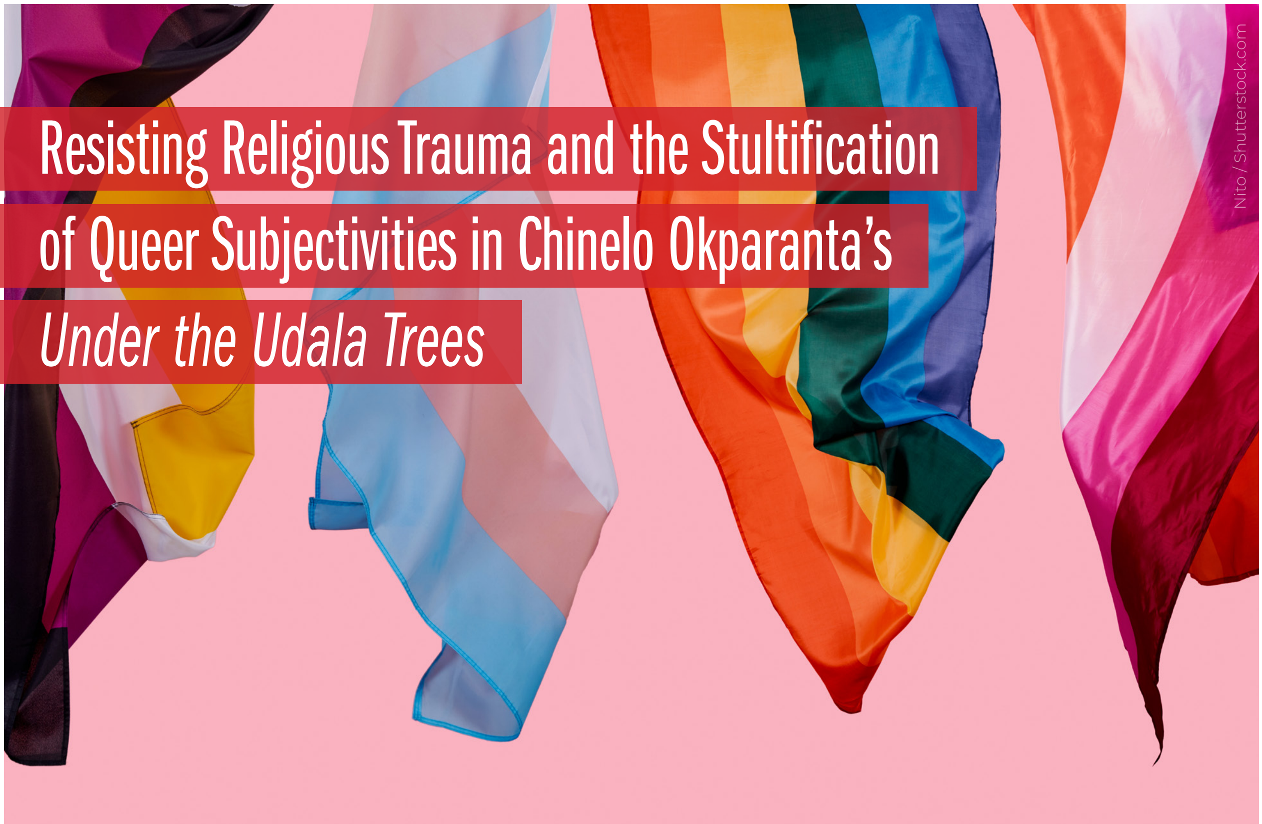
Resisting Religious Trauma and the Stultification of Queer Subjectivities in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*



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Abstract

In Nigeria, politics is intricately linked to religion to such an extent that political leaders have relied on religious doctrine to criminalise same-sex relations and legitimise the country's queerphobic policies. This paper examines Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) to demonstrate the ways in which Nigerian political leaders weaponise what Myra Mendible (2016) calls "stigmatised shame" in their efforts to deter the manifestation of queer identities and to render queer subjectivities docile. Focusing on Okparanta's main character, Ijeoma, I explore the ways in which she resists docility enforced through Bible lessons and imagines queer freedom through a subverted reading of biblical scriptures. I argue that this subversion of scriptures often widely read as condemnation of queer subjectivities illuminates ways in which their normative interpretations are confined to adopted imperial heteronormative formulations. I further argue that Ijeoma's subverted reading highlights Christian theology's intentional resistance to understanding conceptual resources needed in the formulation of well-rounded queer subjectivities—an understanding that would espouse their legitimacy—and in turn delineates them to condemnation. I contend that the novel's interrogation of shame, weaponised through biblical scriptures and inherent in contemporary conceptual resources that inform Christian ideology, intercepts its effects that lead to religious traumatisation.

