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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/302>

DOI: ERREUR PDO dans /localdata/www-bin/Core/Core/Db/Db.class.php L.34 : SQLSTATE[HY000] [1040] Too many connections

**Publisher**

SEPC (Société d'Etude des Pays du Commonwealth)

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 April 2018

Number of pages: 119-133

ISSN: 0395-6989

**Electronic reference**

Cédric Courtois, « “Thou Shalt not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It Is Abomination!”: Lesbian (Body-)Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) », *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 40.2 | 2018, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 05 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/302> ; DOI : ERREUR PDO dans /localdata/www-bin/Core/Core/Db/Db.class.php L.34 : SQLSTATE[HY000] [1040] Too many connections

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# “Thou Shalt not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It Is Abomination!”: Lesbian (Body-)Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)



Chinelo Okparanta’s debut novel is a lesbian *Bildungsroman* set against the backdrop of a patriarchal and homophobic society. The novel depicts the coming-of-age of Ijeoma, and her path towards self-acceptance. Both in line with writers of former generations, but also quite representative of those of her own generation, also known as the third generation of writers born after 1960, Okparanta finds her own path to give a voice to the LGBTQ community, which has been silenced for too long. Written in the aftermath of the Nigerian “Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act,” a confluence of both poetics and politics is at stake in order to explore same-sex sexuality in Nigeria, in a novel deeply anchored in the country’s history.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story entitled “Jumping Monkey Hill,” published in the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), an “African Writers Workshop” is organised by an English scholar, Edward Campbell, in South Africa. When the Senegalese participant reads the story she has written – with hindsight the reader understands the main character is a lesbian – Campbell “sa[ys] that homosexual stories of this sort weren’t reflective of Africa, really” (107-8). To which Ujunwa, the protagonist – undoubtedly Adichie’s avatar here – asks: “Which Africa?” (108)<sup>1</sup> The remaining part of the scene indicates that the white scholar belittles both Ujunwa and the Senegalese participant, and looks down on them from his “Oxford-trained Africanist” status, despite his claiming that he speaks from the point of view of someone who knows Africa and who aims at preventing writers and intellectuals from using Western grids to analyse African texts:

[Campbell] looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn’t speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. The Zimbabwean and Tanzanian and white South Africans began to shake their heads as Edward was speaking.

“This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?” Edward asked. (108)

Campbell does not explain why he believes these stories are not “reflective of Africa.” On the contrary, according to Marc Epprecht, anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s work on “boy-wifery” dating back to the 1930s – it was not published before the 1970s – attests to same-sex relationships. The posthumous publication of Evans-Pritchard’s work has led Epprecht to claim that this is “a revealing instance of homophobic self-censorship among the first generation of Africanist scholars” (“E. E. Evans” 206). Campbell seems to belong to this first generation of Africanist scholars who, in a way, refuse to face reality.

Which Africa is Campbell thinking of? In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie ventriloquizes her concern through her character Olanna when the latter wonders “[h]ow

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1. It will be relevant within the scope of this article to address the role of writers in raising awareness and in tackling new, nearly untouched subjects, sometimes in spite of the fact that they are considered taboo. The metafictional aspect at stake in Adichie’s short story points to the *Bildung* of the writer/intellectual.

much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?" (250) How to give a voice to subalterns who have been denied a way to express themselves? The recovery of the silenced voice has been the main project at the heart of Subaltern Studies, in order to "recover" the agency of subalterns. In his essay "Chandra's Death," the founder of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha, aimed at "reclaiming [...] document[s] for history" (36), in order to deliver the history of the people, therefore clearly emphasizing a new way of dealing with History: History as seen from below. Subalternist historians have been aiming to recover the history of subaltern resistance from the perspective of the people. These historians have not shown any willingness to validate the perspectives supported by the State, perspectives – or narratives for that matter – written by elite social groups.

In light of these preliminary ideas, I would like to offer a reading of Nigerian-American writer Chinelo Okparanta's debut novel, published in 2015, and entitled *Under the Udala Trees*. The plot revolves around the coming-of-age/coming-out of the Igbo heroine, Ijeoma, who is eleven years old at the beginning of the novel which spans a period beginning in 1968, during the Nigerian civil war (1967-70),<sup>2</sup> and ending with an epilogue dated 13 January 2014.<sup>3</sup> Ijeoma's father passes away during a raid launched by the Nigerian army against Biafran rebels. She therefore grows up in a period of intense political turmoil and discovers sexuality and love with a Hausa girl, Amina, who is her age, but also, once she is an adult, with Ndidi, an Igbo woman. The novel is therefore a Nigerian lesbian *Bildungsroman*, connected to one of the most, if not the most traumatic events in Nigerian history: the civil war.<sup>4</sup> In his essay entitled "On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*" (1819), Karl Morgenstern defines the genre whose name he coined:

We may call a novel a *Bildungsroman* first and foremost on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel. The objective and work-encompassing goal of any poet who produces such a novel will be the pleasurable, beautiful, and entertaining depiction of the formative history of a protagonist who is especially suited to such a development [...]. (654-5)

Central to this definition of the genre are the focus on the masculine identity of the prototypical protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*, the emphasis on the progress made by him toward a "certain stage of completion,"<sup>5</sup> and the importance of the development of

2. When Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote *Half of a Yellow Sun* in 2006, she too offered a new (feminine) voice in the Nigerian War Novel corpus. At the end of the book (437), she provides the reader with a list of references that she has read in order to write her novel. These references attest to the overwhelming number of works about the Nigerian civil war written by men. Chinelo Okparanta falls in with these writers but she offers yet another perspective which will be analysed in this article.

