

## **Examining queerness in African literature: Queer representation and the struggle for freedom in selected African prose fiction**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper explores the representation of Queerness in African literature analyzing the ways in which queer identities are portrayed in the continent and implications for the struggle for freedom from stigmatization and the ability for self expression in this rather heavily attacked style of sexual inclination. Drawing from a diverse range of literary works that cut across the African continent especially the prose fiction, the researchers adopted the comparative case study analysis in looking at the similarities and differences between the various cases. Due to space constraints, only a brief textual analyses and reviews of the texts was done in examining the challenge and opportunities presented by queer presentation in Africa through the texts. The researchers considered the ways in which these presentations intersect with broader social issues globally. By highlighting the voices of queer African writers, themes of identity deviant sexual behaviour and the struggle to conform to societal expectations, resistance and liberation ethos emerge in these works. Thus, this paper seeks to contribute to the better understanding of the complex relationship between queerness and freedom in African literature in the quest for a smooth navigation of the obstacles on the path to attaining this freedom.*

**Keywords:** *queerness, African literature, identity, liberation*

## Introduction

Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women studies. Emmanuel (2003) views post-structuralism, a reaction to structuralism, as a collection of forms of theory that builds upon and rejects ideas established by structuralism, which it precludes. The post-structuralist critic opposes the self-sufficient posture of structuralism. It includes both queer readings of texts and the theorization of queer itself. The theory is closely related to gender studies of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) studies posits, Chandler (2011). The term, 'queer literary theory' is used to refer to sexual acts, behaviours, or identities that are considered outside of sex, revisiting these fields with a queer approach, writes Gust (2014). Queer theory is a set of critical theories originally developed by proponents of the LGBT community that examines the intersectional construction of sexual identity and its political, cultural, legal, and historical expression. It is an area of study that examines the fluidity of sexuality and gender, whereas it does an exploration of the social construction that assigns gender identity to physical sex. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of gender, sex and sexuality was influenced by the writings of feminist writers. By the 1980s, these writers started to shift their focus to consider masculinity as a fertile area for investigation and study. This fresh impetus gave men's studies an interdisciplinary status in the field of academic research. The key figures whose works developed the queer theory are Judith

Butler, Eve Sedgwick and Michel Foucault. Sedgwick emphasized the usefulness of queer theory as a tool for understanding sexuality and society at large.

Michel Foucault coined the term in 1969, focusing on the entertaining discursive construction of sexuality in his text, *History of Sexuality*. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* further laid emphasis on the repeated internal performance of and behavioral response to sexuality (masculine or feminine). With the growth of interest in the area, queerness has taken a more activist approach to challenging normative ideas about sexuality rather than simply pointing out their contradictions. It opposes the idea that there is an inherent right or wrong way to be queer. With the spread of the interest in and awareness of masculine studies, feminist critics became more conscious of the fact that they had not fully dealt with male-dominated issues. Skepticism and fear of further dominance earlier stalled this discourse; but in 1990, the Queer Studies Group was inaugurated at the University of California, Berkeley by a group of scholars.

The term can have various meanings, depending on its usage; but it has been broadly associated with the study and theorization of gender and sexual practices that exist outside of heterosexuality, which challenges the notion that heterosexual desire is normal (Warner, 2011). Queer theorists are often critical of what they consider essentialist views of sexuality and gender, so they study these concepts as social, cultural phenomena, often through analysis of the categories binaries and language in which they are said to be portrayed. It is a theory

that prioritizes the social construction of gender over innate and biological factors a position for which it has been intensely criticized.

Adam Isaiah Green, a professor at the University of Toronto, argues that the queer theory denies social urgency in certain contemporary issues, which are social urgency in other positions of radicalized opponents. Joshua Gamson also opines that due to the theory's engagement in social deconstruction, it is nearly impossible for it to talk about lesbian, gay subjects as all social categories are naturalized and reduced to discourses based on them. Adam Isaiah Green says it can only examine discourses not subjectivities. Brent Picket also sees the theory as being socially biased and elitist; since it is only discussed by "small ideologically-oriented elite and in practice, only referred to at universities and colleges (Picket, 2015).

