident in the Ada, in fact, the spirit identities are many, representing diverse attractions: “But remain assured, Asughara’s presence was not our absence, never that. We fell back when she burst forward, true, but we are many and she was just one of us, a beast, a weapon that needed to be in play” (Emezi 2018, 95). One of the multiple spirits that live in the Ada is the Yshwa. He is a spiritual figure that represents the Ada’s moral anchor, religious memory, and a connection to her faith as a devout Catholic. His name is a variation of Yeshua, the Hebrew name for Jesus. He is portrayed as a representation of the Christian doctrine of sexual abstinence, contrasting with the sensual Asughara, and gentle Saint Vincent. He is the moral guide for the Ada and closely associated with her early upbringing, representing the religious control over gender and sexuality. Yshwa is present at the Ada’s christening; however, he does not dominate her gender and sexual identity like Asughara, instead acts as a gentle reminder of an alternative way of being – one tied to discipline and restraint. In an imaginary letter addressed to Yshwa, the Ada tells Yshwa: “I think about you all the time and it helps me detach from all of this. It releases me” (Emezi 2018, 12). The Ada neither fully embraces nor completely rejects Yshwa, instead, she keeps him as part of her desires. Yshwa continues to visit the marble room, reminding the Ada of a moral code she once followed but began to question after the emergence of Asughara and Saint Vincent. Still, the Ada realises she needs Yshwa’s guidance to keep Asughara in check: “after Soren and the loss of her faith, the Ada had decided that her life was better with Yshwa in it after all. It didn’t matter to her if he was real... The Ada chose him because she needed a moral code to control

us with, one that could protect her and others from our hungers” (Emezi 2018, 213). The Ada admits that while Asughara drives her toward hyper sensuality, Yshwa acts as the restraining presence in her complex embodiment.

To highlight the queer nature of the Ada’s existence, *Freshwater* presents her body as a site of conflicting emotions and erotic drives - “The Ada wanted to be contrite. Asughara wanted to burn the world down” (Emezi 2018, 61). Through the coexistence of Yshwa, Asughara, and Saint Vincent, Ada becomes an embodiment of queer affect - disrupting any fixed notion of heteronormative sexuality. Rather than conforming to traditional heterosexual intimacy, the Ada exists as a vessel of multiple sexualities. In a heteronormative framework, there is no room for such multiplicity. As a result, the Ada's identity as a sexually diverse subject challenges the binary structure of sexuality, positioning her as a complex, nonbinary being whose very existence defies categorisation. The spirits comment on how the existing gender system fails to capture their reality: “We have understood what we are, the places we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female, between the us and the brothersisters slaving on the other side” (Emezi 2018, 210). For the Ada, being nonbinary means refusing to be confined to either gender. Instead, she chooses to exist outside of those categories, embracing the freedom of fluidity.

To reflect her gender and the multiple identities expressing themselves through her, the Ada undergoes surgery to modify themselves. After the surgery, the spirits begin to feel more at home in her body, as her body starts to reflect the identities she carries within. Her transformation allows her to more fully embody who she is, but eventually, the Ada marks her multiplicity in a visible way -reflecting her identity and refusal to be defined by rigid norms:

She even put a portrait of us on the high of her left arm, of herself staring out, of us peering over her shoulder with our mouth fastened to the junction of her neck and trapezius. A phantom arm wrapping around her, a ring suspended in blankness. All these things she was doing to her skin made her closer to us, it was like an advertisement, a timeline, of sections, who she was on the inside being revealed on the outside. (Emezi 2018, 230).

The tattoo depicts a layered self – the Ada as the central figure and her multiple selves shown as peering over her shoulders and attached to her body. The imagery of their mouth attached to her neck suggests attachment, possession and connection. The tattoo is a visual representation of a permanent spiritual cohabitation which the Ada experiences. The spirits carry the Ada's correct gender and sexual desires but need her physical body for the expression of these desires. The phantom arm evokes an unseen force, probably Ala, who is shown as a guiding presence and the origin of her multiplicity. The Ada is thus not wholly one identity or the other, but suspended between selves, genders and realities. The tattoo hence acts as a timeline that depicts the complexity of her identity as both a singular and plural self and the many selves that shape her, becoming visible evidence of her spiritual, emotion and gendered multiplicity. So, in a world where single identity is emphasised, Emezi shows the Ada as a radical violation of these gender and sexual codes. By drawing herself and her other selves as an integrated identity on her left arm, the Ada rejects binary gender and the categorisation of one's gender and sexual orientation based on biological determinism. The Ada's identity instead reinforces the idea that gender is determined by one's embodiment as opposed to societal expectations and norms. And given the multiple and fluid nature of the spirits, the Ada cannot be neatly categorised into the heteronormative gender system. In this way, *Freshwater* argues that gender is inherently plural and speaks of Asughara, Saint Vincent and Yshwa as opposite yet complementary identities within the Ada.

6.6 Disrupting the Heterosexual Family and Kinship

Alexandria Smith posits that “for much of the novel, *Freshwater* narrates the relationship between the Ada and her other selves as a struggle for the power to position the Ada's body in the world and in relationship to others” (Smith 2021b, 163). Emezi's *Freshwater* is read here as a counternarrative that reimagines family and kinship through a queer, spiritual lens, disrupting heteronormative expectations. In Nigerian society, family and kinship are traced through bloodline and marriage, which in turn, shape family obligations and social identity. The normative family reinforces gender roles and obligations. However, Emezi depicts the family structure as a much more complex unit as the Ada is connected both to

spirit and human families, but it is the spirit family that has a deeper, more transformative impact on her identity. Emezi uses the Ada's ties with Ala, the brothersisters, and the chosen ones Catia, Melena, and Leshi, to complicate the heteronormative family structure and build a new kinship model – one that destabilises the traditional family and subverts the patriarchal norms in place.

The novel critiques the assumption that family and kinship must follow the heteronormative order by positioning the spirit family as the most important influence in the Ada's life. The brothersisters, a collective spirit that live in the Ada, and Ala are the most foundational kinship group and family in *Freshwater*. Although the Ada is somewhat separated from the cohort due to being housed in the body, the spirits still maintained links with her, remembering their past existence as members of a spirit family: “we never used to be alone, not in Ala's womb, tucked in with the others, the brothersisters. Each time we left, we promised to come back, promised never to stay too long on the other side, promised to remember” (Emezi 2018, 38). They are present before and after the Ada's birth and act as ancestral cohort watching, guiding and protecting her. The brothersisters narrate the Ada's story, protect her and claim agency over her, taking on the traditional roles usually undertaken by parents in a heteronormative culture.

