FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

“ADAM AND EVE, NOT EVE AND EVE”?

TOWARDS A SPACE FOR THE CHRISTIAN LEGITIMACY OF FEMALE SAME-SEX LOVE IN CHINELO OKPARANTA’S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

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Acknowledgements

My fascination for literatures has increased during my years as a student of African studies. The courses on literatures in African contexts convinced me of the importance of text as an art form to express experiences and voices that would otherwise remain silent or unheard. As part of the course on Gender and Identity in African Literatures, instructed by Prof. dr. Inge Brinkman, I analysed Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). This study offered me an insight into the crucial importance of the voices and representations of women in the literary canon. The novel's clear representations of female experiences of pleasure, pain and suffering, which are often taboo, widened my imagination of realities that are not my own. It provided me with the opportunity to connect with the reality of others, and to recognise familiar feelings and experiences in them. While conducting this study, I began to question the missing literary representations of women with queer desires in African contexts.

I was curious for these representations because I had close relationships with people who struggled to find their queer experiences recognised in literary texts, and especially in novels, by African writers. Soon after, I stumbled upon Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), which to my great delight not only depicted experiences of women with same-sex desires, but also entwined them with the Christian faith. Thereby, the novel emphasised the exact same questions I experienced up close. I consequently decided to offer *Under the Udala Trees* my full attention in the form of this thesis, in which I aim to represent a prophetic attempt to create a space for the legitimacy of queer women of faith.

I would like to thank the people without whom this dissertation might only have stayed an underdeveloped idea. First and foremost, my gratitude goes to my supervisor Prof. dr. Inge Brinkman, for her enthusiasm for the topic, her feedback and suggestions, and her encouraging confidence in me and my work. For their advises and proofreading of my work, I thank Marijke Driesen, Adja Sy, Gabriel Manso, Bert De Fré, Matthias Stockmans, Janne Delva and Martí Madaula Esquirol. In addition, I thank my parents, siblings, friends and fellow students, who offered me company, encouragement, advise and a safe space for the discussion of the delicate topic of this thesis. I thank Willibard Alex Kamm Jr, for his trust and the sharing of his experiences that stimulated me to write this thesis. A special gratitude goes to Shalom, who taught me faith. Finally, I thank my dear Penelope Desloovere for her love, care and her immeasurable assistance during the writing process.

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Introduction

> "Man and wife, the Bible said. It was a nice thought, but only in the limited way that theoretical things often are."

This quote from *Under the Udala Trees* (2015, 258) emphasises the limitation of theoretical Bible interpretations concerning a binary categorisation of marriage and sexuality. As a way of freeing our imaginations, Chinelo Okparanta's debut is a pioneering novel, which represents previously neglected experiences of women of faith with same-sex desire in Nigeria. By doing so, the novel re-imagines a space for the legitimacy of a subaltern group of people in an environment that systematically disapproves and stigmatises non-normative sexualities. The *bildungsroman* follows the story of an Igbo girl, Ijeoma, who grows up during the terror of the Biafran war in which she loses her dear father. When a first experience of intimate love with Amina, a war orphan, seemingly relieves her from the misery of war, her deeply devoted Christian mother is desperate to cleanse Ijeoma's soul from the so-called demon of same-sex desire. The title of this dissertation is a quotation from the mother in which her fixed interpretation of heterosexuality is clear: "Adam and Eve, not Eve and Eve" (Okparanta 2015: 150). As a result of her mother's fear of sin, Ijeoma's life story becomes a constant struggle in the liminal zone between her same-sex desire and her Christian faith, in which tragedy alternates with hope.

This thesis offers a close reading of *Under the Udala Trees*[1], with an attempt to interpret the novel as prophetic, as it negotiates a new space for the Christian legitimacy of female same-sex desire. I will analyse the re-imagination of faith, experiences of suffering, and the erotic in the novel. The illustrations of these topics form the main strategies by which the author realises the attempts to create said legitimacy. This analysis of *Under the Udala Trees* is important because it specifically emphasises the possibility of an affirmative imagination of the Christian faith for queer people, which is still interpreted as impossible by many mainstream theologies (Ndijo 2012). Although the novel already lent itself for previously conducted studies, a profound study of the hopeful interpretation of Christianity in the acceptation of queerness is still absent.

By understanding the novel as prophetic, this thesis assumes that *Under the Udala Trees* is of crucial importance for the voicing and representing of experiences by queer women of faith in an overtly

[1] Since Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) is the primary topic of this thesis, I will further logically refer to the novel without specifically mentioning the date nor the author's name.

homophobic society. A prophet is someone who essentially contests 'the powers that be' by announcing alternative ideas and imaginations (van Klinken 2016). An example is the story of Prophet Elijah of the Old Testament (1 Kings 18-17) who tried to reinstall Israel's awe for God, while the city was reigned by Jezebel who worshiped and built an altar for an outsider's god named Baal. Elijah is perceived as a troublemaker and forced into exile because he contests the authorities of that moment. Only later on, when the danger of Jezebel is clear, the impact of his prophecies is valued. In this understanding, by challenging the prevailing discourses of authority, prophets take on a queer role in society. 'Queer' is in this context explicitly understood as being positioned against the normative (van Klinken 2016). This understanding of the prophet implicitly connects 'queer', or contesting positionalities, to the positionality against the dominant heteronormative discourses that silence the voice of marginalised sexualities. People with non-heteronormative sexualities often describe themselves likewise as 'queer'. The double understanding of the term is used both ways in this work: in its contestation of powers that be and as an indication of sexual diversity. The inherent connection between prophets, queer positionality, and religion is interesting for the creation of an affirmative space for same-sex desire within Christianity. *Under the Udala Trees* is understood as prophetic, since it emphasises the ground-breaking techniques to normalise same-sex desire in a Christian environment. The taboo engaged with in the novel are mainly connected to the representation of embodied experiences of pleasure and pain, since in the novel "[t]he exploration of the body is clearly one of the core issues" (Courtois 2018: 127).

Okparanta's novel makes a clear attempt to pave a new way and proposes alternatives to normative thinking. This is not to say that the novel stands on its own: it draws from a wider literary landscape of Nigerian women writers of previous generations, who contested oppressive authorities. To name a few, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta are pioneers of alternative feminist or womanist literary traditions. In their writings, however, the subject of female same-sex desire is not yet touched upon. This has been recently changing in writings by African women (and men) who sporadically give a voice to women with same-sex desires, and counter patriarchal heterosexual normativity (Osinubi 2018; Munro 2016; Green-Simms 2016; Hewett 2005). These affirmative representations are mainly treated in the literary form of short stories (Munro 2016; Osinubi 2018). Monica Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree" (2008) is most known, especially after the re-interpretation of the story in Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki,* which was selected at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. Other short stories published before 2015 were written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin and Chinelo Okparanta. These are complemented by

stories in collections such as *Queer Africa. New and Collected Fiction* (2013) by Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba, and the narrations published in online magazines such as Q-zine.

In novels by African female authors, female queer sexuality was mainly described in an implicit way, as is the case in Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* (2005) (referred to in Zabus 2008), or it appears as a side-issue of the main plot, such as in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). Although these representations are equally important, *Under the Udala Trees* is a pioneering novel in its complete and direct devotion to same-sex desire as the main theme. At the heart of the novel is a Nigerian girl exploring her sexuality, and the struggle and acceptance of her desires, related to the Christian faith. Osinubi (2018) describes how the novel is ground-breaking because it links non-normative representations of sexuality with "multiple forms of authority that are incorporated into the fabric of the everyday" (674). He stresses the political and patriarchal elements of authority, but does not specifically engage with the significant place that Christian religious authority fulfils.

Furthermore, the works by the aforementioned African women writers, do only sporadically represent the confrontation between Christian faith and a women's queer sexuality.[2] In short stories and poems (published in literary magazines), there is some attention for the seemingly conflicting notion of faith and sexuality and we learn about the fragmented existence of queer people of faith. An interesting work is for instance the poem "No Easter Sunday For Queers" (2017) by the South-African Koleka Putuma who explicitly describes the liminal zone of fragmentation. As a novel, *Under the Udala Trees* stands out, especially as it attempts to create the opportunity of a positive interpretation of a Christian experience by a queer person. The importance and the prophetic power of the novel are highlighted by Courtois (2018: 120) who argues that as a *bildungsroman* it "promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel."

In the attempt to shed light on the prophetic character of *Under The Udala Trees*, this study is questioning primarily which strategies the novel employs to imagine a Christian space for the legitimacy of female same-sex desire in a Nigerian or an even wider African context. This central question is borrowed from Nonhlanhla Dlamini's (2016) study of Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, which analysed

[2] In literary works concerning male same-sex desire, the connection with Christian faith is more visible. Examples are Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005) and Siya Khumalo's *You Have to Be Gay to Know God* (2018)

Duiker's strategies for the normalisation and the creation of a legitimacy of queerness. Dlamini (2016) closely studied the angles of mythological divinity and madness. Although I use a similar research question, I emphasise other angles of Okparanta's strategies that contribute to a Christian affirmation of queer people. With this study, I aim to find a connection between the representation of Christian faith, embodied and psychological experiences of struggle, and experiences of the erotic.

My study further examines the representations of juxtaposed perspectives on Christian faith related to same-sex desire in the novel. How do these narratives correspond with queer, grassroots and academic theologies? The depiction of Ijeoma's embodied experiences of pain and erotic pleasure the Ijeoma are often described in remarkably explicit ways. The straightforward description of sexual pleasure and suffering is, especially for female, leave alone queer, experiences, all but a recent phenomenon in African female writing that contributes to women empowerment (Green-Simms 2016; Veit-Wild & Naguschewski 2011; Hewett 2005).

From the main question, a number of sub-questions can be formulated. The following sub-questions attempt to emphasise the prophetic relation between Christian faith, experiences of pain and experiences of pleasure. How are the representations of experiences used to create space for a legitimacy? How does the novel describe these feelings in relation with divinity and faith? In which ways are these embodied feelings of pleasure represented so that they bring forth a more positive imagination of queer existence in Christian faith?

Methodology

Close Reading

The analysis of this study is methodologically achieved through a close reading of the corpus, which consists simply of *Under the Udala Trees*. This means practically that it is primarily based on profound reading or careful observation of the text with attention to linguistic features (Smith 2016). Because this method is based upon observation, it principally departs from personal interpretations. The importance of close reading as a tool for literary studies is by some scholars questioned. Since it departs from interpretation, it is perceived to lack definitive scientific evidence. Jockers, for instance, argues that "interpretation is fuelled by observations, and as a method of evidence gathering, observation … is flawed" (Jockers qtd. by Smith 2016: 66). He explains that observation is not only flawed, but the importance given to this tool for literary analysis is overvalued because the accessibility of large corpora

has grown exponentially, which would enable the creation of more statistical evidence and, in his view, more definitive results.

For my investigation however, gathering numerical data is not the aim. Instead of tracking broader quantitative themes or tropes, I attempt to connect specific ways of representing key issues in the novel, such as faith, desire, pain and confusion. I conduct this by closely observing how these topics are described and in which contexts they take place. Although close reading is far from the only method for literary studies, it does provide a way to interpret the achievements of the text especially regarding these topics. Instead of offering definitives, Smith (2016: 68) argues that close reading, and especially, "the grounding in personal observation and experience opens the possibility of shareable insights, and of connection to shareable experiences, which is what motivates our interest in a literary interpretation as such." Because of the provision of shareable insights and reflections on text, it opens a way to reflect on topics and imaginations that are "otherwise remote" (Smith 2016: 70). Nolan (1999: 46) likewise argues that

> "what close reading can do is to show us the choices that a writer makes along the way, the small but ultimately essential elements of a text that lead us toward its larger meaning. No one would want to be without the theoretical tools that our time has given us, but neither do we want to discard willy-nilly an earlier method whose history has been so illustrious."

Especially with regards to the delicate topic of experiences of same-sex desire, and even more in relation with religion and faith, this capacity of close reading and the attention for microfeatures, is crucial for a text like *Under the Udala Trees*. My analysis, however, has to be conducted within a broader contextual study that draws from secondary literature. Secondary literature opens the possibility to compare personal interpretations with those of others, and provides the discussed text with a broader contextual background.

Secondary Literature

The study of secondary literature is crucial for a thorough analysis of the text. *Under the Udala Trees* is quite a recent novel which has lent itself, though limited in number, for profound readings and criticism. Taiwo Osinubi (2018) describes the necessity and the brilliance of the novel in "The Promise of Lesbians in African Literary History". He thoroughly analyses the connection of sexuality with politics and authority in which he argues that *Under the Udala Trees* offers hope through various techniques such

as the generational shift to a same-sex desiring mother, and the important position of teachers, which implies a generational shift. The first teacher, of Ijeoma's father's age, is the first adult who condemns her desire for another girl. The relation between teachers and condemnation changes when Ijeoma starts a relationship with Ndidi, a school teacher who has a progressive prospect on queer love. Later, this change is emphasised with Ijeoma's daughter who becomes a teacher and likewise affirms queer love. Another strategy of hope Osinubi (2018) argues for, is the use of sexuality in the mundane sphere. In addition, he draws connections between the narrative structures in Okparanta's novel and those seen in previous ground-breaking novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1984). This gives a useful insight into the construction of the plot, and in how Okparanta creates a space for the story of female same-sex desire within the framework of previous works. The novel attempts to add a story to Achebe's praised narrative in which it reshapes the hetero-patriarchal binaries his work illustrated (Osinubi 2018).

