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## Queering the Racial Other: Towards a Queer Africa

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore recent developments in queer representation in 21<sup>st</sup> century African literature. Africa's history with the legitimization of homosexuality is complicit with politics of invisibility, silencing, erasure and rigid cultural ideologies. The Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) of Nigeria which was enacted in 2014 saw a furore among both old and new generation African writers who were embittered by the systemic erasure of LGBTQIA+ lives. Wole Soyinka's portrayal of the mulatto Joe Golder in *The Interpreters* was the closest that an African writer had come to representing a non-straight, non-heterosexual character in the panorama of African literature. While the only accomplishment of Soyinka's character remains a sympathetic portrayal of a homosexual, it also suggests the possibility of closeted queer presence in Africa. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a bold flourish of queer literature - Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) and Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005) present queer protagonists who struggle to come to terms with their queerness and radicalize anachronistic notions of gender and sexuality. Later works by new generation African writers have effectively succeeded in debunking the premise that 'homosexuality is un-African' on which the draconian SSMPA had been built. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) reinvents the bildungsroman by placing a queer African girl as the hero of her story. Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) explores the liminalities of gender and sexuality, the rites of passage that presages the fate of self-identified queer people within a social context that is hostile to sexual difference. This paper will analyze how all these works re-write the history of African queer people into the nation's body politic by strategically applying pertinent theoretical frameworks like race, gender and sexuality, biopolitics, politics of heteronormativity, and queer necropolitics.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, SSMPA, Representation, Gender, Sexuality.

### Introduction: To be or not to be Queer in Africa?

The history of homosexuality in Africa is rife with stories of perpetual conflict with the nation state. Indeed, decentering traditional narratives on sexuality have always come with a necessity to extricate one's sexual identity from all the paraphernalia of associations that come from being the citizen of a colonized nation. In Africa, the un-Africanness of homosexuality has become a byword for a blatant queer necropolitics to keep the cishetero mainstream untarnished. Even today, homosexuality in Africa remains an "unclaimed, unregistered historical reality" that must not see the light of day (Green-Simms, 2016, p. 141). A 2021 BBC

report on the countries where it is illegal to be gay writes that there are 69 countries that have laws criminalizing homosexuality and that nearly half of these are in Africa (BBC, 2021). In the same report it has been recorded that most laws criminalizing homosexual conduct originates from colonial times and out of the 53 countries in the Commonwealth, a staggering 36 of them have retained the homophobic colonial dictum. Rich's (1980) compulsory heterosexuality and Wittig's (1992) the supremacy of the "straight mind" are some of the constants embedded deeply within the ideological fabric making it impossible to articulate alternate discourses on sex and sexuality.

In debates pertaining to queerness and queer identities, even the term 'queer' has been deemed to be problematic. Homosexuality has been marked as a western import and it is therefore that the applicability of the term 'Queer' in the African context is often viewed as a manifestation of neo-imperialism. It is therefore necessary to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of *what* is queer and what does it *mean to be queer in Africa*.

### **Defining 'Queer'**

Is it really possible to define something down to its tiniest detail? Haven't we learned by now that any fixed reality illudes us? This obsession with fixity, stable and definite meanings, clearly definable elements is what runs counter to the very essence of queerness. To be queer is to disrupt the pretentiousness of rigid definitions - binaries are broken down and identities are forged yet again not as chequered boxes but a free flowing stream. Sexuality is a spectrum – that we all know now, and Queerness is the debunking of every definition formulated by cisgendered men on gender binarism and heterosexism. Toni Morrison wrote in *Beloved* that definitions belong to the definers and not to the defined, and that the definers are now taking away the power to define themselves (Morrison, 1987, p. 255). Halperin (1995) notes that 'queer' was originally an unfixed category that allowed the formulation of new sexual and gender identities, but now 'queer' has become a fixed signifier, one that aspires to birth a queer utopia, a space where heterosexist discourses will no longer be able to regulate bodies (Martin, 1994).

'Queer' signals an active force that motivates and asserts identity within a heterosexual matrix. 'Queer' to a large extent frames not only sexuality but also calls into questions the binary-gendered regimes that constitute identity [...] 'Resistance', 'articulation', and 'affirmation' of identities become 'queer' within structures of power that regulate the lives of LGBTQ people. These identities are repressed, minimized, and contained, but never completely silenced (Matebeni et al., 2018, p. 3).