The Ada's relationship with the spirit cohort is neither biological nor hierarchical, instead, their bond is spiritual and predestined as they accompany the Ada everywhere she goes due to their collective link to a cosmological destiny. They are portrayed as the Ada's closest family, bringing their otherworldly experiences into her life. The brothersisters play a central role in the Ada's life, acting as her true siblings who protect, influence, and shape her relationship, often in ways that challenge her human family's authority. Their presence creates a distance between the Ada and her human family by preventing her family from having control over her choices, first by breaking up the Ada's human family and centring Ala and the spirit cohort. As a result, the Ada's interactions with her human family are limited to boundaries that neither disrupt her connection with her other selves nor interfere with her own decisions. The tension between the Ada's human and spirit families is central to this

critique, particularly as Saul, Saachi and the Ala assert varying forms of control over her. Ala shares a deep, intimate bond with the Ada, representing the Ada's her inner essence and guiding force because the Ada is spiritually linked to her. In contrast, Saul and Saachi are symbols of heteropatriarchal authority. Through Saul and Saachi, *Freshwater* both reveals how heteronormativity and patriarchy shape identity and at the same time challenges their authority as the primary frameworks through identity is understood.

Freshwater portrays Saul and Saachi, not as central parental figures, but as placeholders, mere vessels for the Ala. For instance, the Ada's birth is not depicted as a product of sexual intimacy but an answer to a prayer – a spiritually mediated birth, a gift from Ala. Their roles as placeholders for Ala serve a spiritual purpose – to protect the Ada before she is old enough to embrace her embodiment and to give her the correct name that captures her spirit identity: Saul's selection is based on his ability to "give the Ada her correct names" (Emezi 2018, 34), while Saachi is chosen for her grounded, pragmatic nature. Their fierce love for Ada ensures her survival in those early years of her birth "since those first few years are when you are most likely to lose them" (Emezi 2018, 7). However, being born into Saul's household does not place the Ada securely within a heteronormative family structure because although Saul names and claims the Ada, it was not long before he realises that the Ada "is not a child he could have created alone" (Emezi 2018, 32). The presence of spirits within her marks her as one who exists in an entirely different realm—one shaped by matriarchal, rather than patriarchal authority.

At different times in the novel, Saul and Saachi try to control the Ada's identity, reinforcing the role which the heteronormative family plays in perpetuating traditional gender roles. At first Saul tries to 'protect' the Ada from the snake that coiled close to her when she was three. Saul kills the snake, a representative of Ala, conceiving it as harmful to the Ada, but Emezi views the snake's presence as a visit, as a moment in which the Ada's spiritual lineage is confirmed. The Ada admits that "through [the snake's] eyes, Ala looks at us, and through the Ada's eyes, we looked at her – all of us looking upon each other for the first time (Emezi 2018, 12). Since Saul is a modern man who is alienated from his spirituality, the killing

of the snake is depicted as a violent act and an attempt by Saul to lay an absolute claim to the Ada, not recognising that the Ada does not belong to him. By killing the python, Saul physically and symbolically asserts his authority over the Ada's life and her spiritual journey—but that power is ultimately undermined because the Ada does not belong to him. She belongs to Ala. Saul will become emotionally estranged from his family leading to the collapse of his marriage with Saachi and the emergence of the spirit family. The breakup of the Ada's human family is portrayed as the handiwork of the brothersisters.

The brothersisters also limit Saachi's influence in the Ada's life. For instance, when Saachi objects to the Ada's cutting of her hair after Asughara's arrival, Asughara takes over, dismissing Saachi's wishes and altering the Ada's appearance to reflect her own presence because "she had arrived, and something had to mark that" (Emezi 2018, 73). In another instance when Saachi tries to stop the Ada from undergoing surgery to modify herself (mastectomy), her status as the Ada's emergency contact is revoked, thus diminishing her involvement in the Ada's life. The brothersisters "excluded her, exiled and excommunicated her" (Emezi 2018, 206). Similarly, when the Ada moves to the United States for her studies, the brothersisters section off the part of the Ada's mind that hold emotional attachment to her family, and she stops missing her family. But while the Ada's family is kept at a distance, "Ala continued to watch her child" (Emezi 2018, 42). As the novel later makes clear: "she had always belonged to Ala and Ala is not inclined to share" (Emezi 2018, 99). Given that the heteronormative family structure does not support the expression of multiple selves, the brothersisters first disintegrates the Ada's human family before taking over the control of her life. Emeki shows how the disintegration happens – through creating a rift between Saul and Saachi which eventually leads to their separation: "our brothersisters had known this, had known where the weak points in the Ada's family were, where to apply pressure for a breaking" (Emezi 2018, 30). At the end, the Ada's interaction with her human family is limited within the boundaries that neither disrupt her relationship with her other selves nor interfere with her choices. Such portrayal undermines the patriarchal authority and control that define the heteronormative family structure.

Furthermore, the Ada's identity as an ogbanje is an affront to the heteronormative family where marriage and heterosexual reproduction are emphasised. The Ada's expression of gender fluidity involves rejecting procreation and the idea of fertility, since as an ogbanje, she does not preserve or continue the human family line. Instead, the endless cycle of death that defines ogbanje existence disrupts human lineage. Embracing her nonbinary identity means refusing to use her body to fulfil normative gender roles tied to reproduction. The Ada's other selves express their deep aversion to human reproduction:

you must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel. Could there be anything more human? The ways of our brothersisters, of ogbanje, were clear. Do not leave a human lineage, for you do not come from a human lineage. If you have no ancestors, you cannot become an ancestor" (Emezi 2018, 203-4).

While the traditional family expects every child to commit to perpetuating the family system, Ogbanje lives by a different code – hate for the human family because “love for a human threatens the oath and makes the spirits want to stay where they owe debts, when they should return” (Emezi 2018, 27). So, beyond physically altering the Ada's body to match her gender identity, her other selves also work to prevent her from reproducing - even though she has many unprotected sexual encounters.

