# RE-VISIONING

# HOMOSEXUALITY

# IN THE NIGERIAN NOVEL

## A STUDY OF JUDE DIBIA'S *WALKING WITH SHADOWS* AND CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

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# *RE-VISIONING HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE NIGERIAN NOVEL: A STUDY OF JUDE DIBIA'S WALKING WITH SHADOWS AND CHINELO OKPARANTA'S UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

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**Abstract**

Queer studies in Nigerian literature seem to still be stuck in the situation Chris Dunton described in 1989 claiming that homosexuality has been denied history by African writers. There has been a proliferation of works handling characters that are homosexual since the turn of the 21st Century, and not in the usual stereotypical and predictable way Dunton described. This study undertakes two such major works: Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Queer studies in Nigerian literature, when it is attempted, usually focus on queerness from a postcolonial or psychoanalytic view. This study goes a different route by focusing rather on the production of discourse and knowledge, and the strategies of power that inform the construction and maintenance of sexuality—both normative and non-normative—using the queer theory. It will also show how the dynamics of discourse regarding sexuality has informed the shift in the handling of homosexuality in the Nigerian novel.

**Keywords**: Discourse, Hetero-normative, Performativity, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Power.

**Introduction**

The Nigerian novel has been a thriving tradition since the days of *Things Fall Apart*, as well as critical studies of it, which in itself has been as vibrant and diverse in its undertaking of the multiplicity of issues that abound within this tradition of the Nigerian novel and in uncovering new ones. Except, perhaps, when it comes to sexual identity, in which case studies

have remained almost stagnant and underwhelming. The handling of the homosexual subject specifically in African literature (which can be considered a macrocosm of Nigerian literature) as Chris Dunton points out, has been largely monothematic and stereotypical (422); stereotypical, in the sense that it is viewed and attributed to "the detrimental impact made on Africa by the West," and monothematic, because the function of the homosexual subject in the larger design of the novel is mostly "restricted and predictable" (422).

The publication of Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* in 2005, however, marked an open and definitive turn in the orientation of the narrative voice towards same-sex relationship in the Nigerian novel. For the first time, the homosexual character was at the centre of the story, and was much more than the "restricted" and "predictable" symbol of colonialism and all its negative impact. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*—a story that depicts lesbian love in a period of war—followed ten years later. Between and after the appearance of these two novels, other works with similar bent have appeared in the poetry and short story genres, which is important to note in pointing out how this shift in the handling of homosexual material is happening across the board in Nigerian literature.

**Dynamics of Power Relations and the Production of Discourse**

In undertaking this study, my approach to the interpretation of the primary texts focused more on the production of discourse and knowledge, and the dynamics of power relations operating within the societies of the texts. This method was first proposed by Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* where he defined power as:

> the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, *through*

> *ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them*; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system. . . and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (92) (Italics mine)

This implies that a society, over the process of time, creates its own system of power distribution and interaction and this, in turn, affects every facet of life within the sphere of that society—including the formation of sexuality, which, as Foucault ultimately proposes, is a construct (105-6). This happens through discourse which forms specific mechanics of knowledge and power through which also the methods of control and normalization are continuously negotiated and renegotiated. This also means that power relations exist around the discourse on sex at every point, defining its manifestation. In Gayle Rubin's words:

> The realm of sexuality has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvring, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. (4)

Foucault began his study on sexuality from the 19$^{th}$ Century notion that posited that discourse on sexuality has been repressed since the 17$^{th}$ Century through the control of speech, a notion that became known as the repressive hypothesis. For Foucault, the bid to repress discourse on sex

only led to its proliferation; it became an incitement to discourse on sex. Thus, while on the surface the mechanisms of power at the beginning seemed to be implementing restrictions and constraints in order to control sexuality, what was happening in essence was that sexuality was expanding, subdividing, and branching out, "penetrating further into reality" (42). The form of power exercised at this point, according to Foucault, was modifying to enable this: the mechanism of power was now in the domain of the medical, psychiatric and psychological fields and its operation differed from the earlier mechanisms of power which simply sought to prohibit. Here, sexualities proliferated through the extension of power. Homosexuality at this time, for example, has been characterized as a way of inverting the binary gender in one's self. It was recognized as a form of sexuality and was "transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny." (43)