In addition, a relevant discussion of the normalisation of women's same-sex desire in *Under the Udala Trees* is found in ""Thou Shalt not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It Is Abomination!": Lesbian (Body-) *Bildung* in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)" by Cédric Courtois (2018). His study emphasises the refutation of political and patriarchal authority in the form of same-sex desire. It defines Okparanta's novel as a feminist rewriting of the *bildungsroman*, which was initially a male-centred genre. Similarly to my thesis, Courtois (2018) stresses the importance of the representation of the body and its sexuality as empowering factors against a dominant patriarchy, which is according to him both found in the political structures and in those of Christian religion.

Although both readings by Osinubi (2018) and Courtois (2018) are essential to contextualising the novel and its capacities on a political field, the importance of a Christian space for the legitimacy of the existence of queer women of faith is almost absent. Courtois (2018), for instance, primarily addresses the suffocating dominance of religion in the story. He emphasises the protagonist's reluctance to blindly accept the condemning Bible interpretations. My dissertation, however, aspires to emphasise the importance of the Christian faith of the queer protagonist. Complementary to the rejection of the religious patriarchal binary constructions, I highlight the positive, empowering and unifying capacities of Christianity for queer people, as expressed in *Under the Udala Trees*.

The discussion of the theological legitimacy of same-sex desire in African contexts is found in a wide range of studies conducted by Adriaan van Klinken. In "Autobiographical Storytelling and African

Narrative Queer Theology" (2018), he specifically emphasises the importance of writing and creating theologies that stretch further than the currently dominant hegemonic theologies, which profess a homophobic discourse. The focus on the creation of an alternative and affirmative theology is also discussed in his studies on Zambian gay communities of faith (2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015). These studies track strategies of re-humanisation and normalisation of queer desire within Christianity, which predominantly rely on the *Imago Dei* and the interpretation of God as radical love. Furthermore, in "A Kenyan Queer Prophet: Binyavanga Wainaina's Public Contestation of Pentecostalism and Homophobia" (2016) van Klinken provides an analysis of the writings of Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, which he sees as prophetic because of their contrary character against political and religious homophobia. Van Klinken's (2016) approach provided this thesis with the image of the prophetic positionality as a premise for the analysis of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. However, here again, Wainaina, in his prophetic rhetoric, clearly distinguishes himself from Christianity. The prophetic positionality I discuss attempts to create this prophetic notion as a changing force *within* Christianity.

For substantial comparison of Christian affirmation, the thesis draws from queer theology and theological approaches that focus on the importance of love and the theological reclaim of the erotic. A general overview of queer theology is provided by Patrick Cheng in *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (2011). More crucial and radical work in this field is written by Marcella Althaus-Reid (1997; 2003; See also Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2007), who offers a framework for a queer reading of God, the experiences of marginalised believers, and the role of the human body and its relational sexual capacities for the completion of the image of God. The reclaim of the body and sexuality in experiences of faith, is additionally described in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (2010) edited by feminist theologian Margaret Kamitsuka. The theological notion of 'creation' is further established by Laurie Jungling (2010), as a means onto which the body and the erotic are exclaimed as a call from God, in "Creation as God's Call into Erotic Embodied Relationality".

In order to offer a more in-depth study of representations of the erotic, especially in the context of female same-sex desire, Audre Lorde's famed work "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1984) provides useful insights. Furthermore, Joy Bostic (2010) offers an interesting reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in which she emphasises the re-connection between body, its erotic pleasure, and spirit in a divine place or 'prophetic church'. This enables us in turn to read the connections between the erotic and sacredness. My thesis draws further on the erotic as a means of power by referring to studies

that specifically describe these erotic features in literatures by African female writers, which is offered by Courtois (2018) as described above, and by Elleke Boehmer (2005), Lindsey Green-Simms (2016) and Heather Hewett (2005). Further details of these insights regarding pleasure and faith, the body and the sacred will be provided in the course of this thesis.

A Note on the Used Terminology

In talking about non-normative sexualities, especially in an African context, there is a crucial need to be very careful with the terms used to address people whose sexual identities are not compatible with heteronormativity. The importance of the terminology is stressed by Matebeni and Msibi (2015), who argue that "language, naming and words can be deeply political" (3). The frequently used terms 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' etc., or even the acronym LGBT (and additional affixes) are fixed categorical constructs, often "considered "Eurocentric"" (Kaoma 2016: 77) and not everywhere understood in the same manner. Matebeni and Msibi (2015) illustrate this misconception with the example of Wainaina, the Kenyan figurehead with a queer sexuality, who only came across the acronym LGBT in 2014 and publicly mispronounced it as 'ligibit'. On top of that, they argue that this idea of the fixed entity of a 'homosexual' leads to problematic political misuses of power based on categories of sexuality. On the one hand, this fixed construct is a strategic means for homophobic African leaders to classify queer subjectivities as un-African, and even half-human, which would mean that these people do not have the same human rights as people who fit into heteronormativity. On the other hand, this conceptualisation provides western power entities such as governments and media operators with another tool for categorising African countries as less developed. Taking over these fixed constructed entities, often leads to the denial of the complexity of identities. Scholars like Adrienne Rich attempted to redefine the term 'lesbian' to release it from its exclusive sexual notion:

> "As the term "lesbian" has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms" (Rich qtd. by Kaoma 2016: 68)

Additionally, Rich argued for a wider understanding of the terms which includes African experiences as well (Kaoma 2016: 69). Yet, the term continues to be heavily loaded with prejudices and

misinterpretations. Matebeni and Msibi (2015), argue that it is of utmost importance to think "beyond the loaded westernized frame of the LGBTI acronym" (4) and to "exercise new ways of listening to how people speak of themselves and bring meaning to their existence. Destabilizing the normative standards that are used to limit how we speak and name ourselves is a necessary eruption" (5).

In analysing *Under the Udala Trees*, it is necessary to take the description and representation of queer subjectivities the novel offers as our guiding principle, before assuming the term 'lesbian' as part of their identities. Hence, this thesis moves away from Courtois' (2018) use of the term 'lesbian' to describe the characters of the novel. *Under the Udala Trees* does not apply the word in relation to the characters' actions or identifications. It is only used twice in the Epilogue to retell news facts about violence against queer people such as the stoning of members of "a gay and lesbian affirming church in Lagos" (317) (also mentioned by Osinubi 2018). In the attempt to normalise queered sexualities with the story of Ijeoma, the fixed term might again lead to a de-normalisation. This happens by categorising her as a 'lesbian' or by categorising her sexual experiences as "lesbian sexual intercourse" (Courtois 2018: 123) or "lesbian pleasure" (Courtois 2018: 127) instead of just referring to them as 'sexual pleasure'. Using 'lesbianism' as an entity, seemingly re-implies the patriarchal structures Courtois (2018) attempts to deconstruct by representing *Under the Udala Trees* as a re-writing of the male-centred heteronormative *bildungsroman*.

Because of the given arguments by Matebeni and Msibi (2015), who state that it is foremost important to listen to the representations by the considered people themselves, and because of the attempt to be attentive to the complexities of sexual identities, I choose to stick to terms like 'same-sex desire', 'queer desire', non-normative desire or non-heterosexual. The adopted terms allow a broader interpretation of non-normative sexualities. Although 'queer' can be interpreted as 'odd', and therefore would again de-normalise same-sex love, it is used in this thesis mainly to indicate a disassociation from imposed normative heterosexuality. 'Queerness' rather functions as a means to broaden the interpretations of love, sexuality and identity.

Author's Reflexivity

As a last methodological point of attention before digging into the subject, it is essential to reflect on my positionality. While it is my intention to conduct this study with neither prior assumptions nor bias, all research is conducted from the researcher's perspective, with their background, history, norms,

values, education, etc. playing a role. As a white Belgian woman whose sexuality does not conform to heteronormativity, I am aware of the privileged position from which I was able to conduct this study on a delicate topic without the fear of facing negative consequences, whereas for many other scholars this may have been a dangerous task. In addition, although I used a wide range of diverse secondary literature, some specific literary interpretations might be influenced by my background and by growing up in a 'Western' country.

I am aware that my work might not be gladly received by devoted people of faith who face or faced complexities with their own sexual identities in personal, religious and political spaces that do not allow any derogation from the heterosexual norm. Therefore, this thesis attempts to broaden the reader's perspective and imagination, based on a close reading of *Under the Udala Trees*, without claiming to be the only possible interpretation. Instead, I aim to give shareable insights which could eventually lead to negotiation.

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This thesis provides an analysis of the prophetic capacities of *Under the Udala Trees'* strategies in creating a legitimate space for female same-sex desire. The argument is structured in five chapters. The first chapter offers a theoretical framework. It aspires to explain the interpretation of the prophetic notion of the novel, and it follows theories of queer theology and its relation with embodied experiences of pleasure and pain. The second chapter describes a broader context which implies the essence of Okparanta's novel to provide queer women of faith with a voice. It mainly addresses a universal construction of patriarchal heteronormativity, and the political and religious homophobia which is visible in many contemporary African countries.

The three following chapters offer an analysis of the interpreted strategies of *Under the Udala Trees'* capacity of fostering the legitimacy of women of faith with queer desires. The third chapter analyses the strategies that are related to academic queer theology, such as queering biblical scripture, and to 'grassroots' queer theology such as the importance of 'creation' and the image of God. The fourth chapter describes how the novel represents embodied experiences of pain as a way to legitimise queer existence. The fifth chapter provides an analysis of representations of sexual pleasure that do not conform to heteronormativity, which opens ways of re-imagination for queer people of faith. After this a conclusion is proposed.

1. Theoretical Framework: A Prophetic Link Between Queer Theologies and Embodied Experiences of Pain and Desire

Before analysing the strategies that foster the Christian affirmation of female same-sex love in *Under the Udala Trees*, it is necessary to address the theories which form the framework for this study. In this chapter I aim to indicate why the novel can be read as prophetic since it creates a space for a subject that is taboo in the society it addresses. To illustrate this interpretation, this framework presents theories in queer theologies and the interpretations of literary descriptions of the embodied experiences of pain and pleasure. All of these topics play significant roles in lifting up a 'veil of secrecy'[3] that is established around female same-sex desires in a Christian and Nigerian environment.

Chinelo Okparanta addresses the coming-of-age story of a woman with same-sex desire. By voicing the experiences of the marginalised, she contests the hetero-patriarchal orthodox structures of the society she describes. As will become clear further in the text, *Under the Udala Trees* is crucial and essential because it relates the experiences of women's same-sex love to the experiences and examination of Christian faith in a country that, in relation to religious homophobia, stigmatises and criminalises same-sex love by law. In addition, the novel provides queer people of faith with hope, which is already stressed before the first chapter starts, with a quote from the book of Hebrews: "Faith is the assured expectation of things hoped for, the evident demonstration of realities, though not beheld. - HEBREWS 11:1" (Okparanta 2015: vii).

Van Klinken (2016) argues that in African contexts, religion is frequently used to strengthen anti-gay discourses and homophobia. He states that especially in these environments it is of utmost importance to emphasise the intersectionality by giving a voice to queer people within these contexts (see van Klinken & Phiri 2015).Their visions of theology could lead to a deeper understanding. In addition, the imagination of writers to re-interpret and to draw attention to the complexities of intersectional identities is crucial. Nabutanyi (2019: 370) reminds Wale Adebanwi's vision stating that "the role of an African writer as a social thinker is that of a public intellectual who uses his or her fiction to unearth complex versions of the continent's reality and that upon this exposition, then proceeds to theorise Africa's existential questions of the moment." One of the main voices countering the upcoming prophecies of the 'demons' of homosexuality by religious leaders on the continent, is the writer

[3] The notion of 'veil of secrecy' is borrowed from Veit-Wild and Naguschewski (2011)

Binyavanga Wainaina, who recently passed away. Van Klinken (2016) presents his work as prophetic, and Wainaina himself as a queer prophet.

The prophet is often referred to as "an 'inspired figure' who 'must be concerned with the wider moral community at a social or political level' and whose moral authority is believed by the community 'to be inspired by a divinity or other source of spiritual or moral knowledge that influences the destiny of the community'" (Johnson & Anderson qtd. by van Klinken 2016: 67). As described above, van Klinken (2016) demonstrates the prophetic character of Wainaina separate from that notion of divinity, and instead emphasises the socio-political role of the writer. The queer notion of this role is that a prophet "stands up and speaks out against the powers that be. In this sense, prophets can generally be thought of inherently queer […] demarcating 'not a positivity, but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative'" (67-68).

'Queerness' does not immediately engage with notions of non-heteronormative sexuality. However, Wainaina as a prophet is queer both because of his contestation of the normative, and because of his queer sexuality. Concerning the homophobic discourses on the African continent, the powers that be which Wainaina contests are mainly the rising influences of prophetic religious, and moreover, Pentecostal leaders. For Wainaina, who describes himself as secular, those leaders are missing the point of what Christian faith is about; instead of fighting marginalised groups of society, the church should provide a safe space that demonstrates how to love people who are at the peripheries of society (van Klinken 2016).