Beyond centring the spirit as the bona fide family, *Freshwater* also reimagines heteronormative kinship, speaking about “the ones who follow, work and serve because calls pass through blood no matter how many oceans you drop death into” (Emezi 2018, 159). These individuals - Catia, Melana, and Leshi – are depicted as part of the Ada's spirit family that guides her as she navigates her embodiment. The chosen ones occupy a special place within the Ada's spiritual world. Unlike her family and society which remain unaware of her embodiment, the chosen ones perceive and affirms her multiple selves: “those humans recognise us easily; it was as if they could smell us under the Ada's skin and feel us in the air that heaved around us” (Emezi 2018, 96). Since “the worst part of embodiment is to be unseen” (Emezi 2018, 100), the chosen ones play a vital role in Ada's life - they not only see

the spirits inhabiting the Ada, but also help the Ada to recognise her embodiment, becoming an essential part of her journey and an extended spiritual family.

Catia, the Ada's friend and confidante, offers queer kinship. While their friendship is non-romantic, it is intimate and affirming of the Ada's identity - she supports and protects her and also helps her to navigate her embodiment. For instance, when the Ada turns to self-harm to quieten the spirits inside her, Catia stays by her side, supporting and protecting her. On one occasion, when Catia finds the Ada self-harming, she gently helps her clean the wounds and offers emotional support without judgment. Asughara later admits to having a deep affection for Catia: Asughara loves Catia "for how she never made the Ada feel damaged" (Emezi 2018, 123).

Another significant person is Melana. She is the daughter of Chango, of Santa Barbara, and symbolises the dispersal of African spirituality in the Caribbean. Emezi shows the Ada's relationship with Melana is spiritual, as both share the same spiritual origin. The friendship between the Ada and Malena is not accidental - is intentionally orchestrated by the brothersisters to help the Ada understand her existence and begin integrating her many selves. The brothersisters love Melana because "she smelled like us" (Emezi 2018, 97). Malena is described as 'the witness', someone who serves other gods and is also "the only one who saw [Asughara] through the Ada's skin and [Asughara] loved her for that" (Emezi 2028, 118). To be a witness is to hold a kind of divine embodiment herself, which explains her unique ability to recognise the other selves within the Ada and how they "battered against the Ada's marble mind" (Emezi 2018, 45). Like Catia, Malena appears at crucial moments, when the Ada's embodiment requires a kind of spiritual midwifery. As one of the chosen ones, she becomes a vessel through which the spirits communicate with the Ada. They inform her of the Ada's self-harming and suicide attempt, and she is also present during the Ada's surgery, bearing witness to her transformation. Most importantly, she helps the Ada to return to Ala and reconcile her identity within an Ala cosmology. She tells the Ada: "there is a claim over your head, Ada... Back home. Something wants you back home" (Emezi 2018, 97), and

it is through her that the Ada learns about her embodiment and its connection to ancestral beliefs. Asughara narrates how the brothersisters feel about Malena:

It is like we said, we loved her [Malena], from back when we all lived in the mountains, for the way she loved us, all of us, and never made the Ada feel insane. For the way she was a witness. She worked for the other gods, yes, but she loved us and perhaps she did help save the Ada; perhaps what she worked was part of the veil-tearing that brought Asughara here, the third birth. We do not know these other gods, so we cannot verify the impact of what their workers wrought. (Emezi 2018, 92)

Malena acts as a catalyst in the path toward the Ada's self-discovery as their relationship helps the Ada to understand and embrace her multiplicity, recognising that her identity is fluid, layered, and always evolving. Through Malena, the Ada begins the journey back to herself - one that allows her to accept her embodiment and reconnect with her ancestral roots. So, Malena becomes not just a guide, but a companion on the Ada's journey toward self-acceptance and authenticity. Following Malena's advice, she eventually returns to Nigeria and meets Leshi - a Yoruba priest – who equally becomes a part of her queer kinship as well as an Igbo historian, both of whom affirm her identity and encourage her to fully embrace her spiritual heritage.

Leshi, a sound artist who reappears in Lagos after fifteen years, is another important part of the spirit family as he plays a crucial role in the Ada's journey of self-discovery. He "reeked of power, of in-betweenness and he advertised it freely" (Emezi 2018, 233), signalling his own fluid identity and connection to the spiritual world. Like the Ada, Leshi is not fully human - he too has been self-harming to quieten the spirits within him. Asughara immediately recognises the kinship between them, and says, "we recognised the marks Leshi displayed; we knew that it told what spaces he lived in, those liminal gutters" (Emezi 2018, 233). Through Leshi, the Ada deepens her understanding of the spiritual aspects of her existence. Already attuned to the Ada's reality, Leshi becomes a mentor, guide, and protector - performing rituals and offering insight that connects the Ada to her ancestral roots. He sees the immense power that lies within the Ada, identifies her other selves, and helps draw her out from the shadow of the brothersisters into the light of her multiple identity. In doing so, he empowers the Ada

to reclaim her agency and multiplicity in a world that seeks to limit and define her. Over the course of two nights spent with Leshi - nights that are deeply intimate yet not sexual- the Ada gains strength and clarity. These encounters mark a turning point. Her other selves acknowledge how profoundly Leshi's presence transformed them: "who we were before Leshi laid his long hands on us was not who we were afterwards. No, afterwards we were done. We were ready to stop the births and the naming – the Ada was ready to take her front" (Emezi 2018, 237).

Following Leshi's suggestion to 'take her front', Ada meets an Igbo historian who affirms her identity and guides her towards Ala. As the Ada begins to pray to Ala, she experiences a deep sense of peace and spiritual connection that transcends the human realm. The Ada is not entirely human and therefore does not need to conform to the constraints of a heteronormative family structure. As an *ogbanje*, she must "let go of being human" (Emezi 2018, 248), which ultimately means rejecting the constraints, limitation and control that derive from being part of the heteronormative family. After seeking to define her identity within the rigid heteronormative binary, and modifying herself to reflect the spirits within her, the only authority within which the Ada recognises herself is that which derives from Ala. The Ada's sense of self is ultimately rooted not in a human or heteronormative family, but in her spiritual lineage - through her bond with Ala, whom she calls *Nne*, meaning 'mother'. Through prayer and spiritual communion with Ala, Ada gains a deeper understanding of herself and a clearer sense of purpose. The Ada admits that "after all the doctors and diagnoses and the hospitals, this thing of being an *ogbanje*, the child of Ala - that was the only path that brought [her] any peace" (Emezi 2018, 240). Thus, her journey toward self-actualization as multiple self is intimately tied, not to a heteronormative family paradigm, but to a matrifocal spirit family.