**A Brief History of Homosexuality and the Nigerian Novel**

In 1989, Chris Dunton published one of the pioneering essays on African literature and sexuality, "'Wheyting be Dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature," where he stated that homosexuality has been denied history by the African writer who has instead greeted the issue with "a sustained outburst of silence" (448). He agreed with Daniel Vignal who he quoted as stating that it is difficult for the African writer to conceive that hemophilia might be the act of a black African. It is, however, important to bring to note the inherent politics that influenced the attitude of the Nigerian writer writing about pre-colonial Africa and how it contributed in affecting his attitude towards homosexuality: after works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary'*s Mr Johnson,* which presented the pre-colonial African society in unflattering light, it became imperative for the African writer to take back and correct the narrative. But in also trying to map out the authentic cultural aspects of pre-colonial Africa

for both the European and the local audience, the African writer put concerted effort in showing homosexuality as alien to Africa. (Lopang, 77)

Take for example novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, both of which depicted societies south of the Niger at the point of or before contact with colonial power. These were heterosexually-defined pre-colonial/colonial societies where overt masculinity was the ideal; where one proved his manhood by the largeness of his yam barns and by the number of his titles. Any orientation opposing this was in fact considered effeminate and frowned on. This is what informs the binary opposition we find between Okonkwo and his father Unoka. Specifically, in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, children of opposite sex were betrothed to each other at very early age as we find in the case of Ekwueme and Ahurole. This, according to Lopang, "underlines that children were exposed at a young age to the concept of a heterosexual lifestyle. . . . One gets the idea that there is no other alternative that exists in this pre-colonial society." (80) We are thus presented with pre-colonial and colonial African societies where sex is consummated within a heterosexual union strictly for the purpose of procreation, in extension of the family lineage. Sex in these societies was strictly functional.

When homosexual characters began to show up in the Nigerian narrative, it was as evidence of the perversion of the west with its alien practices and negative influence. Even though Joe Golder in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) was one of the first of these characters to show up, the handling of his character was different from the linear and monothematic function that the homosexual character occupied in this period. We do not detect in the narrative voice an overt and direct disapproval of Golder's sexuality even though the society and characters he interacted with were full of it. This resulted in critics becoming divided as regards the handling of his character. For Desai, Soyinka presents Golder as a profoundly

sympathetic character who is entangled in the struggle to negotiate his racial (he is an African-American) and sexual identities, identities which are both at odds with the hegemonic order of things as well as with one another. This, according to Desai "must sober even the most unsympathetic of readers." (738). Dunton would disagree with Desai, pointing at the incident where Sagoe firmly distanced himself from Golder after learning of his sexuality, a situation he thinks Soyinka does not deflect but rather "projected as an appropriate critical response" (440). Thus, for him, even if we are sympathetic to the situation of his two identities being at odds with the hegemonic order of things and with one another, it still does not invalidate that his character is depicted as a degenerate. For Neelika Jayawardane and Ainehi Edoro, the handling of Golder's character is "cringe-worthy and extremely unsympathetic," according to them:

> Same-sex desire is caricatured and vilified through the figure of a mixed-race African-American gay man playing out the classic stereotype of the non-African homosexual outsider whom everyone treats with mild indifference or open revulsion. (np)

This type of complexity in a homosexual character was an exception to the rule. It usually rather followed, as Dunton puts it, that the treatment is crudely stereotypical, monothematic, restricted and predictable (422). In Kole Omotoso's *The Edifice* (1971) for example, the major character, Dele, who excels in the English language, is sexually exploited by a homosexual teacher in colonial mission school thus tying his contact with homosexuality to his interest and involvement in the ways of the west. Also in Dillibe Onyema's *Sex Is a Nigger's Game* (1976), we find a situation where the emphasis on the character of Chidi, a male prostitute employed by a white homosexual by the name of Sir Brian, is placed on his value as a sexual commodity hence the repeated reference to his virility and the size of his organ (Dunton, 424). This also

reinforces the stereotype of the homosexual as an overly sexual being. Also, it isn't unexpected that homosexuality here is ultimately identified with the West in the person of Sir Brian, but the narrative goes for the overkill when Sir Brian himself comments that the practice was "largely imported by the early colonists and by Westernized Africans." (76)

Novels featuring homosexual characters and relationships in a non-pejorative manner began to appear midway into the 2000s: novels such as *The Street* by Biyi Bandele and *In the Middle of the Night* by Vintage Promise. In 2004 *GraceLand* by Chris Abani was published. It is the story of a cross dresser, Elvis Oke, whose journey to discovering and accepting his gender noncompliant identity was fraught with trauma arising from loss, rejection and abuse. Even though the narrative focuses more on gender as performance than on sexuality, it perhaps shows the continuum between both.

