

Towards an Inclusive Society: De-Centering Heteronormativity in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of queer sexuality in African literature is something that is getting more and more attention, as a way of highlighting what happens in various societies in the world. This paper explores the portrayal of queer individuals in two African novels: Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Having observed that in the two novels queer individuals are forced to mask their sexuality and adopt heteronormative public personae in order to fit into mainstream society, this paper observes the two authors have used diaries and letters to accord agency to their repressed queer characters. The paper argues that diaristic and epistolary writing, in which individuals of queer sexuality reveal their intimate feelings for each other, are strong tools which the authors have used to accord agency to their repressed queer characters. The paper also uses Andy Alaszewski's idea of "social suffering versus the diary." Alaszewski (2006) observes that diaries provide a way of avoiding some of the moral dilemmas created when researchers solicit narratives of suffering and represent accounts which contextualize suffering within a personal biography. This study also observes the authors' representation of heterosexual characters who accept the presence of queer individuals in their societies. It is in this line that this paper argues that the two authors offer a glimpse into a possibility of an inclusive society which accommodates people's sexualities that are considered non-normative.

Key concepts: Homophobia, African queerness, epistolary writing, diaries, fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Queer people have often times been discriminated against in most African societies. Durkin (2017) observes, from the historical angle, homosexuality was treated as foreign in Africa. He argues that "while colonialists maintained punitive control over African bodies on the continent, anthropologists and ethnologists developed ethnological systems that transformed Africans into solely heterosexual beings" (p.2). It is against this background that homosexuality is treated as an abomination in most African societies. Tendai Huchu and Chinelo Okparanta represent how homophobic Africa is in their novels: *The Hairdresser of Harare* and *Under the Udala Trees* respectively. In his analysis of Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Ncube (2016) observes that:

The representation of the closet in this novel allows for a detailed examination of more than just identity concern but also various other underlying phenomena such as the effects of power (social, economic and political), culture and religion [...] the fear of stigmatization makes it difficult for Huchu's protagonist to come out of the closet. In its writing against the closet, the novel destabilizes the political economy of identity and gender which places great importance on upholding heteronormative perceptions of gender

and sexual orientation (p.32).

Ncube's analysis shows that queer individuals keep themselves in the closet for fear of repression and stigmatisation from the heteronormative community, hence adopting heteronormative public personae. However, this paper observes that while highlighting how homophobic Africa is, in the two texts the authors show how the repressed queer characters come out of the closet to declare their real sexual orientation through such powerful tools as letters and diaries.

Using Judith Butler's gender performativity theory this paper argues and challenges the fixed idea of using one's gender to determine their behaviour (including sexual behaviour), rather, gender as a social construction should be determined by one's behaviour. It is against this theoretical background that this paper sets out to argue that epistolary and diaristic writing are strong tools that Huchu and Okparanta have used to accord some agency to their stigmatized queer characters.

The article also employs Andy Alaszewski's idea of "social suffering versus the diary." Alaszewski (2006) observes that diaries provide a way of avoiding some of the moral dilemmas created when researchers solicit narratives of suffering and represent accounts which contextualize suffering within a personal biography. He argues that social suffering focuses on those aspects of human experience which tend to be overlooked or even airbrushed from the record because they are inconvenient or difficult to deal with. Thus, he argues, keeping a diary or telling a story may be an important mechanism by which an individual makes sense of and manages adverse events. Alaszewski argues, "diaries appear to offer their readers an honest and authentic account by 'telling it as it is'" (p.3). He further argues that the diary does not only recount the events but also the feelings associated with those events whether they are guilt, anxiety or elation. It is in view of this observation that, the article emphasizes the power behind the diaries and letters that the authors have used in the two novels in giving agency to their repressed queer characters. The queer characters come out of the closet through the diaries and letters.

Diaristic Writing and the Repressed Queer Desire: Positive Assertions by Queer Characters in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*.

