

# Mapping Belligerent Sexualities in Chinelo Okparanta's, Akwaeke Emezi's, and Tendai Huchu's Works

Etienne Langmia Forti, (PhD)

The University of Maroua, Cameroon

<sup>1</sup>Received: 30/08/2025; Accepted: 09/10/2025; Published: 12/10/2025

---

## Abstract

This paper draws examples from Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*, and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* to argue that there is a culture-engendered belligerence between practitioners of same-sex relationships and practitioners of heterosexuality in Africa, symbolized by Nigeria and Zimbabwe. The three novelists portray a conflictual coexistence of two broad sexualities by delineating characters who engage in same-sex relationships and those who aggressively and unapologetically reject what they consider as an encroachment of a 'foreign' and culturally unacceptable form of sexuality in the respective societies. Consequently, the three authors depict the bellicose responses of the broad-based heterosexual population who uphold socio-spiritual and culturally-engendered standards of sexuality that sanction and sanctify relationships between people of the opposite sex as the one and only hallowed exemplar. Hence the paper examines the inevitable and outright rejection of homosexuality in these societies as the outcome of the broad African perception of sexuality which considers same-sex relationships as a 'deviant' 'alternative' form of sexuality; an unacceptable replacement of an immemorial sexual orientation enshrined in the notion of sex and/or amorous relationships as phenomena that naturally bound persons of the opposite sex to each other. Reading these works from a conflict-of-sexualities and sexual identities standpoint has a twofold significance; firstly, it establishes the parallelism between the contestants of same-sex relationships found in the fictional worlds of the texts and the leaderships of some African countries who have been struggling to eradicate all traces of what they consider an un-African sexual habit and/or orientation; and secondly, it reminds the African that globalization is not a seamless journey towards integration and homogenization but a permanent work-in-progress journey fraught with competing, integrating as well as disintegrating cultural practices and forces. This paper will borrow critical perspectives from Afrocentric views of sexuality rooted in heteronormativity which determines the perceptions of the 'coexistence' of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and on the continent.

**Keywords:** *Sexuality; Belligerent Sexualities; Homosexuality; Gay; Lesbian; Heteronormative standards; Homophobia*

## Introduction

The discussions on mapping belligerent sexualities in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are examined from the perspective of Afro-normative perceptions of homosexuality. The focus is on the conflictual relationship that characterizes the coexistence of the overwhelmingly heterosexual populations of Nigeria and Zimbabwe and the minority homosexual groups - a tension rooted in *Afrocentric* views of sexuality. The rejection of homosexuality in both societies stems from the heteronormative standards which label homosexuality as an un-African, taboo sexual practice that should be prevented from further encroaching upon deeply entrenched Nigerian and Zimbabwean sexual norms and values. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the fictional novels of Chinelo Okparanta (2015), Akwaeke Emezi (2020), and Tendai Huchu (2010) which reflect the intense resistance to the coexistence of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The vast majority of Nigerians and Zimbabweans adhere to a traditionally African, heterosexual conception of sexuality, which they view as the sole normative standard. Consequently, the heterosexual majority regard the

---

<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Forti E. L. (2025); Mapping Belligerent Sexualities in Chinelo Okparanta's, Akwaeke Emezi's, and Tendai Huchu's Works; *Multidisciplinary International Journal*; Vol 11 No. 2 (Special Issue); 343-353

homosexual minority as sexual deviants who must conform to *heteronormative* sexual standards. In fact, the *heteronormative* framework governing sex and sexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe is widely accepted as the only legitimate model, rendering homosexuality a perceived threat to the sacred Afrocentric Nigerian and Zimbabwean sexual norms and values.

### **The Nigerian and Zimbabwean Afrocentric Perceptions of Homosexuality**

It is important to recognize that the rejection of same-sex orientation is embedded within the sociocultural and political frameworks that shape discourses on sex and sexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, as is the case in much of sub-Saharan African. The perception of homosexuality in these contexts invariably invokes the concept of heteronormativity, which functions as the normative benchmark against which the legitimacy and acceptance of homosexual identities and practices are judged. The homosexual community, along with advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, often characterizes the rigid stance of predominantly heterosexual population towards the visibility and legitimacy of same-sex orientation as being informed by the concept of heteronormativity. In this discussion, the concept of heteronormativity is adopted from Habarth (2008), who notes that “heteronormativity, or the normalization of heterosexuality, exists across multiple social domains. It is maintained and perpetuated by social institutions such as marriage as well as everyday actions taken by individuals. It is an unseen force that dictates the boundaries of presumed normal sexuality and even normal social interactions” (p.2). Heteronormative sexuality thus denotes the belief that heterosexuality constitutes the only natural and legitimate sexual orientation governing the sexual relations of Nigerians and Zimbabweans. The normalization of heterosexuality as the socio-cultural and religious ideal manifests in these societies through gender-specific terms for partners, the assumption of sexual orientation based on perceived gender (biologically, socially, culturally, and religiously constructed), and marriage or procreation expectations limited to heterosexual unions. This interpretive framework, applied to explain the rejection of homosexuality on the continent, emerges from the intersection of Western liberal notions of sexuality and sub-Saharan African socio-cultural norms. This is the view of Mkhize and Mthembu (2023) who note that “the term heteronormativity was coined by a queer theorist, Michael Warner, to describe the social processes through which heterosexuality is treated as normal whilst treating those that fall outside this standard as abnormal and of lesser value” (p.377). The concept of *heteronormativity* has increasingly emerged as a critically weaponized term within the queer discourse, both globally and on the African continent. It is employed by proponents of same-sex relations to interrogate and critique the entrenched sociocultural and spatial configurations of gender identity and sexuality that systematically privilege heterosexuality. These normative structures regulate social relations by rejecting non-heteronormative identities and practices, thereby reinforcing a hegemonic sexual order across various contexts on the continent, [particularly in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, sic] (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.378). Consequently, the contention that seeks to characterize the African conceptualization of sexuality – predominantly shaped by *heteronormative* norms – as inherently discriminatory lacks substantive grounding. Such a radical inference is not supported by the well-established evidence that:

Africans are culturally conservative and have been fighting to save their cultures from western adulterations. One of such battle grounds in these clashes between African and western cultures are on gender identity. In Africa gender identity is the product of nature such that any behaviour contrary to acceptable gender role is [...] abominable. Thus homosexual identities promoted by western liberal culture are increasingly challenging the conservative gender assignation in Africa.

(Okpokwasili, 2024, p. 22).

Therefore, the *Afrocentric* view of sexuality considers the existence of the minority queer group in the fictional societies of Nigeria and Zimbabwe as being un-African. This is because the only acceptable form of sexual exchange is between two persons of the opposite sex; man and woman. The latter is the normative pair whose biological gender conditions them to engage in sexual intercourse in conformity with their different functions laid down by nature which is first and foremost procreative. Thus, any other sexual affinity shared out of the normative standard is considered deviant, un-African, and unwanted. This line of defence of the sacred place of life in the African global consciousness is strengthened by the:

common sense belief that human beings possess the innate mechanistic urge to reproduce. This phenomenon has been recognized as a natural law. As such, the heterosexual component of human behaviour is by and large viewed as being genetic, whereas ... homosexuality is primarily the focus of scientific investigations into human sexual orientation. This later development is anti-African with glowing exclusive condemnation and rejection, either legally or morally or both. (Ezebuilo, 2023, p.56)

Therefore, the rejection of homosexual identities in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, as portrayed in Okparanta (2015), Emezi (2020) and Huchu (2010), is fundamentally shaped by a normative conception of gender roles, perceived to be biologically determined and sanctioned by natural law. The antagonistic coexistence between heterosexual and homosexual individuals within these fictional societies mirrors the broader sociocultural paradigm in which the predominantly heterosexual populace constructs same-sex identities as deviant and antithetical to established gender and sexual norms.

### **The Marginalization, Perversion, and Criminalization of Homosexuals in Nigerian and Zimbabwean Societies**

The homosexual characters - namely Ijeoma, Amina and Ndidi - in Okparanta (2015) are subjected to systemic marginalization as a result of Nigeria's entrenched heteronormative ideology, which constructs marriage exclusively as a union between individuals of the opposite sex. This normative outlook is exemplified in the character of Mama, who, upon discovering Ijeoma's same-sex orientation, adamantly urges her daughter to renounce her lesbian identity. Mama's insistence is rooted in a cultural logic that defines womanhood primarily through the institution of heterosexual marriage, wherein women are socialized to serve their husbands with loyalty and submission. Her position serves to reinforce the prevailing sociocultural narrative that renders homosexuality not merely unconventional, but fundamentally deviant within the Nigerian context, regardless of the emotional or affective legitimacy it may hold for those who embody it. Hence, homosexuality is perceived as incongruent with the sociocultural norms and values that shape and regulate notions of sex and sexuality. In concrete terms, the roles, functions, and responsibilities traditionally assigned to women and men are regarded as naturally predetermined roles that - within this normative context, homosexuality is seen as incapable of fulfilling. Consequently, Ijeoma's lesbian sexuality is portrayed as irrelevant, unacceptable, and "un-Nigerian", as it is perceived to contravene the natural order governing sex, sexuality, and procreative responsibility. Indeed, the natural law that underpin human existence is presented as incompatible with homosexuality, a belief that Mama seeks to instil in her daughter through didactic instruction and moral reinforcement, "this is the way it should be... The will of God... The wonderful will of God" (p.196). Like Mama, Mkhize and Mthembu (2023) emphasize on the fact that gender roles and sexual relations amongst heterosexual men and women are ordained by nature thus naturalized while sexual relations upheld by the homosexual population is abnormal and constitute deviant forms of sexual expression (p.379).