### **Sex is always political**

The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics [...] They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political (Rubin, 1984, p. 267)

To identify as a queer person in Africa would mean to be a part of an invisible queer matrix as opposed to Butler's (1990) regulated heterosexual matrix that informs the heteropolarity of gender politics. The gender hierarchy which is at work is routinely enforced by the hegemonic binarization process which is inherently homophobic. Not only so, but identity politics has a crucial role to play. A finding from a Pew Research Institute study of public perception and

attitude revealed that 98% of Nigerians perceive homosexuality negatively (Cox, 2014) and another study revealed that upholding traditional family values constitute the most integral position in Nigerians' social life (Onuche, 2013). To be queer would then implicate challenging the very foundational basis of the country by overturning conventional codes of existence.

Foucault's theorizations on biopolitics and biopower helps to put the political aspect of queerness into perspective. Since biopolitics is essentially the state sanctioned supervision and regulatory control of the population's biological processes (Foucault, 1978), homosexuality cannot be condoned, and the nation's biopower thwarts any hope for a progress towards homonationalism. What is seen is state-sanctioned violence against homosexuals and a complete dehumanization and denigration of queer identities. Taylor (1992) talks about the necessity of a politics of recognition, especially for political issues related to identity, citizenship, and activist claims. To integrate self-identified queer people into the larger fold of what constitutes "national identity" would mean a move towards homonationalism, and for that there is a need for a social recognition and acceptance of queer identities.

### **When is the right time to be queer?: (De)Criminalizing Homosexuality in Nigeria**

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) that is responsible for keeping a track on the progress of laws pertaining to homosexuality around the world reported that death penalty has been legalized for same-sex sexual practice in Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and in the northern states in Nigeria (BBC, 2021). Nigeria has welcomed unfavourable attention after the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) which was enacted in 2014. The long title of the bill which was passed in 2013 goes like this: "An Act to prohibit a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex, solemnization of same; and for related matters" (refworld.org). The summary of the contents of the bill also categorically states that even witnesses would not be spared the penalties reserved for the perpetrators of homosexual conduct: "This Act prohibits marriage contract or civil union between persons of the same sex and provides penalties for the solemnization and witnessing of same" (refworld.org).

Anti-homosexual legislations like the SSMPA are predicated upon the foreignness of homosexuality and hence inevitably tie in cultural and religious discourses that colours queerness as an assault on national identity (Amusan et al., 2019). The SSMPA came as a shock to the entire world, revealing the precarity of queer lives and became a global human rights concern overnight. 'Gay rights' became a blanket term standing for the protection of the rights of gay, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders as self-identified queer persons organized campaigns to decriminalize homosexuality and protect and the civil rights of homosexuals. Over the years, Gay rights protests and marches have gained significant momentum, marking an underground presence of massive queer population who no longer want to be forced into the closet, and resisting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Literature has, in its own way, resisted against homophobic tendencies and this paper surveys a few literary pieces that revolutionized queer existence in Nigeria.

### **Towards a Queer Utopia**

The question then arises: Is it possible to imagine Africa as a Queer utopia? There seems to be a bold flourish of queer literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian literary scene that promises a movement towards an articulate resistance against systemic homophobia. These literary works actively engaged in a discursive analysis of queer lives in a brutally uncompromising society. Tracing the formulation of what can be called exclusively 'queer spaces', these texts opened up the possibility of such spaces reserved for alternate identities. As opposed to utopias which

are ideal spaces that are impossible to achieve, such alternate spaces have come to be regarded as queer heterotopias. In his work “Of Other Spaces”, Foucault (1986) introduced the notion of heterotopic spaces where people can celebrate their differences, free from the repressive regime of everyday life. In queer heterotopias the binaries pertaining to sex and sexuality are deconstructed and subverted in an almost carnivalesque celebration of fluidity, and not fixity. Queerness is not forbidden, but empowering, and as an emergent culture it threatens the dominant culture. I aim to investigate the extent to which the chosen texts succeed in formulating a queer heterotopia within a hostile, heteronormative cultural climate.