Despite many challenges faced by individuals of queer sexuality as highlighted in the novel, Tendai Huchu uses language in such a way that he accords agency to queer individuals, who are seen making positive assertions and declaring their true identity. These individuals refuse to bow to pressure and come out of hiding. Huchu uses such literary styles as epistolary and diaristic writing to accord agency to his queer characters. Huchu also depicts traces of inclusion where we see some members of the heterosexual community accepting to coexist with queer personalities. The author also uses families as both agents of alienation and, at the same time, as agents of spaces for inclusion of ostracized queer individuals.

In this novel, queer characters face a number of challenges. As in the words of Sylvia Tamale, "[i]n Africa many acts associated with sexuality are criminalized or highly stigmatized" (2011, p.12). This is probably so because, according to Ayub Sheikh, African societies are socialized to embrace heterosexual values and hence ridicule and oppose the idea of difference and ambiguity (1). This is what Butler's gender performativity theory sets out to deconstruct. Of great interest in this theory is the argument against fixed sexual identity, that is, Butler's deconstruction of the idea that gender is a fixed phenomenon. She argues that "if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from sex in any one way [...] the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (1991, p.9). In *The Hairdresser of Harare*, one notices that Dumisani is disowned by his parents and is finally brutally attacked by thugs simply because he is discovered to be different from the rest of the population. However, this does not stop him from being what he is and he finally comes in the open to declare his sexual orientation amidst the attack and homophobia

from his family and friends. Tendai Huchu makes Dumisani express his queerness through the diary.

As already noted, Dumisani reveals his queerness through the diary. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines a diary as a form of autobiographical writing, a regularly kept record of the diarist's activities. According to Stowe (2002), "diaries open a tantalizing window into past lives (p.1)". He further states that diaries are personal but not necessarily private. Through the style of the diary, Huchu makes his queer characters come into the open as they reveal their secrets in it. Dumisani records every incident with his queer lovers such as Colin and Mr. M-. Because Dumisani is living in a hostile society, he cannot publicly declare his sexual orientation, but by recording his sexual encounters in the diary and leaving it in his bedroom where he sometimes spends time with Vimbai, it shows that he is not scared even if anyone knows about his sexual orientation. In one of his entries in the diary Dumisani clearly writes that he needs to tell Vimbai the truth about his sexual orientation. Dumisani writes:

Can't believe how well things are going. Family utterly adores Vimbai; she's bigger than Michael Jackson. Allowance has been restored. Still keeping the job because I love it, but it feels so good not to have to look at the price tags when I go shopping. Need to tell Vimbai everything. Is it too soon? Seems like a really nice person [...] shouldn't have to live my life in the shadows like this (Huchu, p.165).

Dumisani is tired of living in the shadow; he wants Vimbai to know his sexual orientation. Huchu has employed the diary as a shift in style to reveal Dumisani's mind. In this case Dumisani has declared his sexual orientation to the public. This, in a way, is a positive assertion on the part of the individuals of queer sexuality considering that they are living in a hostile society, which forces them to mask their true identity. It should be noted, however, that Dumisani's queerness remains largely hidden since the diary remains his personal property. This idea points to the fact that the diary is used as a way of communicating the social suffering (of queer people) which society seems to neglect. This is in line with Alaszewski's observation that social suffering focuses on the human experiences which tend to be overlooked because they are inconvenient or difficult to deal with (ibid). Dumisani's problem here cannot be shared with anyone as the society discriminates against his sexual orientation, hence resorting to the diary as the only way out.

This idea of Dumisani feeling good and writing in his diary that things are well is in tandem with Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's argument in his article, "Denormalising Imperatives in African Queer Scholarship", in which he argues that the dissatisfaction with the emphasis on violence and homophobia in African queer scholarship has prompted calls for attention to other themes of everyday life and popular culture such as pleasure and queer self-expression. Osinubi cites Brenna Munro, whom she says offers one gloss on diverse invocations of pleasure. He argues, "Beyond the obvious enumerative impetus, Munro submits a notable insight when she concludes that identifying and imagining queer African pleasure itself [...] enacts a form of decolonization" (2018, p.599). It can be argued that, Dumisani is said to be colonized in the hostile society he inhabits and that by expressing his pleasure in the diary, he decolonizes himself from this bondage.