This prophetic character as analysed in Wainaina's work forms a meaningful framework for the analysis of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Van Klinken (2016: 77) argues for the case of Wainaina's oeuvre: "the prophetic aspect of the story can be found in the exposure and interrogation of popular arguments while creatively opening up a space for new imaginations." Similarly, *Under the Udala Trees* provides a story that counters the main homophobic narratives and discourses, through strategies of a 'grassroots queer theology' and embodied experiences of pain and fragmentation. Meanwhile, the story opens up a space for new imaginations by the representation of experiences of pleasure, which can be linked to certain forms of queer theology. The hopeful imaginative capacity allows for a prophetic interpretation of Okparanta's novel.

In contrast to Wainaina's voice, Okparanta attempts to negotiate this space *within* a protestant Christian environment and within the faith of the protagonist, while Wainaina clearly distances himself from

Christianity. The prophetic strategies negotiating a space for the legitimacy of female same-sex love in relation with Christian faith, form a theoretical guideline in the study of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*.

1.1 Queer Theologies

In mainstream Christian theological discourses, queer love and religious faith are perceived as irreconcilable. The negotiation of a space for queer people of faith is often a troubled process. The dilemma's notwithstanding, van Klinken (2018; 2015; See also: van Klinken & Phiri 2015; van Klinken & Gunda 2012) attempts to analyse strategies of queer people of faith in African contexts to logically connect faith and non-normative love, sexuality and gender. He does this by looking beyond, though in relation with, the earlier established 'Western' discourses of queer theology. Mainstream queer theology is often linked with a transgressive notion towards constructed normativity (van Klinken & Phiri 2015; Althaus-Reid 1997).

Yet, van Klinken and Phiri (2015) argue that this transgressive character is actually problematic for many queer people in African contexts, because their aim is to normalise themselves as full human beings and to be recognised as equals within their communities. This is stressed in *Under the Udala Trees* (220, italics in original)[4]: "I *did* want to lead a normal life. I did want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out." In understanding the strategies that could form paths towards an African queer theology, van Klinken (2018; 2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015; van Klinken & Gunda 2012) discusses earlier contextual forms of women's and postcolonial liberation theology, and what he calls 'grassroots queer theology' on the continent.

1.1.1 Coming to Terms with a 'Western' Queer Theology

The main theologies countering the popular discourses of 'Hegemonic Theology' in a way that answers to or contests the underrepresentation of particular identities linked to gender, and gaps in understanding of sexualities, are brought together under the term "Queer Theology". Cheng (2011: n.p.) describes this simply as "queer talk about God". It is the theoretical space in which theology

[4] In the analysing chapters, every specific quote from *Under the Udala Trees* will only be followed by the page number in between brackets (e.g. (pp.)). This avoids the endless repetition of the authors name and date, since the novel is the logical source for analysation of this dissertation.

entwines with queer theory. Theology is literally defined as 'talking about God', because *theos* is the Greek word for 'God' and *logos* means 'word'.

The term 'queer' has obtained various meanings over time. Cheng (2011) distinguishes three related ways in which this term is used. First of all, it is indicates an umbrella-term to address all forms of sexuality and gender that do not fit into the heteronormative or gender binary categories. In this sense it is used similarly to the acronym LGBT+. Meanwhile, Cheng (2011) explains the term likewise as an action of transgression. This means that the term 'queer', which was originally used in a pejorative means to address oddities, is reclaimed mainly by LGBT+ people to contest and go beyond societal norms that oppress them. Since the 1980's, western LGBT+ movements wear 'queer' in this sense more and more as part of their pride. This is, for instance, illustrated by the frequently used slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it" (Cheng 2011: n.p.; Aburrow 2009: 146).

Finally, and increasingly, the term 'queer' is used as a means to erase all sorts of boundaries attached to social constructions. This interpretation relates to Michel Foucault's work which indicates the deconstruction of societal roles and identities that are embedded in certain political discourses (referred to in van Klinken & Phiri 2015; Cheng 2011; Sawyer 2004: 163). In addition, post-structuralist philosophers such as Judith Butler elaborated on this construction of social roles in the specific form of fixed gender and sexuality binaries:

> "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity." (Butler qtd. by Sawyer 2004: 136)

Adapted to Christian belief, queer theology then provides a way to deal with theology by removing barriers concerning gender and sexuality. Queer theory, as illustrated by Butler (1993), "offers a critique of gender, regarding it as a performance or a political formulation, and a product of discourse" (Aburrow 2009: 146).

In 'Western' countries, mainly the UK and the USA, queer theology developed in the late 1990s and 2000s in the context of the gay liberation movements and as a more specific form of liberation theology. Although related to earlier lesbian and gay theology, Elizabeth Stuart (referred to in van Klinken & Phiri 2015) argues that queer theology is different in essence. Instead of fighting for the liberation of gay and lesbian identities on the basis of oppressed sexualities, queer theologians aim a broader liberation that

eliminates the constructions and discourses of gender and sexuality, as highlighted by theorists like Foucault and Butler. In short, as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood put it, queer theology is "a movement of people probing sexual constructions of theology and taking seriously "the queer project of deconstructing heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology, but also unveiling the different, the suppressed face of God amidst it"" (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood qtd. by van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 43).

1.1.2 'Grassroots' Queer Theologies in African Contexts

Van Klinken & Phiri (2015) argue that the academic interpretations of queer theology in 'Western' countries are not easily applicable to situations of queer people of faith in Africa. In addition, the 'Western' surprise that many queer people in African countries are deeply religious, is critiqued as well (van Klinken 2015; See also van Klinken & Gunda 2012). They draw attention to the work of African theologians in various fields who in the first place already countered mainstream 'Western' theologies; African liberation theologies and African women's theologies. In addition, these theologies create the space for a more inclusive theological approach of the Christian faith, that could eventually lead to queer theology. Furthermore, van Klinken (2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015) describes how the experiences of queer people of faith create theologies by just living lives as Christian queer people. He refers to these experiences as 'grassroots queer theology'.

In the named African theological movements, van Klinken (2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015) argues that a shared understanding of 'creation' offers a way to counter exclusive discourses that are approached in mainstream hegemonic theology. In this view, there is a strong belief that all people are created in the image of God, or the *Imago Dei.* Liberation theologies used this assumption to form counter-voices against the white theologies represented by European missionaries. The belief that humanity is created in the image of God, was proof for people, oppressed on the basis of their skin colour (e.g. under Apartheid in South-Africa), that white people treated them as lesser than human, and thus as lesser than what God had planned for them. This idea is in essence built on human dignity, by being all equals in God's image, and it demands equality and justice.

Used in postcolonial struggles against racial oppression, these theologies exclusively expressed the experiences of men and often retainend the patriarchal gender structures. In order to offer liberation to

women within discourses of Christian faith, African women theologians[5] attempted to re-imagine the image of God. The *Imago Dei* in this sense recognises an equal human dignity for both man and woman, which leads to a more inclusive notion of humanity. The 'women theologian' Mercy Oduyoye described God as the source of humanity in all His forms (van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 41). She means that all human beings and their bodies are to be addressed with equal dignity, because they are all sacred by means of creation.

The inclusive standpoint of 'women theology' in the *Imago Dei* is further extended beyond sole gender equality, and includes all sexual marginalised groups. Phiri (qtd. by van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 42) argues that "[a]ny form of discrimination and oppression mars the image of God in creation and humanity, for God is a God of justice and the practice of Christianity is supposed to reflect the justice of God." This image of all life as sacred is extended by 'women theologian' Musa Dube in an attempt to open up conversations about queer sexualities in African religious contexts in the battle against HIV/AIDS. Van Klinken and Phiri (2015: 42) argue that she

> "bases her argument theologically on the account of creation. Creation, in her understanding, means that all life is sacred: "[A]ll people, regardless of their color, gender, class, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, health status, age, or **sexual orientation**, were created in God's image and are loved by God, who is the source of human dignity."" (added emphasis in bold)

In this phrase, Dube literally demonstrates how people with queer sexual desires are sacred and are owed dignity. In other words "sexual orientation does not disqualify people's creation in the image of God" (van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 42).

The idea of creation as proof God's affirmation is likewise addressed in mainstream queer theology. Theologian Richard Cleaver argues that the image of God is formed collectively in 'humanity' (referred to in van Klinken & Phiri 2015). He explains this by the stories of creation in the Bible (Genesis 1 and 2), whereby human beings are described to be in need of companionship, and are consequentially sexually attracted to each other. Thus, to be fully 'human', human beings need one another, which leads to a communal representation of the image of God. This understanding allows to see the image of God in the diversity of His creation. It broadens the narrowness of most academic African theologies, in

[5] As described by van Klinken and Phiri (2015), 'African women theology' is a commonly accepted term for this theological movement. Although some theologians refer to their work as 'feminist', I will maintain the term 'women theology' since the term 'feminist' is controversial in this case.

which the experiences of queer people of faith are excluded, and which accordingly denies the creation of human diversity.

1.1.2.1 Imago Dei in 'Grassroots Theology'

Van Klinken (2018; 2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015) argues that the best way to address African theologies with an inclusive interpretation of queer love, develops from the bottom-up. Similarly to the other 'grassroots theologies' discussed above, these potential queer theologies draw from the *Imago Dei*. For an analysis of bottom-up queer theology, it is necessary to start from the experiences and beliefs from queer people of faith. This is in line with theologian Emmanuel Katongole's argument "that African theology should take the stories of "ordinary Africans" as a starting point to write a "theology from below"" (Katongole qtd. by van Klinken 2018: 216).

The importance of a theology that draws from the experience of Christian believers has equivalences in the academic trends of queer theology. There as well, experience is perceived as an important and even crucial source for queer theology, because Christians believe "that God acts within the specific contexts of our lives and experiences" (Cheng 2011: n.p.). Queer theology includes stories of marginalised voices. Van Klinken (2018: 2015) studied these through the scope of stories written by queer people in Kenya and by interviewing gay communities in Zambia.

Through a study of certain gay communities in Zambia, van Klinken and Phiri (2015) understood that, although they emerged separately from the academic theologies, these 'grassroots theologies' carry significant theological notions. In these spontaneous forms of theology, it is striking that the notion of the *Imago Dei* is again frequently used as an important means to negotiate a space for the legitimacy of their existence. Van Klinken (2015; See also van Klinken & Phiri 2015) describes that many of the Zambian gay Christians, while being excluded from the main theological teachings of their churches, do not see themselves as victims, but attempt to find ways in which they are able to normalise and re-humanise themselves in the contexts of their communities.

One way of affirming same-sex desire on the basis of 'creation' is through queer essentialism whereby queer people disprove the dominant belief that their sexual orientation is a choice, and that they intentionally contest the Great Design which is described as a blasphemy. Queer essentialism offers a possibility to remove this responsibility: queer people simply found themselves with their sexuality. Thus, by 'being born this way', queer people argue that their queerness is beyond their control. It is how

God knew them and created them. This enables them to reclaim their humanity in God and their equality to other human beings. Apart from the creation of equality, other queer people of faith see the image of God and their creation as a means of God's plan for human diversity. This diversity, with regards to sexuality, is likewise perceived as being part of God's intentions.

1.1.2.2 Universal Love

Both views of the *Imago Dei* draw from the universal understanding of God as Love (van Klinken & Phiri 2015; van Klinken 2015). The fulfilling of God's image is perceived as the embodiment of the human capacity to love. By assuming this, queer theologians deny the dominant idea of God's image as manifested in the binary construction of gendered bodies with specific roles. Universal love is at the centre of the argument and illustrations for queer people of faith to humanise themselves:

> "For them, love is not only a universal category, but has a particular Christian meaning as it is rooted in their belief to be created in the image of God who is love. Hence they can legitimize their own loving relationships as a truly Christian practice that reflects the *Imago Dei*." (van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 48)

In addition, van Klinken (2018) relates to 'women theologian' Oduyoye's autobiographical storytelling to illustrate how a human being can be fully human through that notion of love. In her case, similarly to the marginalisation of queer people, she is diminished in her humanity because of her infertility. This infertility automatically marginalises her from the universal Christian sacredness of procreation and the heterosexual family. Being fully woman, or living a sacred life, is assumed as only possible in the reproduction of heirs. Oduyoye (van Klinken 2018), however, reshapes this idea by arguing that everybody needs to complete the *Imago Dei*, and be fruitful, according to their capacities. These capacities, manifested in love, surpass the fiction of the narrow gate of procreation leading to a holy life. This message is obviously fruitful for queer people of faith.

The legitimacy of queerness by the means of radical love has equivalents in academic mainstream queer theology:

> "radical love is at the heart of Christian theology because we Christians believe in a God who, through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, has dissolved the boundaries between death and life, time and eternity, and the human and the divine." (Cheng 2011: n.p.)

This understanding of God as Love, enables queer people to legitimise themselves as being loved by God no matter who they are. The image is strengthened by the Christian understanding of God as manifested in Jesus Christ, who is an expression of His love for humanity in the form of the sacrifice and resurrection (van Klinken 2015). These explanations provide queer people of faith with an opportunity to look at themselves in a way that is separated from the main theologies that are represented in traditions of the Church (van Klinken 2015). It enables them as well to critique and to question the dominant notions of sin that is often linked to procreation, sodomy, abomination etc. (Cheng 2011).