This connection to Ala reflects *Freshwater's* larger project of decentring the traditional family structure based on patriarchy and heteronormativity, and offering an alternative family framework that is matriarchal, fluid and accepting of all identities; this is because "when you break something, you must study the pattern of the shattering before you can piece it back

together” (Emezi 2018, 227). In other words, Emezi suggests that healing or reconstitution is not about restoring one to an imagined wholeness, instead, it is about understanding the nature and the cause of the breaking and fixing it from that point. For the Ada, the ‘shattering’ arises from the fact that she is multiple yet lives in a society that accepts only binary existence. So, piecing her together involves refusing to confine her to a limiting and inadequate gender system and placing her within a spirit cosmology that explains her fluidity and multiplicity where she can embrace rather than battle her selves. In other words, piecing the Ada together means recognizing her as a multiple, liminal being - an identity that can only be fully understood within an Ala-centred ontology.

The return to Ala is framed as a salvation, a redemption from a traumatised existence caused by the rigid gender in place, a release. This is because the question - “how do you survive when they place a god inside your body?” (Emezi 2018, 227), - is answered through the Ada’s return to a spirit cosmology that recognises her “unusual incarnation...as the child of Ala as well as an Ogbanje” (Emezi 2018, 227). So, her life, which begins as an answer to a prayer, ultimately finds resolution in a prayer to Ala, who she refers to as Nne. She describes how she feels returning to Ala as a source of worship: “so that night, I prayed to Ala... Nne I said, and the word was double-jointed. Mother. I felt her immediately and the brothersisters lifted off my mind in a hurried cloud. I was cast into a vast, empty space and everything around me was peaceful. It felt like the otherworld – that’s how I knew that I was inside her, suspended and rocked” (Emezi 2018, 246-7). By the end of the novel, it is Ala, not Saul, who becomes the defining presence in the Ada’s life. Ala becomes the true centre through which the Ada understands and affirms herself, marking a shift from heteronormative human family framework to a matrifocal queer spiritual family. In sum, while heteronormative systems uphold the traditional gender roles and reinforce male authority, *Freshwater* imagines a world that is matriarchal. In the world Emezi creates, heteronormativity and patriarchy are not just questioned, they are completely dismantled.

6.7 Summary

This chapter has shown how Emezi's *Freshwater* disrupts heteronormativity by portraying the Ada as a multiple subject whose identity emerges from an Ala-based cosmology. It first examined how the Transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and Christianity contribute to the erasure of indigenous spirituality, producing culturally alienated subjects. In response, Emezi challenges the hetero-Christian worldview by foregrounding an Ala-based cosmology that recentres indigenous epistemologies. This chapter further demonstrated how the Ada's identity as both an ogbanje and the child of Ala situates her within a spiritual framework that exceeds Western, hetero-Christian models of identity. It also explored how Emezi grants greater agency to the Ada's spirit selves, in direct opposition to the heteronormative frameworks that privilege the body as a site of fixed identity. Rather than being a locus of singular desire, the Ada's body is represented as a site of multiple desires and subjectivities, thereby unsettling the heteronormativity normalisation of stable gender and identity. Finally, the chapter showed how Emezi disrupts heteronormative notions of family and kinships by privileging the Ada's connection to her spirit family over her human one. Taken together, the portrayal of the Ada as an ogbanje and the displacement of a hetero-Christian worldview in favour of an Ala-based spirituality constitute a sustained, powerful and the most radical challenge to heteronormativity.

Disruption, Violence, Solidarity and Queer-World making in Nigerian Queer Narratives

7.1 Conclusion

This study has critically examined how contemporary Nigerian queer narratives interrogate the dominance of heteronormative perspectives in literature. It highlighted that the privileging of heteronormativity is rooted in cultural, legal, religious and social norms and shows how the selected authors write against a system that is both institutionalised and embedded in the everyday life of the people. Through close readings of Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Ani's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* and Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Freshwater*, this thesis explored how queer identities are represented and reimagined in contexts of exclusion, while also challenging the institutionalisation of heteronormativity. By foregrounding heteronormativity as a powerful system shaping queer lives, the study highlights the diverse ways these texts resist its dominance. Most importantly, centring a queer perspective opens alternative ways of seeing, knowing, reading, and representing the world, disrupting the heteronormative codes embedded in Nigeria. This analysis thus demonstrates that these texts not only contest the privileging of heteronormativity in literature but also articulate alternative imaginaries of gender, sexuality, and queer embodiment within Nigerian literary discourse.

7.2 Key Findings

The study was guided by four central questions - how Nigerian writers of queer subjectivity construct queer identity and desire, how the characters negotiate personal identity and societal expectations, the way in which the characters engage with stigma – both legal, religious and cultural - as well as the characters' subversion of heteronormativity. The selected authors challenge the dominance of heteronormativity in literature by centring queer voices that have previously been marginalised and often cast in stereotypes. Their works interrogate the assumed universality of heterosexuality in Nigerian society, and expose how heteropatriarchal systems - reinforced socially, culturally, religiously, politically, and legally – shape exclusion, inclusion, and belonging. Whereas the novels are read collectively as queer

texts that shift the focus from heteronormativity to gender and sexual fluidity, this study specifically pays attention to the different strategies adopted by the authors in their challenge of heteronormativity.

The authors construct queer subjectivity as an identity that is both local and transgressive. They challenge the idea of exclusive heterosexual citizenship by foregrounding queer lives as indigenous, visible, and enduring. They situate queerness within specific social and historical contexts, and emphasise its resistance to cultural, legal and religious constraints. Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi frame sexuality as a site of personal and societal struggle, dramatizing the tension between personal identity and societal expectations. They show how collective identities are enforced at the expense of individual aspirations, while creating space for alternative expressions of selfhood. The authors depict characters negotiating socio-cultural, legal and religious norms that demand conformity through heterosexuality and prescribed gender roles.