3. This date is worth mentioning as we will see later.

4. Before the Nigerian civil war started, in each region – broadly speaking, the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East – the major ethnic group dominated the region: each ethnic group wished to see one of their own reach the federal level. In each region, the ethnic minorities felt alienated from the political process, thus furthering divisions based on identity, and preventing the development of a pan-Nigerian identity. It was obvious then that Nigeria was a state but certainly not a nation. Fear of being dominated by another ethnic group overcame people. Many citizens considered that the federal system, as it was then, was dysfunctional. As an outcome, the civil democratic regime was overthrown by military officers in January 1966, and then the civil war began in 1967 and lasted until 1970. The Eastern region (mainly Igbo) attempted, in vain, to secede to establish the sovereign state of Biafra. It is estimated that more than 800,000 people were killed in two and a half years.

5. The adjective "certain" carries with it the importance of taking into account different types of development. Development is multifaceted and this will have to be taken into account when applied to female development compared to the prototypical male development in the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

the reader while reading the novel. In light of this definition, *Under the Udala Trees* can be read as a *Bildungsroman* despite having a female protagonist; the androcentric view of the genre has been debunked since Morgenstern defined the genre, notably by feminist critics among whom Susan Fraiman in *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism," I would like to argue that the heroine

emerges along with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. [The hero] is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. (23-4)

In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti also parallels the construction of the hero and the construction of the world around him. However, like countless other critics who see the *Bildungsroman* as a masculine genre, Moretti does not take into account its feminine avatar. The question I would like to tackle then has to do with the manner in which Chinelo Okparanta rewrites the *Bildungsroman* by not only being in line with the tradition of this genre and, as an outcome, by taking into account its generic memory, the law of the genre, as Jacques Derrida puts it (1986), but also by getting away from this very tradition. Can the subaltern lesbian speak, or at least be given a voice, through a renegotiation of the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*? How is Nigerian patriarchy disrupted and (possibly) debunked? To what extent can the lesbian *Bildungsroman* be considered didactic and political? How do poetics and politics converge in this lesbian *Bildungsroman*?

### The Subaltern *Can* Speak: (Re)Writing the *Bildungsroman*

The *Bildungsroman* has often been called a moribund genre. David H. Miles even considers that Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) constitutes "an absolute end to the genre" (990), while Franco Moretti regards the First World War as the period which "ma[d]e [the Bildungsroman] impossible" ("A Useless Longing" 44):<sup>6</sup>

Rather than fulfilling the archetype [of the bildungsroman] the war was to shatter it, because unlike rites of passage, the war killed [...]. If one wonders about the disappearance of the novel of youth, then, the youth of 1919 – *maimed, shocked, speechless, decimated* – provide quite a clear answer. We tend to see social and political history as a creative influence on literary evolution, yet its destructive role may be just as relevant. If history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war did to the bildungsroman. ("A Useless Longing" 43-4, emphasis added).

According to the critic, the trauma – both physical and psychological – associated to the Great War seems to have put an end to the existence of the European *Bildungsroman*. However, the genre is currently being revived by subaltern groups. According to Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, who refers to the *Bildungsroman* written by disenfranchised Americans, the genre "portrays the particular identity and adjustment to problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society; it expresses their struggle for individuation" (75). I wish to argue that Okparanta's novel stages a protagonist who is a subaltern according to three criteria that interact following

6. Both remarks have to be hedged because they do not take into account *Bildungsromane* written by "minority" groups.

the theory of intersectionality: she can indeed be considered a subaltern because she's a woman, a lesbian, and an Igbo during the Nigerian civil war. As is common in the female *Bildungsroman*, Ijeoma becomes aware of the limitations to her self-construction that society imposes on her because she is a woman.

If we were to follow the taxonomic definition of the *Bildungsroman* given by Jerome Buckley and Franco Moretti, among others, the feminine experience does not fit in the theoretical framework of the genre.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while referring to the female *Bildungsroman*, feminist critic Rita Felski refers to “the historical process of women coming to consciousness of female identity as a potentially oppositional force to existing social and cultural values” (131). This “historical process” goes hand in hand with Bakhtin's above-mentioned idea, and it is interesting in the context of the publication of Okparanta's novel as Nigeria can be considered not only a patriarchal country but also a homophobic one as will be demonstrated later in this article; the construction of the protagonist's identity has to be achieved against this backdrop. According to Fraiman, the objective for a woman in the female *Bildungsroman* is to negotiate crossroads both concrete and metaphorical – “not a single path to a clear destination but [...] the endless negotiation of crossroads” (x) – and this is what is occurring in the novel under scrutiny: the path toward self-acceptance is not a smooth straight line, not teleological, unlike what the memory of the genre seems to postulate.