On queer pleasure, Munro (2018) argues "Pleasure binds people together, emerges between us, is deeply part of human sociality – and yet it can also be anti-social. Pleasure can absent you from the immediate world you inhabit or absorb you in the present obliterating the past and the future" (660). In this novel Dumisani lives a happy life when he reveals his real self in the diary. He temporarily forgets the hostility of the community he inhabits as the diary forms his 'world'. He takes pleasure in recording his happy moments with his fellow queer individuals in the diary. It is in this vein that the study argues that the diary is a powerful tool that Huchu has used to accord agency to Dumisani. It should still be noted that the diary remains a personal entity and this indicates the limits to queer expression.

Huchu accords agency to Dumisani when he makes him reveal to Vimbai that he deliberately wrote the diary so that Vimbai or anyone who is heterosexual could possibly read it and know his sexual orientation.

As Polonsky (2011) notes, “[T]he diary ameliorates one’s perception of identity and boosts enjoyment” (p.328), it is, therefore, ideal for troubled minds like individuals of queer sexuality, who are forced to mask their sexual identity by the hostile heterosexual societies. Knowing that she is the cause of Dumisani’s trouble – when he is attacked by thugs because Vimbai tipped the minister about Dumisani’s being queer – Vimbai apologizes but Dumisani tells her that he is the cause of it all because he did not tell her about his sexual orientation. Dumisani says, “I wrote it hoping that one day someone like you might read it as an explanation of why things are the way they are. You just found it before it was ready and before I was ready” (Huchu, p.165). One would expect him to deny his true identity considering the suffering he has gone through in this hostile society, but he does not do that. He even tells Vimbai that the diary was a way of revealing his sexual orientation to the public. By writing the diary, Dumisani found solace and felt better. In the same conversation, Dumisani also shows that he is not ready to give in to pressure; he is going to leave Zimbabwe for elsewhere just to make sure he lives by what his sexual orientation dictates.

Huchu represents some traces of inclusion in the novel when he depicts some members of the heterosexual community accepting to coexist with queer characters. One such character who accepts coexistence with individuals of queer sexuality is Vimbai. Despite the homophobia she has had, which has led to the trouble that befalls Dumisani, Vimbai feels Dumisani has been a very good man to her and would not wish him dead because of his sexual orientation. She regrets putting Dumisani in trouble as she still loves him despite her discovery that he is queer. Vimbai says:

I wondered if what Dumisani had said in his journal might be true. If it was, then he had one kind of love for me and another for this man, we were both loved but each of us in their own way. It would be a lie to say I did not want him to myself, but this didn’t mean that if I couldn’t have him, I would want him dead. Dumi was too nice a person and he’d helped me so much in my life. If only I could find a way of righting things again (p.183).

From Butler’s perspective, one can argue that Vimbai’s realization that Dumisani has not been that ‘bad’ shows that the idea of discriminating people based on their performance of gender roles is not justified. Dumisani has been good to Vimbai; the only sin has been that he did not marry a woman in order to become a ‘man’ as per the society’s expectation with regard to gender roles assigned to male individuals. One observes that on top of feeling guilty that she caused Dumisani’s trouble, Vimbai shows that she loves Dumisani and regrets the separation. She wishes she could have another chance to be with him. Vimbai has finally accepted Dumisani the way he is and this gives us a glimpse into the possibility of an inclusive society, perhaps in the near future. The idea of projecting a better future for queer people is also shared by Bernie Lombard. In his analysis of Diriye Osman’s short story collection: *Fairytales for Lost Children*, Lombard (2018) notes that by vowing to follow her daughter, the mother-narrator in “Watering the Imagination” situates the queer child as what Ellis calls a (queer) horizon of possibility: “The queer sensation of a pull from elsewhere, when not fulfilled” (2015, p.2,) here, signifies the future, and should not be confused with exile. Lombard further observes that:

Although numerous characters are queer throughout the book, only those in London openly identify as LGBTQ. This process of claiming queerness in the later stories requires distancing, not just from Africa, but from family as well [...] Although being gay ostracizes Diriye from his family and his Somali culture, his location in London allows him to subvert his oppression by reducing the importance of biological kinship and claiming the power to imagine and choose alternative forms of belonging” (p.691).