Feminists also criticize this theory for blurring the boundaries between gendered social classes, which it explains as personal choices rather than consequences of social structures (Mason, 2002). It is important to note that Queer theory is distinct from other schools of thought around gender and sexuality. Unlike postmodernism, it takes a more activist approach as it seeks to challenge normative ideas about sexuality rather than simply pointing out their contradictions. It opposes the idea that there is an inherent right or wrong way to be queer.

## **Queer theory in literature**

As an academic and literary field, queer theory is based on examining texts from the perspective of how they interact with notions of gender and sexuality. The field looks at identity as a spectrum rather than as a binary. Scholars reason that queer theory has drawn the attention of several great scholars, from Oscar Wilde's trial to the discourse of sexuality surrounding Virginia Woolf's affair with Vita-Sackville-West. Beyond issues of sexuality, the theory has played a great role in shaping the literary canon.

Queerness can also be understood as a framework of "non-normativity", which challenges social categories, says Lynne Joyrich, Professor of Modern Culture and Media. Professor of English, Jacques Khalip also says sexuality "renders problematic and complicated" pre-existing notions of identity. Through Queer theory, readers can broaden their understanding of the traditional canon by looking at the "in-between spaces of text that challenge heteronormativity when not overlooked". For example, Khalip Pray examines Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay entitled, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" as an example of uncovering homoeroticism and sexual complexity in parts of a text previously not seen as looking at such thing.

### **Theoretical framework of queerness**

It is pertinent to observe that queer theory does not construct or defend any particular identity, rather, it is grounded in post structuralism and deconstruction and works actively to critique hetero-normativity, breaking down traditional assumptions that

sexual and gender identities are presumed to be heterosexual or cisgender. The framework of this research is solidly grounded on the concept of queerness as a sexual and cultural phenomena which have categories, binaries and languages in which they are said to be portrayed. The erstwhile idea is that the theorization of gender and sexual practices that exist outside heterosexuality is not normal (Michael Warner; Annamarie Jagose).

Queer theory thus becomes a lens used to explore and intersect how scholars, activists, artistic text and the media perpetrate gender and sex-based binaries, with the aim to demolish hierarchies and fight against social inequalities opine Barber et al. Ellie Gore (2002) has done extensive research on the theory building her theoretical framework on the concept of queerness on political economy as the main focus of her grouse against feminist oppression. In her opinion, most critical political economies ignore sexuality entirely. As a result, she notes that matters of queerness oppression and resistance have not been systematically investigated or theorized. This is also a critical gap that needs to be addressed; at the level of “starter-centric” frames and global phenomena. Her study of LGBT politics and activism in Ghana is one that can be explored on the Nigerian clime to explore the role of sexuality within political agronomic parlance and narratives. The results of LGBT struggles have achieved significant wins in the form of decriminalization of homosexuality to the recognition of marriage rights.

In recent times, on the African continent and in global climes, LGBT has suffered setbacks in places like Uganda; same-sex relationships are now punishable by life sentences. There have been restraints to queer associations, assembly and expression. Polish president Duda and the ruling nationalist conservative party, law and justice made anti-LGBT politics a central plank during their 2019 re-election campaigns (Mendos, 2019). As of June 2020, more than 100 municipalities across the country had adapted against LGBT propaganda or “pro-family” resolutions (Giobanau, 2020). In USA, Trump administration began a concerted campaign to roll back trans rights in area of health care and military service (Levin, 2019). Thus there is a general homophobic feeling that is threateningly unwholesome.

These foundational issues give this research the imperative to engage the queer concept as it affects the African continent currently.

### **Queerness in African literature**

Although the idea of queerness, especially in Africa, seems quite new or recent, it has actually been in existence for a while. From the colonial era to the present day, African writers have grappled with questions of identity, sexuality and belonging, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for greater inclusivity and acceptance. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of queer representation in literature as a means of both reflecting and shaping social attitudes towards gender and sexuality. The exploration of

queerness in African literature serves as a dynamic lens through which authors challenge traditional narratives, providing a platform for marginalized voices and fostering a nuanced understanding of diverse sexual identities. The significance of queer representation in African literature is of interest here. It focuses on how the practice of African literary cogitations contributes to the broader struggle for freedom and acceptance among queer practitioners. Africa is queer-phobic. Religions and non-normative bodies seriously oppose the idea. Countries like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, etc legislate on it.