The novel is a first-person narrative where the narrator is the teller of her own story; she constructs her story. Internal narration helps the reader identify and sympathize with the heroine as explained by Kathryn Simpson, who offers a reading of Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*:<sup>8</sup> “[the use of internal narrators] is crucial in disarming any hostility or negative response to [the] lesbian identity” (63). This aspect is crucial as we will see further down. Through the character of Ijeoma, Okparanta ventriloquizes a message which targets Nigerian readers, and she gives a voice to those who have always been ostracized, relegated to the margins, in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and in Nigeria in particular: a voice is therefore given to the LGBTQ community as mentioned in the “Author's Note”: “This novel attempts to give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history” (325). Ijeoma's voice represents “the small voice of history” (Guha 2010) during the civil war.

According to Jerome Buckley (17) and Marianne Hirsch, in the male *Bildungsroman*, love affairs have a formative role for the protagonist. Hirsch writes:

The novel's other characters fulfill several fixed functions. [...] [*L*]overs provide the opportunity for the education of sentiment. (In the novel of formation these figures are subordinated to the protagonist in contrast to the social novel where a number of characters provide equal centers of interest.) (298)

7. Indeed, all the novels Buckley addresses in his study were written by men, save for *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot that he reads as “a sort of contrapuntal *Bildungsroman*, comparing and contrasting hero and heroine as each moves into young adulthood” (97). Susan Fraiman accuses Buckley of androcentricity in the choice of novels he made for his study (2). The idea according to which the *Bildungsroman* is a masculine genre has not only been conveyed by primary texts but also by literary critics.

8. It bears noting that the coming-of-age of both heroines in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* – a novel with countless autobiographical elements – and *Under the Udala Trees*, has to be achieved against a very religious backdrop. Both titles contain a reference to a fruit; it is beyond the scope of this article to address this issue, but intertextuality seems to be at stake, tending to prove that Okparanta falls in with a (Western) lesbian literary tradition.

However, there is little doubt that in a patriarchal society it cannot be the case for women. Indeed, as Ellen Morgan argues,

[t]he female protagonists who did grow as selves were generally *halted and defeated before they reached transcendent selfhood*. They committed suicide or died; *they compromised by marrying and devoting themselves to sympathetic men*; they went mad or into some kind of retreat and seclusion from the world. (184, emphasis added)

The elements which have been highlighted in Morgan's quotation do appear in the novel under scrutiny. For indeed, the grammar school teacher – who accepts to take care of Amina, a Hausa orphan, and of Ijeoma, who has temporarily been left by her mother in order for the latter to start building a new life elsewhere – interrupts the sexual intercourse between Ijeoma and Amina. When they are together in the shed that they have been allotted in order to sleep, Ijeoma the narrator remembers and describes the following sexual scene, which is perceived from the point of view of Ijeoma the character:

Slowly she made her way to my chest. We'd never gone farther than the chest. But now she gently removed my nightgown, and then removed hers. She cupped her hands around my breasts, took turns with them, fondling and stroking and caressing with her tongue. I felt the soft tug of her teeth on the peaks of my chest. Euphoria washed over me.

She continued along, leaving a trail of kisses on her way down to my belly. She traveled farther, beyond the belly, farther than we had ever gone. I moaned and surrendered myself to her. I did not until then know that a mouth could make me feel that way when placed in that part of the body where I had never imagined a mouth to belong.

The knock snapped us back to reality. (123-4)

The overwhelming presence of monosyllabic words points to the intensity of the pleasure felt by Ijeoma, furthered by the verb “moan.” More interestingly even, transgression is clearly inscribed in this passage with the repetition of the comparative form “farther,” indicating a geographical transgression, an idea backed by the transgression of a taboo (“I had never imagined a mouth to belong [there]”) with quite euphemistic terms since the genitals are not explicitly mentioned. Transgression is highly pleasurable for Ijeoma and Amina. However, the disruption of this highly intense moment is not only audible though the plosive /k/ in the next sentence but also visible thanks to the typographical blank on the page pointing to what has been called an “arrested development” by Jed Esty, i.e. their illicit sexual intercourse is interrupted by a patriarchal figure, a man who is also someone who represents authority and is the guardian of morality: a teacher. The latter shames them and this moment is reminiscent of the “Book of Genesis”: “We were naked, and we felt our nakedness as Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden [...]. He lectured and he lectured, and he lectured. As God must have lectured Eve” (125). The two characters are described as the original couple: a rewriting of the Biblical text is therefore at stake.