Lombard’s analysis above points to queer futurity. By having the main character declare his queerness after coming of age symbolizes that queerness has grown up and queer people have agency. This is also what happens in Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* when Dumisani goes to UK where he is very sure that he will live happily and freely with his queerness.

Michelle, Dumisani's sister, also accepts Dumisani the way he is. This is satirical because Michelle comes from the very same family which is bitter with Dumisani for being queer. By accepting and understanding Dumisani's queerness, Michelle challenges and 'laughs' at the homophobia of her parents. Michelle says,

"I have known for a while now that my brother is gay, and I'm cool with it. The rest of the family isn't" (Huchu, p.185-6).

Michelle acknowledges that her brother, Dumisani is only different; not necessarily evil. She accepts him because he is a human being just like her. Her request that Vimbai should continue loving him could be taken as a call to the entire heterosexual community to stop ill-treating individuals of queer sexuality. Michelle's speech also reveals a great deal of homophobia on the part of Dumisani's family, perhaps due to the stereotypes that surround individuals of queer sexuality in Africa. However, Michelle defies such stereotypes and accepts her brother's sexual orientation. This, in a way, deconstructs heterosexuality as a 'normal' sexuality, or one would say Michelle's attitude thwarts such efforts to understand sexuality as fixed as observed by Judith Butler in her gender performativity theory, which purports that one is expected to behave according to the gender roles prescribed to their respective sex. When Michelle supports Dumisani's queerness, she opposes dictations of gender. In this case Huchu has used Dumisani's family as an agent of inclusion as his sister accepts him. It is very important to note that it is also this very family that has been used as an agent of alienation to individuals of queer sexuality when Dumisani's parents disown him. With Michelle having the courage to side with the queer it offers some ray of hope to the LGBT community.

The ending of the novel gives a picture that queer characters are not alone. Michelle, Vimbai and Chiwoniso escort Dumisani to the airport as he flies to the UK. They huddle together in a hug bidding farewell to him. Vimbai tells us that they write each other letters and she still loves Dumisani even when he travelled abroad. It is the letters again playing a very important role in sustaining the love between Dumisani and Vimbai. This helps to cement the argument of this paper that letters (and diaries) are strong tools which the authors use to accord agency to their repressed queer characters. It should be noted also that this time around the letters between Vimbai and Dumisani help to foster inclusion as the two are a heterosexual and a homosexual respectively. As earlier noted, the epistolary mode here is used to sustain the love between the two troubled minds. Society does not allow Dumisani to be close to Vimbai because of his sexual orientation but the letters enable him to do so. Vimbai says in the last paragraph of the novel:

In a way I will always love Dumi. He restored my faith that there are still some good men out there. I never got to tell him of my deal with the minister because wherever he may be, I want him to live life to the fullest without fear (p.189).

The above statement can be argued to be a declaration putting homophobia to an end. It was Vimbai who led to Dumisani's trouble by revealing his sexual identity. Now it is the same Vimbai who wishes Dumisani well for the rest of his life. Huchu has employed a paradox here because Vimbai's actions contradict themselves. She does not want him to live in fear. This simply shows that Vimbai no longer has homophobia against individuals of queer sexuality. Again, Vimbai compares Dumisani's love to the love she got from Chiwoniso's father, who made her conclude that men are cruel. But with Dumisani, her love for men got restored. It can be argued from this observation that Huchu has ridiculed the heterosexual society by depicting it as cruel through Chiwoniso's father while the homosexual community is represented as loving and kind through Dumisani.

It has been observed that Huchu has accorded agency to queer characters through epistolary and diaristic modes of writing. Through these modes, Huchu reveals some positive assertions, with such individuals coming out of their hiding to declare their true identity; their true sexual orientation. For instance, Dumisani

has gathered courage to confirm the suspicion that Vimbai had that he is a homosexual. Dumisani does this when he is in trouble after being attacked by thugs because of the very sexual orientation, but has no fear to tell Vimbai that he is indeed queer. This confirms what Vimbai once read in Dumisani's diary. It has also been observed that some members of the heterosexual community like Vimbai and Michelle accept the queer characters the way they are; understanding that they are just different and not necessarily evil as most people treat them. Such acceptance, therefore, gives the reader a glimpse into an inclusive society, perhaps in the near future.