Mama's invocation of the normative standards that governing sex and sexuality as reflective of "... The will of God..." (Okparanta, 2015, p.196) underscore the broader Nigerian socio-cultural construction of marriage as a divinely ordained and naturally constituted institution. Her appeal illustrates how religious discourse is mobilized as a regulatory instrument to enforce conformity to heteronormative expectations, particularly in persuading Ijeoma to enter into a heterosexual union with Chibundu. This insistence reflects an entrenched cultural logic in which sex, sexuality, and marriage are conceptualized through an Afrocentric heteronormative paradigm. These norms - anchored in religious, cultural, and natural bases - are not only prescriptive to Nigerians but are extended to foreigners living in the country. Although Ijeoma remains unconvinced by the hegemonic discourse that legitimizes only one form of sexual expression and marital union within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, Mama positions herself as the moral arbiter - a custodian of normative values - seeking to realign her daughter with what is construed as sexual and social propriety. As a staunch proponent of the afro-normative order, Mama cautions Ijeoma against articulating dissent or questioning the cultural repudiation of homosexuality, urging her into silence with the admonition "hush, before you breathe life into your doubts! Marriage is for everyone! Remember, a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all. Besides, good men are rare these days. Now that you have found one, you must do what you can to keep him" (p.196). This cautious admonition from Mama reveals more than a personal desire for Ijeoma to renounce what is considered a deviant sexual orientation; it simultaneously reflects and reinforces the predominant socio-cultural precept that equates a woman's worth with her capacity to attract and accept male authority through heterosexual marriage. In invoking this position, Mama upholds gendered ideology in which femininity is meaningful

only within the hetero-patriarchal structures that sanctions male presence as the guarantor of female respectability. Her point of view is thus symptomatic of what Foucault (1978) identifies as the productive power of discourse (pp.17-18, 94, 98) – here, one that regulates bodies, desires, and identities by delineating the boundaries of permissible. Within this context, Ijeoma's deviation from heterosexual norms is not merely a private matter but a threat to the symbolic order that sustains Nigerian cultural nationalism. Accordingly, she is compelled to conform to afro-normative configurations of sex, sexuality and marriage – normative structures that are naturalized through religious doctrine, cultural tradition, and nationalist ideology, and which collectively function to delegitimize queer subjectivities as un-African and morally transgressive.

According to some western influenced critics and supporters of homosexuality, such as Murray S. and Roscoe W., the belief that same-sex practice has never existed in Africa is a myth that was created and perpetuated by European colonialists and upheld by Africans (Mkhize, 2023, p.382). This line of impassioned advocacy, which argues that contemporary Africans societies – such as Nigeria - ought to tolerate homosexuality, remains largely unconvincing. Such arguments are frequently advanced by Western homosexuals or by African diasporic individuals who have lived in Western societies where same-sex relationships are normalized and institutionally protected. Consequently, this group tends to dismiss African normative constructions of sexuality as ahistorical or mythical. However, Mkhize (2023) critically interrogates this position by challenging the narrative that same-sex practices were historically embedded in precolonial African societies, when he observes, "...many Africans own their homophobia as something that they believe to be consistent with their values and beliefs, rather than a false thing from the outside that tricked them into believing that they are homophobic because of colonialism" (p.382).

In fact, Nigerian society, as depicted in Okparanta (2015), upholds clearly defined perception of the biological and social responsibilities expected of the adult girl-child and woman. Critics of these culturally embedded values, common not only in Nigeria but across much of Africa - often describe them as patriarchal. It is for this reason that Ezebuilo (2023) contends that:

As Africans, how we do and experience sexuality can be influenced heavily by society and culture... In Africa... not only does the discourse reveal same-sex relations boldly as unnatural, but also as distinctively un-African. Indeed, same-sex practice is not only a disgrace to God but also humanity; it is a taboo that cannot be tolerated in any normal society. (p.61)

Heterosexuality is constructed as the only accepted sexual expression within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, as it is perceived to be in accordance with natural laws believed to regulate human existence. This ideological stance informs Mama's persistent plea that her daughter, Ijeoma, adhere to the heteronormative status quo of marrying a man – a wish entrenched in the culturally valorised role of women as guarantors of lineage and preservers of familial continuity. Mama's stance symbolises the broader sociocultural imperative that governs sexuality and marriage in Nigerian society, one to which she compels Ijeoma to conform. In an effort to compel her daughter to renounce the lesbian sexuality, Mama instructs Ijeoma to go on a date with Chubundu, taking deliberate steps to ensure that her daughter appears alluring and desirable in a manner consistent with conventional expectations of femininity. Mama aims to present Ijeoma as a woman capable of attracting male attention, particularly that of a man who admires her. In this light, Mama attempts to inculcate in Ijeoma the performance of sensual femininity that is in accord with accepted sociocultural norms that define womanhood and heterosexual desirability. The narrator depicts this by noting that Mama ensures Ijeoma wears a revealing dress to the rendezvous with Chubundu, as she tells her daughter that "it's really the perfect dress... It will show just enough of your neckline and your ankles. That should be enough to keep his interest. That's the way to do it. Show a little of the collarbone and a little of the ankles" (Okparanta, 2015, p.159). Mama actually ushers Ijeoma into the Nigerian and/or African values as far as sexuality and marriage are concerned.