### **Performing Masculinity in Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004) and Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)**

#### **Gendering Sex**

Gender roles are inscribed onto our bodies from the moment we are ascribed a gender. Gender, then precedes our social existence, and our lives must be shaped and informed by the nebulous conceptualizations. Stipulated gender roles are then reaffirmed and reinforced every time one acts out in accordance with those mandates. Butler has disintegrated the sex/ gender distinction to justify her statement that “there is no sex that is not always already gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Butler’s argument on gender leads to the conclusion that gender is more of a “doing” than a “being” – it is something that one does, and not is. Butler elaborates –

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (Butler, 1990, p. 5).

Butler’s contributions on gender performativity have revolutionized queer studies in unforeseen ways. That the “gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its *reality*” (Butler, 1990, p. 36; my emphasis), and scrutinizing ‘reality’ would reveal the constructedness and artificiality of heterosexual identities. The locus of this section is to investigate the politics that goes into the construction of heterosexual identities in the African cosmology with special reference to Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004) and Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Published 16 years apart, both the narratives are based in Nigeria, and both have protagonists who are at a loss when it comes to *acting out* hypermasculine codes of conduct. I am choosing to use ‘hypermasculinity’ instead of masculinity because of the exaggerated emphasis that has been recurrently placed upon looking and acting masculine in both these texts.

#### **Masculinity in *GraceLand***

Abani’s *GraceLand* records the harrowing and traumatic coming-of-age story concerning a Nigerian boy named Elvis. Oscillating between prolepsis and analepsis, the novel paints a competent portrait of a post-civil war Nigeria where the fracturedness of the Nigerian civilization and a general disorientation as a result of globalization percolates into the protagonist’s life. The protagonist, Elvis, must negotiate his way through a series of contradictory impulses. It has been observed by critics that Elvis is in a quest for identity, and in the process, he performs “mimicry and simulation” but is still unable to find his true identity (Nnodim, 2008, p. 324). By profession a struggling impersonator, Elvis is perpetually faced

with a cultural reconfiguration every time he attempts to mimic his namesake, American sensation and superstar, Elvis Presley:

He impersonates Elvis Presley to earn a living, but this activity puts him at odds with the normative discourse on gender: it invites a consideration of the ways in which masculinity is perceived, constructed and performed in this society and – most importantly – how it is historicised in his relationship with his father and the male figures in his childhood life. (Ouma, 2011, p. 81)

To some extent, it can be asserted that Elvis deliberately queers the Presley aesthetic (Omelsky, 2011) as a means of coming to terms with his own troubled gender identity. Overwhelmed by the freedom he feels in the Presley get-up, Elvis, within the safe and closed space of his own room, feminizes his look by experimenting with make-up. He whitens his face with the customary “Saturday Night Talc”, and puts on dark mascara and shiny red lipstick as he dances to “Heartbreak Hotel”. It is at this point that the queering of the Presley aesthetic is complete and Elvis successfully shatters all heteronormative constraints. However, he regrets not being able to go out in public carrying this look since he looks much too similar to the “transvestites that haunted the car parks of hotels” (Abani, 2004, p. 76). If he were to be seen like this he would surely be beaten up and the “target of some insult.” Elvis’s room, then, becomes a queer space for him to be his queer-self, but simultaneously the room metamorphoses into the closet where the boy must keep his queer-impulses hidden from the outside world.

This make-up ritual is merely a manifestation of Elvis’s long repressed desire to experiment with femininity. As a child, Elvis convinced his aunts to dress him in girls’ clothing and let him wear make-up. When Elvis’s father sees this, he beats him up, shaves his head for trying to look in a “feminine way”, and screams: “No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual!” (Abani, 2004, p. 24). Elvis’s gender blurring acts tend to challenge and subvert the heteronorms that constitute the notion of the hypermasculine African man. The African construct of masculinity is founded upon compulsory heterosexuality, a necessary display of violence and associated acts of ‘manliness’. This is clearly evident when we witness five-year-old Elvis’s initiation into “manhood” through the ritualistic killing of the hen. It is as the father Sunday says:

It is the first step into manhood for you. When you are older, the next step is to kill a goat, and then from there we begin your manhood rites. But this is the first step. (Abani, 2004, p. 21)

Abani does not shy away from portraying homosexual sex – there are three times in the text when Elvis has his brush with sexual intercourse with a man – and Abani has taken care to treat homosexual sex non-pejoratively. Elvis’s sexual awakening is thwarted many times, but never once does Elvis think of gay sex negatively, or with disgust. Elvis’s first experience of gay sex is with his friends, all of whom innocently attempt to explore their own sexualities even after knowing it is a “taboo”. This explorative and experimental venture into homosexuality is violently cut short due to the intrusion of Uncle Joseph, who proceeds to rape Elvis as a corrective punishment, and therefore contributing to Elvis’s second encounter with gay sex which was non-consensual. Like his childhood encounter with cross-dressing, Elvis’s first experimentation with homosexuality is undergirded by violence and trauma (Green-Simms, 2016).