Introduction

In January 2014, Nigeria's then president, Goodluck Jonathan, signed into law the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act which only recognises heterosexual marriage in the country. This piece of legislation similarly prohibits queer[1] social clubs and societies, and anyone found to contravene the law faces up to ten years imprisonment. Ukah (2016, p.25) highlights

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that the Act is "perhaps the only political issue that a coalition of Muslims and Christians, as well as a significant number of civil society organisations in the country, have shown unanimous agreement". Ukah further underlines the fact that Pentecostal communities had great influence on President Jonathan's signing into law the state-sanctioned homophobia (2016). This intersection of religion and politics is attributed to the "loss of credibility in the political process by a large segment of the citizenry" which "compels politicians to seek their citizens' confidence and assurance by liaising with charismatic prophetic figures and relying on prophecies for state governance" (Ukah 2016, p.22). As such, politics in Nigeria are intricately linked to religion and those who adhere to religious beliefs have better chances of participating in the country's political and economic climate. These individuals also stand a chance of receiving benefits as citizens, benefits that are not accorded their queer counterparts who question the use of religion to legitimise policies that contain the expression of queer subjectivities.

Considering that religion is weaved into Nigeria's social fabric and is used to control queer Nigerians, this paper focuses on Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), a novel that similarly indicts religion in the erasure of queer Nigerian people. I examine the trauma experienced by Ijeoma, the protagonist, at the hands of her mother's Christian values and religious visions which she imparts on her with the aim to hinder her exploration of same-sex intimacy. To achieve this, I draw from Michelle Panchuk's (2020) theorisation of religious trauma and its accompanying causal factor, hermeneutical injustice. I argue that Adaora, Ijeoma's mother, through re-inscribing religious scriptures and doctrine—and forcing Ijeoma to consume them in her attempt to render Ijeoma's 'deviant' body docile—results in religious trauma that counteracts the maturation of Ijeoma's sexual identity. I further demonstrate that religious trauma achieves efficacy through its attendant, hermeneutical injustice, that Adaora effects through biblical scriptures imbued with what Mendible (2016) terms "stigmatised shame".

Much reception of the novel has tended to focus on the confluence of Nigeria's nationalism, its production of state sanctioned homophobia and the novel's resistance of heteronormative nationalistic ideals (Manzo 2018; Osinubi 2018; Navas 2021). Courtois (2018) and Lockwood (2022) slightly deviate from this theme to attend to the demystification of the bildungsroman genre as rooted in androcentrism and read *Under the Udala Trees* as a female bildungsroman whose female same-sex loving protagonist is imbued with a voice and agency that challenges Nigeria's patriarchal and queerphobic rhetoric. Cruz-Gutierrez (2022) similarly attends to this demystification but remains focused on the effect of Nigeria's nationalism on queer Nigerian individuals through reading the novel as a "bildungsromance" that ruptures romanticised customary laws imposed on Nigerian women and essential to Nigeria's nation building project. This theme of womanhood and motherhood is similarly pursued by Umezurike (2021) and Mabunda (2023) who argue that Okparanta's protagonist challenges the building blocks that make up the imagined Nigerian nation through her defiance of traditional definitions of womanhood and motherhood that currently buttress Nigeria's nationhood. This paper is indebted to these authors' analyses of the nexus between Nigeria's nation building project, gender, sexuality and motherhood and the resultant state sanctioned queerphobia through queerphobic policies. However, I aim to contribute to the growing area of study that is attentive to disruptive methods realised by queer African people through a re-storying of the Bible in their attempt to shear off the continuous cycle of harm normative interpretations of the Bible enable (van Klinken et al. 2021). Writing particularly about *Under the Udala Trees*, van Klinken and Chitando (2021) and Stiebert (2024) have observed that biblical scriptures have not only been reinterpreted by queer African people to refute normative misreadings that delegitimise their queer subjectivities, but the scriptures' reinterpretations have been noted to hold liberatory potential and are a source of queer affirmation.

At the end of the novel, Okparanta provides an author's note that reveals the novel's intention of rehistoricising queer subjectivities in a country that seeks to erase queerness from its historical lineage. The note similarly indicts religion in these attempts at erasure. My analysis hinges on this note to highlight the ways in which traditional interpretations of biblical scriptures are permeated with shaming mechanisms that impede queer individuals' access to necessary conceptual resources needed in the formulation of well-rounded queer identities. I contend that *Under the Udala Trees,* as a creative work that exposes the stigmatised shame inherent in conceptual resources employed by Christianity, intercepts the shame's intended effect of stultifying queer subjectivities and throws its objective into turmoil.