From Mama's perspective, a woman is inherently predisposed to attract a male partner who will eventually marry her, as it is considered unnatural for a woman to fulfil this normative role within a same-sex (lesbian) union. Consequently, Mama symbolises the Afrocentric mothers who uphold and perpetuate a heteronormative conception of sexuality and marriage, one that is anchored in procreativity, achievable solely through heterosexual relationships. In response to Ijeoma's anxiety over the meeting with Chubundu, "what if I'm not pleased?," Mama tells her "Smile anyway. He is a good man and you will be pleased. With a man, life is difficult. Without a man, life is even more

difficult” (Okparanta, 2015, p.190). According to Mama, the cultural foundation of marriage as a union between individuals of opposite sex is perceived as natural, despite its inherent challenges - challenges that, in her view, cannot be totally absent in same-sex unions such as the one Ijeoma aspires for. For Mama, as well as for those who oppose the encroachment of same-sex marriage in Nigeria:

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...the woman, the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain is that, neither of the wheels is able to function fully without the other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being? ... A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all. (Okparanta, 2015, p.157)

The afro-normative conception of marriage is most clearly reflected in Mama's use of this bicycle analogy, which emphasizes marriage as a heterosexual union in which each partner performs complementary roles and functions. This model represents the culturally recognised and accepted norms of marriage, while alternative forms, such as the same-sex union Ijeoma aspires to, are viewed as the un-African and contrary to the natural order that governs marital relations. When Mama tells her daughter, “What is certain is that, neither of the wheels is able to function fully without the other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being? ... A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all” (p.157), it is call to Ijeoma to realise the baseless nature of lesbianism. This is because a homosexual union is perceived as unproductive by the predominant heterosexual society, as neither partner can fulfil the procreative function traditionally associated with their biological gender. Mama's recommendation that Ijeoma conforms to the cultural and biological norms of sex, sexuality, and marriage is informed by the perception of homosexuality as un-African. According to Mkhize and Mthembu (2023), like Mama, homosexuality is not accepted in African societies because the practice is immoral and would destroy the African conception of marriage as a union that is strictly between male and female (pp.377-79). Thus, same-sex practices are not accepted in Nigeria and Zimbabwe whose sexual cultures are overwhelmingly, if not entirely, heterosexual. This perception underlies the rejections of same-sex orientation and related unions in both countries, as such practices are seen as a threat to the nature-based cultural norms that guide sex and sexuality in these societies. This demonstrates the strong rejection of homosexuality across the continent, as it is widely seen to conflict with Afrocentric ideals and deeply rooted cultural norms that determine acceptable forms of sexuality in Africans societies. In fact, Mkhize and Mthembu (2023) note that “... Africans own their homophobia as something that they believe to be consistent with their values and beliefs, rather than a false thing from outside that has tricked them into believing that they are homophobic because of colonialism” (p.382).

In Zimbabwe like in Nigeria, the condemnation of same-sex practices derives from the sociocultural values and beliefs which hold that homosexuality is immoral and un-African. This accounts for the rejection of the practice in Zimbabwe described in Huchu (2010). Homosexuals in Zimbabwe are viewed as perverts who should be excluded from society because they represent a sexual practice that goes against to accepted norms and values guiding sexuality. This is why when Vimbai discovers the gay relationship between Dumi and Mr M\_, she immediately reports to Minister M\_, who in turn uses her influential position to ensure that such an abomination is gotten rid of. The Minister who represent state authority sends men to threaten and even kill Dumi in a bid to keep the information from spreading to a wider audience given her husband's participation in the prevalence of this form of sexual abnormality (p.157). At this juncture, Minister M\_ plays a dual function in the attempt to stamp out homosexuality in her community.

The first role she embodies is that of a representative of the state, which is firmly opposed to same-sex practices and uses every available means to eliminate what it deems a sexual abnormality. The second role, closely related to the first through a shared purpose of rejecting same-sex relations, is informed by the Zimbabwean, and more globally African, conception of the family. From this perspective, she sees unorthodox sexual relationship, marked by infidelity between Dumi and her husband, as a threat to both her marriage and her ministerial position. The reaction of Minister M\_ reflects the position of the Zimbabwean government as it seeks to safeguard the cultural underpinnings of sex, sexuality and marriage. These illustrations of the rejection of homosexuality in both Nigeria and Zimbabwe reveal the prevailing cultural perceptions of alternative forms of sexuality, which are considered incompatible with the established norms of heterosexuality. The unconditional adherence to the afro-normative form is informed by the



fact that in the "... African point of view ... rejection or abstinence from any sexual aberrations such as cybersex, contraception, lesbianism, homosexuality, bestialism, masturbation etc, is necessary for sustaining the human species and society" (Ezebuilo, 2023, p.56). Consequently, Mama's rejection of Ijeoma's lesbian inclination, Vimbai's shock at discovering Dumi's homosexual orientation, and Minister M\_'s suppression of queer practices collectively reflect an Africanist entrenchment in heteronormativity, viewed as essential to the continuity of the human species. This entrenched stance is further reinforced by sociocultural and religious contexts, as well as African spiritual worldviews, which shape moral perceptions of sexuality. It is within this paradigm that the negative reception of what is often regarded as an unorthodox sexual orientation emerges, for, as observed, "[...] the attitudes of religion and African spirituality towards sexuality, in general, affect the way queer people are treated in most sub-Saharan African countries" ( Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.383).