*Under the Udala Trees* explicitly stages several instances of lesbian sexual intercourse, unlike what Elleke Boehmer argues appears in some more timid fiction, something she calls “implicit queerness” (“Versions” 117) which may be found in Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* (2005) for instance. Homosexuality is not depicted as an ideal to reach but the *queer* approach opens up different – and perfectly acceptable – possibilities of being, as explained by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made)

to signify monolithically” (8). Everyday activities, such as “chatting, or plaiting hair” (Okparanta, *Under* 124), may also carry erotic innuendos. In *Stories of Women*, Elleke Boehmer has argued that female chatter, small talk, allows “women [to] share their woes and confirm female bonds [...]; they also translate their lives into a medium which they control.” She has also suggested that women’s discourse “can be interpreted not only as a way of life but as a mode of self-making” (98). Amina and Ijeoma are making themselves as they chat together, and they confirm female bonds by plaiting hair, a feminine activity from which men are most of the time excluded – at least so it was at the time when the story is set. These intimate moments – a poetics and politics of (black) hair is at stake here – can enable women to disrupt the patriarchal discourse.

After the grammar school teacher has found out about the two teenagers, Ijeoma’s mother comes to pick up her daughter. The mother’s main aim is to make her daughter change by brandishing the Bible and making her study very specific passages from it because she “believed so much that there was a demon in [her daughter]” (59). Pages 90 and 91 are saturated with Biblical passages which interrupt the narration of Ijeoma and Amina’s story, putting a (temporary) end to the alternative her-story in order for “[t]he wonderful power of our glorious and Almighty God!” (92) to prevail. In the same manner, Jude Dibia in his debut novel, *Walking with Shadows* (2005), showcases the religious justification often put forth in order to discredit homosexuality. It is considered the first Nigerian novel to put forth a *queer* protagonist, called Adrian Njoko. Adrian’s brother, Chiedu, wields the authority of the holy text: “homosexuals [...] God forbids it! The law says it’s a felony for a man to practice sodomy” (50). Adrian’s wife will echo this by stating that “[e]ven God forbids the act” (108). We can consider that Okparanta purposely interacts with Dibia. She might be said to go further than him because unlike Dibia – or Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) – she does not deal with the attraction felt by the protagonist for a white person (Antonio in Dibia’s novel), but with the attraction between two Nigerians, Ijeoma and Amina. The mother – but also the State – are not satisfied with a simple teaching of the holy Word: they brainwash the LGBTQ community as embodied by Ijeoma in order to better discipline and punish – to use Michel Foucault’s words in *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (1975) – these indocile individuals who yield to their sexual drives. The mother promotes patriarchal and heterosexual values among which lesbianism has no place whatsoever: “There’s nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul” (65). Because her husband died during a raid, Ijeoma’s mother symbolizes this patriarchal authority which she has interiorized; she aims at submitting Ijeoma to heteronormativity or to what Adrienne Rich famously called “compulsory heterosexuality.” The novel uses one Biblical passage several times, a passage that is often quoted by those who oppose homosexuality: “Leviticus 18: Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination!” (75) However, Ijeoma does not take these commands at face value:

Bible stories and thoughts of their potential as allegories were beginning to invade my mind. [...] I wondered about the Bible as a whole. Maybe the entire thing was just a history of a certain culture, specific to that particular time and place, which made it hard for us now to understand, and which maybe even made it not applicable for us today. [...] I was excited by my thoughts. (82-3).

She contests the Word, refuses to read the Bible literally, and is thrilled at these transgressive ideas. In this novel, what is at stake is a willingness on the part of both the

grammar-school teacher and Ijeoma's mother to wipe out any trace of lesbianism in the two teenagers: "He and his wife would do their part in *straightening* her out, and Mama would do her part in *straightening* me out" (129, emphasis added). The presence of a parallel syntax and the use of the word "part" (could it mean "role" here?) may echo Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The polysemy of the verb "straighten" is fruitful and repeated by the narrator because the "straightening" of the gay citizens is central for society: to straighten could not only mean putting someone on the right path here, but also making someone straight, meaning heterosexual, two ideas which actually go hand in hand in a patriarchal society. This aspect also appears earlier in the novel when Ijeoma writes that "[she] wanted to ask God to help [her] turn [her] thoughts away from Amina, to turn [her] instead onto the path of *righteousness*" (72, emphasis added), a passage that clearly indicates that she has interiorized a patriarchal world view whose shackles she will have to rid herself of.

### Disrupting and Debunking Patriarchy

*Under the Udala Trees* is a disruptive novel right from the title. The udala fruit is a symbol of female fertility: in fact, legend indicates that spirit children gather above udala trees when they have had enough of floating between the world of the dead and that of the living. In exchange, women who come and stay under the udala trees are bound to be exceptionally fertile. This *Bildungsroman*, most of the time perceived as a masculine genre as we have already posited, is subverted ("under"): the novel is clearly set in the feminine realm from the very beginning. Ijeoma "felt anger [and wanted] to retract [her]self from any longer being a *pawn*. [She] could *seize back control* of [her]self just by opening [her] mouth and speaking [her] mind" (213, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> Here, Ijeoma wishes to move from passivity to action, one of the criteria that determines whether or not a *Bildungsprozess* is successful (Suleiman 65).