However, the ending of the novel leaves much to be desired – Elvis flees Nigeria in the hopes of finding a ‘grace land’ in the U.S. In a way, then novel then reflects both revolutionizes

and limits queer existence in Nigeria, and in doing so, it paints a remarkably realistic portrait of the actual conflicting circumstances.

### **Masculinity in *The Death of Vivek Oji***

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) grapples with certain similar issues as seen in Abani's *GraceLand* (2004). The titular character, Vivek, has two personas – much like Elvis Oke whose alter-ego was embodied in the queered Elvis aesthetic. Vivek is Nnemdi, and Nnemdi is Vivek – they are two sides of the same coin, yet the narrative evinces how Vivek must constantly negotiate these two polarizing sexual identities to conform with the socio-cultural demands of a heterosexist society. While Vivek's life narrative is undergirded by a crisis in traditional masculinity, his cousin Osita is seen over-compensating in his sexual rendezvous with women so as to negate his own complex attraction towards the eccentric Vivek. Vivek, bejewelled and looking “like a bride” (Emezi, p. 11), stirs the latent homosexual desires in Osita:

Osita wished, much later, that he'd told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire. “Take it off,” he snapped instead, his throat rough. “Put it back before they catch us. (Emezi, 2020, p. 11)

In a way, then, *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) is a novel of negotiations, of half-truths, and of masqueraded desires. Osita, Vivek's love interest, is just as important as him. Although Osita can be identified as a bisexual for his sexual intimacies with both men and women, his love for Vivek triumphs all. After Vivek's passing, Osita only slept with women because it “felt safer, as if he wasn't giving any important parts of himself away: not his soul or heart, just his body, which didn't matter anyway” (Emezi, 2020, p. 45), and he did not want any man to touch him ever again. However, when Vivek was alive and before they had initiated their short-lived relationship, Osita was driven into a furious rage as his cousin outted him in the enclosed space of Osita's room. Insinuating that Osita was perhaps seeing a man instead of a woman cost Vivek heavily – he is typecast into a stereotypical effeminate gay man for his long hair:

Don't touch me. You think I'm like your friends? Or like you? Is that why you decided to start looking like a woman, eh? Because you've been knocking men? Biko, I'm not like you... (Emezi, 2020, p. 67).

Vivek's response is simple compared to Osita's moralistic tirade – “Why are you so afraid? Because something is different from what you know?” (p. 68). Within these statements the entire anti-homosexual fiasco is condensed in the form of an eloquent argument challenging the politics of sexual difference that is at work. The terseness of Vivek's retaliation speaks volumes about the exclusionary politics that dehumanizes a queer person. By marking Osita as the one who is “afraid” of homosexuality/ becoming a homosexual as opposed to Vivek being the one who is “afraid” of being exposed, Emezi tips the balance of power. Vivek/ Nnemdi, the queer, the outcast with the long hair and eccentric habits, becomes the object of fear – for his very presence negates the binaries so carefully constructed by society. Vivek/ Nnemdi disrupts the heteronormative veneer of society by bringing to surface realities hidden deep beneath. Durán-Almarza take a familiar/stranger dichotomized stance in her reading of the text:

The stranger is a literary figure that stands in creative tension with binary thinking: as ambivalent, liminal characters, strangers challenge hegemonic assumptions of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, what is felt to be safe and what is to be feared (Durán-Almarza, 2022, pp. 76-77).

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The narrative is nothing if not a long-winded unspooling of uncomfortable truths surrounding Vivek's (non)existence. There is an unspoken agreement among Vivek's family and friends about his queerness, but no one dared to broach the matter. It is only his mother, Kavita, who keeps telling everyone that it is a "phase" and that Vivek will soon come out of it. Spaces become an integral aspect of the novel. Closed rooms are continually queered as Vivek starts to live two very different lives. Acting as a queer heterotopia, closed rooms allow Vivek to bring out Nnemdi. The photographs handed over to Kavita after Vivek's death shows him embracing his feminine self comfortably and Nnemdi becomes a material memory.