Thus, the resolute rejection of same-sex relations in Nigeria and Zimbabwe reflects the broader pattern across most African countries, rooted in the Africanist conceptualisation of sexuality. In both nations, as in much of the continent, homosexuality is criminalised, forcing the queer minority into secrecy. Emezi's (2020) portrayal of Vivek illustrates the social consequences of this rejection of homosexuality: even after his death, the circumstances remain obscured, as queer sexuality is deemed an aberration unworthy of public concern. Elizabeth, Vivek's friend, concludes that Auntie Kavita's efforts to uncover the truth are misguided, for the prevailing social prejudice renders such questions futile:

Seeing Kavita like that, almost going mad with trying to figure out what had happened to Vivek, she wondered if Vivek's mother deserved a bit more of the truth- if she and the others were hurting her every time she asked the wrong questions and they gave her their careful answers. The truth was so far away from any of her suspicions that she had no chance of interrogating them successfully. She didn't know how much she didn't know. She was Vivek's mother and she was wasting away before their eyes. (p.123)

Elizabeth considers it prudent for Kavita to refrain from posing questions that might disclose Vivek's sexual orientation. This caution stems from the fact that homosexuality is regarded as a taboo sexuality and un-African alternative, and any suggestion that her son identifies with it would imply her complicity in its perpetuation. The suppression of homosexual practices in Nigeria reflects a broader national effort to eliminate elements perceived as threatening to the culturally entrenched heterosexual order. Osita concedes that, as members of a 'marginalised' minority, they are denied societal acceptance and are therefore compelled to exist discreetly on the periphery of social life, "maybe we were all pretending to be fine because the world gave us no other option" (Emezi, 2020, p.131). Osita and Vivek must conform to the normative standards expected by Nigerian society. The fear they experience and express in response to the societal rejection of their queerness reflects their awareness of its perceived un-Africanness.

In fact, it is considered provocative of the homosexuals such as Vivek, Osita, Ijeoma, and Ndidi to think that they can alter the heterosexual norms governing sex and sexuality in Nigeria by attempting to introduce an alternative form of sexuality. In this country, homosexuality is categorized as abominably immoral, as illustrated by the case of Ijeoma, who is conscious of the socially determined immorality attributed to her relationship with Ndidi. Her awareness of the abnormality of her sexuality reflects the internalisation of prevailing heteronormative discourses, which, although presented as natural truths, are in fact products of cultural ideology. This ideological outlook is what sustains the societal condemnation they face, "mentioning it to anyone can cost some of us, if not all of us, our lives" (Okparanta, 2015, p.164). The homosexual characters are acutely aware that their sexuality is socio-culturally constructed as a form of sexual immorality and, therefore, considered unacceptable within the Nigerian context. This awareness is evident in the episode where the grammar school teacher reacts with visible shock upon encountering Ijeoma and Amina in a sensual act. Ijeoma herself reflects on the intensity of his reaction, remarking, "the sight of us must have startled him, because he gasped like a dying man taking his final breath" (Okparanta, 2015, p.105). The teacher's response encapsulates the moral panic and cultural anxiety that overwhelms heterosexuals faced with a prospect of coexistence with same-sex relations, thereby illustrating the deep-rooted heteronormativity that view homosexuality as aberrant and morally corrupt. Against the background such a reaction from the wider Nigerian heteronormative group, Ijeoma's acknowledgement of the un-Africanness of her sexual identity becomes significant when she reflects "the whole incident was startling to me too and must have been startling to Amina as well, not only for having to endure the discomfort of his looking at us in this way, but also for having to endure the misfortune of

being forced to see ourselves through his eyes” (Okparanta, 2015, p.107). The teacher’s reaction is symbolic of the broader Nigerian sentiment that condemns and rejects them as culturally immoral.

Concretely, the Nigerian society, symbolised by the grammar school teacher, his wife and Mama, perceives Ijeoma and Amina as outcasts who must be reintegrated into the heterosexual norms and values governing sex, sexuality, and the family as prescribed by Nature. Mama along with the grammar school teacher and his wife symbolise the custodians of the normative sexuality, which Ijeoma and Amina are expected to fully embrace. That is why these parents agree that the teacher and his wife will conscientize Amina, while Mama will do the same with Ijeoma (Okparanta, 2025, p.110). They take up the duty to ensure that Ijeoma and Amina follow nature’s laid down precepts of sex and sexuality, this being heterosexuality. Ijeoma explains that just as they separate with the grammar school teacher after the parents have taken the decision to teach them the normative norms of sexuality:

Mama led me down the road to the bus stop without uttering a single word. She simply maintained her grasp on my hand. In that stiff, unnerving silence, we boarded the bus. Her gasp was tight, painful even, loosen up, I imagined saying to her, to her fingers. Loosen up. And I imagined the reply something like this: this is anger. It does as it pleases. (p.111)

Mama’s unbearable anger reveals the perceived severity of Ijeoma’s transgression – her defiance of what is considered as nature’s immutable law of sexuality, a principle known to underpin both personal existence and communal survival. Mama’s reaction is not merely personal but ideologically informed by heteronormative worldview that equates sexual morality with reproductive capacity and preservation of lineage. Ijeoma’s silent endurance of the pain inflicted by Mama’s grip signifies her awareness of entrenched societal condemnation of lesbian identity. This reaction epitomizes the broader Nigerian sociocultural anxiety over the perceived erosion of traditional norms, in which non-heterosexual orientations are viewed as alien, ‘un-African’ intrusions that threaten the cherished continuity of both family lineage and national identity.