Religious trauma and hermeneutical injustice in *Under the Udala Trees*

Under the Udala Trees is a coming-of-age novel centered on the character of Ijeoma, who, throughout the narrative, is at pains to live a fulfilling life outside the docility that often governs queer Nigerians. The narrative, set prior to, during and after the Nigerian civil war, traces the ways in which Christianity is a catalyst for the violence and shame Ijeoma experiences throughout her coming of age. After her father dies during the civil war, Adaora, decides that Ijeoma should stay with family friends; the grammar school teacher and his wife. It is during Ijeoma's stay with them that she meets Amina and an attraction is sparked. When one day the grammar school teacher finds Ijeoma and Amina in bed, he returns Ijeoma to her mother. Upon Ijeoma's return, Adaora subjects her to Bible lessons aimed at cleansing her body of the devil responsible for her same-sex attraction. Years after the civil war, Ijeoma meets Ndidi and they fall in love. Due to societal pressure and threats of violence, Ijeoma capitulates to the heteronormative ideality envisaged for her by Adaora and marries her childhood friend Chibundu. However, Ijeoma finds no respite in the marriage as she is subjected to spousal violence. Towards the end of the narrative, Adaora seemingly comes to terms with Ijeoma's sexuality and a family is envisaged between Ndidi, Ijeoma, Ijeoma's daughter and Adaora.

Okparanta's novel defies what Dunton (1989) has called a "sustained outburst of silence" that haunts queer subjectivities in the African continent through writers' neglect of queerness' historical context. Setting the novel within the context of the Biafran war, *Under the Udala Trees* questions Nigeria's heteronormative nation-building project that seeks to erase queer subjectivities from the country's historical lineage. *Under the Udala Trees* thus can be categorised as part of what Green-Simms (2023) has termed "emergent" literature that consists of the "polyphony" that characterises the wave of third generation Nigerian writers. These are writers intentional in writing stories that centre queer characters, stories that are about "love, joy, and heartbreak of African men who love men and women who love women" (Green-Simms 2023, p.141). This literature deviates from the stereotypical and violent portrayal of queer Nigerians as espoused by most Nollywood films (Green-Simms 2023). Similarly, in their analysis of *Under the Udala Trees*, Lockwood (2022) pays attention to its focus on the intersection between colonisation, religion and continued violent efforts to suppress same-sex intimacies in the African continent, particularly in Nigeria. Lockwood's examination rests on the urgent need to question the various ways religious orthodoxy has been used in women, queer and African people's subjugation as an effect of colonisation. Such examination is important as it contributes to the study of "the history of harm and harm reduction" necessary for understanding conditions that hinder the maturation of queer subjectivities (Lockwood 2022, p.7).

I examine Ijeoma's relationship to the Christian religion and illustrate that Ijeoma's encounter results in religious trauma that hinders her full understanding of her same-sex attraction and renders her subjectivity docile. In order to achieve this, I draw from Panchuk's (2020) theorisation of religious trauma. Panchuk defines religious trauma as "a broad category of traumatic experiences that include (but is not limited to) putative experiences of the divine being, religious practice, religious dogma, or religious community that transform an individual in a way that diminishes their capacity for participation in religious life" (2020, p.2). In her theorisation, Panchuk (2020) identifies three interconnected phases that inform each other and characterise religious trauma. The initial phase consists of an individual experiencing trauma from an entity directly informed by religion. Secondly, the individual identifies religion as having contributed to the manifestation of the traumatic encounter through religion's inability to hinder the existence of said entity whilst providing fertile space for the experience to occur, even encouraging such traumatic encounters through religious practices. Lastly, the religion or symbols and practices associated with the religion evoke and replicate the individual's trauma. Panchuk further asserts that as a result, the "survivor may be distrustful of God and religious communities, [. . .] or believe that they are doomed to be rejected by religious individuals" (2002, p.2). As such, they "might experience intrusive memories triggered by religious practices, feel extreme fear, distrust, or revulsion towards the divine being, or even internalise a deep sense of shame as the result of religious doctrines" (Panchuk 2020, p.2). For Ijeoma, intrusive memories lead to dreams that cause panic. Distrust and revulsion of the doctrine inform her questioning of biblical scriptures whilst offering careful alternative interpretations. Shame and fear inform her capitulation to heteronormativity towards the end of the narrative when she marries Chibundu. This affect emanates from Adaora's biblical teachings and the resultant religious trauma.