It is not entirely coincidental that Nnemdi is the one who remains in memory after Vivek's death. It is almost as if Vivek's death was necessary to bring Nnemdi to life even if she remains unaccepted by most of her loved ones. From a stranger she becomes the familiar one, and it is Vivek who now eludes all familiarity which raises the question: did Vivek even exist, or was *he* the stranger all along?

### **Negotiating Queerness in Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2006)**

In Dibia's *Walking With Shadows* (2005), a family man's well concocted image of the ideal husband and the ideal father comes crashing down as his past which he had hidden and hidden from catches up to him. At the core of the novel is a penetrating insight into the formulation of the African family. The very existence of the African family is necessarily dependent on the presence of the father, the mother, and their children. However, in traditional narratives unlike Dibia's novel, the family would also consist of grandparents, grandchildren, and extended family members. What remains the lynchpin of the African family is systemic and institutionalized heteronormativity. A heteronormative marriage is not only the only expected form of union between two people, but it is also socially valued and prized for it promises continuity which is seen as a necessity to ensure the survival of the people:

In Africa, as in all cultures, children are crucial in the continuity of a lineage, a clan, a society. Children are the base that hold up the structure and ensure the perpetuity of a family and the larger traditional society... Thus, culturally, inability to procreate signals tragedy... (Okereke, 2005, p. 7)

In his novel, Dibia problematizes the African family as the heteronormative unit that stifles sexual awakening and/or remains complicit in masquerading homoerotic desires. Dibia's voice stands out from the polyphonic narrativizations of other Nigerian writers especially in the way the author has attempted to humanize his protagonist who has been castigated as a sexual deviant in the novel. Adrian is a family man who has left his murky past behind and embraced the highest ideal of masculinity that his society demands of men. He is a successful, loving husband with a beautiful career driven wife, a beautiful daughter – his entire family true to the image of the traditional African family. But given Adrian's past, it becomes clear that he looks upon this heteronormative way of life as a corrective ritual righting the wrong that was his homosexual past. In a way, Adrian's playacting as the ideal African man is nothing but a farce to escape a past laden with disgrace and rejection. It is as Akpan (2021) puts it, to avoid being recriminated by society, many homosexuals put on the mantle of disguise by getting married and raising a family. When Adrian's past sees the light of day, it is his wife Ada who reiterates what constitutes a family and what does not:

What had happened to the old values they were all brought up with? A man and a woman made up a family and then produce children, not a man and man or woman and woman. (Dibia, 2005, p. 130)

The novel opens with a prologue where the protagonist, formerly known as Ebele, goes through a baptismal rite to renounce his homosexual past and be reborn as a ‘normal’ man. He hinges onto Ada as his chance at redemption and salvation by living a socially acceptable and lauded life. When his homosexuality is ultimately publicized, it is interesting to observe how it is the closest people that condemn him – he is reprimanded and shunned by his wife, his brother, his colleagues and by the general public at large. His wife Ada attempts to rationalize the situation but is unable to do so since she knows that Africans cannot be homosexuals: “Adrian was a Nigerian, an African man. Being gay was certainly not in African culture. The whole idea was so foreign, so unnatural” (Dibia, 2005, p. 2). Ada keeps on believing till the end that homosexuality is a foreign import, un-African, and a disease. Both Ada and Adrian’s father strongly proclaim religion as a bulwark against perverse sexual desires. Ada suggests that Adrian read the Bible because even “God forbid the act” (Dibia, 2005, p. 95). Adrian’s father is shocked to hear about his homosexuality because he had instilled “Christian values” in all his children (Dibia, 2005, p. 182). The image of the gay man and the African man are irreconcilable according to the African cosmology.

The conclusion of the novel makes it implicit that the integration of the queer body into the body politic of the nation is not possible. Adrian leaving Nigeria for the U.S with the hope of living more openly is very similar to Elvis Oke’s escape to the U.S at the end of Abani’s *GraceLand*. Despite maintaining its reputation for being the first 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian text to sympathetically portray a gay protagonist, Dibia’s novel underscores the impossibility of the queer figure in the African cosmology while remaining hopeful for a more inclusive future.