Epistolary Writing versus Agency of Queer Characters in Okparanta's Under the Udala Trees.

Okparanta has employed the epistolary mode in revealing the troubled minds of her queer characters and giving agency to them. The letters are very effective because they can be kept for a long time. According to Patch (2014), the fictional epistolary novel is one in which the author conveys the story through documents or letters. Patch further observes that the epistolary genre is particularly suited for the female voice. Patch observes, "Female letters traditionally focused on domestic life or on love; they spoke in the private voice appropriate to women whose roles were increasingly circumscribed within the constraints of bourgeois ideology" (p.3). John (2019) posits that a letter is an object that conjugates various forms of impossible, failed or disavowed epistolary communication. He argues that correspondence brings queer subjects together in a variety of romantic, sexual and social configurations. It can be argued from an observation like this one, therefore, that epistolary writing is best suited for ostracized individuals like those of queer sexuality, and Okparanta rightly employs it to accord agency to his queer characters.

Using this narrative mode, Okparanta brings out the voice of two girls: Ndidi and Ijeoma, through letters. Their voice is repressed by the heterosexual society and the only way to bring it out is through this epistolary mode. By making a record of intimate relations the characters have with each other or one another; it shows their courage to reveal their true selves in this rather hostile society, which does not accept them. This is so because chances of someone, not a homosexual, seeing and reading the letters are there, but these ostracized girls seem not to care. When the hostile society separates them by forcing Ijeoma to marry Chibundu, the same-sex relationship does not die as the two continue communicating through letters, in which they express their deeply felt love. Ndidi states that:

My darling Ijeoma, just as I thought I might never hear from you again, I received your letter in the mail. Not a day goes by that I don't think of you... (p.283).

Ndidi still loves Ijeoma despite the latter getting married to Chibundu. Ijeoma's feelings for Ndidi have not died. Rather, they have just been masked when she wears heteronormative public personae to fit in the mainstream society. Ijeoma continues to write letters to Ndidi, a development which simply shows that her marriage with Chibundu has been forced by the hostile society she is living in. By continuing her same-sex relationship with Ndidi, Ijeoma defies the demands of the heterosexual society and reveals to whoever will read her letters that she is queer. This is no mean achievement considering the hostility of the environment they are living in. As Etoke (2009) observes, most prominent African feminists and womanists choose not to discuss same-sex love or even acknowledge its existence. She cites Ifi Amadiumes's statement that,

"These priorities of the West are of course totally removed from, and alien to the concerns of the mass of African women" (as cited in Etoke, p.19),

which indicates disapproval of the existence of homosexuality in Africa. Etoke also cites Chikwenje Ogunyemi, who argues that her "*African Womanism*" does not address female homosexuality because of the African silence and intolerance of lesbianism. Etoke argues:

African feminism and womanism exclude African women who happen to be lesbian or bisexual from their activist agenda. Blinded by their desire for self-naming and their willingness to distinguish themselves from

Western feminism and Black feminism, they eradicate un-African realities... They silence a minority of African women by not giving them the right to experience a sexuality that does not fit the norm (p.175).

It is from the above background that Ijeoma and Ndidi have resorted to communicating through letters as they are not protected should they choose to meet in public. One notices the undying tie between them as Ndidi writes:

My darling Ijeoma, I received your second letter in the mail today. What was I ever thinking to encourage you to marry? Yesterday, I ran into your mother, and she couldn't stop gushing over the fact that you are pregnant. I've never felt such anger at the thought of anything as the thought of Chibundu having his way with you... (p.283).

Despite living in a predominantly heterosexual society and facing challenges as already noted, these two queer characters cannot stop loving each other and have resorted to expressing their feelings through letters. Okparanta deliberately makes the letters land into the hands of Chibundu, a heterosexual and Ijeoma's husband so that Ijeoma's sexual orientation is known to the heteronormative society. These further cement the argument that the epistolary mode is a powerful tool which the author has used to accord agency to Ijeoma and Ndidi. It can be argued from this observation, that neither distance nor Ijeoma's marriage with Chibundu has managed to repress the same-sex desire in Ijeoma and Ndidi. The two assert themselves by sticking to their true identity.