Women in the novel do not need men in order to reach orgasm. They define pleasure outside the masculine law. Masturbation is also presented as a satisfying alternative to compulsory heterosexuality, "debunking the widely accepted notion that penile coitus is solely responsible for women's sexual pleasure" (Zabus, *Out* 104). Sex with men is depicted as an ordeal and certainly does not lead to any kind of pleasure whatsoever. A re-conquest of the female body – what Stella Bolaki has called "body *Bildung*" (30) – is put to the fore and the novel showcases female sexual autonomy. When she sees Amina for the first time, by simply looking at her, Ijeoma transgresses patriarchal rules whereby

9. We could possibly see an implicit reference to the straightening of (black) hair as well. Adichie's *Americanah* addresses this issue in an interesting manner. The protagonist, Ifemelu, writes a blog about race in America but it is a minor character, Wambui, who comes up with the idea that "[r]elaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do" (208). Admittedly this is a different context both geographically and temporally, but this politics of hair is highly ambivalent, as it is a way to confirm bonds between women, but also to lock them up "in a cage." Also worthy of interest is the polysemy allowed by the word "straight" regarding the perception of homosexuality as a form of mental disease: people "suffering from" it would need to be put in a *straitjacket* in order to be controlled.

10. However, she sometimes realises that this resistance is utopian: "That night, I saw the foolishness of my resistance in his [her husband's] words. *Just let me know when you feel ready*. I knew in my mind that I might never feel ready. There was no sense prolonging my resistance. Anyway, better to have one person miserable rather than two" (238). The sense of sacrifice for Chibundu's happiness is clear in this passage.

staring is a masculine prerogative: “The moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her” (105). Indeed, according to John Berger,

*men act and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. [...] The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (40-1, original emphasis)

Ijeoma also compares Amina to a water goddess, expressing here some form of same-sex desire: “Her hair hung in long clumps around her face, like those images of Mami Wata, hair writhing like serpents” (105). The alliteration in /h/ could point to the sounds of pleasure, the moaning sounds, that will be produced during the sexual intercourse between the two teenagers; the mere sight of Amina makes Ijeoma feel short of breath. Homoerotic passages pervade the text and climax in a shared moment of daily life, particularly when the two teenagers prepare dinner: “That evening, Amina and I peeled the yams together, rinsed them together, our fingers brushing against each other’s in the bowl” (106). Peeling yams carries here an extremely sensual and/or sexual connotation, and the idea of a lesbian couple is undoubtedly conveyed.

However, there are some compromises in this *Bildungsroman*, compromise being identified as a key factor of the genre by Moretti: “The myth of bourgeois opportunity has little place for the middle-class female protagonist, and to reinvent the genre around her is to recognize a set of stories in which compromise and even coercion are more strongly thematised than choice” (*The Way* 6). Towards the middle of the novel, Ijeoma accepts to marry a man, Chibundu, who used to be one of her friends when she was a child. She thus seems to yield to the afore-mentioned compulsory heterosexuality: “I looked at Chibundu, I nodded, and, wordlessly, I accepted his ring” (221). Marriage is often identified as the classic end in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, indicating the pact sealed with society. However here, this is the moment when silence and “claustrophobia” (222) start for Ijeoma: she feels “trapped in her own body,” (243) “like a coffin: [she] felt a hollowness in [her] and a rattling at [her] seams” (196). In another noteworthy passage (222-3), Ijeoma is about to marry Chibundu. To be more precise, she is married off to him by her mother. Despite the concerns she expresses as regards the institution of marriage – a moment that is often described as the most beautiful day in a woman’s life – she feels discomfort both physical – “Sweat formed on my forehead” (222) – and mental – “There was a bit of claustrophobia in its embrace” (222). The whole chapter, dealing with marriage, ends with a subversion of all the things that are usually perceived as the best parts in a wedding ceremony: “Soon I was going through the sermon, the prayers, the kiss, the handshakes, the smiles, the nods, and the tangential congratulations. Because that’s what you do when you find yourself married to a man who both logic and your mother insist is the right man for you” (223). This passage puts forth a depersonalization process, a sort of dissociative moment when Ijeoma and her other self (the part that she seems to be acting/performing) are no longer unified. This can be considered a rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* since the genre clearly lays the emphasis on the existence of a sovereign, unified self which is identified in the traditional *Bildungsroman* by Pin-Chia Feng (41) for example. Once she gives birth to a baby girl, Chibundu is not satisfied because this daughter cannot pass his name onto future generations: he wants a boy, and again here is the reason why Ijeoma accepts to have sex with him: “I now felt Chibundu’s hostage [...]. If he would only get his son, then maybe I would

finally be excused from any more of those nighttime obligations. Maybe I could finally be released from this captivity of a marriage" (304). Ijeoma is ready to let her husband make love to her for one reason: "But I knew full well that he also held the key to my only imaginable escape. Perhaps by making me a mother, he would save me. Maybe motherhood would make me feel more invested in the marriage" (242). Here, giving birth to a boy is a way to obtain freedom. However, quite symptomatically and symbolically, her pregnancy ends up in a m[isc]arriage, sealing the inadequacy of the couple that Chibundu and herself form.