Across the texts, queer identity emerges as a site of internal struggle and resistance as colonial laws and religious moral codes sustain stigma and violence against queer people by constructing queerness as un-African, sinful and socially unacceptable. The existing norms are shown to produce conflict in the characters, however, the characters' refusal to internalise queer disavowal constitute a radical challenge to heteronormativity. Emezi's focus on the misgendering of Vivek and the Ada based on the existing gender system, for instance, is a way the novel probes rigid gender norms, challenging its restricting framework. The authors interrogate the assumption that conformity ensures safety, exposing its psychological cost and foregrounding self-acceptance as a form of resistance.

Okparanta interrogates religion as a key instrument of heteronormativity yet reworks it to accommodate queerness. By reinterpreting Christian doctrine, Okparanta imagines the possibility of the co-existence of queerness and faith, while linking queer marginalisation to broader questions of citizenship and belonging. Okparanta also uses the Biafran war to foreground the argument that queerness should be a mode of national belonging rather than the basis for exclusion. Similarly, August's rejection of heteronormative and patriarchal

expectations, in *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, portrays the novel's engagement with identity and traditional expectations. Ani suggests that queer masculinity can co-exist with heteronormativity and that queer men do not need to fulfil traditional gender roles. The novel's recognition of alternative forms of masculinity therefore sparks conversations about the need for a more inclusive range of identities in Nigerian society. Moreover, Ani's critique of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014) positions the text as both timely and politically charged. Also, the connection of queer struggle to wider systems of oppression emphasises solidarity and collective resistance over isolated identity politics.

Ani's position demonstrates a more progressive engagement with heteronormativity compared to those of Dibia and Okparanta. In Dibia's text, the protagonist escapes to London, and Okparanta's character remains in Nigeria but lives a closeted life. In contrast, Ani's characters live openly and challenge the system despite the violence directed at them. So, from the perspective of 2023, Dibia's text feels outdated and out of sync with the type of literary activism happening in Nigeria. *Walking with Shadows* and *Under the Udala Trees* present a closeted life as a possible queer life. *Under the Udala Trees* preaches self-acceptance and tolerance, suggesting that one can be a little of who one is as long as there is no public confrontation, but *He Sang a Lullaby* totally rejects that message of compromise. Ani argues for societal transformation that would allow queer Nigerians to live openly, because it does not consider escape or concealment as a sustainable option for queer people. Ani's direct engagement with the anti-gay law highlights its immediate impact on queer lives and how much education around this impact is needed to provoke society into action. Whereas Dibia, Okparanta and Ani simply challenge heteronormative structures such as law, family and religion, Emezi responds differently: they do not seek tolerance or acceptance in the same manner as the other authors but instead create an alternative cosmology where colonial, Christian and heteronormative laws have no ultimate authority.

Akwaeke Emezi challenges the Nigerian heteronormativity and Western identity categories by developing a distinctively indigenous framework that detaches African queerness from Western labels. *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Freshwater* critique rigid gender

systems that fail to account for the complexity of queer embodiment, using misgendering to expose their limitations. Through the ogbanje and reincarnation frameworks which offers alternative vocabularies for selfhood, Emezi presents identity as multiple, layered, and spiritually grounded, reimagining gender and embodiment as fluid and expansive. The Ada and Vivek's multiplicity are used to disrupt the idea of a singular, stable self, decentre the body as the primary site of identity, and unsettle fixed categories of gender and being. In this way, the text presents a counter-narrative that challenges biologically determined notions of identity.

In addition, the positioning of the Ada as a child of Ala - the earth deity associated with fertility and morality- challenges the dominant discourses of morality, heterosexual reproduction and belonging. It suggests that belonging and moral worth are not contingent on heterosexual reproduction but are instead rooted in a shared origin within the same cosmological framework – in this case, the Ala. From this perspective, both those who reproduce heterosexually and those who do not are seen as deriving from the same source and are therefore equally entitled to social recognition and inclusion in society. Thus, the spiritual kinship framework, shaped by Ala, expands how identity and community can be understood.

Again, Emezi's literal treatment of the spirits resists reductive readings of trauma or magical realism in Western thoughts, insisting instead on an ontological framework grounded in Igbo spirituality. As Harlin argues, "*Freshwater* reimagines the relationship between the self and the body in order to offer alternative frameworks of bodily autonomy and power for queer Black subjects" (Harlin 2023, 316). Through the indigenous lens, queerness emerges not as a deviant identity but as something that is culturally embedded, contesting the un-Africanness of queerness, its incompatibility with Nigerian culture and showing an inherent gender fluidity within indigenous spirit frameworks. Locating queerness as a precolonial identity supports a decolonial reading that portray queerness as a legitimate and situated Nigerian experience. By naming Vivek and the Ada using indigenous frameworks, Emezi introduces genderfluid and cross-gender characters to the spectrum of identities in Nigerian

literature, portraying queerness as a culturally present and spiritually grounded experience. *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* therefore represent a strategic repositioning of indigenous faith geared towards garnering legitimacy for genderfluid identity as well as a direct response to the dominance of heteronormativity.

These writers thus speak back to structures that define what is considered 'normal', 'natural', and 'acceptable' regarding gender and sexuality within a Nigerian context. What is evident therefore, is that the authors under study do not simply make queer characters central in their stories, breaking years of invisibility, but they also question the very system that has kept queer lives at the margin of literary and cultural discourses. By rejecting restrictive gender roles and heteronormative expectations, these texts reimagine masculinity, femininity, and embodiment as more fluid and inclusive. The authors' responses reveal complex negotiations with heteronormativity rather than a single trajectory. Together, the different responses to heteronormativity highlight the evolving landscape of Nigerian queer literature - one that navigates between activism, realism, and the speculative reimagining of queerness in African contexts. These works construct indigenous queer subjectivity, expose how stigma engenders violence against queer people, imagine spiritual forms of community and belonging and rethink Nigerian identity beyond the heteronormative lens. These novels thus extend the critiques of postcolonial nationhood, where heterosexuality is often promoted as the condition for inclusion. By placing queer lives at the centre of their stories, Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi contest the exclusion of queer subjects in Nigerian heteronormative society.