When Ijeoma divorces Chibundu to rejoin a fellow woman, Ndidi, her behaviour can be argued to have deconstructed heterosexuality as the centre found inside the 'charmed circle' of sex as proposed by Gayle Rubin. Rubin (1984) suggests that society treats heterosexuality as the centre as it is inside the 'charmed circle' of sex. By extension, it can as well be concluded that homosexuality is the periphery as it is outside the charmed circle of sex. It is this kind of categorization of sexual activities that sees all other sexual acts, other than heterosexuality, as non-normative, hence attracting repression and stigma. When Ijeoma shifts from heterosexuality (with Chibundu) and goes back to homosexuality (with Ndidi) she makes the same sex relationship the centre. Ijeoma can also be argued to have acted against the prescriptions of her gender. Being a woman, Ijeoma was supposed to accept her role of being the wife of Chibundu and always behave like one. Borrowing Butler's words that queer theory aims at thwarting all attempts to analyse sex as a fixed entity (p.9), Ijeoma has deconstructed the fixed categorization and thinking about sexual activities. What Ijeoma has done shows that a female person cannot just be confined to being a man's wife, which is against the society in which she lives, which discriminates against people's sexual acts based on gender.

It should be noted, however, that in the words of Butler (1988), in her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", discriminating against individuals based on gender may not be justified because gender is socially constructed and can, hence, be socially deconstructed. Butler argues:

To be female is a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialise oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and related corporeal project (p.522).

In the above quotation Butler emphasises that gender is not natural, rather historical; it is a cultural interpretation of sex. It can be argued, based on this observation, therefore, that Ijeoma's behaviour is in tandem with Butler's understanding of gender and discriminating her (Ijeoma) based on gender would not be justified.

Again, it has been the letters playing an important role in making contacts between Ijeoma and Ndidi. Despite being with Chibundu, the letters ensure Ijeoma does not forget Ndidi, giving her hope that one day

she will possibly exercise her sexual orientation without fear. It should be noted that Ijeoma only gathers courage to divorce Chibundu when she reads the letters from Ndidi. This shows how powerful the epistolary mode has been in resurfacing the repressed sexual orientation in Ijeoma and, hence giving her agency.

Okparanta shifts from letters to dreams in giving agency to her queer characters. According to Freud (1953), the mind harbours wishes or desires that lie outside awareness but that nevertheless manifest themselves at night through dreams (397). Dreams, argues Freud:

When read or interpreted as a rebus or puzzle, instead of being taken literally, turn out to be translations into semi-conscious form of unconscious material. Such material is generally in the unconscious because it has been repressed or driven from consciousness by a mental censor that judges what is fit for expression (p.397).

Freud further argues that things unfit for expression are ideas or desires having to do, for example, with sexuality (ibid). Ijeoma tells Amina in a dream that what they used to do was not bad. She says:

I attempt... to tell her that those things we did were not so bad, if bad at all. I attempt to say that soon there'll be no more fears of stoning, that soon all those stories of villagers sending lovers to drown in the rivers will be ancient, almost forgotten, like old light, barely visible in the sky. The words have just made their way out of my lips when a lorry passes by... (p.317).

Ijeoma visualises an inclusive society in which homosexuals will mix with heterosexuals. When Ijeoma dreams about Amina, it simply shows how difficult it is to repress or erase Ijeoma's sexual orientation. It is difficult to erase Ijeoma's experience with Ndidi in her mind. As Freud argues,

"The material of the forgotten childhood experiences is accessible through dreams [...] Child's mental life, with all its egoism, its incestuous object choice, persists in it and therefore, in the unconscious and that our dreams take back every night to this infantile stage" (p.752).