Consistent with the perception outlined above, the Christian religious perspective on homosexuality posits that such practices are unclean, immoral, and antithetical to the universal procreative function of humankind. The already negative sociocultural construction of same-sex relations is further reinforced by the doctrinal Christian precepts of the Christian faith, which affirm the biologically determined categories of male and female - man and woman - as the normative and legitimate basis for amorous relationships and marital unions. This is evident in the Book of Genesis, Chapters One and Two, Verses 26-28, and 21-24, respectively, where it is said that:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he Him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth ... And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs ... And from the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man ... Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (Couric, 2000, pp.1-2)

From a theological standpoint within the Nigerian and Zimbabwean contexts, it is held that God created the two opposite biological sexes with a distinct procreative function, intended to ensure the continuity of the human race as ordained by the Creator. Against this backdrop, homosexuality is not regarded as a viable means of perpetuating humankind, given the absence of biological procreation in same-sex union, which are often classified as unnatural. Consequently, in both Nigerian and Zimbabwean sociocultural thought, as well as within religious doctrines grounded in creationist narratives, homosexuality is excluded from the recognised forms of legitimate sexuality. It is thus positioned as a deviation from the culturally sanctioned African conception of sex and sexuality, which is understood to derive from the divinely instituted obligations assigned to the male and female sexes.

### **Religious Constestations of Homosexuality in Nigerian and Zimbabwean Societies**

At this point in the analysis of Nigerian and Zimbabwean perspectives on homosexuality, it is pertinent to note that “... when we speak of African sexuality, we are relying on discourses of culture and religion and the way that these structure African realities. Religious and cultural factors fashion African people to conform to the

mainstream notions of sexuality” (Ezebuilo, 2023, p.61). This accounts for the strong objection to the existence of lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, in both Nigeria and Zimbabwe. In the case of Nigeria, as portrayed in Okparanta (2015), the deviant sexual inclination exhibited by Ijeoma and her lesbian friends is regarded as a spiritual ailment requiring cleansing through a regimen of prayers and Bible studies. Mama therefore seeks to dissuade Ijeoma from lesbianism by grounding her reasoning in biblical teachings intended to awaken her daughter’s Ijeoma’s awareness of the perceived immorality of such sexuality. Mama’s deliberate emphasis on Bible passages that explicitly condemn homosexuality is aimed at ensuring that Ijeoma recognises the evident moral repugnance of lesbianism in light of God’s intention in creating man and woman, and assigning them the responsibility of procreation. She invokes the biblically conferred duty upon man and woman, as laid down in the Book of Genesis, to underscore God’s primary purpose in the creation of Adam and Eve – namely, to perpetuate the human race. Furthermore, Mama draws Ijeoma’s attention to the natural order in which all of God’s creation appear in complementary pairs, especially in the plant and animal kingdoms, within which humankind plays an indispensable role in the continuation of Life. This theological and naturalistic reasoning is reinforced when Mama refers to the Book of Genesis in her condemnation of homosexuality, stating:

20...but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place.

22 The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

23 The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh;

She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (pp.54)

The Biblical foundation of heterosexuality is invoked to portray homosexuality as a destructive practice, since same-sex unions cannot sustain life by ensuring the procreative continuity of the human race. Mama alludes to this fundamental responsibility of complementary pairs - male and female, man and woman - as the origin of life on earth, as described in the Book of Genesis. The lesson Mama expects Ijeoma to grasp is that, by adhering to lesbian sexuality, she is effectively contributing to the discontinuation of their family lineage. Mama’s position, like that of the grammar school teacher, reinforces the claim that heterosexuality is divinely ordained and socially sanctioned norm upon which the survival, stability, and continuity of the human family depend:

[...] most religions consider homosexuality as unnatural and immoral... for the Christians, condemnation of homosexuality can be justified by several passages in both the New and the Old Testament [...] none state the point more clearly than Leviticus 20:13: ‘If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.’(Mathisen, 2018, p.19)

This religiously grounded heterosexual basis of sexuality in Nigerian society perpetuates the perception of homosexuals as immoral and sexually deviant. It is within this context, and under the weight of culturally entrenched heterosexual norms, that Osita - traumatized by the death of his gay partner, Vivek - remains silent about the circumstances of his partner’s demise. His reticence reflects an acute awareness of the societal view of same-sex relationships as perverse, immoral, and un-African. Moreover, Ijeoma and Osita are doubly ostracized: not only for non-normative sexual orientation but also for engaging in an incestuous relationship as cousins. In Igbo culture, as in most sub-Saharan African societies, both incest and homosexuality are strongly condemned, regarded as parallel violations of moral and natural law. Osita’s awareness of this moral boundary is evident in his invocation of divine judgement when he confesses “[...] *God forgive me, I really love him, I really do*; when he was bright and brilliant and alive, my cousin, my brother, the love of my sinful life” (Emezi, 2020, p.132). His words constitute an implicit