Moreover, religious trauma derives sustenance from its attendant, hermeneutical injustice. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources" (2007, p.155). By hermeneutical resources Fricker (2007) refers to the resources that underscore the socialisation of individuals, that aid in deciphering meaning during social interactions and inform their complete understanding of the world. Structural identity prejudice on the other hand refers to "prejudices against individuals in virtue of their social identity that manifest not only in individuals attitude but in the very ways that societies are structured" (Panchuk 2020, p.5). Because we live in an unequal world, the powers that be—through inflecting their social power and resources for their own end—determine the terms in which subjugated individuals are socialised. For example, socialisation can take place through biased knowledge production that distorts marginalised individuals' experience of the world. This can further be evidenced through the ways in which Christian religious leaders, through religious imperialism, are equipped with the social power to influence how individuals are socialised within religious settings. Indeed, Panchuk highlights that "we should expect that there are areas of the religious lives of marginalised groups where middle-class, cis-gender, straight, Christian, adult, white men have little motivation to achieve a proper understanding" (2020, p.10). Said similarly writes that "[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (1994, p.xiii). This power imbalance means that those who occupy the upper echelon hardly put resources into understanding the experiences of those whose social power disadvantages, and

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when they do, precision is not sought after (Fricker 2007, p.152). The lack of due diligence means that subaltern groups are often not equipped with the necessary conceptual resources that could positively inform their subjecthood or the negotiation of new identities (Panchuk 2020, p.5). This caters to the erasure of their world experience whilst the experiences of those who wield social power remain privileged. It is a result of this power imbalance that prominent interpretations of biblical scriptures in Nigeria do not espouse queer subjectivities.

Ijeoma depends on her parents for conceptual resources necessary to understand the world. With Ijeoma's father having passed on during the war, Adaora dictates this epistemic lens. Through the Bible lessons, Adaora presents skewed, religiously informed hermeneutical resources that replicate traditional heteronormative understanding of the Bible with the aim to hinder the full development of Ijeoma's sexual identity. Adaora's interpretation of biblical scriptures thus bears no effort to understand Ijeoma's same-sex attraction. Put differently, Adaora turns to conceptual resources that replicate heteropatriarchal notions of womanhood and dictate the lives of those who practice Christianity in her aim to cleanse Ijeoma's 'deviant' body. The skewed interpretation of biblical scriptures shames Ijeoma's same-sex attraction and limits access to hermeneutical resources that would aid her understanding of her sexual identity. As such, through Adaora's Bible lessons, stigmatised shame is weaponised to facilitate "a *hermeneutical* environment conducive of religious traumatisation" (Panchuk, 2020, p.12, emphasis in original). Johnson and Moran caution against the use of shame as a disciplinary tool in the socialisation of children as shame often carries patriarchal "cultural and social expectations" that can limit children's access to conceptual resources necessary for the development of well-rounded identities (2013, p.7). As the sole parent responsible for Ijeoma's socialisation, Adaora wields this power to the maintenance of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy whilst restricting Ijeoma's agency.

Resisting stigmatised shame and religious trauma in *Under the Udala Trees*

The first time we bear witness to Ijeoma's religious trauma is through her remembrance of moments after her return to Aba to stay with her mother, shortly after the incident with the grammar school teacher. These are moments where, aware of the cause of Ijeoma's return, Adaora subjects her to Bible lessons aimed at cleansing her soul of the evil she believes to be responsible for Ijeoma's 'indecent' behaviour with Amina.

Ijeoma gestures to her traumatisation when she states that:

> Sometimes I think back to the year 1970–the year the lessons began–and it feels like I'm reliving it all over again in my mind: sitting rigidly at the kitchen table with mama, or in the parlor, my heart racing inside of me, my mind struggling to digest the verses, turning them inside out and upside down and sideways, trying hard to understand. (Okparanta 2015, p.59)

Ijeoma struggles to bury the memories of the Bible lessons and relieves them "all over again" (Okparanta 2015, p.59). The ultimate signifier of the trauma is when, even after her attempts at forgetting, Ijeoma asserts that "still, I remember" (Okparanta 2015, p.59). The haunting experienced by Ijeoma stems from the shame of her same-sex attraction deeply inculcated in her through biblical scriptures.