### **Disrupting African Femininity in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)**

The African cosmology pertaining to gender and its equation to all the stereotypical gendered ascriptions that predate biological sex is a complex discourse that never fails to baffle. Voices of African womanhood are polyphonic and it is dangerous to just indulge a single story. Nigerian scholar Ifi Amadiume in her work *Male Daughters and Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987) made an ethnographic study in an attempt to decolonize the African woman’s body which under the colonial gaze had been reduced to a figure of pathos. Amadiume’s work stresses upon the positions of unimaginable power which are generally reserved for the men but were bestowed upon women in certain unique circumstances. In a town named Nnobi there exists “male daughters”, or women who had the “status of a son” and were able to inherit the father’s property. Such subversive gender dynamics allowed these women to be economically independent and even hold positions of authority in the household. Further, “female husbandry” or women-to-women marriage was also frequently practiced as a way for women to free themselves from the chokeholds of patriarchy and endless domestic service.

It is the colonial intervention that stifled these versions of femininities and produced a monolith discourse on African femininity that maintained its stronghold well into the country’s post-colonial era. Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) revolutionizes female autonomy not only on account of writing the first Nigerian lesbian bildungsroman, but also for reimagining the “relationship between the Nigerian woman and nation beyond Western notions of gender and sexual normativity.” (Navas, 2021, pp. 118-119)

Okparanta’s novel is centred right in the middle of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war and her narrative seems to parallel a very personal, private upheaval with disruptions on a nationwide scale. The harrowing experiences that befall Ijeoma once her sexual awakening begins seem to hint at an extremely unsettling future for queer people in Nigeria. In Okparanta’s vision of the sexual revolution initiated by a lesbian is reconfigured the past, present and future of a



country ravaged materially, culturally and ideologically by imperial control. By situating her fictional lesbian narrative onto a momentous historical reality, Okparanta re-forges and re-negotiates identities, nationhood, belonging, and maps the body politic of a nation in formation. By integrating the body of the lesbian into Nigeria's body politic, Okparanta is actively re-writing the queer body into history to counter future homogenized narratives.

Ijeoma has her sexual awakening when she meets Amina and both the girls indulge in a harmless, innocent experimentation with their sexual orientation until they are both caught and their sexual identities are violently disrupted and re-oriented. Okparanta's choice of the form of the bildungsroman allowed her to explore sexual difference in its nascent stages. In this regard it is important to note how a queer/ lesbian bildungsroman is different from the generic trope of the bildungsroman:

...in contrast to the classical Bildungsroman, lesbian authors redefined the original pattern of the novel of development so as to revise the heterosexual discourse of the Bildungsroman and, thus, to highlight the search for their true sexual identities. In this sense, it could be affirmed that the lesbian Bildungsroman has an explicit pedagogic content. According to Sally Munt, the reworking of the traditional Bildungsroman pattern has an explicit pedagogic function, to instruct the reader in the complexity and contemporaneity of lesbian identity (1988, p. 17). The outcome of refocusing the apprenticeship novel's process on subversion from a lesbian perspective was the creation of a postmodern literary genre known as lesbian Bildungsroman (Andermahr, 2009, p. 51). (Morera, 2014, p. 66)

Curtois (2018) argues that in the process of becoming, Ijeoma faces and overcomes many hurdles as she keeps questioning the patriarchal and religious values that surround her. She counters her mother's religious fanaticism by trying to rationalize and interrogate the religious dictum:

Just because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history [Ijeoma is referring to Adam and Eve], 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 of them perfectly viable. (Okparanta, 2015, p. 83)

In more ways than one, the trajectory of Ijeoma's life defies the conventional life charted out for an African woman. Ijeoma does fall a prey to the heteronormative compulsions of the society and gets married to a man, and so does Amina, her girlhood lover. However, the unconventionality in Ijeoma's life narrative lies in her continually defying traditions. She divorces her abusive husband after years of enduring his torture. Okparanta has also taken liberties to critique the institutions of marriage and motherhood – both of which are considered to be the rites of passage to ideal femininity. When she mothers a daughter, her husband Chibundu is dissatisfied and Ijeoma starts believing that by giving birth to a son she can finally be “released from this captivity of a marriage” (Okparanta, 2015, p. 304). She starts to think of herself as a “hostage” and even considers that motherhood can make her “feel more invested in the marriage” (Okparanta, 2015, p. 242). However, her miscarriage turns out to be a symbol for their “inadequacy” as a couple (Courtois, 2018, p. 181).