The works of Binyavanga Wainaina and Chinelo Okparanta have played pivotal roles in reimagining queerness in African literature. Wainaina's essay, "How to Write about Africa"(2013), challenges stereotypes and offers authentic portrayals of queer characters, contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. In Wainaina's essay, we find a rebuttal to the early stigma and stereotypes of Africa. The erstwhile opinions of the imperialist west about Africa being a place where we have poverty-stricken individuals in jungles that are filled with withering grassland are being rigorously challenged. He warns the west to change this opinion while reconstructing the better way he feels writers should write about the continent. Chinelo Okparanta, in her novel, presents the queer ideology in Africa as one that needs understanding, not outright condemnation.

### **A study of selected queer-related African prose fiction** *Under the udala trees*

A *novel* by Nigerian-American author, Chinelo Okparanta (2015), set in the 1960s, in Nigeria. It is about Ijeoma, a girl growing up in war-torn Nigeria who must come to terms with her sexuality and the conflicts it presents in society. It is written in a style of literary realism that incorporates elements of Nigerian folklore, categorized as LGBT+literature. It won Best Lesbian Fiction in 2016.

Our first person narrator, Ijeoma is a young Igbo girl living in Ojoto during the Nigerian Civil War. After her father, Uzo is killed in an air raid, her mother, Adaora sends Ijeoma to live with a grammar school teacher in Nnewi. Before she leaves, her childhood friend, Chibuzor kisses her under an orange tree.

In Nnewi, she meets Amina, a Hausa girl under an Udala tree and brings her home to live with the teacher and his wife. As a house girl, Amina falls in love with Ijeoma. One day, the teacher finds them making love and he sends Ijeoma to live with her mother in Aba. The stay in Aba is devoted to bible lessons as Adaora tries to exorcise the ‘demon’ of Ijeoma’s sexuality.

Amina and Ijeoma get reunited at the Girls’ Academy, a boarding school. Amina, however, refuses to continue with the old way of life after a nightmare and begins to date men, until she gets married to a Hausa boy. While working in her mother’s shop, Ijeoma meets Ndidi, a secondary school teacher who introduces her to the underground LGBT+ community – meeting in a church by day and ata gay dance club at night. The club is discovered and burned! Ndidi loses some of her gay friends.

Chibundu returns to court Ijeoma; and with Ndidi's encouragement coupled with pressure from Adaora, they get married. Ijeoma is depressed, while they live in Port Harcourt. But she still maintains constant contact with Ndido; some of the unsent letters discovered by Chibundu make him angry and he presses her to give him a son. She undergoes a miscarriage and leaves Chibundu to return to Aba and is accepted by her mother. Chidinma accepts Ijeoma as lesbian, while she (Ijeoma) remains a secret partner to Ndidi for many years and Chibundu refuses to remarry. The narrative helps Ijeoma come to terms with her sexuality and the conflict this presents in an African society that is queer-phobic.

### **Cultural stigma**

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the story returns to the 1960s. Ugwu, a village boy goes to the city of Nsukka to work as a houseboy for Odenigbo – a professor and radical. Odenigbo gets into a relationship with Olanna, a wealthy Nigerian's daughter. His white friend, Richard meets and falls in love with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister, leaving Susan, his girlfriend. Mama, Odenigbo's mother labels Olanna a witch. The story of Nigeria's coup and counter coup is told with the bitter consequences of the secession declared by Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. This leads to a war between Nigeria and Biafra (the eastern part of Nigeria, which is made up, majorly, of Igbo-speaking people).

Olanna, Odenigbo and Baby relocate to Aba and Umuahia under worsening conditions. We notice the intrigue of sexual escapades as Olanma's visit to London allows Odenigbo to sleep with and impregnate Amala, a girl brought to the house by Mama. Olanma gets wind of the affair and the baby; she gets drunk one night and seduces Richard to have sex with her. She adopts Amala's baby and names her Chiamaka. Kaineme learns of her sister's affair with Richard and stops speaking with her.