These haunting memories of the Bible lessons also return after Ijeoma meets Ndidi, the school teacher, where envisaged joyful moments loom and seem like a possibility. Ijeoma recounts that:

> Memories of my Bible studies with Mama rushed back to me yet again, no matter how much I tried to put them away from my mind. Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream, as if to mockingly ask me how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach. (Okparanta 2015, p.195)

The Christian hermeneutical resources that Adaora taps into to socialise Ijeoma—the scriptures and theological concepts that she wields to render same-sex attraction a sin—do not envisage a joy-filled life for same-sex desiring women. These memories are similarly accompanied by depressive thoughts overt when Ijeoma contends that the dreams were a stark reminder of an unhappy life she would live as a queer woman. This forlorn

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conceptualisation of life for queer people—a life filled with violence and shame as forced upon her imagination by Adaora—discourages Ijeoma's envisioned life outside the gender binary.

As noted briefly above, shame is a crucial tool that stems from the hermeneutical resources Adaora taps into in her socialisation of Ijeoma. Shame is easily accessible because "female sexuality figures as a site and source of shaming" (Johnson and Moran 2013, p.2). This is because "historically, women have been defined as corporeal in a way that men are not, and the female body thus a critical locus for discourses and representations that link femininity with shame" (Johnson and Moran 2013, p.10). Shame finds pride of place in Ijeoma's body as it is already "socially inferiorised" (Bartky 1990, p.9). In other words, Ijeoma experiences shame in double fold; as a woman but also from the religious scriptures that shame her sexuality. This shame is weaponised by Adaora to reduce Ijeoma's body to traditional definitions of womanhood—that of procreating and being homemakers.

This aim is visible from their first lesson when Ijeoma is forced to read from Genesis chapter one where God forms a being from Adam's rib and Adam proclaims that the being shall be called a woman. Adaora repeats the part where the verse says a man and a woman shall become one. She asserts, "man and wife. Adam and Eve. I ne ghe nti? Are you listening" (Okparanta 2015, p.67). The notion that a woman emanates from a man's rib sustains and advances heteronormativity and inequality respectively. The verse that Adaora reads for Ijeoma is fundamental in the inculcation of women's subserviency in religious settings. Indeed, such a principle is noted by Elizabeth Johnson who highlights that discourse around Adam and Eve sustains gender hierarchy and legitimise women's subordination in society (2002, p.5). Through her reading of this verse to Ijeoma, Adaora does not only attempt to dissuade Ijeoma from same-sex relations and intimacy but also reproduces the belief that women are auxiliary to men.

The attempt to render Ijeoma's body docile is also visible in another scene subsequent to Amina, Ijeoma's first love, getting married to a man. Adaora wields Amina's marriage to warn Ijeoma that her time is running out and that she also needs to secure a husband. Adaora holds that:

> Marriage has a shape. Its shape is that of a bicycle. Doesn't matter the size or color of the bicycle. All that matters is that the bicycle is complete, that the bicycle has two wheels.
>
> "The man is one wheel," she continued, "the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other. And what use is to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being?" (Okparanta 2015, p.182)

This view is also held by both the grammar school teacher and his wife when they meet Ijeoma the first time and assert that her fair skin will easily get her married off to a man. Adaora, together with the grammar school teacher and his wife, draw such a notion from a lineage of Christian religious scripts that privilege men at the expense of women. Indeed, as noted by Johnson, this religiously informed architecture of the world by men for men is visible "in ecclesial creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological systems, liturgical worship, patterns of spirituality, visions of mission, church order, leadership, and discipline" (2002, p.4).

This shaming phenomenon is further evident when Adaora cites and repeats Genesis two verse twenty-four to shame Ijeoma's sexuality. Adaora asserts, "a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Okparanta 2015, p.67). The verse buttresses Adaora's subjectivity as a woman and its hold is visible when she utters under her breath that "a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all" (Okparanta 2015, p.182). It is a result of such religious and patriarchal conditioning that Adaora finds it most effective to weaponise shame in her attempt to hinder the maturation of Ijeoma's same-sex attraction and render her body docile.

The effects of this stigmatised shame are seen through Ijeoma's inability to experience sexual pleasure as a queer woman. The first time Ijeoma experiences debilitating shame around her own pleasure is when she and Amina are caught pleasuring each other by the grammar school teacher. Upon his realisation, the grammar school teacher puts down the lantern he is holding and picks up the Bible that lies atop the table, "[A]n Abomination" he says "that is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! That is what the Bible calls it!" (Okparanta 2015, p.125). Ijeoma likens this shameful experience of feeling naked in front of a male figure to that of Eve when she stood naked in front of God. This incident, as the grammar school teacher paces about, shaming their sexual intimacy, marks the genesis of Ijeoma's shame.