This brief rundown of the treatment of homosexuality in the Nigerian novel is necessary to provide the study with a background: homosexuality was treated as an alien idea, one synonymous with the negatives of colonial experience. In more recent times however, there is an active bend towards humanizing homosexuality in the Nigerian novel. This study will also show, through a queer reading of the texts, how the movement of discourse on sexuality, in its various mechanisms of power relations, makes for the construction of sexuality, implying also a dynamic in the perception and reaction towards an identified non-normative sexuality, in this case homosexuality.

**Dynamics of Discourse: The Strategy of Silence**

Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* is a narrative driven by what Foucault calls a process of "ceaseless struggle" (92) where we witness the established power over the discourse on

sexuality encountering a confrontation. Adrian, the workaholic protagonist who is caught up in a saga regarding his sexuality as a consequence of exposing a fraud at his work place, has tried to keep the truth of his sexuality under wraps for years, getting married and having a child with Ada in the process. The air of taboo that surrounds the reaction to the revelation of his sexuality, and the fact that it takes centre stage in the office environment over the uncovered fraud, set the narrative in a society that is hostile as a hetero-normative establishment.

Adrian's social excommunication after having his sexuality exposed is perhaps the height of the manifestation of the repressive mechanism already in operation within this social establishment. We however find out that before this point, silence was a major mode of censorship on discourse surrounding sex. According to Foucault, discourse on sexuality is first subjugated at the level of language by the avoidance of words that make it too visibly present thus imposing a silence. (17) This is evident in the following incident where Ada, Adrian's wife, first confronts Adrian after getting the call that broke news of his homosexuality:

> "You said you had a phone call, what was it about?" [. . .]
>
> "It was a man." Ada spoke slowly and then her features hardened. "He claimed… I don't understand what he was trying to say…" She trailed off but kept her eyes fixed on Adrian's.
>
> "What did he say?" Adrian demanded.
>
> I had to send Ego off to her friend's place after that," she continued, "I couldn't bear to let her see me cry… Not that I cried, but I was too confused and then angry and…" [. . .]

> ”You haven’t told me what he said,” Adrian insisted.
>
> “Is it true?” Ada asked, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Apart from me, have you been with another one… another *man*?”
>
> When she said “*man,*” it was in a low murmur forced out of her breath. (12-13)

Ada’s difficulty in stating exactly what she has been told over the phone is not from a fear of Adrian having committed infidelity but more with whom he committed it with, evident in how she says *man* in a “low murmur.” Here is a character that unwillingly breaks the code of silence that has imposed *avoidance of words* that make homosexuality too visibly present. In fact, we confirm that breaking this code of silence is something she would never willingly engage in when we listen in on her thoughts after the confrontation with Adrian:

> When could she talk about this? How would she even begin to tell anyone about it? In fact she certainly could not tell anyone, not her family. She wouldn’t be able to bear the sympathy and the shame of it all. Yes, shame. This was her shame. (17)

We are reminded of the consequences of breaking this code of silence: shame and alienation.

Furthermore, Ada, Nkechi—Ada’s cousin through whom she met Adrian—Chika and Chiedu (both Adrian’s brothers), all admit to recognizing signs that bespoke and hinted on Adrian’s difference as regards sexuality. Signs they all reacted to and regarded with an imposed silence. Ada would later blame herself for ignoring these signs. Silence served to enable the expectation of society of its members to apply their sex only within the permitted heterosexual framework or be met with alienation. Through silence, it is taken for granted that all members of

society understand and accept to perform their assigned function. In one incident, Nkechi, worried that her son was displaying same signs, tries to broach the topic with her husband but was met with a stiff and emphatic reminder that society demanded silence on this issue when her husband, Obi, with an air of finality, responds, “My son is not a homosexual.”

Abdul, Adrian’s gay friend who has been in a gay relationship with Femi for so many years, also seem to be buying into this code of silence, even though this silence does not directly occur at the level of language, when he tells Adrian the secret to their success in maintaining the relationship right under the public’s nose: “I don’t go about advertizing the fact that I am ‘*queer*.’” (15) He further explains that he could never reveal his sexuality to his father until he died but could not bear to keep it from his family afterwards: he breaks the silence with them. It is important to note that one of the reasons he gave for revealing his sexuality to his family is so that they would not continue to expect him to bring a wife and a child home. His mother eventually admits to having always known about his sexuality.