7.3 Representation of Violence against Queer people in the Novels

Violence against queer people is an integral aspect of Nigerian queer narratives as each text mirror how queer identities experience violence in their everyday life. Across these texts, violence is not incidental but constitutive of the social order, revealing the way in which legal, political, religious, and social structures regulate bodies and identities. The authors expose how heteronormativity is sustained through multiples forms of violence: from physical to psychological, sexual, social and structural harm. *Walking with Shadows*, *Under the Udala*

Trees and *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* show heteronormativity as a system that discipline queer desire and is reinforced through the family, religious institutions and state. In *Walking with Shadows*, the disclosure of Adrian's sexuality leads to the loss of his job, status and family. In another instance, he is physically assaulted by a pastor who attempts to exorcise him of his queerness – Emezi depicts a similar scene in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Dibia also refers to cases of mob violence against queer people that law enforcement officers refuse to prosecute on the grounds that the victims deserve what they get because they are queer.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta depicts a scene where the queer community that meets in the underground church is attacked by an angry mob, resulting in the death of their leader, Adanma. Beyond the physical violence, Okparanta also portray the extent at which Adaora, Ijeoma's mother, weaponizes the Bible to psychological torment Ijeoma. The Biafran war could also be read, not only as a traumatic moment in Nigerian history, but also as a metaphor for the pervading violence that queer people grapple with daily.

Similarly, Ani foregrounds the contemporary Nigerian state as a site of queer violence, where both the state and the mob punish and discipline queerness, rendering queer lives unliveable. The death of Segun, who is openly queer, provides a stark example of how close queer people are to experiencing violence in their day-to-day lives. The internalisation of violence is amplified in Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Freshwater*. Vivek constantly expresses frustration with societal attitude towards his identity. While the societal policing of gender ultimately leads to the formation of alternative community, it also creates the conditions that enables the death of Vivek in the hands of Osita, his brother and lover. Similarly, *Freshwater* extends this inward exploration of violence by showing how the Ada's psychological and spiritual fragmentation emerges from external trauma and pressure to conform to heteronormativity. Collectively, these narratives argue that heteronormativity is inseparable from violence. However, while highlighting the high cost of living under heteronormative violence, enacted through family, the state or even religious bodies, the texts powerfully illuminate queer resilience.

7.4 Dynamic characterisation

Contrary to what might be expected in the light of the intense homophobia which the authors address, the selected authors carefully weave gradual, but transformatory portraits of the characters explored in their works that show an incremental awareness and journey towards queer liberation. Beginning with the image of the first queer character, Adrian, the reader encounters a fearful and timid character who clings to the family institution and in search of social respectability. He is forced to admit and accept his sexuality after being outed by a colleague. *Under the Udala Trees* builds on this but diverges by portraying a character who, rather than clinging to heteronormative family and societal accommodation, rejects it and embraces her queerness, living with her partner in a closeted relationship. Okparanta's character mirrors Femi and Abdul, the two queer characters in *Walking with Shadows*, who live closeted amidst the hostility around them. In Ani's novel, the characters move from living as closeted to living openly, challenging societal violence and the suppression of queer identity through class activism. Like Okparanta, Ani's character refuses to hold on to the family institution but problematises it as the epicentre of queer suppression. Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* rejects the idea of the heteronormative family but forms a counter community where queerness thrives and finds expression. The subversion of heteronormative structures and identity claims comes to a crescendo in Emezi's *Freshwater* as the ideas of the family, patriarchy, body, identity, gender and community are completely decentred and deconstructed through the Ada's complex being as both human and spirit. The Ada chooses the spirit family over her human family, disrupting the structures that bolster heteronormativity.

The mothers in these novels are also importantly represented as progressively liberated figures. In *Walking with Shadows*, Adrian's mother is homophobic, completely rejecting her son's sexuality, citing traditional norms and religion as the basis for her rejection. Adaora, Ijeoma's mother in *Under the Udala Trees*, is initially homophobic but accepts Ijeoma's sexuality at the end, paving way for the emergence of a receptive granddaughter, Chidinma. Although Adaora does not fully accept Ijeoma's sexuality but is permissive of it, she is positioned as a transformed subject, prefiguring Segun's mother in Ani's novel. In *He*

Sang a Lullaby August's mother dies as a victim of patriarchy, however, Segun's mother, who is both supportive and accepting of her son's identity, is a figure of resistance. She is portrayed as the agent of change who first sows the seed of activism in Segun through her involvement in local activism. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's mother consolidates the image of the mother as an agent of change - Vivek reclaims his identity posthumously due to his mother's support and search for answers. Her receptivity to her son's queerness helps in the unravelling of his identity and the posthumous acceptance of Vivek's identity. Yet, while the figure of the biological mother is centred in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, she is stripped of her power in *Freshwater*. The human mother figure is replaced by Ala, a spirit mother who guides the Ada towards embracing her full identity as a multiple subject. While Saachi, the human mother, represents societal discipline, biological reproduction and heteronormative family structure, Ala symbolises spiritual belonging, multiplicity and fluidity. Put differently, the substitution of Saachi with Ala is not merely a narrative choice but an ideological move. It relocates identity, authority, kinship, and morality from the human family and heteronormative systems to the spiritual and cosmological, therefore reinforcing the novel's broader challenge of heteronormativity.

Similarly, the children in the novels also show movement towards queer acceptance: Ada, Adrian's wife, promises to raise her daughter, Ego, to accept Adrian and others like him whom society rejects on account of their sexuality. But whereas *Walking with Shadows* does not move beyond the promise of raising a queer-receptive child, *Under the Udala Trees* elevates this idea by showing Chidinma as a heterosexual and accepting daughter of a queer mother. She does not simply accept her mother's identity; she becomes a queer rights activist, defending the right of queer people to express their identity. Like Dibia, Ani equally depicts a sympathetic sibling. Chinyere, one of August's sisters, shows receptivity towards August's queerness and helps disrupt entrenched homophobia. In Emezi's *The Death of Vivek of Vivek Oji*, the image of the receptive child[ren] has fully developed, and it is the young characters in the text who go beyond personal transformation to build a supportive community that subverts the traditional oppressive society. However, the idea of the

traditional community and society is completely disrupted by the centring of the spirit community as a more crucial community for the Ada's identity in *Freshwater*.