The second scene where Ijeoma struggles with shame is when she has just returned from Ndidi's place and is "swollen with desire" (Okparanta 2015, p.194). Although aware that her mother is in the next room, Ijeoma struggles to hold back and pleasures herself. However, to do so, she first banishes her mother's teachings of Ona from the Bible and how God took his life for wasting his seeds. At the center of Adaora's notion that sex is for procreation also lies the belief that women are not supposed to derive pleasure from sexual intimacy. Thus, the notion that self-pleasure is a sin had previously dissuaded Ijeoma from reveling in self-pleasure. Once Ijeoma is done, she feels "not an ounce of guilt accompanying" the act (Okparanta 2015, p.194). The lesson on Ona carried shaming mechanisms and in banishing it Ijeoma experiences sexual liberation.

Adaora's shaming tactics mimic those wielded by Nigerian political and religious leaders in the suppression of queer subjectivities. Because Nigerian political leaders rely on religious support for political gain, and to maintain this support, they extrapolate distorted religious doctrine to inform their leadership of the nation. Given that these leaders possess privilege as men and leaders of religious groups, they also have little interest in engaging the "hermeneutical resources that marginalised [queer Nigerian] communities have already developed" (Panchuk 2020, p.6). As a result, Nigerian women and queer people become the "victims of contributory injustice and willful hermeneutical ignorance" (Panchuk 2020, p.6). Further, as Panchuk notes, "because some Christians believe that submission to suffering is a way of becoming more like their atoning savior, silent submission to abuse is sometimes endorsed or even demanded" (2020, p.6). Solidarity is wielded and maintained through this silent submission. As such, state and religious leaders can mobilise religious communities to reach into their violent hermeneutical resources in order to shame individuals who live outside the strictures of religious texts. In the novel, this is exemplified by the group of religious fanatics who, upon discovering that Ijeoma's queer circle uses the church as a social gathering space, burn Adanna outside the church as a warning to the others—I explore Adanna's scene in detail below. Adaora is similarly ensnared into silent submission and participates actively in this cultural economy of prescribed behaviors and expectations and plays a pivotal role in transmitting it to Ijeoma.

However, throughout the narrative, Ijeoma meets her mother's advances with resistance. Ijeoma attempts to offer alternative readings of the Bible scriptures and in doing so, exposes some of the hypocrisies that inform the conceptual resources people who practice the Christian religion live by. In one of their earlier lessons, Adaora is stuck on the verse where God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because sodomites wanted to have sexual relations with Lot's visitors. Lot in turn offers his daughters before the men in effort to prevent sodomites from sleeping with his visitors. Adaora reads Lot as a kind man who, instead of offering his visitors to be done the will of the Sodomites, offers his daughters. In this way, prevents the ungodly acts Sodomites were prepared to execute on his visitors. Adaora contends that Lot is "a good man" and that he "was willing to protect his guests from sin" (Okparanta 2015, p.73). Ijeoma interjects to counter this normative reading and suggests that it might be a lesson on hospitality; "the idea that he was willing to put in danger his own belongings, and that he was willing to risk the welfare of his own family members in order to safe-guard his guests. It could have been a lesson on hospitality" (Okparanta 2015, p.74). Ijeoma imagines the myriad lessons that could be taken away from the verse and questions the privileging of the prevention of same-sex acts as the core moral lesson. In subverting this normative reading, Ijeoma rejects traditional religious doctrine and how it is meant to guide her life. In this way, Ijeoma refuses the docility forced upon her body.

Efforts to expand her analysis of certain verses in the Bible are repeated in another scene where Ijeoma has just completed a Bible lesson with her mother. She wonders about the infinite readings that could delineate the story of Adam and Eve and questions the privileging of the normative narrative. Ijeoma reflects: "[J]ust because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man?" (Okparanta 2015, p.83).