The repressed feelings for Amina have resurfaced themselves through dreams. Mama engaged Ijeoma in Bible studies to purify her because she was found in an intimate relationship with Amina. From a Freudian perspective, it can be argued that Ijeoma's dream is a carbon copy of what she always thinks about, probably her vision for the future. It can also be argued that it is coming in a dream because the society in which Ijeoma lives has repressed this desire in her. The presence of Amina in the dream – when Ijeoma has rejoined Ndidi after divorcing Chibundu – shows that the same-sex desire has refused to disappear in Ijeoma and this satirically challenges efforts by Mama to purify Ijeoma of the 'abomination'. The rejoining of Ijeoma with Ndidi and her meeting with Amina, though in a dream, foreshadows a possible society which will be inclusive as this in a way deconstructs the fixed mindset on sexuality. In this case, Okparanta uses the dream mode to accord agency to her queer characters as they are made to experience an inclusive society through dreams.

Okparanta's use of letters as a way of giving agency to her characters is very similar to a narrative technique in Monica Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree", in which she also portrays two girls involved in 'forbidden' love. Anyango writes a letter to her sweetheart reminding her how they fought against repression from the heterosexual community. Anyango writes:

That's what we fought against when we walked to school each day. Me and you hand in hand, running away from Nakawa Housing Estates' drifting tide which threatened to engulf us and turn into noisy and frightening housewives. You said it yourself; we could be anything (p.92).

According to Sheik (2013), the two girls challenge gender roles as they fall in love with each other instead

of becoming wives to men. Sheik argues that “*African societies are socialised in heterosexual values and hence ridicule and shame the idea of difference and ambiguity*” (p.168). What the two girls do in “Jambula Tree” is exactly what Ijeoma does with Amina and Ndidi in *Under the Udala Trees*. The ‘Udala’ trees, just like the ‘Jambula’ tree are a symbol of a society where individuals of queer sexuality can live freely without fear of being attacked by the heterosexual community. The two pairs of girls in these two texts play and do whatever they want freely; without fearing anyone. It is this kind of life that individuals of queer sexuality desire to live. When Ijeoma recalls the Udala trees she recalls some good old days. When Anyango and her lover climb the Jambula trees, they defy all odds as girls are not allowed to climb trees in their patriarchal society. By making her characters recall good past moments through letters, Okparanta mirrors an inclusive society using the same letters. The trees in both texts, therefore, foreshadow an inclusive society in which individuals of queer sexuality will have no challenges. The letters in both texts prove to be very powerful in making the girls recall their good past when they could exercise their sexual orientation. Through these letters the authors give their characters hope for a better future in which such experiences will flourish. In this case, the epistolary mode has been used to accord agency to the queer characters.

Okparanta also accords agency to her queer characters through family (marriage). The same marriage which has been used by Ijeoma’s mother to repress queer desire in her has now been used to, ironically, accord agency to Ijeoma and offer glimpses into an inclusive society. This is seen when Chibundu reveals that he does not hate Ijeoma because of her sexual orientation. He understands that Ijeoma is just different and not necessarily evil. Chibundu says:

I don’t hate you for it. I really don’t. You know that I don’t believe in all that nonsense about abominations. Maybe there is something special about that kind of love, about a man lying with another man or a woman loving another woman in that way. Maybe there is something appealing about it (Okparanta, p.285).

Chibundu’s position renders the stereotypes about individuals of queer sexuality null and void. Chibundu’s behaviour here is in line with the observation of McEwen and Milani (2014) that heterosexuality is a political institution that requires men and women to be opposites, and that is why they are socialized to be different in very particular ways. However, McEwen and Tommaso argue that:

such construction of a binary of gender opposites is problematic because it is ultimately geared to reproducing and justifying inequalities along gender lines [...] it erases the complexity of gender identification which is not reducible to simplistic dualistic model of man/masculinity and woman/femininity. In fact, men can also perform femininity in as much as women can perform masculinity. Moreover, not everyone identifies in a straightforward way as a man or woman and one might choose to define oneself as ‘trans’ or ‘intersex’ (p.3).

Chibundu accepts Ijeoma as a human being who is only different from him in that she has a different sexual orientation, not that she is deviant as the entire community thinks. It can be argued based on this understanding, therefore, that Chibundu’s acceptance of Ijeoma as an individual of queer sexuality points to a possibility of having an inclusive society in which such individuals can coexist with heterosexuals, the way Chibundu coexists with Ijeoma.