Adrian's wife on the other hand, sets off as homophobic spouse but transforms by the end of the novel. But her transformation is based on a simplistic understanding of Adrian's sexuality, an understanding which does not translate nor sustain their marriage. Ijeoma's husband also embodies such a permissive attitude towards Ijeoma's sexuality – but while Adrian desperately wanted his marriage with Ada to continue, Ijeoma rejects Chibundu's entreaties to return to their marriage. I argue that these novels, though written by different authors and at different times, seem to have imagined their characters in a way that shows a gradual but continuous progress, movement, and successive engagement with undoing heteronormativity.

7.4 Queer Friendship and Solidarity

In the chosen texts, queer love is constructed as a strong bond that transcends ethnic, political, religious and cultural boundaries. In *Walking with Shadows*, Dibia shows an enduring friendship that exists between Adrian (Igbo), Femi (Yoruba) and Abdul (Hausa). Okparanta also reveals how Ijeoma's relationship with Amina, a Hausa girl, is empowering. Although both girls later part ways, the memories they share linger in her mind, shaping a recurrent dream Ijeoma had about the unity of the Hausa and the Igbo ethnic group after decades of enmity orchestrated by the Biafran war. Ani, on his part, also portrays queer love as a force that traverses geographical and ethnic boundaries. August's relationship with Segun (Yoruba) and Segun's relationship with Tanko (Hausa) and Trevor also point to a future where identity, friendship, and belonging are forged, not on the heteronormative paradigm and ethnic lines but on queer love and an inclusive community. Thus, in a country where ethnicity and tribe are elevated to a narcissistic dimension, Dibia, Ani and Okparanta envision queerness as a strong unifying force capable of outdoing artificial borders of ethnicity.

7.5 The Emergence of an Alternative Community

Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi depict the existence of an emerging counter-community that exists side by side with the violent heteronormative society. Dibia speaks about a queer-exclusive club – The Champagne, a restaurant bar - where queer people network and find love. Adrian's search for acceptance had led him into embracing normativity, however, the exposure of his sexuality and the resulting rejection takes him back to an underground community he had turned away from. Upon return, he is surprised to see how the world has changed since he embraced heteronormativity – more queer men are becoming open and accepting of their sexuality and freely socialising within their community. After meeting Yahaya, a married queer man at the Champagne, Adrian notices the changes that have taken place within the queer community: "it was ironic. Here he was battling with his homosexuality and seeking acceptance from those he loved the most while this stranger was totally comfortable proclaiming his sexuality and the fact he was married as well. Two different worlds! How could this be? Where had he been while this sexual revolution was taking place? (Dibia 2006, 108). Although Adrian escapes to London in search of acceptance, the existence of the queer community is a testament to the emergence of a disruptive community. Similarly, Okparanta mentions an underground church where queer women meet to build community and solidarity, and Ani uses the Socialist Students Forum (SSF) - a coalition of the oppressed in society which remains at its formative stage - as a model of the community of the marginalised. This community transforms into a stronger system in Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*.

The Nigerwives' community in Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* disrupts traditional ideas of community, especially those rooted in patriarchy and nationalism. While traditional Nigerian communities are formed based on blood ties and lineage, the Nigerwives' community is founded on shared experience. Living as foreigners and often seen as 'outsiders' in their husband's country, the Nigerwives offer emotional support, solidarity and help one another to adapt into the Nigerian culture. The women are described as "aunties to each other's children" (Emezi 2020, 17), thereby filling the gap left by biological families. They

also help each other “assimilate into these new lives so far away from the countries they’d come from... they taught Kavita how to cook oha soup and jollof rice and ugba. [They also] held parties for Easter and birthdays” (Emezi 2020, 17). The existence of the Nigerwives’ community suggest that identity can be fluid and shaped by experience and empathy instead of ethnicity. The women also embody cultural hybridity because they are neither fully Nigerian nor fully foreigners. It is therefore not surprising that it is within this community that Emeki centres Vivek’s queerness.

Similarly, the children occupy liminal spaces as they feel alienated from the dominant Nigerian culture; Vivek’s struggle with gender identity, or expression is mirrored in this in-betweenness. While the Nigerwives are not portrayed as explicitly queer affirming, the model of community that they create becomes a crucial space for the expression of Vivek’s queer identity. For instance, while the traditional Nigerian community polices and punishes gender fluidity, the community which the children of the Nigerwives creates offer a form of belonging that is not dependent on conformity but shared experience – they form a strong close-knit community impenetrable by the adults in the novel. The community formed by the Nigerwives children was described as a “bubble where everything was okay and the outside world didn’t exist” (Emezi 2020, 232). I argue that the emerging community is disruptive because it is not founded on traditional values nor blood ties but on identity. Moreover, although the queer community does not dismantle the traditional Nigerian community but exists side by side with it, its mere existence radically challenges the normative Nigerian community and redefines what a community could look like for the marginalised or those who do not fit in. In *Freshwater*, the spirit community, and not the human community, is a vital presence in The Ada’s life. Thus, in place of the normative community, the authors imagine a community where queerness is not only acknowledged but protected, thriving above ethnicity, national and traditional identity.

7.6 Nigerian Queer narrative as a tool of Activism

Although this thesis focused on creative works by Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emeki, their works are part of a much larger movement that seeks to give voice and visibility to the queer

community. As already stated, the 2014 Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which was aimed at punishing and silencing queer people, has nonetheless, become the catalyst of queer visibility. Since the enactment of the law, homophobia and queer suppression have increased but so also has queer activism. Local organisations, such as Improved Sexual Health and Rights Advocacy Initiative, The International Centre for Total Health and Rights Advocacy Empowerment, Queer Alliance, The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERS), Total Health Empowerment and Development Initiative, Woman's health and Equal Rights, continue to clamour for greater rights and freedom for queer subjects under their health remit.

There are also rising incidents of violence, extortion, arrests, blackmail, and kidnap of queer people since the 2014 law was passed (Human Right Watch 2016). Queer people are equally at risk of losing their jobs if found to be queer and are targets of extortion from people who stalk and blackmail them online using dating apps, in an act known as Kito. In a report carried out by TIERS, and 22 other rights groups, they note that "In 2023, about 70% of 996 human rights violations against people who are or were perceived to be LGBTQ+ were Kito cases" (Salako 2024). This has led queer subjects into masking their identity and maintaining minimal physical presence within their communities. However, while acceptance is slow, the physical space is thin and danger lurks in online networking apps, social media has offered queer activism more visibility. So, although the impact of the law continues to be felt in society, it has led also to a cultural shift in terms of voicing queer presence in Nigeria and the emergence of a vibrant range of literary and digital platforms where queer stories are flourishing in new forms, spaces, and geographies. For instance, in a study carried out by TIERS, it was discovered that:

social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people rose to 34% in 2022 from 30% in 2019".