1.2 Inclusive Theologies and the Embodied Experience of the Erotic

The negotiation for the legitimacy of same-sex desire and non-conformal genders, is actually a negotiation centred around the body. In the usage of universal love and the *Imago Dei* to legitimise an inclusive approach for non-normative sexualities and gender, the body becomes the space for negotiation. This departs from the idea that the representations of the body, and their experiences of pleasure, are embedded within the laws and doctrines of religious and political authority. This is, in the first place, because the body is the geography where the normalisation of the hetero-patriarchal binary thinking takes place (Quero 2006). It is in this specific zone that humanity was defined within a strict binary of male and female sexuality. In theologies (e.g. queer theology, liberation theology, indecent theology) contesting that fixed interpretation, it is therefore again the body which becomes the geography to deconstruct these constructed binaries.

Kamitsuka (2010: 1) argues that Christian theologies throughout time had a certain fixation on the human body and its sexual desires: "Whether through repression, spiritualization, or regulation, Christianity has made the body and its passions central to what it means to be human—and "saved."" It is a space that is paradoxically perceived and grounds many tensions in Christianity. The body occupies a very large space in experiences of Christian faith, which is for instance illustrated by fasting prayers. Meanwhile, the body, its desires and its experiences of pleasure, are closely related to sin. Liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (referred to in van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 44) puts it as follows: "The theological scandal is that bodies speak, and God speaks through them." It is the discrepancy between the body as sinful, yet sacred, that Kamitsuka (2010: 6) addresses by arguing that "[s]piritualities across the spectrum of Christianity show this tension regarding the body. The body is necessary for one's devotional life of bodily practices; yet the body's sin-prone inclinations are at odds

with one's spiritual aspirations." She indicates that this relation between sin and pleasure varies from one person to another. Eros (love related to embodied pleasure), is present in biblical texts, yet "under the veil of allegory" (Kamitsuka 2010: 3). The control of the body and its sexuality, is a more flexible theological struggle. In most theological denominations, eros is allowed and even blessed in the form of heterosexual marriage. Instead, "all other forms of sexual expression are consigned to categories of abomination (homosexuality), fornication (premarital or adulterous heterosexual sex), and misguided uses of the body (masturbation)" (Kamitsuka 2010: 3). The experiences of eros are thus only seen as sinful when not conforming to that heterosexual formation of procreation, whereby sin is exemplified in the erotic 'Other'.

Althaus-Reid (1997) additionally argues that classical theology is highly sexual in this heterosexual and patriarchal way that mainly focuses on reproduction. Therefore, women, and other sexually marginalised groups, are denied the experience of being fully human in their bodily desires:

> "Classical theology has been built as a highly sexual theology with an inner logic of attraction. Its values, beliefs, objectives and strategies are all of a deeply heterosexual nature, telling us how to attract love from God but not how to be, and to feel/live that of God in us." (Althaus-Reid 1997: 50)

Althaus-Reid (1997) links the experience of feeling God immediately to the experiences of the body. Queer theories in that sense have been able to produce the idea that in addition to the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God, God is found in the flesh of humans, and human bodies mutually reflect God. In the idea of the *Imago Dei*, Althaus-Reid (1997) sees God as the complexity that establishes human relationships and their unruly sexualities, for which she uses a radical representation of the queer God. According to her, "people's existence in the image of God is fully embodied and incorporates their bodies and desires" (Althaus-Reid qtd. by van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 44). Jungling (2010) similarly suggests that 'creation' is inherently a call from God for erotic embodied relationality. She defines

> "eros as the divine call into life as embodied relationality that has been freely and faithfully given in and through God's ongoing creation. Erotic love is the force that gives life the relational essence that fills and empowers all of creation." (Jungling 2010: 217)

Although in the 'grassroots theologies' described by van Klinken & Phiri (2015) the embodiment is not that radical, they too address how God's image is reflected in the relationships between human beings.

These relationships can be non-sexual or sexual and lead to an embodied presence of God. In this meaning of love, the dichotomised categories of love, *eros* (worldly love) and *agape* (love shaped by faith), are trespassed (Kamitsuka 2010).

Consequently, this assumption of radical love that represents the *Imago Dei,* is important for people whose identities are, politically and by religion, reduced to their sexual preferences or acts (van Klinken & Phiri 2015). As argued by van Klinken and Phiri (2015), the experiences of queer people of faith are necessary to establish a queer theology form the bottom-up. These experiences are absent in mainstream theologies that rely on a heterosexual standard (Althaus-Reid 1997). Representing the experiences of the erotic in means of embodied desire or solidarity, empowers marginalised queer people of faith (Kamitsuka 2010; Althaus-Reid 1997).

In her "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic and Power" (1984), Audre Lorde argues that the erotic for women, disregarded of their sexual preferences, functions as "the most profoundly creative source" (Lorde 1984: 59) of power against their oppressed position in a hetero-patriarchal organisation of life. The erotic is spiritual in the sense that it creates a bridge between people connected to their deepest forms of love. Lorde says:

> "For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."(1984: 56)

The erotic pleasure of women, is therefore believed as something that needs to be suppressed. In ruling male models of power, a woman is only perceived to be strong when controlling that source of power. As will become clear in chapter 2, the representation of the embodied experiences of pleasure by marginalised sexualities, such as queer women, is prophetic. Lorde (1984) describes how this representation empowers, and it it refutes the common discourses that stigmatise women with queer desires.

1.3 The Prophetic Representation of Pain and Fragmentation

Given the importance of the body in theological discourses, and the tensions surrounding the interpretation of desire and chastity, the representation of female same-sex erotic pleasure in literary work is inherently prophetic and potentially empowering. There where hetero-patriarchal rules eliminate their sexual desires from 'normal' sexual pleasure, these representations provide a space for breaking

the taboo surrounding the existence of queer identities. Complementary to pleasure, the representation of female experiences have a similar effect by lifting the 'veil of secrecy' (Veit-Wild & Naguschewski 2011), that hides female experiences in mainstream literary works. Hewett (2005: 81) argues that Nigerian "writers have evolved an "aesthetics of pain" in order to represent their "hopes and dreams tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system."" Here, individual experience of suffering is immediately related to the larger oppressive state of, in this case, postcolonial Nigeria. The evolving "aesthetics of pain" could be understood likewise in a broader complexity of the discipline and power that is inherent to state control. The relation between the body and the state is emphasised by Silvani (2011: 8): "there has been a growing tendency to regard the body as both a natural physical entity and a screen onto which cultural (social, political, historical) signs/images are projected." Because bodies are subjected to various power relations which inscribe them, it is possible to read those bodies as testimonies of forms of oppression.

In her article, Sarah Nuttall (2005) likewise underlines that the body is affected and inscribed by its social perceptions. She quotes Roy Boyne:

> "The body is a public matter. Bodies are social phenomena. From the sociological standpoint, experience of pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste, growth, decay, strength, weakness, movement, or stillness. […] embodied experience is social experience." (qtd. by Nuttal 2005: 204)

Silvani (2011) connects this socially inscribed body with the Lacanian Symbolic Order, which means "the system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives" (Manshield qtd. by Silvani 2011: 17). This system is "constituted through language via the gateway of the Law, including through taboos, such as that of Oedipus" (Cooper 2007: 144). In other words, every body or selfhood is subjected to a dominant symbolic order or perception of society to acquire its identity as an individual, and this is reflected within the language and the taboos of the society.

Given the fact that societies have such an impact on the construction of identities, and how oppression can manifest in the body in terms of hurtful experiences, this theoretical framework is useful for the analysis of pain in *Under the Udala Trees*. It becomes especially interesting when looking at cases whereby queer people of faith might feel fragmented because of their un-conforming desires to what is considered 'normal' in their societies and according to their religious faith. As explained earlier, van Klinken and Phiri (2015) argue that the main critique on 'Western' queer theology is the notion in which

it focuses on the transgressive. According to them, this is not the case for the Zambian queer people of faith in their research, because those queer people of faith instead attempt to humanise their existence and aim to be perceived as 'normal'. By representing how these experiences of fragmentation influence queer personalities mentally and physically, there opens a space for critique on the dehumanisation of people with marginalised sexualities. These painful experiences of fragmentation are as important as the experiences of embodied pleasure since they reflect the ways in which queer people of faith are repressed to live as full human beings in the image of God.

To summarise, this framework offers theories that can be linked to the strategies in Okparanta's novel to create a Christian affirmative space for queer people. It defines *Under the Udala Trees* as prophetic following van Klinken's (2018) understanding of the prophet as someone who challenges dominant powers that be. In his article, the prophetic claim challenges structural homophobia, which is useful for this dissertation. This framework explains the novel's prophetic strategies as embedded in affirmative theological movements that are mainly found in queer theologies. A legitimacy of queer people in the Christian faith is for instance present in the notion of God's creation of humanity according to His image. Another important angle is the queer theological restoration of the connection between the spiritual mind and the body, its sexuality and the expression of its painful experiences (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2007; Kamitsuka 2010; Jungling 2010; Bostic 2010). Mainstream theologies have a difficulty with this connection, which often leads to the repulsion of erotic pleasure. Here, it is illustrated, however, that the erotic (Lorde 1984) and the expression of embodied pain (Hewett 2005) are actually readable as sources of empowerment, which is the case in *Under the Udala Trees*.

2. Contextualised Perspectives on Historically Constructed Gender-Roles and Sexualities in Sub-Sahara Africa

To explain the importance of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, this chapter offers a broad contextualisation of various perspectives on queer desire by shedding light on the construction of patriarchal heteronormativity and African female authors' re-imagination of these social structures. By patriarchal heteronormativity, I mean the construct of heterosexual norms and rules in colonial and postcolonial male dominated authorities. These norms are remarkably often fostered by religious powers. Regarding the role of religion, this chapter exclusively focuses on the relation between the Christian faith and heteronormativity, since the Christian experience of a queer girl is the main concern of *Under the Udala Trees*.

The following quote from Dlamini (2016) illustrates how the perspective on queer desires in colonised countries has been influenced by the intertwined powers of colonialism and the 'Western' Christian church. Although the contemporary landscape of discourses on sexuality is more complex than a simple result of colonialism, she shows how colonial classification of people has installed norms that led to a standard binary understanding of sexuality and gender:

> "Nyanzi- et al. (2011) and Tamale (2011) argue that the advent of colonialism and Christianity twisted the ways in which pre-colonial African cultures viewed sexuality and masculinity construction. They succinctly argue that the moral values of the Western Christian church, paternalistic scientific and anthropological research on the colonial subjects and their sexualities, helped foster the production of scholarly backed knowledge which differentiated the Westerners from the natives using racial lenses. The knowledge was used in several colonial and anti-colonial projects, one of which is the pigeon-holing of individuals into heterosexual and homosexual categories." (Dlamini 2016: 73)

This quote shows the variety of influences in which a so-called 'African sexuality' was created. Key roles were initially played by colonial propaganda, the Christian missionaries, and anthropological sciences (Dlamini 2016; Macharia 2012; Lugones 2007; Oyěwùmí 2005; Arnfred 2004). This chapter will further examine and juxtapose various perspectives concerning the complexity of constructed heteronormativity, and the influences of political agendas and Christian religion.

2.1 A European Heteronormativity and the Construction of Gender in its Colonies

A wide range of studies concerning African gender and sexualities starts from the premise of an imperialist construct of heteronormativity. Obviously it is problematic to uphold an image of a general queer pre-colonial African past, yet an overview of the historical colonial impact in gender normativity is necessary to understand current religious and political discourses concerning same-sex desire on the continent (Chitando & van Klinken 2016). Therefore, it is important to emphasise that recent gender and queer studies attempt to go beyond the dominant binary understanding of gender and sexuality in both colonial and postcolonial discourses.

Prominent scholarship in the field of gender construction in Africa is the work of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí. She argues that "the conceptual category of gender is in origin, constitution, and expression bound to Western culture" (xii). In particular, Oyěwùmí draws attention to the genderisation and patriarchisation

in the writing of Oyo (Yoruba) history which took place since the onset of colonisation. In Yoruba language, subject markers are not gender-specific, which shows that it is far from simple to distinguish the sex of historical figures appearing in oral histories. Oyěwùmí (170-171) argues that all those previously gender-free categories have been transformed into gendered, and in most cases, male-specific categories in 'Western' anthropological and historical studies. In this fashion, it happened "that some outstanding women in history have been mistaken for men and their achievements, attributed to male rulers!" (Awe qtd. by Oyěwùmí 170). This case illustrates the possibility for misconceptions about gender categorisations in a specific Yoruba context as a result of colonial projects. Socio-political advantages of women are wiped out.

Similarly, María Lugones (2007) criticises the contemporary organisation of life as a colonial/modern system which was universally imposed on people outside of Europe, since the early stages of global colonial capitalism. To illustrate this, she uses Anibal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" which

> "introduces the basic and universal social classification of the population of the planet in terms of the idea of 'race' (Quijano 2001–2002, 1). The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms." (2007: 190)

The colonial system of power is based on a social classification of the world population by biologic differences of skin colour to which Lugones (2007) adds gender. Arnfred (2004) likewise illustrates the relation between the construction of race, gender and sexuality as part of the self-realisation of colonisers and the 'othering' of the colonised:

> "People in Africa became black when they were conquered and defined by European people, who in the same move defined themselves as white. In this process black people got not only their colour, but also, following Fanon, their sexuality […]'Blackness' in itself, and 'blackness as sexual' is the double outcome of the very processes of othering, discussed above: in defining the other you define yourself." (Arnfred 2004: 18)

Furthermore, Lugones (2007) explains that as much as gender roles are constructed in order to dominate on social levels, the very arrangements of heterosexualism and patriarchy are constructs to facilitate the capitalist, Eurocentric, modern/colonial project: "the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of

relations – is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along "racial" lines" (2007: 190). In this heterosexual model, Lugones (2007) explains the European man as the central figure of production and capital, while the European woman exemplifies sexual purity and passivity. She is bounded to compulsory heterosexuality and banned from collective authority, because women were seen as bodily and emotionally weak.