Ijeoma's questions gesture to the fact that normative interpretations of the story are self-serving to particular groups. She questions the extent to which Christian orthodoxy has produced and sustained problematic readings of certain Bible scriptures in effort to validate certain hermeneutical resources that Christian followers lead by. I contend that Ijeoma's refusal to adopt Christian hermeneutical resources that govern her mother's life to inform her subjectivity—and through constructing different interpretations of the Biblical allegories she encounters—interrupts the shame she is made to feel. Ijeoma refuses to read the Bible as a single story that denounces queer subjectivities and reads it as a text filled with multiple meanings (van Klinken and Chitando 2021). Indeed, van Klinken and Chitando (2021, p.13) have identified a trend in which "African lgbti people and communities at a grassroots level identify with and are empowered by religious faith; how they negotiate spaces within Christian communities; and how they develop affirming theologies". Ijeoma refuses to internalise the negative qualities that accompany normative interpretations of biblical scriptures and instead offers alternative interpretations that subvert their intended effects.

This internalisation of negative qualities plays out differently through Amina's narrative. While at boarding school, after Amina and Ijeoma reunited, Amina dreams about the cataclysm that will befall earth as recorded in the book of Revelation. This becomes a turning point for Amina as she relents and adopts the conceptual resources hammered in them at Sunday schools and school revivals. This capitulation paves way for her lack of social agency. As Amina's same-sex attraction is inherent, religion cannot cleanse or cure it. The teachings from the Sunday school and school revivals only lead to her religious traumatisation. The trauma Amina experiences translates into religiously informed dreams that instill fear and shame which results in her submission. It is shame, compounded by fear, that alters Amina's trajectory. Mendible aptly articulates this phenomenon when she writes that "the coercive power of shame consistently works its magic on the bodies of women, especially where sexuality is concerned" (2016, p.16). Both Amina and Ijeoma experience "hermeneutical

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marginalisation" and are exposed to "skewed hermeneutical resources" through their encounter with religion (Panchuk 2020, p.11).

As the narrative progresses, Ijeoma similarly capitulates and marries a man. However, Ijeoma's turning point occurs when she witnesses Adanna's dead body; an incident that feeds her temporary separation with Ndidi and the queer women's social gathering. The incident threatens violence onto Ijeoma's body and instills fear. Adanna's death is an apt example of what Gqola theorises as the "female fear factory", and the burning of Adanna's body is a "theatrical and public performance of patriarchal policing of and violence towards women" (2021, p.19). In response to the fear instilled in her, Ijeoma yields to her mother's desires and marries her childhood friend Chibundu. Ijeoma yields to heterosexual marriage to shield her life from the violence she had witnessed perpetrated on Adanna, the same form of violence that Ndidi had recounted to her about Adanna's two male friends who were beaten to death by the community. The religious trauma that haunts her and the deaths of queer people that had become an everyday occurrence culminate in Ijeoma surrendering to heterosexual marriage. This desire for the semblance of safety carried by heterosexual relationships is visible when Ijeoma states that "I *did* want to be normal. I did want to lead a normal life. I *did* want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out" (Okparanta 2015, pp.220-221, emphasis in original). The repetition of being "normal" and leading a "normal life" stem from childhood inculcation steadfast in carving her queer subjectivity as deviant (Okparanta 2015, pp.220-221). This is because Ijeoma never encountered "conceptual resources necessary to understand God as embracing [her] in a way that encompasses [her] sexual identity" (Panchuk 2020, p.12). The Bible lessons were unwavering in asserting the abnormality of her sexual attraction.

Ijeoma's marriage fails to be a haven as Chibundu subjects her to both physical and sexual violence. After Ijeoma bears him a daughter, and after finding out that she is still in love with her ex, Ndidi, Chibundu gives her an ultimatum; she needs to bear him a son to pass on his family name and he promises to let her live her life with Ndidi. Here Chibundu taps into the same hermeneutical resources basket as Adaora to recite the patriarchal notion that sons must carry on the family name and women are obliged to participate in the decreed biblical objective to multiply. With Ijeoma's lack of agency, Chibundu enacts violence on Ijeoma in order for her body to serve his desires, to comply to its 'natural objective' in the institution of heterosexual marriage:

> In the darkness, I watched as his murky, monster-like face came square above mine. His hands found their way to mine as he twisted the blanket out of my hold.
>
> "The sooner we get to it, the sooner we'll be done," he said.
>
> I stiffened. (Okparanta 2015, p.274)

The scene above portrays Ijeoma's rigidity and unwillingness to bear Chibundu another child. However, the patriarchal conditioning of their marriage entitles Chibundu to her body. Their marriage serves as an avenue for violence to take place. Chibundu's actions unmask how the hermeneutical resources he taps into enable sexual and physical abuse to go unpunished. In this way, Ijeoma's religious trauma is reproduced as marriage is supposed to be a holy union enshrined before God.