Staying with the family, Okparanta uses families both as agents of alienation as well as offering spaces for inclusion. Ijeoma’s daughter, Chidinma understands her mother’s sexual orientation and accepts it. It is no surprise; therefore, that Ijeoma does not find it difficult to share with her daughter that Ndidi has not been just a mere friend. Ijeoma confesses that even though Chidinma is not queer she accepts coexistence with individuals of queer sexuality. She does not show any hatred at the realization that her mother is queer. She also does not act against two female students who are found making love to each other at the university that she teaches. Ijeoma says, “The fact that she herself is not of my orientation does not make her look at gays and lesbians with the kind of fear that leads to hate” (p.317-18). This shows that the new generation in

Nigeria has a different attitude towards individuals of queer sexuality. It also shows that the hostility which engulfed the society represented in the novel is slowly but surely fading and chances of having an inclusive society, probably in the near future are sprouting. Okparanta here deliberately uses the same family, which repressed Ijeoma's queer behaviour to now offer a space for inclusion as her daughter – born from her heterosexual marriage with Chibundu – accepts her queer identity.

Glimpses into the possibility of an inclusive society are offered when Ndidi describes a town where individuals of queer sexuality are accepted and she ends up mentioning several towns in Nigeria, perhaps the whole Nigeria. Okparanta employs foreshadowing here as Ndidi visualises this inclusive society perhaps coming in the near future. Ijeoma reports:

Ndidi describes the town, all its trees and all the colors of its sand. She tells me in great detail about the roads, the directions in which they run, from where and to where they lead [...] with each passing night she names more towns: Ojoto, Nnewi, Onitsha and Nsukka, Port Harcourt and Lagos, Uyo and Oba, Kaduna and Sokoto. She names and names, so that eventually I have to laugh and say, "How is it that this place can be so many places at once?" (p.318).

The mentioning of the several places in Nigeria shows that Okparanta is foreshadowing the whole Nigeria is going to be a safe place for individuals of queer sexuality. When that time comes, such individuals will never be hunted like thieves or wild animals.

In his analysis of *Under the Udala Trees*, Osinubi (2018) observes that Chinelo Okparanta deconstructs heteronormativity through Ijeoma and Ndidi. He argues that “*Okparanta conjures two school teachers: the grammar school teacher, who discovers and condemns the sex between Ijeoma and Amina, acts as an agent of social control; Ndidi, the lesbian teacher, acts as a humanising and reparative presence*” (p.678). He further observes that there is an intertextual significance to the second Ndidi's profession as a school teacher. Both lovers, Osinubi argues, “*facilitate encounters with cultural attitudes towards sex; whereas the relationship with Amina is marked with trauma and prohibition, the relationship with Ndidi anchors reparative re-education and affection*” (ibid). It can be argued, based on Osinubi's observation, that perhaps by bringing in Ndidi, another teacher to support homosexuality, which was earlier denounced by the grammar school teacher, Okparanta shows that homosexuality is not a social evil as it is accepted and lived by a school teacher.

It has observed that individuals of queer sexuality in *Under the Udala Trees* come out of their hiding through letters and assert themselves positively amid the torture they are subjected to by the hostile society. It has also been observed some heterosexuals come to understand and appreciate queer personalities are only different from them; not necessarily evil and begin to accept them, something which makes the reader see a possibility of an inclusive society perhaps in the near future, as represented in this novel.

CONCLUSION

The study has exposed the power of such literary genres as diaries and letters. The study has argued that diaries and letters are strong tools which the authors; Tendai Huchu and Chinelo Okparanta have used to accord agency to their repressed queer characters in *The Hairdresser of Harare* and *Under the Udala Trees* respectively, using Judith Butler's gender performativity, the study observed that letters and diaries help the individuals of queer sexuality to declare their sexual orientation amidst societal hostility and, in turn, thwart the society's fixed and rigid understanding of sexual activities. It is observed that the two authors have offered glimpses into the possibility of an inclusive society, having coexistence of homosexuals and heterosexuals.

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