Moreover, in a colonial Christian perspective, white female sexual experiences are neglected in order to pertain a moral idea of sexuality in the creation of gender-roles. Female chastity, under male control, was in this case used as benchmark for white Christian 'civilisation'. Arnfred (2004: 17) writes for instance that

> "Gradually a Christian moral regime is created: sexual pleasure for women is defined out of existence, female chastity and passionlessness (Cott 1978) becoming the model and the norm. Sex for women is legitimized only as a means of procreation; pleasure is seen as very close to sin—the idea of sexuality as 'primordial sin' being a cornerstone in Christianity"."

In opposition to this white framework, colonised people are being stereotyped and reduced to less than human, which allowed white men to force colonised women into sexual practices with them. These women were meanwhile represented as victims of aggression of colonised men, which activated a white saviour's complex. Colonised men perceived simultaneously as aggressive towards their wives, and as infants who needed the civilisation mission (Arnfred 2004: 12).

The victimisation of African women as passive objects contributed to the creation of the Other as 'uncivilised' in contrast with the 'civilised' European (Arnfred 2004; Lugones 2009; Mies 1986). To 'civilise' them, Munro (2007: 753) writes that " [a]dministrators and missionaries introduced and enforced heterosexuality opposed to homosexuality as the central axis of sexual definition, and female domesticity within the patriarchal nuclear family as the ideal, healthy template for social organization". Arnfred (2004) demonstrates that these sexual dichotomies and imaginations of victimised women are still alive in current politics concerning gender; both in postcolonial African leadership, and in a dominant 'Western' NGO-sector concerning gender-based topics (e.g. HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation etc.). By using those fixed notions of gender and sexuality, anti-colonial discourses apparently reinforce the same bipolar notions of gender and sexuality, imposed on colonised subjects for colonial capitalist purposes.

2.2 A Postcolonial Remasculinisation: "Homosexuality is un-African and un-Christian"

Postcolonial discourses and rhetoric strikingly reflect a keen political trend towards heteronormativity in most Sub-Saharan African countries. A large amount of anti-colonial 'black' and African literatures and politics persuade the African masses to redefine an 'African sexuality', as a counter-reaction to the ideal white heterosexual man during colonisation. Postcolonial leaders strive for a heteronormative 'African sexuality' as a means to reject 'Western' (sexual) dominance in a process of positioning themselves in a global context (Kaoma 2018; Ndijo 2012; van Klinken 2011; van Klinken & Gunda 2012; Epprecht 2010). Therefore, there is a strong refusal of non-normative sexualities, which often results in stigmatisation of queer people:

> "African nationalists and sympathizers upheld an erotic but moral Africa to stand in contrast with the neurotic and immoral West. In recent years, this opposition has often centered around the claim that 'homosexuality is un-African' […]. The rhetoric of patriotic heterosexuality has in many cases been backed by the power of the state and vigilantism against suspected gays and lesbians." (Epprecht 2010: 769)

The strive for this straight mapping of African societies by postcolonial leaders and philosophies whereby the 'African body' and sexuality is re-imagined, could be read "as a counter-history to colonial sexual policy" (Ndijo 2012: 622).

As explained above, colonialism often catalogues African men's virility to obscure the atrocities of colonial powers. European colonial propaganda and other literature over-sexualised African subjects whereby a 'primitive' uncontrollable heterosexual lust was described, for both African men and women, which would contrast the 'civilised' European (Epprecht 2010). This alienation of human identity and manhood of colonised men is highly visualised in anti-colonial politics, literature and philosophies. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon illustrates the impact of such a denial in a psychological sense. He literally describes the experience of a black man during colonisation: "they are denying me the right to be a man" (96). Another example is for instance how "the designation "boy," when applied to African men, subordinated age and morphology to race and labor" (Macharia 2012: 3), which again conflicts with the said imagined victimisation of their wives as vulnerable to their virile aggression.

2.2.1 A Postcolonial African Remasculinisation

It is this "traumatized African masculine selfhood" (Ndijo 2012: 622) that African leaders are trying to restore with the creation of a postcolonial African (hyper-)masculinity. Although Newell (2009) argues that anti- and postcolonial discourses, such as Fanon's, lack the significance of the gender-aspect of racism, the need for a restoration of racialized masculinity is a prominent case in various postcolonial discourses (see also Epprecht 2010; Ndijo 2012). Yet, "[p]ostcolonial masculinities often exceed colonial constructions of race and gender, without leaving race and gender behind as categories" (Newell 2009: 247). This often results in a form of stereotyping that is not much different from colonial discourse.

In addition, the overall conceptualisation of 'African masculinity' discussed here, is hyper general and pays no attention to specific cases and culturally diverse interpretations of gender. Within this framework, it is striking that the literature of remasculinisation is marked by romanticised and often imaginary pre-colonial and pre-Christian African societies. These often do not stroke with the reality. As discussed above, Oyěwùmí for instance demonstrates a juxtaposed interpretation of gender-roles in ancient Yoruba societies with an emphasis on women's socio-political power.

About the postcolonial interpretation of an 'African masculinity', Epprecht (2010) argues that "[t]he 'remasculinization' of African men in this body of literature is often attempted through heavy-handed portrayals of African men's heterosexual virility and polygyny" (773). The 'African man' becomes a "subject whose sexuality is caught in an authoritarian heterosexist ideology" (Ndijo 2012: 619). This norm leads often to an essentialist patriarchal and heterosexist form of masculinity which is mainly characterised by "misogyny, homophobia, racism and compulsory heterosexuality" (Connell qtd. by Ndijo 622).

People with same-sex desire form an "antithesis" to the politics of the sexualised body in the construction of an 'African sexuality' (Ndijo 2012). By rejecting this dominant phallic economy, queer women for instance contest their role in the restoration of a heteronormative postcolonial national identity. Ndijo writes that

> "They [queer women] are the supreme symbols of what could be called unsubmissive African women who reject the passive and enduring role that the patriarchal African society generally imposes on women in sexual intercourse. These are people who do not content themselves with

> challenging the myths that the post-colonial bourgeoisie has always produced about the sexual passivity and docility of African women." (2012: 625)

Thus, postcolonial African citizens with non-normative sexualities disprove the assumption "of sexual subordination of women by men, and [this] especially subverts the moral economy of sexual exchanges based on gender" (Ndijo 2012: 650). Because they deviate from the norms of this authoritarian heterosexist ideology that rules in postcolonial nations, it is understood that queer people become the scapegoats of society for all sorts of problems.

2.2.2 A 'Biblical Manhood' and an African Christian 'Protective Homophobia'

In Christian parts of Africa, the postcolonial heteronormative politics are in interaction with African Christian theological rejections of same-sex desire. Religion plays a huge role in political decision making and social organisation (Kaoma 2018; van Klinken 2011; Arnfred 2004; Chabal and Daloz 1999). It has become a recent site of controversy over same-sex desire and sexual diversity (Chitando & van Klinken 2016: 3). However, within African Christianity there is a wide diversity of theological perspectives when it comes to sexualities (van Klinken & Gunda 2012). Van Klinken and Gunda (2012) argue that within certain theological movements on the African continent, there is space for queer theology and a more inclusive approach to sexual diversity.

However, the 'African Christian rejection' of sexual diversity corresponds with politician's strive to protect African societies from sexual influences form the global north (Kaoma 2018; van Klinken 2011). Kaoma (2018) explains how global shifts to democratisation and human rights concerning sexual rights, are often rejected by African leaders because the agenda of human rights issues and the engagement of 'Western' NGO's has an alarming neo-colonial notion. Thereby, these protectionist discourse and reclaim of sexual politics are understandable (but not justifiable) in relation to the sexual politics of colonial domination.

From a religious, cultural and postcolonial perspective on the contestation and externalisation of sexual diversity, Kaoma (2018) describes the concept of 'protective homophobia'. He defines this homophobia as a "politically and religiously organized opposition to homosexuality as an attempt to protect Africa's traditional heritage, Christianity/Islam, and children from the "global homosexual agenda"" (Kaoma 2018: 1). It is clear that, in this sense, African Christian religious and political discourses on the rejection of homosexuality see eye-to-eye.

In addition, various African Christian leaders describe sexuality as being part of the public domain, because it is essential for the procreation of the nation (Kaoma 2018; Boesak 2011). Thereby sexual rights enter into the philosophies concerning the rights and obligations of the community. Kaoma (2018: 9) stresses that "[i]n this ontology, sex is not just a social or biological act but a sacred/religious duty through which life is sustained and transmitted." This is, however, an idea that closely relates to the dominant gender- and sexuality norms that were imposed by colonial Christianity (cf. Arnfred 2004).

Here, a link can be made between said postcolonial imagination of 'African masculinity' and contemporary African Christian expectations of so-called 'biblical manhood' (van Klinken 2011). Both share a part in ontologies considering sexual rights and obligations as a public good, and both share the idea that same-sex intimate relationships form a threat to the dominant narrative concerning 'African masculinity' (Epprecht 2010; van Klinken 2011; Kaoma 2018). Based on field research, van Klinken (2011; 2012) argues that in Zambian Christian Pentecostal churches, the reshaping of masculinity is an important topic for sermons. The proclaimed biblical masculinity in the sermons influences a rhetoric of disapproval of same-sex love or sexual diversity, because it stresses certain expected patterns of gender roles.

The reshaping of 'African manhood' here closely relates to politics of development contesting neo-colonialism (van Klinken 2011). Within the churches' gender politics there is a specific space for the tasks and roles of men, whereby a stereotypical representation of 'the homosexual' is understood as a counter-image. This is, on the one hand, based on the problematic assumption that same-sex relationships are solely based on sexual contact:

> "The distortion here is as a result of the fact that these relationships, gay and lesbian relationships, where you have a man and a man or a woman and a woman, are purely defined by sexual orientation. […] It is a diversion from the role that God has presented. Because marriage, even a normal liberal marriage between a man and a wife, is not purely defined by sex. It is defined by companionship, by love, by showing that two can become one." (Banda qtd. by van Klinken 2011: 133)

The assumption that a same-sex relationship is exclusively based on sex, makes them contestable in various Christian contexts where *sex for pleasure* is closely linked to morality and sin (Arnfred 2004), in opposite to *sex for procreation* which is sacred.

On the other hand, homosexuality is found problematic because queer men are believed to reject the role of leadership. In the first place this is related to the rejection of fatherhood, and thus leadership, within a family. Fatherhood is further also extended to leadership at a political level (van Klinken 2011: 136-137). Banda (referred to in van Klinken 2011) indicates this assumed rejection of leadership by queer men as problematic, because his ontology is based on a fixed interpretation of biblical manhood. Drawing from the Old Testament, he claims that God's intentions for the roles of men and women are clearly established (van Klinken 2011). Juxtaposed to male leadership, women's role is simply believed to be motherhood. In this ontology "[t]he heterosexism is revealed, first, through a theology that considers heterosexuality as the normative and only acceptable form of human sexuality (van Klinken 2011: 138).

In short, heteronormativity is fostered by colonial and postcolonial authoritarian voices that are both politically and religiously inspired. The explained cases illustrate a predominant stress on the colonial interpretation of male virility, and the postcolonial reshaping of an 'African masculinity', which sometimes is linked to biblical manhood. In all these interpretations, queer sexualities are found problematic, and female experiences are overtly neglected.

2.3 Towards an Alternative Narrative of Same-Sex Love and Christianity

> "Stories matter. And many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise." (Adichie 2009)

As described above, the context of Christian, political and cultural contestation of same-sex relationships in Africa is complex. It is within this complexity of dominant narratives that this study attempts to demonstrate strategies for legitimisation of female same-sex desire related to Christian faith in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under The Udala Trees*. To study different strategies of legitimisation in the representations of non-normative love, and various Christian perspectives in fiction, it is necessary to elaborate on the often neglected narratives of women writers who criticise and eliminate this dominant heterosexual masculine narrative.

2.3.1 The Literary Canon and the Marginalisation of Female Experiences

In said contexts of colonial and postcolonial constructions of masculinity and heteronormativity, it is remarkable that previous gender roles were hardly considered. This is demonstrated above by the

example of Oyěwùmí's study of Yoruba gender roles whereby previous pre-colonial political titles that were possibly earned by women, were in colonial historical discourse automatically attributed to men (Oyěwùmí 2005; Lugones 2007; Arnfred 2004). This resulted in history-making that represented all historical political roles as male functions, while women's experiences and voices are neglected. As demonstrated above, this happens likewise in dominant postcolonial literary narratives. Chinua Achebe, the most famous voice in anti-colonial African writing, argues that it is the task of 'African writers' to restore and bring dignity to the past, in writing their own stories:

> "It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost." (qtd. by Stratton 1994: 24)

The importance of literature in this case is emphasised and an attempt to restore this dignity is Achebe's well-praised *Things Fall Apart* (1958). However, Stratton (1994: 24) asks whether Achebe, with this literary work, equally attempts "to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to African women" as well.