However, this repressive mechanism manifesting as controlled discourse undermines itself by opening up the very discourse it so vehemently tries to control. In Foucault’s words, it becomes an “incitement to discourse.” Right from the point Ada confronts Adrian after the phone call we witness an exchange that sees Ada inquiring curiously into the issue of sexuality:

> “What are we going to do? Why did you let me live this lie all these years?”
>
> “It is no lie that I love you.”
>
> “I don’t want to hear that,” she pleaded, closing her eyes. “So what the hell is this? Are you gay or what? You said you were… So does that mean that you choose to be gay when it suits you?” (14)

Even Adrian admits at this point to not have given a thought to Ada's question before. This leads him into personal retrospection as he recalls childhood events that show he has always been gay. Inadvertently, the revelation of Adrian's sexuality leads to the proliferation of conversation around sexuality, and most times in ways that seek to understand, and not just condemn, the non-normative sexuality. The established power over the discourse on sexuality faces a confrontation and is unable to retain its control over discourse. Indeed, none of Ada, Chika and Nkechi come to fully accept homosexuality as normal, but each at the end arrives at a certain stance of tolerance for it: Ada vows to teach their daughter to be tolerant of people with a different life style; Nkechi discovers she won't love her son any less if he turns out a homosexual; Chika promises to stand by Adrian even though it is hard for him to understand his sexuality.

Perhaps, the most prominent silence in Jude Dibia's novel is that of Adrian himself. Even though we learn that he decides to pull the wraps on homosexual relationships after he suffers heartbreak from a male lover, it still remains apparent his family never knew about his sexuality even when he was actively homosexual. Adrian is a man seeking to accept himself and be accepted by others. As a child, he never felt as loved and accepted as his two brothers and felt himself a target for being different from them. He invoked his father's love by sitting under him while he combed out his afro, envisioning the droplets of water that fell on him in the process as "showers of love." It is in the bid to seek out acceptance from his wider sphere of existence that he embarks on the necessary deceit of getting married to Ada. He plays along with his society's demand to fit into the heterosexual framework and this backfires on him when his past is brought to light. Adrian is not the only one who subscribes to this strategy for social acceptance: Ada will, through her friend Iheoma, meet other women whose husbands are homosexual. In fact, one of the women is a lesbian who marries a gay man as a façade to enable her practice her own

sexuality without losing acceptance. This shows how this society's strategy of control, its mode of maintenance of a heterosexual framework, works against itself.

Religion also features in the strategy of power in control of discourse in this narrative. Chiedu, Adrian's elder brother, is quick to remind him that the Bible forbids homosexuality. He arranges a deliverance session for Adrian where he is physically molested and manhandled. In another incident, Ada tells him, "You need to read your Bible, Adrian. Even God forbids the act." (37)

In Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, however, religion plays an even bigger role in the control of discourse while also leading to its proliferation. Consider the reaction of the grammar school teacher when he first discovers Ijeoma and Amina under the sheets:

> He must have noticed the Bible on the table when he grabbed the lantern, because he turned back to the table, set the lantern back down, and grabbed the Bible. Pointing to it, he cried, "An abomination!" . . .
>
> He looked directly at me. He shouted, "That is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! That is what the Bible calls it!"
>
> Now he turned to Amina. He shouted at her too. "The Koran condemns it as well. I don't know much of Islam, but I know enough to know that the Koran and the Bible see eye to eye on this matter!" (86)

Ijeoma struggles to accept her sexuality for most of her life. She struggles with guilt and prays many times to be different. A major feature of the novel is the Bible study and prayer sessions Ijeoma's mother—Adaora—engages her in. In Adaora's belief, these sessions will cleanse and save Ijeoma's soul from the sin of lesbianism. During these sessions, she emphasizes