acknowledgement of the perceived moral transgression in their relationship, which he sees as contrary to God's intended purpose for the creation of male and female. There is, therefore, a degree of ambiguity surrounding the characters' engagement in what is considered as sexual perversity, particularly when Osita tells God that Vivek is "my cousin, my brother, the love of my sinful life" (Emezi, 2020, p.132). This ambiguity relates to their gendered identities as males who, during moments of sexual intimacy, assume alternating roles traditionally ascribed to male and female partners. If they can interchangeably enact the roles of man and woman in a sexual intercourse, depending on their mood or sensations they wish to experience on a given day, then they reveal what is perceived as an abnormality associated with homosexuality and even likened to bestiality. In doing so, they reject the clearly defined sexual roles assigned by nature and God as biological specific to each gender. Consequently, within the broader Nigerian society, they are regarded as sexual deviants.

Homosexuality, construed as a religio-cultural sexual aberration, is similarly reflected in the Zimbabwean society described in Huchu (2020). This is exemplified in the character of Dumi's parents, who, in repudiation of his homosexual orientation, withdraws their monthly financial support to their son who in his diary records, "Moved in with a colleague. Couldn't afford to pay rent at the house in Avondale anymore since allowance got cut off. I don't even think that she likes me. Didn't know being broke could be such a drag. My kingdom for a swimming pool!" (p. 158). The imposition of this financial embargo functions as a coercive mechanism, aimed at compelling him to renounce what his family perceives as unclean, immoral, and culturally alien form of sexuality, inconsistent with their religious and traditional norms. In essence, his family is adamant that he rejects his homosexual orientation and return to what they regard as normative heterosexuality. This explains why, when he introduces his colleague, Vimbai, to his parents, they immediately reinstate his allowance, believing he has abandoned his homosexual identity. This sentiment is reflected in Dumi's diary, where he expresses his joy at the restoration of his financial lifeline, "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" (Huchu, 2020, p.159). Like Osita in Okparanta (2015), who is conscious of the perceived un-Africaness of homosexuality, Dumi demonstrates an awareness of the norms and values of the Zimbabwean society regarding same-sex relationships. This awareness is precisely why his family's financial support is restored when he pretends that Vimbai is his girlfriend. At this point, his family believes that he has renounced his gay identity in favour of heterosexuality. Their decision to accept him back into the fold upon his pretence signifies Dumi's understanding that, in the Zimbabwean society, homosexuality is abnormal and socio-culturally unacceptable.

In fact, Zimbabwean society views homosexuals as repulsive perverts who should not be permitted to adulterate its sexual culture, which is firmly rooted in nature's primary function assigned to the male and female biological genders. This Afrocentric conception of gender roles – anchored in the belief that men and women have specific, divinely or naturally ordained obligations to nature – explains Vimbai's reaction upon discovering that the bed she shares with Dumi is the very same bed he uses for his deviant sexual encounters with Mr M\_, in her own house. Her shock and disgust erupt in an anguished outcry:

[...] The day I came home and found him and Mr M\_ at my house was the day they had consummated their unnatural passions in the bed that I shared with Dumi. I robbed my body, feeling dirty and needing a long bath. Which one of them was the man and which was the woman anyway? ... My daughter was the product of the union between man and woman. What could man and a man ever hope to produce in a million years? Even the president had called them worse than pigs. I might have disagreed with a lot of what he has done to this country but I had to agree with him there. I imagined Mr M\_ with his silly moustache fondling the man who was my fiancé. (Huchu, 2020, pp.160-161)

From Vimbai's reaction – one that aligns with the dominant societal view in Zimbabwe and is reinforced by the country's highest authority – Dumi's sexuality cannot be equated with that of animals, as she believes that no species in the animal kingdom engages in sexual activity with members of the same sex. She considers the idea of two men in a sexual relationship to be deeply unsettling and difficult to comprehend. In her view, Dumi and Minister M\_ represent a deviation from what she understands as the natural order, particularly because such a relationship, unlike her own heterosexual union that produces her daughter, does not lead to biological reproduction.

Dumi's sexual orientation is considered as profoundly repugnant to an Africanist sensibility such as demonstrated by Vimbai, to the extent that the recollection of having shared a bed with him provokes an almost visceral desire to purge every trace of his presence from her body. This impulse to erase the material and symbolic residue of her association with Dumi functions as a Zimbabwean cultural metaphor for broader national resolve to obliterate forms of sexuality deemed 'unnatural' and, therefore, incompatible with the moral and socio-cultural order of the country. This is because "the gender roles and sexual relations of heterosexual masculine men and feminine women are naturalized, and sexual relations between LGBTIQ individuals are considered abnormal and as being deviant forms of sexual expression" (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2023, p.379). Vimbai's reaction thus epitomises an embodiment of the hegemonic Zimbabwean discourse that positions homosexuality as a culturally immoral aberration – an interpretation that, for an Africanist subjectivity like Vimbai's, appears almost axiomatic within the inherited religio-cultural and nationalist paradigms:

[...] repulsed by expressions of homosexuality [...] [as] Sexuality in general [is] closely linked to a strictly dichotomous idea of gender identity: Men and women have clearly defined sexual roles that must not be deviated from. A logical extension of this idea was that if a man engaged in sexual acts with another man, he was not truly masculine. (Mathisen, 2018, p.17)