In her analysis of *Things Fall Apart* Stratton (1994) proves how the novel consistently marginalises women and neglects their experiences. An example is the masculinisation of a well-known Igbo river goddess, which is in fact a feminine deity, like the term "goddess" already indicates. Stratton (1994) quotes Ifi Amadiume in arguing that with this case, Achebe, just like European anthropologists and historians, is equally guilty of the masculinisation of societal terms that were female in their original context. This influences the representation of the status of women in the public sphere. By illustrating the goddesses power, Amadiume demonstrates that in this pre-colonial Igbo society "women were not marginalized either politically or economically" (qtd. by Stratton 1994: 27). The emblematic marginalisation of women from the political and communal sphere in representations of pre-colonial Igbo societies, leads to legitimisation of continuation of colonial male domination in the period of transfer of political power between colonial rule and politics of independence. This adds to the politics of remasculinisation discussed above.

Besides, Stratton (1994) argues that *Things Fall Apart* does not explicitly lack representations of women, but that they conform to gender stereotypes. The stereotypes are, like in the postcolonial political discourse discussed above, based on dichotomist ideas of what women are in contrast to men. This is

visible in *Things Fall Apart* through the representation of gender-roles (and thereby male domination) in means of sexual allegories: "the sexual allegory of male and female, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, rationality and irrationality, activity and passivity" (Stratton 1994: 32). These characteristics are similarly described by Ndijo (2012) and Epprecht (2010) in discussing the (hyper) masculinities of an 'African sexuality'.

To understand the marginalisation of women in the story, Stratton analyses the protagonist Okonkwo's character and function in this ideology as follows:

> "Rather it is the relation between Self and Other in a patriarchal situation that defines Okonkwo's character. Okonkwo provides a classic example of male psychology in a patriarchal society, from the perspective of which women are inferior because of their otherness. Insisting on sexual otherness, Okonkwo projects on to women those qualities he most despises in himself." (Stratton 1994: 33)

It becomes clear again that male domination and subordination of women is part of the self-realisation of the process of remasculinisation of men suppressed, and even feminised (Stratton 1994: 31) by colonial oppression.

In most ground-breaking anti-colonial male literature, the position or representation of women is caught in the trope of 'Mother Africa' or the 'motherland' (Stratton 1994; Boehmer 2005). Léopold Sédar Senghor, for instance, plays with images of 'Africa' as a (naked) black woman in his poetry (Stratton 1994). In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a character asks why a mother is found supreme, while in the described Igbo society, all inheritance goes via the line of the father:

> "A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – "Mother is Supreme". Why is that? Uchendu answers his own question by explaining that a mother's supremacy resides in her role as protector. Just as a child 'seeks sympathy in in its mothers hut', so man 'finds refuge in his motherland"' (Achebe qtd. by Stratton 1994: 28)

The real status of mothers, or women, are hardly praised. Instead, Newell (2009: 244) argues that "male authors convey their anti-colonial nationalism with reference to a feminized, symbolic "motherland" which does nothing to advance the liberties of women."

2.3.2 Female Voices: the Representation of Experiences in Female Writing and Strategies of Queerness

Even though they might not be canonised in great numbers, women writers wrote and write stories that contest the generalised and stereotyped images that are supposed to represent their experiences. For instance, while women were subjected lead passive lives, and had less access to education than men, both in colonial and postcolonial realities, women were (and are) active in anti-colonial struggles (Stratton 1994). Their passivity in this sense, is a construct and the strive for women's voices over their own experiences is still a very actual theme in African female writing.

The problem here, is that these voices are often not heard, or are misinterpreted by literary critics, because the male literary tradition is still normative (Stratton 1994; Cooper 2007; Cooper 2008; Boehmer 2005). This reminds the question on whether the subaltern can speak, asked by Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak (1988). By the subaltern she means "folks in social groups who cannot access the structure of welfare provided by the state" (2018), which in this situation can be women writers (and women in general) in postcolonial nations. Stratton (1994: 62) clearly demonstrates with the example of the Kenyan author Grace Ogot, that early postcolonial female writers' work is misunderstood. Grace Ogot's promising *The Promised Land* (1966) was barely or badly criticised, by male criticism and 'Western' feminists, while Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was praised.

To speak out, Ogot used strategies of inversion of the gender roles in male canonical work like that by Ngugi or Achebe. Although, this does not invoke imposed ideas of gender, it is a way of criticising the patriarchal structures of colonial and postcolonial societies. Related to Spivak's findings, this case shows that the mere problem of the literary male tradition is that there is no space for the experiences of women written by early postcolonial writers such as Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. This is illustrated by Hewett (2005: 85) who argues that following Carole Boyce Davies, it is not the muteness of the subaltern woman, but the "selective hearing or mis-hearing" of her oppressors" that created this absence of women's experiences. It is becomes clear that stories written by women, deal with totally different experiences of (post)colonial realities than those illustrated in men's literature. Robolin (2004) illustrates this for instance with Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* in contrast with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and mimicry on colonial experiences.

To cope with this way of unfitting the literary canon as women writers, or being "banished from Oedipus" as Cooper (2007) puts it, women writers have been walking alternative paths to express their

experiences under the yoke of the Lacanian 'Symbolic Order' that is dominated by men. This Symbolic is explained to be the site where one earns his or her subjectivity or in other words, it is a "system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives" (Mansfield qtd. by Silvani 2011: 17). This order, however, is globally still dominated by the Law of the Father in a 'Western' metaphorical language. The idea of Oedipus here indicates that it "is based on a Western conception of patriarchal family, a conception that is white, male and heterosexual" (Cooper 2007: 144). This is in line with the heteronormativity discussed above, and women writers, especially non-European, or in this case, African writers do not fit in this symbolic and cannot identify with the language of that order.

Yet, Cooper (2008; 2007) describes how subaltern writers who deviate from this dominant order (e.g. women, migrants, refugees, criminals, etc.) wrest their language into new ways of writing to circumvent the dominant metaphorical language of the order they are perceived by. Because these writers can never become fully part of that order, the language used in that order is not theirs to inherit. As a result, subaltern writers wrest this dominant language in their writings until it feels comfortable enough for them. Ways of wresting it are for exmample the use of rhetoric of metonymy, which represents "realities of material culture" (Cooper 2008: 6). This is a strategy to draw back to the ordinary, which threatens the metaphoric of the imperial patriarchal rule. Language is transformed for instance by referring concretely to objects, using indigenous languages, and for instance focussing on rhythm of the used words. Cooper (2007; 2008) discusses works of writers Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Biyi Bandele, Leila Aboulela and others, in which these strategies are used.

Another remarkable strategy women writers use to make their voices heard, is the description of the body and sexuality, and even queer desire, which is considered taboo. By lifting this 'veil of secrecy' (Veit-Wild & Naguschewski 2011), women writers go against the grain. To respond to the void of women's representations in postcolonial literature, Hewett (2005) argues that a new generation of Nigerian women writers developed strategies of empowerment by using descriptions of female sexualities or sexual independence. The writers she highlights are Titilola Shoneyin, Promise Okekwe, Temilola Abioye, and Unoma Azuah because "their poetry and short stories claim previously taboo subjects and advocate a radical critique of patriarchal culture and its master narratives" (Hewett 2005: 81). However, she struggles with the lack of non-stereotyped representations of same-sex desire in fiction. This is understandable because her article was published before the work of writers such as

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinelo Okparanta, Monica Arac de Nyeko and others who explicitly describe women's (sexual) desires or other intimacy towards one another.

Newell (2009: 247) argues that "queer representations and queer readings pose a significant challenge to the old imperial visual economy, allowing authors to engage with manhood on the edge of the field of patriarchal representation". Although this claim merely concerns male queer desire, it expresses how representations of non-heterosexual sexualities go against the patriarchal normativity. Green-Simms (2016) writes about a new generation of (female) Nigerian writers that: "third-generation writers often show how homosexuality is integral to larger debates and discussions about women's struggles, sexism, imposed gender normativity, violence, corruption, religion, and immigration" (2016: 143).

The representation of queer desire between women, is understood by Boehmer (2005) as a means to express the experiences of women's sexualities and personal development, as well as to contest the patriarchal order: "The passion for the female other is the dialectical ground on which identity is sought" (2005: 177). However, she understands this contestation already in intimate relationships between women and/or girls (friends, kinship, cousins, sisters etc.) without an explicit sexual desire. These friendships would count as sites for the self-realisation of girls, not possible to find in their male counterparts. The 'queerness' here is thus taken very wide. Boehmer describes it "as a paradigm, even if disguised or embedded, through which to articulate a still- unrealised striving for self-realisation or an ethically invested expression of desire" (2005: 183).

Nfah-Abbenyi (2007) likewise argues that in the work of the Cameroonian Francophone writer Calixte Beyala, women's intimate relationships with one another is a space for self-realisation in a patriarchal and often aggressive environment. She emphasises the narratives of the erotic representations between women as a means to reclaim the erotic experience. This does not mean that the women identify as 'lesbian' or that they refuse sexual contact with men. They instead reject the patriarchal dominance by finding a safer environment in women-centred space and sexual intimacy.

Within this framework of literary works by African female writers, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under The Udala Trees* touches upon both the taboo of erotic representations of women's sexuality, and women's same-sex relationships. As explained in the contextualisation, this work is an exception that has long been waited for (Osinubi 2018), and to which the previous postcolonial African writings such as Achebe's, Nwapa's and even Adichie's, paved the way. Although, Unoma Azuah and Lola Shoneyin touched upon

same-sex desire in their fiction, Okparant's novel is the first to present the development of this desire as the main topic of the story. The following chapters offer an analysis of the strategies used in *Under the Udala Trees* to create that space for the Christian legitimacy of queer women, with respect to the said context.

3. *Under the Udala Trees*' Strategies for Normalising Same-Sex Desire in Relation to Queer Theology

Under the Udala Trees follows the life story of protagonist Ijeoma, who is torn between the desire for other women and her Christian faith, which is influenced by the homophobic interpretations of Bible scripture by the people who surround her. With this story, the novel provides a framework for various contesting voices, interpretations, and experiences of Christianity and same-sex desire. This allows to look beyond the dominant perspective of queer love as 'un-Christian', while it introduces a legitimacy related to queer theology. As described by Cheng (2011), queer theology could be simply explained as the space where queer theory meets theology. Although this, for many Christian believers, might seem an oxymoron, *Under the Udala Trees* succeeds in questioning the dogmatic impossibility of being queer and Christian at the same time.

This chapter analyses how the novel uses queer theological strategies to normalise non-normative sexualities within the Christian faith. It provides a queer reading of the biblical scriptures, which are often used to strengthen anti-gay rhetoric. The dogmatic interpretation is represented by the voices of Mama and a grammar school teacher, which are questioned and re-imagined by Ijaoma. Furthermore, this chapter examines how the queer theological notion of the image of God functions in *Under the Udala Trees*.

3.1 Queering Biblical Scripture

As explained in chapter 1, queer theology that profoundly deals with scripture embraces a prominently wide field of study. A queer theological perspective on scripture, or simply "queer scripture" (Cheng 2011: n.p.) aims to offer an alternative reading of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that form the Bible. Since selective interpretations of the scriptures are widely used as the basis for anti-gay rhetoric or homophobia, queer theologians aim to reclaim or re-read these and other passages as a contestation of the dominant heteronormative interpretation. This is likewise happening in gender studies, whereby the patriarchal, and even the binary gender roles are deconstructed via alternative Bible readings (Sawyer

2004). A frequently and popularly used reference contesting non-heteronormative sexualities is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19 (Cheng 2011). This story is assumed to proof God's punishment for male homosexuality. However, alternative readings indicate the moral lesson of inhospitality in the story, instead of that of homosexual lust. On top of that, they show how this biblical story describes a case of rape instead of mutual and respectful same-sex love. To create a more positive queer narrative, queer theologians use affirmative interpretations of other Bible stories (e.g. Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth, and the story of David and Jonathan).

Affirming theologians indicate how anti-queer theologian and fundamentalist Bible-believing Christians frequently use scripture for anti-queer argumentations in which they overlook the complexity of the Bible (Boesak 2011; Johnson 2010). In this sense, popular Bible verses (e.g. Leviticus 18 and 20, 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10, Romans 1: 29-31) which are popular in anti-gay rhetoric, are often quoted as exclusive statements, and overtly repeated out of their original contexts (Johnson 2010).

In *Under the Udala Trees*, the Bible forms an important guide for Ijeoma's personal development as a Christian and as a woman with a queer sexuality. The word 'Bible' is used 73 time throughout the story. Ijeoma refers to the scripture in all the stages of her life, which is a source of turmoil as well as a source of empowerment for her. Biblical scripture is introduced merely in the form of literal quotes and specific stories from the book of Genesis, which are generally used to support the main anti-queer discourses of Bible-believing Christians[6]. Okparanta's novel discusses these stories by Ijeoma's mother, Mama, who fears the assumed sin of same-sex desire. Her pious authority is questioned when Ijeoma's own reflections, interpretations and questions follow.