Adrienne Rich (1980) argued that woman-identified experiences can act as a bulwark against institutionalized heterosexuality and even patriarchy. Okparanta in her novel highlights Ijeoma's homosexual relationship with Ndidi as a source of empowerment that strengthens her

to end her toxic marriage. The ending of the novel debunks the notion that a woman is defined by a man, rather, the narrative illustrates how embracing one's sexual identity can be emboldening. Okparanta effectively portrays homosexuality to be African, and in the process of normalizing homosexuality in the African context, she underscores certain problematic trends in the heterosexual matrix that need to be redressed.

## Results and Discussion

The paper effectively illustrates how 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian authors have been instrumental in rewriting the queer body into the body politic of the country. From the range of texts exposed to critical evaluation, the picture of Nigeria that emerges is that of a nation which is still under the mire of colonial dictum. The postcolonial scenario in Nigeria is no different from colonial Nigeria where narratives on correctness were being manufactured by an alien race. Culturally and ideologically, Nigeria had much more leeway pertaining to same sex relationships before the arrival of the British. It was the British that imported the stringent Victorian values regarding sex and sexuality that was so indoctrinated in the minds of the natives that they are still under their influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The texts chosen for illustration in this paper reveal different facets of the Nigerian cosmology and how they deny any scope for the co-existence of alternate discourses. The challenges faced by homosexual men and women form the background of the study while a microscopic examination of the Nigerian society constitutes the heart of this paper's critical scrutiny. The Nigerian society is torn apart – all the institutions that condone a homophobic and queerphobic stance are exposed. Abani and Emezi's novels disrupt traditional narratives on African masculinity by expanding and diversifying the very notion of "masculinity". Through their genderbending acts, both the protagonists Oke and Oji resist the machinations of institutionalized heteronormativity. The course of Dibia's novel, however, runs counter to the course of the previous two novels. Within the baptismal rite of Ebele being reborn as Adrian is symbolically encoded an act of self-denial and a desire to live up to society's standards. Even in the newly acquired flesh of the heterosexual family man, Adrian sees his former homosexual self, and in the end, he is forced to accept his true sexual identity at the cost of his social image.

The endings of all the three novels are to be noted with some critical interest. Despite contributing immensely in making queer people visible and their voices heard, the narratives end with the respective self-identified gay protagonists being uprooted from their society. Both Oke and Adrian leave Nigeria for the United States, hoping that they will be able to live more freely there (even if that is contestable), and Vivek's death removes him from ever getting truly integrated into the Nigerian society. In so far as the question of integration is concerned, there remains a yawning gap in Nigerian literature that needs to be filled.

Okparanta's text is both gynocentric and androcentric in intricately delineating the sexual politics that orchestrates her characters' lives. Okparanta's use of the bildungsroman is ground-breaking to say the least – she not only politicizes the genre but subverts the genre in many ways: first, by centering a female protagonist instead of the traditional male, and second, by concluding with the breaking off of a conventional heterosexual marriage. The political and the personal are intertwined in a way that the fate of the nation depends upon the conclusion that Ijeoma's story has, and thus Okparanta politicizes the African lesbian bildungsroman, something which had never been attempted before.

The texts explored expunge the narrative that homosexuality is un-African. However, there still remains several issues that could be explored. The underground queer scene of Lagos would make a fine entry point into conversations about queerscapes in urban places. Eloghosa

Osunde's *Vagabonds!* (2022) is a fictional narrative dabbling in magical realism to obliquely articulate the biopolitical forces at work in regulating bodies. The portrayal of queerness in Nollywood can be a potent topic for discussion and exploration. The impact of globalization and the formulation of global queer discourses allow for an intensive study on intersecting Afrodiasporic and Afroqueer trajectories.

### Conclusion

The article explores the possibility of a queer heterotopia in Nigeria. The texts explored re-imagines Nigeria as a queer space where self-identified queer people are compelled to make choices in favour of or against their nation. Nationhood and the belongingness are filtered through a heteronormative narrative where the country's body politic eliminates its queer citizens. This leads to yet another question that this paper addresses: is queer citizenship possible in post-colonial Nigeria? The politics of belonging problematizes queer citizenship but it is not completely impossible. In the fictionalized queerscapes painted by the writers lies the germination of a hopeful vision of inclusivity and queer futurity.

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