Dumi's sexual identity becomes a clear distortion of the biological gender identity that his apparent maleness, as reflected in his physiological appearance, is expected to uphold. Thus, when Vimbai discovers his homosexuality, she laments bitterly, feeling deceived by the contradiction between his outward appearance and his sexual reality:

DUMI IS A HOMOSEXUAL [...] If it wasn't written in his hand and before my eyes, I would have denied it. I could not have foreseen this. He spoke like a normal man, wore clothes like a normal man and even walked like a normal man. Everything about him was masculine. Didn't homosexuals work with Handbags and speak with squeaky voices? (Huchu, 2020, p.166)

Vimbai, a heterosexual woman, is profoundly unsettled by Dumi's challenge of the significance of his biologically determined male gender. To her, it is incomprehensible that such a man of such striking appearance could embody a dual and ambiguous gender identity, with his homosexuality ultimately overshadowing his biological gender. Her repulsion reflects what Mathisen's (2018) identifies as a prevailing norm in many African societies where there is " [...] a strictly dichotomous idea of gender identity: Men and women have clearly defined sexual roles that must not be deviated from [...] if a man engaged in sexual acts with another man, he was not truly masculine" (p.17).

### **Conclusion: Silenced but Surviving: The Paradox of Homosexual Rejection**

All in all, the existence of homosexuality in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and its adoption by some citizens as an alternative form of sexuality despite the heterosexual foundation of these societies as decreed by nature, is deemed unacceptable. The overwhelmingly heterosexual population of the two countries justify their opposition to same-sex relationships as being un-African. The argument raised is that same-sex relationship and union do not reflect the cultural and religious precepts of creation and procreation – principles regarded as fundamental to the perpetuation of the human race and humanity on the continent. African, Nigerian, and Zimbabwean perceptions of homosexuality generally frame the practice as a threat to the traditional, endemic customs, norms, and values believed to have been established by God in His creation of Life, in which every element of nature has an opposite counterpart ensuring the continuity of the species. Therefore, the socio-cultural and religious custodians of these norms – whether entrenched in African traditions or influenced by European systems – view the encroachment of same-sex practices upon the heterosexual foundation of their societies as an abnormality, an abomination, and a taboo that should be eradicated. Accordingly, the afro-normative values, which uphold the belief in life's perpetuation as ordained by God and described in the Book of Genesis, regard homosexuality is an abominable perversion that must not be allowed to undermine the moral foundations of society. This is because African Traditional Religion "... reveal same-sex relations boldly as unnatural, but also as distinctively un-African. Indeed, same-sex practice is not only a disgrace to God but also to humanity, it is a taboo that cannot be tolerated in any normal society" (Ezebuilo, 2023, p. 61).

## Reference

- Ahlberg, B. M. (1994). Is there a distinct African sexuality? A critical response to Caldwell. *Africa*, 64(2), 220–240.
- Amadiume, I. (2006). Sexuality, African religio-cultural traditions and modernity: Expanding the lens. *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1(2), 26–28.
- Arnfred, S. (2009). African feminists on sexualities. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 43(1), 151–159.
- Babatunde, E. B., & Ake, M. (2015). The relativity of heterosexual norms and gender power on young people's sexualities in Africa. *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 7(2), 52–63.
- Chimakonam, J. O., & Agada, A. (n.d.). *The sexual orientation question in Nigeria: Cultural relativism versus universal human rights concerns*. University of Pretoria.
- Emezi, A. (2020). *The death of Vivek Oji*. Riverhead Books.
- Ezebuilo, H. C. (2023). Sexuality and human nature: An African perspective. *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies*, 4(1). <http://oajis.enogjournal.com.ng/index.php/oajis/article/view/33>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books.
- Habarth, J. M. (2008). *Thinking 'straight': Heteronormativity and associated outcomes across sexual orientation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Huchu, T. (2010). *The hairdresser of Harare*. Freight Books.
- Khamasi, J., & Maina-Chinkuyu, S. (Eds.). (2005). *Sexuality: An African perspective, the politics of self and cultural beliefs*. Moi University Press.
- Mabvurira, V., Masuka, T., & Motsi, J. (2012). The “politics” of sexual identity in Zimbabwe: A social work perspective? *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(13), 192–199.
- Mathisen, R. B. (2018). *A postmaterialist explanation for homophobia in Africa: Multilevel analysis of attitudes towards homosexuals in 33 African countries* [Master's thesis, University of Bergen]. BORA UiB.
- Mkhize, S. P., & Mthembu, A. (2023). Unpacking pervasive heteronormativity in sub-Saharan Africa: Opportunities to embrace multiplicity of sexualities. *Progress in Human Geography*, 47(3), 377–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231168602>
- Okparanta, C. (2015). *Under the udala trees*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Okpokwasili, O. (2024). The moral implications of homosexuals (LGBT) in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 1–15.
- Tamale, S. (2014). Exploring the contours of African sexualities: Religion, law and power. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 14, 150–177.
- Walton, T. (2018). Sexual minorities and the right to culture in African states. *International Law and Politics*, 50, 1321–1362.