Due to Mama's depression after her husband's death, and the shortage of alimentation during the Biafran war, her daughter is sent off to family friends. Ijeoma works there as a house girl in exchange for safety and basic care. When she learns about the intimate relationship between Ijeoma and Amina, Mama is quick to collect Ijeoma at the hosting family and takes her to their new home in Aba. There, Ijeoma narrates Mama's strict Bible lessons with the aim to "straighten [Ijeoma] out" (129). The lessons focus on fragments of the Bible (from the book of Genesis until Revelation) that seemingly address the 'sinful' nature of same-sex desire. Mama, who believes that Ijeoma is haunted by demons, has a serious and inevitable quest:

[6] The term Bible-believing Christians is self-chosen name for mainly conservative or fundamentalist Christians who grant full authority to the Bible.

> "Mama spoke again. "Now that you have had the week to settle in, we must make a schedule for you. There's nothing more important now than for us to begin working on **cleansing your soul**."" (65, added emphasis in bold)

3.1.1 Queering Mama's Interpretation of the Stories in the Old Testament

Mama's lessons start with the very beginning of Genesis, where God's creation of the earth is revealed. In the novel, some fragments are literally quoted in Igbo and English: Genesis 1: 1-2 and 1: 20-24. Mama reads them to Ijeoma in order to make her first point clear. She stresses God's design in which she believes that man and woman are created to become one flesh. The quotation of Genesis 1:24 is highlighted:

> *"[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.*
> She repeated that last part:
> *[24] N'ihi nka ka nwoke garapu nna-ya na nne-ya, rapara n'aru nwu-nye-ya: ha ewe gho otu anu-aru.*
> She said, "*Nwoke na nwunye*. Man and wife. Adam *na* Eve. *I ne ghe nti?* Are you listening?" She was shaking her finger, a reminder and a warning." (67, italics in original)

Mama's reliance on a strict interpretation of the binary gender-roles as part of God's intention is made clear. The codes switching between English and Igbo remarkably emphasises this.

In addition, this quote illustrates how Mama plays the role of an authoritarian teacher. Osinubi (2018) describes the importance of the teachers' roles in *Under the Udala Trees* as a strategy to disprove the dominant contestation of queer desire. The condemning role played by Mama and as later described, the grammar school teacher is juxtaposed by the affirmative positions of teachers from new generations: Ijeoma's second lover Ndidi and Ijeoma's daughter Chidinma (Osinubi 2018).

To support her argument Mama adds that, because other forms of relational covenants are not spoken about in the Bible, they are not according to God's design, and are thus sinful: ""The bottom line, Ijeoma, my dear," she said, "is that if God wanted it to be otherwise, would He not have included it that other way in the Bible?"" (68)

Juxtaposed to Mama's fixed homophobic Bible interpretations, *Under the Udala Trees* describes Ijeoma's discomfort as a result of the Bible studies (cf. chapter 4). Furthermore, the novel narrates how she, as

fourteen-year-old girl, reflects on the story of Adam and Eve by means of questions and alternative interpretations:

> "The thought occurred to me: Yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But *so what* if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did *that* have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. Just because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? **Infinite possibilities, and each of them perfectly viable**. […] Also what if Adam and Eve were merely symbols of companionship? […] By now I knew enough that there were at least a few allegories in the Bible […]. After all, if it were to be taken so literally, whom, then, did Cain marry, if only Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were in existence at the time?" (82-83, italics in original, added emphasis in bold)

By applying the questions to this story of the Bible, the passage allows to create a space for broader interpretations of scripture. Ijeoma thinks beyond the only possible clarification of the story of Adam and Eve as the model of the preferred heterosexual relationship. First, she introduces the idea of other possible relationships existing in similarity to the one described by the Bible by stating that this "did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden" (83) and that there are "infinite possibilities and all of them perfectly viable" (83). This illustrates that Ijeoma does not accept to feel guilty about her love for Amina. Instead, she seeks other possibilities to keep her faith meanwhile protecting her desire for a person of the same sex.

Secondly, Ijeoma emphasises the interpretation of the story by insinuating that the bond between Adam and Eve is strong because of the aspect of companionship, and not so much because they are individuals of the opposite sex. This again supports the idea that such a bond is able to exist between an "Eve and an Eve" as well. The stress on companionship corresponds with the interpretations of the theological concept of *Imago Dei* described by van Klinken and Phiri (2015). As discussed above, they present the theological interpretation of human creation in the image of God, as only possible in the relationality between people. The diversity of the possibilities of relationality is stressed in grassroots theologies (van Klinken & Phiri 2015). The quote above intensifies this argument by proposing the situation of Cain,

Adam and Eve's son. Ijeoma questions with whom he would have shared this essential human trait of companionship when no other people than Adam and Eve existed at that moment.

The passage is interesting because it suggests the possibility that this story is nothing more than an allegory, written with the aim to pass on a broader message. As such, this again enables to imagine a more diverse world population in the earliest stages of humanity, and it allows to reconsider the credibility of Bible interpretations that firmly rely on fixed dominant doctrines.

Apart from the setting in the garden of Eden, the dominant interpretation of Genesis' story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is questioned. Ijeoma's experience of the lesson concerning this story starts with Mama's emphasis on the behaviour of the Sodomites interpreted as sinful because of the same-sex notion. She underlines how the story is applicable to Ijeoma's queer love:

> ""Don't you see?" Mama asked. "It's that same behavior that led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the very same behavior that you and that girl – what's her name again? – engaged in."" (73)

In this quote it is remarkable how Mama disrupts Amina of her humanity by simply calling her "that girl" and by forgetting her name. In other parts of the story Mama likewisell denies to call her by her name.

The Bible story mentioned in this quote narrates a scene in a city called Sodom when Lot, a man who respects God, is visited by angels, who are considered as men. Lot accommodates them at his home place. At a certain moment, the (male) Sodomites insist on meeting the men (angels) in order to get to 'know' them, which is explained as 'to sleep with them'. Instead of offering his guests, Lot decides to offer his own virgin daughters to these men, to do with them whatever they want. As a reward for his actions, Lot is the only warned citizen to flee the city with his family, because God plans to destroy the city as a revenge for the Sodomites' evilness.

Mama assumes that God punishes the Sodomites, for their deviant sexual behaviour, by which she means the attempt to have sex with people from the same sex: ""Lot was a good man," Mama said. "Hospitable. Was willing to protect his guests from **sin**."" (73, my emphasis in bold), and "[…] Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah." (74) It is clear that Mama's interpretation of the story only addresses the interpretation used in anti-queer rhetoric: God's punishment of the Sodomites as a result of their homosexual lust and

Lot's reward for acting according to the heteronormative rules by sacrificing his own daughters (see also Cheng 2011).

In contrast, Ijeoma, just like other queer theologians, questions this idea (see also Siker 2012; Cheng 2011; Toensing 2005). She introduces a re-imagination of the message of this story as a warning for the Sodomites' sinful nature of inhospitality instead of a warning for same-sex desire:

> ""The point is that Lot protected his guests from being handled in that terrible way that the Bible warns against."
> "What terrible way?" I asked.
> "Man lying with man," she said, sighing with irritation.
> "And *that* is the lesson we are to take from the story?" I asked.
> […] "Maybe it was a lesson on hospitality," I said in a soft voice, though she had clearly struck a nerve in me. […] "The idea that he was willing to put in danger his own belongings, and that he was willing to risk the welfare of his own family members in order to safeguard his guests. It could simply have been a lesson on hospitality," I said." (73-74, italics in original)

A similar discussion is represented in *Under the Udala Trees* concerning Mama's interpretations of the story in the book of Judges chapter 19. The chapter narrates the story of a certain Levite who buys a damsel, with whom he once spent the night. During the travel back home with the woman, he passes the city of Gidead, where the inhabitants insist on raping him. Instead of going himself, the Levite sacrifices the woman. The following morning, the woman arrives home half to death, and annoyed by her, the Levite draws her over his donkey and continues the journey. Later on, he cuts the woman into pieces and sends all the body parts away separately. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Mama again expects Ijeoma to see the similarity of her own situation with that of the scriptures. Mama interprets this in the same fashion she earlier explained the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is again contrasted with Ijeoma's re-imagination of the allegorical capacity of the story. She questions her mother's capacities of interpretation:

> "It was the same thing she had said with the story of Lot. It was as if she were obsessed with this issue of abomination. How could she believe that *that* was the lesson to be taken out of this horrible story? What about all the violence and the rape?
> […] I looked at Mama and said, "Mama, the Bible is full of stories. Maybe they're all just allegories of something else."

"Hush," Mama said. "The Bible is the Bible and not to be questioned. What we read in it is what we are to take out of it."" (80-81, italics in original)

By creating a dialogue about this matter, the passages provide the opportunity to consider both juxtaposed understandings of the scripture. Ijeoma's thoughts, quotes and experiences are more profoundly developed because of the autodiegetic narration. This is also emphasised by Courtois (2018: 122): "[i]nternal narration helps the reader identify and sympathize with the heroine." In this sense, even though Mama's interpretations are widely carried by many people of faith, her ideas seem slightly superficial. This is especially stressed by the ways in which she cannot answer Ijeoma's questions with satisfying explanations. This lack of persuasiveness becomes clearer in the next sections.

3.1.2 Queering Decontextualized Quotations of Leviticus

In addition to the Bible stories previously explained, *Under the Udala Trees* endows re-imaginations of popular quotations of biblical law, that are wrenched out of their contexts and used in anti-queer rhetoric. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the book of Leviticus (chapters 18 and 20) strengthens Mama's confidence in the importance of cleansing her daughter's soul. Leviticus is for the same reason often used in conservative theologies. Dresner (1999) explains the passage of Leviticus as a confirmation that same-sex relationships are a "violation to the order of creation" (404). In *Under the Udala Trees* a verse from Leviticus 18 is literally quoted and followed by a discussion between Ijeoma and her mother:

"Leviticus 18.

[22] *Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.*

[…] What is the meaning of 'abomination'?" I asked.

"Simple: something disgusting, disgraceful, a scandal."

"But what exactly is disgusting of disgraceful or scandalous about lying with mankind as with womankind? Does the Bible explain?"

"The fact that the Bible says it's bad is all the reason you need," Mama said. "Besides, how can people be fruitful and multiply if they carry on in that way? Even *that* is scandal enough – the fact that it does not allow for procreation."" (75, italics in original)

This passage, just like in Dresner's (1999) plea, draws attention to the word 'abomination' in the English translation of the verse. While Mama is confident about her interpretation of said verse, Ijeoma becomes confused. She consistently disturbs her mother with questions for ungiven explanations. Ijeoma's

interrogative attitude contrasts Mama's blind belief in her own interpretation of the Bible. Mama, for instance, states that there is no need for explaining why God denounces same-sex love, because it is stated in the Bible. Although Ijeoma neither questions the importance of the Bible, she is more careful with believing the dominant doctrines that are based on human understandings of it.

To intensify her message, Mama adds that same-sex relationships do not lead to reproduction, and are thus sinful. This is in line with Dresner's (1999) statement clarified earlier, that it goes against the natural order of God's creation. Yet, this statement reduces every form of sexuality to reproduction. The de-erotization of Christian lives and experiences is found problematic in certain movements of (queer) theology, which will be discussed in chapter 5. Ijeoma regains her strength because of Mama's argument that Ijeoma's love for Amina is scandalous because "it does not allow for procreation" (75). She is not convinced because Mama's argument is too simple and because the fixation on procreation leads to insulting heterosexual infertile couples such as the grammar school teacher and his wife:

> ""God intended for it to be man and woman. And God intended also for man and woman to bear children. It is the way it should be, so yes, it is an abomination if it is not man and woman. And it is an abomination if man and woman cannot bear a child."
>
> My head felt as if it were to explode. Did she not realize what she was saying about the grammar school teacher and his wife and couples like them? I felt a million questions churning in my mind, the sort of questions that might only have exasperated Mama more." (75-76)

This connection between infertility and queer love concerning the argument of procreation, is likewise illustrated in queer theologies. Van Klinken (2018), for instance, links the case of experiences of queerness to the her-theology of Mercy Oduyoye, who is infertile. While procreation is by many Christians extremely valued, Oduyoye argues that this understanding of being created in the image of God is too narrow. She describes how Christian fruitfulness can possibly be completed in other means of expressing love as a human being.

3.1.3 The New Testament as Salvation

In an interview at France24English (2018), Chinelo Okparanta stresses the importance of the changes in the Christian laws between the two Testaments. *Under the Udala Trees* represents the new covenant of the New Testament as a means of salvation for Ijeoma. Although some passages of the New Testament are frequently used in anti-gay rhetoric (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11), the story does not reflect on these

decontextualized quotes. Instead, it emphasises the general notion of love through Jesus Christ as the most important message. Apart from the understanding of love, the New Testament provides a perspective of 'change' in God's laws and Word, because the ten commandments were replaced by the New law in Jesus Christ.