However, the novel goes beyond a simplistic rejection of marriage. The institution is not presented as necessarily dysfunctional. There is another form of marriage that seems to be working, but it is not a heterosexual one, it is a homosexual one, with Ndidi (of course there is no marriage *per se* but it feels like one according to the narrator).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this lesbian *Bildungsroman* aims to rewrite the pattern of the genre which classically ends with a marriage, in order to question it.

In this novel, female empowerment is mainly achieved through a lesbian sexuality. A declaration of sexual independence is at stake – in a society where it is believed that "a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all" (181). The exploration of the body is clearly one of the core issues, and an aesthetic of lesbian pleasure is highlighted, showing to the readers that there is no point in denying the existence of homosexuality. Okparanta is very critical of the heteronormative discourse that lies at the very foundation of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Her novel normalizes homosexuality.

### The Lesbian *Bildungsroman*: A Political and Didactic Form?

Okparanta interrupts the patriarchal discourse since her novel is partly a (Biafra) war novel, most of them having been written by men – two notable exceptions being Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), among others – making this category a mainly male preserve. With *Under the Udala Trees*, a clear inscription of the female voice inside the national narrative takes place. The "National Question"<sup>12</sup> is referred to in the novel: for Okparanta, a possibility

11. This type of marriage might point to what British anthropologist Sylvia Leith-Ross observed, that is to say a fluidity as regards sexual practices among the Igbo ethnic group, to which Ijeoma and Ndidi – and Okparanta – belong: "I could not get them to explain themselves fully. This is to be regretted as I had occasionally caught glimpses of some peculiar conception of sex or of a thread of bi-sexuality running through everything [...] or of a lack of differentiation between the sexes – or of an acceptance of the possibility of the transposition of sex – which it could have been interesting to study" (101). As explained by Zabus, "Female husbands in the Igbo context, then and now, are generally widows without a male offspring, who take on 'wives' to produce heirs for their husbands' lineages" (*Out* 45). What Zabus calls "female Igbo gender bending" (*Out* 46) seems to be at stake in Ijeoma and Ndidi's union. Indeed, a specific form of same-sex marriage has been practiced among the Igbos – and other ethnic groups – since before the advent of colonialism. This type of "marriage" has nothing to do with a lesbian marriage, since no sexual relationship is at stake. These women are married for social and legal reasons. Woman marriage has served traditionally in order to exercise social influence in patriarchal societies in which, by definition, inheritance and succession is patrilineal. By marrying, it is possible for women to become the heads of their households and thus gain social status. One good example of female husbandry is when an older woman, who is beyond child-bearing age, who has never married, and is childless, decides to become a female husband because she might want a child to inherit her wealth and her property. In order for inheritance to be ensured, she can look for a younger woman and pay the bride price before the younger woman agrees to marry her and bear her children, who she will have with any man she wishes, or a man chosen by the female husband. The paying of the bride price enables the female husband to obtain the same rights over the children as a "classic" husband. However, Okparanta seems to rewrite this practice by showing that sex, rather than lineage, can be at stake in such a union.

12. The "National Question" arises from the extreme diversity that Nigeria represents as regards ethnic groups, with more than 400 languages spoken. It has been a concern since the independence of the country in 1960. Indeed, how is it possible to build a national feeling when there are so many differences – whether they be religious, linguistic or

to live with, to love even, someone from another ethnic group, exists. Not only does Ijeoma's mother refuse her daughter's lesbianism but she also cannot understand her attraction to a Hausa and, as a result, she quotes the Bible once more in order to prove that the holy text does not accept the mingling of Igbos and Hausas: "*Leviticus 19: Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment of linen and woolen come upon thee*" (76, original emphasis). The *Bildung* of the individual parallels the national *Bildung*<sup>13</sup> as exemplified in the following passage where General Yakubu Gowon, who was the head of State in Nigeria from 1966 to 1975, is attributed these words when the civil war ends: "[...] [T] he tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again we have an opportunity to build a new nation [...]" (116). This is part of a speech addressed to the citizens of Nigeria that Gowon delivered on 15 January 1970. Official history joins fiction, and I would argue that allegorically, the union that Ijeoma, as an Igbo, and Amina, as a Hausa, form, could allegorically represent the "One Nigeria! One Nigeria!" (116) that Hausa soldiers are calling for at the end of the war, but which seems to be extremely difficult to achieve, even in the twenty-first century. Indeed, according to Helon Habila in his latest non-fictional work *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2017): "because these divisions predate the birth of the nation, most people here – and this is true to a large extent in other parts of the country – are always *Muslim or Christian first, ethnic affiliation second, and Nigerian third*" (68, emphasis added).

Added to the disruption of the male discourse on the civil war, Okparanta's novel can be read as a response to the representation of homosexuals in Nigerian fiction, as exemplified by Wole Soyinka's African-American mulatto professor, Joe Golder, in *The Interpreters* (1965). Golder is depicted as a lecherous and predatory figure; homosexuality is in a way described as un-African since he is not an African character *per se*: he has been "sullied" by Western practices. Black homosexuality seems to be only imaginable in a diasporic context for Soyinka in this novel in particular.<sup>14</sup> Ijeoma's mother sees her daughter's lesbianism as a disease, as indicated in the following passage: "You will be *cured* by the glory and power of God" (89, emphasis added). Chantal Zabus explains that "[h]omosexuality is still thought to be not only 'un-African' but also a highly suspicious import from the deviant West" ("Out" 251). Okparanta's text disrupts the patriarchal discourse on homosexuality and displaces the lesbian character from her initial place at the margins to the centre, thus destabilizing the male discourse.