Also, according to an Afrobarometer survey conducted between 2019 and 2021, only 21% of Nigerians are tolerant of same-sex relationships, but that figure is up from 8% in surveys conducted between 2016 and 2018. While the vast number of Nigerians oppose same-sex relationships, support for the SSMPA has waned to 48% in 2022 from 77% in 2015 (Salako 2024).

Similarly, queer people continue to assert their identities more openly and connect under threats in blogs, twitter and other online platforms. Also, a gay pride event, now in its fifth year, continues to take place behind closed doors amidst the crackdown (Salako 2022). Queer writing has also found expression through poets like Romeo Oriogun and short story writers such as Arinze Ifeakandu whose works continue to attract both local and global attention. The danger at home has resulted in the migration of queer writers to the west for personal safety and the freedom to write without fear or censorship, mirroring the tension between repression and visibility. Ani Kayode Somtochukwu, whose work was published in the UK in 2023 represents one such important voices.

What the selected writers share is a commitment towards reimagining how queer lives can be lived and known, showing how writing can be political and channelled towards securing social justice for the oppressed. They are not just inserting queer voices into the Nigerian context; they are reshaping the foundation of storytelling itself. Most importantly, their works disrupt the expectation that queerness should remain hidden or punished. In contrast, they make queerness a central, transformative and a deeply human experience.

Furthermore, the study combines Queer Postcolonial Theory and Indigenous Knowledge framework – Ogbanje and reincarnation beliefs – and offers an interdisciplinary approach that enhances the critical understanding of how the texts construct and contest queerness. This study also theorises Nigerian and broadly African queerness because the authors situate characters within Nigerian cultural, legal, social, religious and political contexts. Such representation challenges the association of queerness with the west and imagines queerness in context-specific ways. In sum, this thesis has demonstrated that Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi are not simply writing back to the hegemonic system, but rather they are also imagining and describing a future where queer identity exists as a legitimate identity, and not something to be explained away, denied or hidden. Most importantly, the thesis shows how literature serves as a powerful tool of resistance to dominant regimes. The novels analysed do not merely reflect the lived experiences of queer people, but reimagine new ways of being, loving and existing outside the heteronormative constraints.

In 2025, queer storytelling is no longer marginal but central to defining contemporary Nigerian literature. The voices of Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi resonate more widely as part of a vibrant and urgent global literary community. Their work teaches Nigerian readers how to read against the grain of normativity, how to write with courage, multiplicity and imagine possibility amidst repression, suppression and violence. They imagine a future where queer people can thrive and be human, echoing Mekanjuola's motivation for queer activism: "the desire for me has always been to build a society where we can live and be free and be equal, where you are going to be judged not by your sexual orientation but by your character" (Salako 2024). In a context where queerness remains a marginalised identity, the accepted expansion of Nigerian subjectivity and creation of a more inclusive society remains urgent and necessary.

7.7 Original Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes several original contributions to the fields of Nigerian literature, queer African studies and postcolonial theory. It offers the first sustained analysis of heteronormativity as a structural system within Nigerian literature, rather than treating queerness as an isolated theme or character trait. By foregrounding heteronormativity as a cultural, legal, religious and political regime, the study reframes how Nigerian queer narratives should be read and understood. It provides a diachronic mapping of Nigerian queer fiction from 2005 to 2023, tracing how writers across two decades respond to, resist and reconfigure heteronormativity. This long-view approach demonstrates the evolution of queer literary strategies and the shifting cultural landscape in which they emerge. It develops a culturally grounded theoretical model by integrating queer postcolonial theory with indigenous Igbo cosmologies of *ogbanje* and reincarnation. This framework expands existing scholarship by showing how African spiritual epistemologies can illuminate forms of gender fluidity and queer embodiment that fall outside Western identity categories. It demonstrates that Nigerian queer narratives articulate a distinctly localised queer subjectivity, one shaped by indigenous belief systems, colonial legacies, religious authority and contemporary legal structures. This challenges the assumption that queerness in Africa is derivative of Western identity politics.

It provides the first comparative study that reads Dibia, Okparanta, Ani and Emezi together as a coherent literary formation, revealing how their works collectively disrupt heteronormativity while employing markedly different aesthetic, political and spiritual strategies. It identifies and theorises the emergence of alternative queer communities in Nigerian fiction, including underground networks, activist collectives, diasporic hybrid communities and spiritual kinship structures. This expands current understandings of belonging and sociality in queer African contexts. It advances the argument that Nigerian queer narratives function as a form of literary activism, challenging dominant cultural narratives and imagining new possibilities for citizenship, kinship and identity. This positions literature as a critical site of resistance within contemporary Nigerian society. It contributes to the decolonisation of queer theory by demonstrating how African epistemologies can reshape global understandings of gender and sexuality. The thesis shows that indigenous frameworks do not merely supplement Western theory but offer alternative ontologies that reconfigure the very terms of queer analysis. It broadens the Nigerian literary canon by foregrounding voices and identities historically excluded from national narratives. By centring queer subjectivities, the study argues for a more inclusive understanding of Nigerian literature and its cultural responsibilities.

7.7 Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study open several pathways for further scholarly inquiry. Future research could extend the analysis beyond the five novels examined here by exploring queer narratives emerging from other Nigerian regions, languages and literary traditions, particularly those outside the Igbo-centred corpus that currently dominates the field. There is also scope for examining how other genres, including poetry, drama, film, digital storytelling and visual culture, contribute to the evolving landscape of queer representation in Nigeria. Comparative studies that place Nigerian queer narratives in dialogue with those from other African countries would deepen understanding of how different colonial histories, legal regimes and cultural frameworks shape queer expression across the continent. In addition, further work is needed to explore the intersections of queerness with class, disability, religion

and migration, which were beyond the scope of this thesis but remain central to the lived realities of queer subjects. Finally, the integration of indigenous epistemologies into queer analysis invites broader interdisciplinary research that considers how African cosmologies, spiritualities and philosophies can reshape global conversations about gender, sexuality and identity.

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