the heterosexual order implied by the Bible passages, lingering on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and insisting that the lesson to be taken from it is that “a man should not sleep with a man,” much to Ijeoma’s surprise. Ijeoma will go on to question the sense behind this, pointing out how it is rather meant as a lesson in hospitality given that the man was willing to put his family in danger to protect his guests. On another occasion when they read Leviticus 18:22, Ijeoma questions the meaning of abomination and why homosexuality is considered disgraceful and disgusting. To this the mother replies that all the reason needed to consider it so is because the Bible says it is and because “it does not allow for procreation.” Ijeoma does not find this satisfactory as she knows that the grammar teacher and his wife could not have children. Her mother would go on to claim that even that too—the inability of a heterosexual couple to have children—was abominable, thus exposing her interpretation of the Bible as self-serving. She consistently refuses to have her interpretation of the Bible passages they read questioned by Ijeoma throughout the weeks they spend reading the Bible. This worries Ijeoma the more and will eventually lead her to proffer her own interpretation to the Bible passages that will make her comfortable with her sexual identity. In this way, not only did the Bible reading sessions lead to Ijeoma and her mother having conversations around sexuality, but also sets her on the journey to accepting her sexuality. This reflects the imposition of confession as a mode of control over the discourse on sexuality in 17th Century Europe which, according to Foucault, only led to the explosion of discourse. It is perhaps symbolic, to this effect, that the lesbian club Ndidi takes Ijeoma to at night masquerades as a church at day time.

**Performativity and the Compulsion to be Hetero-normative**

Butler’s describes performativity as acts, gestures and desire that give the effect of internality even when such effect is only produced on the surface of the body and sustained by

discursive means (185). This implies that what is accepted as reality is only, in essence, fabricated. For Butler, if reality is fabricated as interior essence, then such interiority is a function and result of social discourse. (185) Thus, the only evidence of any sexuality is produced strictly on the surface of the body and this as a function of social discourse. This means that everyone is performing their sexuality.

In both works under study, the major characters—Adrian and Ijeoma—encounter disbelief many times when they confess to be homosexual. It is not considered possible or internalized as the normative heterosexuality. It is considered an acquired habit, the effect of bad influence, the result of some sort of "spiritual" possession or at best an unfounded claim. This is why in *Walking with Shadows*, characters like Adrian's brother, Chiedu, and his mother believe that it can be prayed out of one. This attitude is mirrored in *Under the Udala Trees* by Ijeoma's mother resorting to Bible readings and violent prayers sessions. This further informs the social coercion to perform heterosexuality: Adrian marries Ada in order to maintain social acceptance; Ijeoma marries Chibundu under pressure from her mother—both marriages crash by the end of the novels.

It is important, at this point, to mention the character Rotimi—a young man at Adrian's work place who considers him a mentor. He is Adrian's only ally at the work place and he pledges his loyalty to him. However, he will reveal to Adrian that he has had sex with a person of same sex even though he considers himself heterosexual. He will also attempt to kiss Adrian in an emotionally charged situation in what Adrian thought was a show of sympathy. He is ashamed of his actions and reprimands himself afterwards even though he can't deny finding Adrian's eyes attractive. Rotimi, apparently, is a character in conflict about his sexuality even

though he believes and considers himself strictly heterosexual. This is what Butler refers to when she speaks of performing sexuality "in the mode of belief." (192)

Compulsion to fit into the hetero-normative framework also plays out in the watchdog attitude parents and guardians are expected to assume over the sexuality of children, a pattern which manifests in both novels. In *Walking with Shadows*, Nkechi slaps her son Junior because he was always playing with his sister's dolls. She will later say to Ada: "As a parent it is my duty to notice and correct it before it is too late. I can't encourage him to continue with his girlish ways." (62) Similarly, this is what drives Adaora's attitude and reaction in *Under the Udala Trees* as she blames herself for not having paid sufficient attention to Ijeoma to be able to forestall her turning out a lesbian.

This effort to initiate children into the heterosexual framework means they have to be taught early enough what and how to think about sexuality. It means that they begin to incorporate early enough the attitude of the larger society towards sexuality. This brings to mind the incident Rotimi recalls after Adrian gently repels his advance. Back in secondary school, he had orchestrated a gang up that waylaid and beat up another boy, Ella, whose eyes had held him enchanted, by lying that he tried to touch him while he—Rotimi—slept. In reality however, Ella had only walked in on Rotimi masturbating in the hostel bathroom.

In both novels, we find that the produced knowledge/discourse controlled by the repressive strategy of the hetero-normative society ultimately works against itself. The strengthening of control over social discourse leads, in the end, to the strengthening of the resistance against it; proliferating discourse in the opposite direction intended. The struggle against the hetero-normative machine of society invokes sympathy for the homosexual

characters as they, for the first time, begin to take centre stage in the narrative design of the Nigerian novel.

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