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cultural in general – among people? The divide between the North and the South of Nigeria is exemplified by the couple that Ijeoma and Amina form: indeed, while Ijeoma speaks English properly, Amina has difficulties to do so. This fact can be explained by the different ways the North and the South have been ruled by British colonial authorities: indirect rule was carried out differently in the two protectorates. Islam was kept in the North and so was Koranic education; the South was Christianized, with a heavy emphasis on a Western education with the teaching of English, while it was not the case in the North.

13. According to Marxist critic Fredric Jameson in his article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," the post-colonial text has to be read allegorically: applied to the *Bildungsroman*, this theory points to the parallel evolution of the hero/heroine and the nation. This generalization is problematic and cannot be applied to all "third-world" texts but *Under the Udala Trees* lends itself to such a reading.

14. Mark Mathuray, among others, has sought to bring out the complexities of Soyinka's novel and this protagonist in "Intimacies between men: modernism, African homosexualities and masculinist anxieties in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*." This study goes against a homophobic interpretation of Soyinka's characterization of Joe Golder. I nevertheless argue that this gay character not being Nigerian – or African more generally – but African-American is significant.

I would like to further argue that Okparanta elaborates a poetics and politics of queerness. Ijeoma, Amina, and Ndidi achieve subjecthood through same-sex relationships although at times the construction of their subjectivity is slowed down due to the environment in which they live. They may suffer from a form of trauma, resulting from their confrontation with their environment and pointing to a form of vulnerability which they may embrace – or not – in their “process of becoming” (Bakhtin 21): “At the moment when I had found a community that should have been a source of support and security, an unexpected source of self-loathing flared up. [...] Self-purification was the goal” (196).<sup>15</sup>

The novel has to be read in light of the current political evolution of anti-gay rhetoric in Nigeria but also sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, an anti-gay rhetoric that is at the heart of the politicians' concerns. Indeed, on 7 January 2014, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act was implemented in Nigeria, expanding on deeply-rooted colonial era sodomy laws, and whereby same-sex couples who live together can be sentenced to 14 years in prison. Okparanta's use of a lesbian character can be perceived as a militant act judging from the overwhelming pressures that this community undergoes especially on the part of religious zealots.<sup>16</sup> After the grammar school teacher discovers the two teenagers in the scene we mentioned before, the narrator writes:

He had heard of such cases, in which the accused [homosexuals] were stoned all the way to the river. Stoned even as they drowned in the waters of the river. Of course, it was rare that such cases were spoken of. So taboo the whole thing was, anathema, unmentionable not even deserving a name. (125)

This is reminiscent of Lord Alfred Douglas's poem “Two Loves” written in 1892 and in which an indirect reference to homosexuality is made – “the love that dare not speak its name” (28) – linked to the case of Oscar Wilde. Later in the novel, during the party that the discreet lesbian community has organized, some people arrive and decide to purify the place: most of the women manage to hide in the cellar. When they come out, they have to face sheer horror:

We had hardly walked two yards when we saw, in the backyard of the church, a flame of orange and blue. A stack of burning logs. Ndidi began to cry, and then all of us were crying too, because we had all seen what remained of the face, and we had all recognized her: Adanna in the midst of the logs, burning and burning and turning to ashes right before our eyes. (208-9)

A link can be made between the burning of the Igbos during the civil war – to which the text also refers – and the burning of homosexuals: both have gone or are going through a genocide.

As already alluded to, some African leaders use the holy books in order to address the “perversion” that homosexuality represents for them, and according to Mary Mo-

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15. We could see an intertextual reference to Oscar Wilde here: the Irish writer referred to same-sex attractions as “forms of sexual madness,” “diseases to be cured by a physician rather than crimes to be punished by a judge” in his “Letter to the Home Secretary of Her Majesty Queen Victoria” (1896; qtd. in Zabuz, *Om* 100). Ijeoma's will to “purify” herself comes from the internalization of the link between heterosexuality and normality, homosexuality and abnormality.

16. It goes without saying that it is easier for Okparanta to write such a story when we know that she is based in the USA, where she arrived when she was 11 years old. The problematic question of Okparanta's African readership also has to be asked. What validity do these attempts to give the subaltern a voice have when the initiative is launched from a location situated at the very heart of Western power?

dupa Kolawole, homosexuality is “completely strange to their world view” (15). According to them, homosexuality is “un-African,” a sort of disease that was brought to Africa during colonization.<sup>17</sup> Politicians invent scapegoats to displace social anxieties. Therefore, society needs to be purified. The condemnations of the West only reinforce the rejection of homosexuality: change has to come from the inside and this is precisely the goal of this didactic *Bildungsroman*. At the end of the novel, Ndidi and Ijeoma do form a couple who raise Ijeoma’s daughter, because Ijeoma has divorced Chibundu. Yet, they are not a couple in the open because of the risks this could represent for them. Being homosexual in a heterosexist society – not necessarily in sub-Saharan Africa, it goes without saying – carries with it great threats as explained by John Rechy:

We [homosexuals] become strangers in a strange land, sinners in the eyes of religionists, criminals in the eyes of some lawmakers – that is, outlaws. That early separation forces the homosexual into roles and camouflage in order to survive a hostile environment. In later life that separation defines a prominent aspect of the gay sensibility. It includes a terrific sense of dramatic representation that veers at times toward extremity. We might even call it gay theater. (124)

The members of the LGBTQ community have no choice but to pretend, to pass themselves off as people who they are not really, to act, in order to simply survive. The didactic aspect of the genre was identified by Karl Morgenstern as we have seen at the beginning of this article, but also by Marianne Hirsch (298), who argues that the *Bildungsroman* participates in the *Bildung* of the reader. Several examples appear in the novel:

Just because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history [Ijeoma is referring to Adam and Eve], why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? Infinite possibilities, and each of them perfectly viable. (83)

This passage puts to the fore an interior monologue in which Ijeoma shares her thoughts with the reader. The questions which are asked have a clear goal: triggering a reflection process in the reader in order for the latter to start questioning what is presented as unquestionable truth about homosexuality by both religious authorities and the State. Also part of this didactic aim, hope is found in the protagonist’s mother’s final acceptance of her daughter’s lesbianism, indicating a better future for the LGBTQ community.<sup>18</sup> It seems that Okparanta attempts to take Jude Dibia up on his wish to imagine a new Nigeria where people “would be more receptive and less judgmental than they were now” (Dibia 253) as regards homosexuality, since Ijeoma and Ndidi remain in Nigeria while other African short stories or novels addressing LGBTQ issues – *Walking with Shadows* included – end in Europe or in America, seen as Eldorados for the community (whether this is true or false is not the point here). This novel also aims to reach an end

17. This is an idea that was already expressed by colonialist Sir Frederick Jackson (1930) when he wrote that homosexuality is absent in Africa because of the “good sense of the natives and their disgust toward the bestial vices practiced by Orientals” (Qtd. in Epprecht, *Heterosexual* 771). One of the examples that can be provided comes from notorious Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe who, in 2002, described homosexuals as “mad person[s] [...] we don’t want to import it [homosexuality] to our country, we have our own culture, our own people” (qtd. in Zabus *Out* 3).

18. In *Walking with Shadows*, Jude Dibia uses an epigraph by Alfred North Whitehead: “What is morality in any given time and place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like, and immorality is what they dislike.” Chantal Zabus affirms that “[t]his pronouncement which the famous English mathematician-cum-philosopher made on 17 August 1941 is very much in keeping with Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is a recurrent text in filigree in [...] various West African novels [...]” (*Out* 96).

to the “single story” – to use Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s words in her 2009 TED Talk – of homophobia in Africa whereby the LGBTQ community would be particularly targeted on the African continent. Acceptance can be found, and hope certainly is part of Ndidi and Ijeoma’s world view:

Some of those nights when we are together in bed, Ndidi wraps her arms around me. She molds her body around mine and whispers in my ear about a town where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani. Ndidi describes the town, all its trees and all the colors of its sand. She tells me in great detail about the roads, the directions in which they run, from where and to where they lead.

“What is the name of the town?” I ask. [...]

[...] You see, this place will be all of Nigeria.” (321)

The use of the present tense inscribes this moment in the immediate environment of the reader. The couple Ndidi and Ijeoma embody attests to the possibility of a coexistence and to the greatness that all sorts of couples could represent. The repetition of the conjunction “and” makes all kinds of possibilities intermingle, whether they be sexual possibilities, or ethnic ones. Desiring a better future, daydreaming as Ernst Bloch identifies in *The Principle of Hope*, function as utopian forerunners and anticipations of a future society where oppression will have disappeared and happiness will have become prevalent. This iconoclastic Utopian impulse is also a militant act.

In her debut novel, Chinelo Okparanta proposes a rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* whose androcentric leaning has long been pointed out by literary critics. By staging a lesbian protagonist, and by describing a very feminine world view, she manages to prove that the subaltern can indeed speak. Although the protagonist, as a female, but above all as a lesbian, has to face many hurdles in her “process of becoming,” she nevertheless succeeds in reaching a “certain stage of completion,” to go back to Karl Morgenstern’s definition of the *Bildungsroman* genre, by questioning the patriarchal and religious values she is presented with. Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and her short story “America” – published in the short story collection *Happiness Like Water* (2013) – both stage lesbian protagonists who, despite the threats against the LGBTQ community, finally remain in Nigeria to live their lives as freely as they can. This attests to one of the central objectives in the writing of a *Bildungsroman*, i.e. an emphasis on the reader’s development thanks to the possible identification he/she may feel with the protagonist. Written in the aftermath of a strengthening of an anti-gay law in Nigeria, *Under the Udala Trees* thus combines poetics and politics and explores the ethical role of literature.

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