Ugwu gets married to Eberechi, but is conscripted to the army where he is injured; Mama is hit by the enemy's bullet and dies; Odenigbo is depressed and starts drinking. Kaineme crosses the enemy's line and doesn't return – a mystery. It is later revealed that Ugwu was the writer of "The World Was Silent When We Died", - a novel within the novel.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* not only reflects the devastating effect of the Civil War on the people of the eastern part of Nigeria whose proposed national flag is replicated by *Half of The Yellow Sun*, it equally draws attention to issues of the diverse sexual activities and behavior of its major characters even in this war-torn zone. The female characters portrayed seek to display or exhibit sexual freedom which is one of the major tenets of queerness. Through their behavior, they seek to normalize what queer-phobic Africans consider anathema to the African ontology. In this way, Adichie deconstructs the narrative that queerness is a western or foreign behavior. The erstwhile trend is extend the African hatred for queer sexual behavior to literary text as Osofisan (2012:146) shows in his angst against

contemporary writers is visible when he blasts them for concentrating on individuality, sex, women and wine and all themes which negates the core African values cherished by their predecessors, as discussed by Nwokocha (2022). Balogun and Oriaku (2014:127) view the quest for sexual freedom as expressed in *Half of a Yellow Sun* as emblematic of a middle class hybridized new woman who obviously has a shallow knowledge of the rules and values of traditional Nigerian society. On the contrary, Nwokocha (2022) argues that the activities of this stigmatized woman of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* sees sex as an escape route for them to detach themselves from the trauma of wars portrayed in the novel and that their sexual behavior is a true reflection of a realistic African experience.

### **Struggle for freedom- *Out of darkness, Shining light***

*Out of Darkness* is the fourth novel by the Zimbabwean business lawyer, writer and journalist, Petina Gappah. It deconstructs the myth, David Livingstone who is seen as a hero while his African attendants are seen as dark companions. They take his corpse from Chief Chitambo's village (Zambia) to Zanzibar, on the way to England. The experience is seen through his loquacious cook, Halima and pompous servant, Jacob Wainwright. Halima can't understand why David Livingstone left his family to wander about looking for the beginning of a river – feeling that his ideas are superior to nature's.

The angst is that one of the fellow travelers warns that even if we dress and speak like them (whites), we can never be them. The harsh truth of the imperial project that has taught people to love their conquerors and hate themselves leaves Wainwright to be made an outsider in his own homeland. The heart of the enslaved people carrying the burden dies within them when they realize there is no return.

This queerness of the narrative lies in Halima who is a purchased concubine for one of Livingstone's men, whom she earlier revered but now sees as petty and sometimes venal. At the death of the Bwana (Livingstone), Halima begins to wonder if she is finally free. The novel has been described as a powerful and poignant lament to those rendered invisible in the past (Grant, 2020); who need to be brought out of darkness (Guynes, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Queer representation in African literature is a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes, breaking cultural stigmas, and contributing to the broader struggle for freedom – especially by members of the LGBTQ community. Through the works of various authors, this literary exploration is an attestation to the diverse, complex and authentic narratives that deserve attention in the broader discourse on African identities.

These works, however, face a much stronger resistance in Africa than those of foreign writers in the Western world, following first, the African culture, which promotes and

accommodates heterosexual (monogamous and polygamous) ways of life and frowns strongly against same sex relationships and anything associated with them.

Secondly, the religious nature of the African people makes it difficult to support such a way of life. While queer nature and all other deviant sexual acts or ways of life are strongly kicked against by various religions, in Christianity there is explicit documentation of the LGBTQ activities as seen in the book of Exodus and strict instruction against the same, describing it as unnatural, sexual pervasion, as seen in Romans chapter 1 of the Holy Bible (Christianity is probably the only faith that condemns homosexuality and its likes in very clear terms).

With a clearly written command and condemnation of everything LGBTQ in the Holy Bible, the African literature has a lot to contend with as regards the acceptance of queerness and all its associations as portrayed in their works.

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