The lack of accountability fuels more violence from Chibundu and Ijeoma begins to feign sleep to evade sexual intimacy with him. When Chibundu catches on, the confrontation turns violent as he calls her a prostitute and throws money at her. Ijeoma, in embracing her mother's normative vision, finds no respite. And although aware of the injustice she suffers, the lack of hermeneutical resources to hold Chibundu accountable makes it difficult to seek assistance.

Surmounting stigmatised shame through *Under the Udala Trees*

In the novel, the former president of Nigeria, Gowon, declares immediately after the civil war that "[t]he tragic chapter of violence has just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation" (Okparanta 2015, p.316). This imagined new nation is devoid of queer subjectivities. Indeed, Lee (2018: 66) contends that "[c]entral to the post-independence nation building projects was the maintenance of a heterosexual, cissexual, and patriarchal social order, through discourses of 'family values', the promotion of heterosexual monogamous marriage, and continued criminalisation of sexual and gender transgressions". Aware of such nation building objectives, Okparanta centers queer subjectivities at the heart of the Biafran war in effort to displace the heterosexual ideality that informs Gowon's nation building project. In this way, marginalised subjectivities are privileged. Navas puts it aptly when she writes that Okparanta's "exploration of lesbian Nigerian woman(hood) from a literary stance offers a valuable and subversive way of rewriting, re-constructing and re-conceptualising the Nigerian post-nation so that othered subjectivities can also be recognised as part of the nation-building project" (2021, p.112-113). I argue that Okparanta's creative output through *Under the Udala Trees* works to displace the stigmatised shame that inheres in Christian doctrine and orthodoxy. This is in the light of Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark's contention that:

> [t]the writer seeks, through his or her capacity to communicate, nothing short of the surmounting of shame in its destructive aspects. Such a surmounting is the goal of both love and creativity. If severe feelings of shame compel us to hide and conceal inner reality from others and from ourselves, it is often countered in the writer by a creative ideal, a defiant and even ruthless decision not to turn away or to lie, a courageous and almost shameless will to see and to know that which internal and external sanctions conspire to keep us from looking at and exploring. (1999, p.29)

Adamson and Clark's words echo Gqola's words when she states that theorising the "female fear factory" came from the recognition of urgency in "questioning it [. . .] as is interrupting it and making it strange" (2021, p.19). The urgency that informs Gqola's theorisation similarly informs my questioning of the exploitation and weaponisation of shame by African state and religious leaders in their maintenance of structures of heteronormativity. Rendering strange the stigmatised shame that befalls queer African people provides an opportunity "to create new ways of living" (Gqola 2021, p. 19). Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is courageous in its effort to interrupt the weaponisation of stigmatised shame in order to imagine liberating ways of existing for not only queer Nigerians, but Africans at large.

Conclusion

In the epilogue, Ijeoma and Ndidi have rekindled their relationship and each night they spend together, Ndidi imagines and maps the contours of a town where queerness and queer intimacy flourish unencumbered and where love transcends imagined ethnic boundaries. When Ijeoma asks for the name of this town, Ndidi provides names of the different towns that make-up the Nigerian nation. I conclude that the potential to realise Ndidi's envisaged Nigerian nation partially lies in the examination of the consequences that emanate from the weaponisation of shame by both Nigerian religious and state leaders. It is crucial that attention is paid to the manipulation of affect for the maintenance of a heteronormative Nigerian nation. This is because heteronormativity is similarly maintained "through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds" (Ahmed 2004, p.146). Cognisant of this, my discussion has illustrated the ways in which traditional interpretation of the Bible is permeated with shame that is wielded to render Ijeoma's body docile. However, through offering subverted interpretations of the Bible, Ijeoma interrupts the shame she is meant to experience and throws its objective into turmoil. Moreover, I contend that *Under the Udala Trees*—a creative output aware of the shame inherent in Christianity's conceptual resources and ways in which it is wielded to stifle the expressions of queer subjectivities—interrupts and renders it strange to imagine liberatory ways of inhabiting the world for queer Nigerian individuals. This is a step toward the realisation of Ndidi's envisaged nation.

Notes

1 I am cognisant of contestation around the term "queer" and its accompanying theory. However, I adopt this umbrella term as placeholder to name gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities. I use "queer" in this paper to refer to "anyone who feels marginalised by mainstream visions of sexuality" (Morris 2000,

p.21). For a nuanced consideration of the subject, see Davids, N. and Matebeni, Z. (2017); Johnson, E.P. (2001); Matebeni, Z. and Msibi, T. (2015); and Morris, M. (2000).

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