3.1.3.1 The New Testament as a Reminder of God's Love

At moments of great despair and turmoil, the story reminds some verses of the New Testament that bring relief to Ijeoma's situation. When she lives in Aba, for instance, Ijeoma spends a day in church to brood over her confusion caused by the so-called sinful "nature of [her] love" (229). In the end, as if inspired by God, she remembers a verse in the book of John, chapter 8:

> "The exhalation came out as a long, tumbling sigh. Somewhere in the middle of it, I remembered John 8. I knelt there at the front of the church and at last the words came out of my mouth, Jesus' words: *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her*." (201-202, italics in original)

This passage stresses the Christian understanding that every human being carries sin within as a heritage from Adam. Therefore, it is not up to human beings to condemn one another for sinful behaviour, since only God is assigned to judge in righteousness. This passage in the story thus reminds Jesus' disapproval of condemnation, which empowers Ijeoma.

Under the Udala Trees highlights another verse of the book of John which emphasises the love of God for his creation. Frightened by the condemnation of the grammar school teacher, Amina struggles with panic attacks due to her love for Ijeoma. In order to comfort her, Ijeoma cites John 3:16: "Once, I went so far as to quote her John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life"" (159). This reflection shows how, even after Mama's Bible lessons, Ijeoma is convinced of God's love being large enough for all the people. This idea of everlasting love is likewise very important in queer theology (van Klinken and Phiri 2015). Ijeoma emphasises:

> "I said, "You see, God Loves us all the same. He gave His only son to save us all. All of us, even the thieves and the liars and the cheats, even the murderers and the disobedient. Even those of us accused of abominations."" (159)

In this quote it is remarkable that Ijeoma emphasises the innocence of queer people by saying "those of us accused of abominations". This illustrates that she does not believe the love between two people of the same sex as an act of abomination on its own. In strengthening her persuasion, she not only believes that God's love is sufficient, but also that the only commandment that came with Jesus Christ is to love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. In this commandment, the Bible does not distinguish the neighbours who are sinful and the neighbours who are sacred:

> "Just to point out to her that God loved us all. Just to point out to her that He didn't put any qualifiers on His love. Not even when He said to love your neighbour as yourself. He didn't say don't love the thieving neighbours, or don't love the adulterers, or don't love the liars or the cheats or the disobedient children. He simply said, "Love your neighbour as yourself."" (159)

This quote confirms the queer theological argument of the the *Imago Dei*. It stresses God's love and His demand for people to love in the same radical way which reflects His image in humanity (van Klinken & Phiri 2015; Cheng 2011; Kamitsuka 2010; Althaus-Reid 1997).

Years after the Bible studies with Mama took place, Ijeoma struggles with her own faith as a result of the doctrines that condemn same-sex love her sexual orientation. She compromised to marry a man, Chibundu, because of Mama's pleas and for her own safety. When she lived in Aba, she and her girlfriend Ndidi narrowly escaped a homophobic murder attempt, which threatened their relationship. Having moved to Port Harcourt after her wedding, the relationship with Ndidi came to an end. However, Ijeoma still thinks of Ndidi and is not able to love Chibundu in a romantic way. This results in anxiety, frustration and depression, which will be discussed in chapter 4. Ijeoma often spends time in church to find answers and to cool down. One moment, she remembers how the New Testament shows another side of God in which He is not the God of punishment, but the God of salvation. This especially happens in the image of Jesus Christ who died at the cross to take all the punishment for the sins of humanity on himself.

In the following passage, Ijeoma's thoughts are not so rebellious anymore as they were when she was a teenager receiving Bible lessons from her mother. Instead, she gave in to the idea that her same-sex desire is sinful according to the popular doctrines inspired by decontextualized quotations from scripture. However, Ijeoma is still eager to find ways within her belief that allow her queerness and her Christian faith to co-exist. She has been trying to fulfil the expected social roles, conforming to heteronormativity (e.g. marriage and pregnancy), without success. Seeking refuge in the salvation of

Jesus, and questioning the doctrines of the dual image of God as graceful versus judgemental, is her only way out. In the following quote it is striking that the passage makes a distinction between the perspective of human beings on religion, and the scriptural representations of God in the New Testament:

> "Because if **people** like Mama and the grammar school teacher were right, then the Bible was all the proof I needed to know that God would surely punish me.
>
> But if I would go **back to the Bible** – to the New Testament specifically – what exactly were the consequences if we failed to do His will? Would God really carry out His will by way of punishment? Was not all our punishment taken care of by Jesus on the cross? What to make of God's grace in combination with His punishment?" (229, added emphasis in bold)

3.1.3.2 The New Testament as an Indicator of Change

Apart from God's love, *Under the Udala Trees* stresses the importance of the New Testament as an indicator of change fostered by God. This provides hope for Ijeoma, because the change of the law in the New Testament breaks with the law of Moses described in the Old Testament. The passages often used in anti-gay rhetoric, which were drawn from that part, are no longer valued in the New Testament. There the ten commandments are reshaped into a single Law demanding love. The importance of change as a hope for Ijeoma is stressed in the beginning of the novel:

> "Perhaps it was part of His aesthetic, part of His vision for the world. Perhaps everything was a reflection of that vision of **change**. Perhaps the nature of life was **change**. **Wasn't creation the ultimate proof of this?** […] Maybe it was the point of life, and of the Bible, that things had to **change**. Was this not what the pastor had said was the reason why the New Testament was created after the Old?" (37, added emphasis in bold)

The Epilogue also expresses the renewal of the Word in the New Testament as an improvement generated by God. Ijeoma suggests that in the future this might lead to even more freedom. The Old Testament is described as being able to vanish, with references to Hebrews 8, including all the condemnations written in it: "If that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been made for the second. With that new covenant, He made the first old. And that first one was allowed to vanish away" (321). Ijeoma continues to stress the notion of change:

> "The Bible itself is an endorsement of change. Even biblical covenants change: In the New Testament, no longer need for animal sacrifices. Change. No longer the covenant of law, but rather the covenant of grace. Change. […] Many days I reason that change is the point of it all. And that everything we should do should be a reflection of that vision of change. Maybe the rules of the Bible will always be in flux." (322)

This idea of change provides another hope for the widening of one's own limited imaginations: "Because a new change was looming, and I was finding myself forced to acknowledge that the limit of my imagination was by no means the limit of the world." (37) Especially based on the Bible, Ijeoma adds that the broadening of one's imagination is the main lesson to take from the holy book: "This, it seems to me, is the lesson of the Bible: this affirmation of the importance of reflection, and of revision, enough revision to do away with tired, old, even faulty laws" (321).

Briefly, by referring to, and questioning the mainstream interpretations of biblical scripture, *Under the Udala Trees* paves new paths in the imagination of the Christian faith. It juxtaposes the mainstream homophobic interpretations with affirmative imaginations of the same scripture. Therefore, the novel offers a framework that represents a broader possible interpretation which does not condemn same-sex desire.

3.2 In the Image of God

As explained in the theoretical framework of this study, van Klinken and Phiri (2015) demonstrate how, in certain situations, queer people of faith depart from the central Christian claim of 'creation' to legitimise their existence. The belief that God creates, and that people are created in His image, is understood as a way to make clear how a queer existence is beyond an individual's choice, but is God-given.

Under the Udala Trees is less explicit in claiming Ijeoma's sexuality as something she was born with. However, when Ijeoma leaves Chibundu and goes, together with her daughter, back to Aba to live with her mother, Mama says: "God, who created you, must have known what He did. Enough is enough." (323). This exclamation indicates a very remarkable shift in Mama's understanding, since she has been the most critical voice against her daughter's same-sex desire. She fought it with Bible studies, prayers and a semi-arranged heterosexual marriage. Ijeoma endured all of these until a certain point, concluding that that life is not meant to be hers. When Mama becomes conscious of that, she finally has to admit

that "enough is enough". Mama's character thus took a total turn by finally admitting that Ijeoma's queerness is part of her creation, by which she lays the responsibility for it in God's hands. Mama's round character is expressed in Ijeoma's memory of the painful experiences of the Bible studies in which this version of her mother becomes something in the past:

> "Time and time again I've tried to bury the memory of those lessons, to act as if they were not part of my reality, because claiming them would be like continuing to remember that **former version** of Mama, the one who believed so much that there was a demon in me." (59, added emphasis in bold)

3.2.1 A 'Cursed' Child

Related to the notion of creation, *Under the Udala Trees* implicitly touches upon the theme of queer sexualities as beyond human choice. At a certain moment in the story, Ijeoma sits in church and narrates about the birth of a boy with a harelip who is born in her neighbourhood. By then, a harelip is believed to be a curse form God. The mother of this boy abandons him in the hospital, out shame and fear for the curse. About the boy, Ijeoma tells that

> "more than likely he would be left to perish, unwanted and unloved. Because this was the nature of such things, of anything that was **outside the norm**. They were labeled with such words as "curse," and wasn't it wise to keep curses at bay?" (228, added emphasis in bold)

In this passage, Ijeoma explains how the boy would always be marginalised because of deviating from the standard. Eventually, because of the boy's non-normativity, Ijeoma feels connected to him. She understands that everything outside the norm is believed to be a curse. This counts for the boys appearance with the harelip, as well as for Ijeoma's desires for another woman. In addition, stressing the boy's case emphasises the innocence of being marginalised in social terms. The boy is simply born with his harelip, yet society punishes him for life, which is actually also the case with Ijeoma. Furthermore, the story scares her, because, influenced by her environment, she is afraid of giving birth to a cursed child as a punishment for her own 'abomination'.

When the story continues, Chibundu enters the church and forms a counter-reaction to Ijeoma's anxiety for giving birth to a cursed child. Although it is not sure if Chibundu is aware Ijeoma's same-sex desire, he argues that the belief in abominations is installed by the church to extend its control. Chibundu's counter-voice does not really represent the theological creation or *Imago Dei*, but it critiques the

churches' production of fear for deviations. In this way, he emphasises the human role in the imagination of stigmatisation, instead of real wrongs in the eyes of God. Chibundu compares the church with a business:

> "Take the Anglican or Catholic church, for instance. You have all these doctrines that are set up, and we are told that God is the reason for all of them. […] The Church is the oldest and most successful business known to man, because it knows not only how to recruit customers but also how to control them with things like doctrines and words like 'abomination'. […] My sense of it is that some things are called abominations that really aren't." (231-232)

Later on, Ijeoma gives birth to a perfectly healthy baby girl, Chidinma. This again forms a counter-argument for the 'abnormality' of her love for another woman. Instead of being cursed, Ijeoma is blessed: "Chidinma was the name I decided on, for "God is good," because she was no curse of a child, no harelip" (264). The story of successful procreation debunks the myth of a punishing God. Curtois (2018) adds that the fertility of Ijeoma, or of the story in general, is stressed by the concept of the udala tree, which is believed to be an extremely fertile tree. It is remarkable that underneath this tree, Ijeoma first meets Amina, who awakens her sexuality.

3.2.2 A Natural Same-Sex Desire

In addition to the comparison of Ijeoma and the boy with the harelip, the theme of creation is implicitly reflected in the story by the way Ijeoma's life unfolds. When Ijeoma grows up, she and Amina fall in love. Juxtaposed to the dominant political insinuation that same-sex love is a disease that infiltrates Africa from the West, the story of both girls falling in love, does not connect by any means to people or influences from outside Nigeria. On top of that, Ijeoma does not reflect upon her love for Amina, until adults get involved and frighten them by arguing that God will punish this behaviour. Their love is simply there. This natural development of the love between the girls is emphasised by their desires for each other (cf. chapter 5) and by the way Ijeoma is surprised by the seriousness of the adults' reaction. She tries does not understand the severity of their case: "I sputtered, my tongue tumbling over a string of words, before something coherent came out. "Amina and I, we didn't think anything of it," I began" (128).

Before the interference of the grammar school teacher and Ijeoma's reaction, the normalcy of the girls' love is emphasised in the way Amina proposes to marry Ijeoma. When Ijeoma asks if Amina wants to

marry her or another person, Amina acts as if this is a silly question: "She rolled her eyes at me. "Of course I mean to each other. I mean that it would be nice to be married to you"" (118).

The naturalness of Ijeoma's same-sex desire is further stressed in every stage of the story. It is for example implicitly represented in shared mundane activities. The importance of everyday life related to the erotic, is for instance described by Osinubi (2018) and Courtois (2018) in the discussion of erotic pleasure (cf. chapter 5). The repulsion of heteronormativity, is mostly emphasised after compromising to a heterosexual marriage with Chibundu, which destroys her. Courtois (2018) argues that this compromise to heterosexual marriage is not a completely free decision, because Ijeoma is fragmented between the expectations from outside and her own experiences of being stuck in a heterosexual reality that is not hers. It becomes clear that she acts against her own nature, which hinders her to be fully human according to the *Imago Dei*. This is for instance expressed by the ultimate embodied objection of the relationship: a miscarriage (Courtois 2018). In addition, Ijeoma's depression and the absence of her love for Chibundu indicate that this heterosexual marriage is not natural for her: "A year of marriage and a baby on the way, and yet there was no indication that my love for him would ever develop into a romantic kind of love" (233).

Furthermore, the novel literally states that the love for women exceeds Ijeoma's own decisions. At a certain moment, Ndidi attempts to convince Ijeoma of "trying out" with Chibundu, whereby Ijeoma's disbelief is represented: "Of course I had never tried being with a boy. How could she imply that I even had a choice in the matter?" (215)

In short, the representation of Ijeoma's same-sex desire in Okparanta's novel can be interpreted as related to the queer theological notion of the image of God. In this assumption, queered subjects are justified and affirmed by understanding their sexualities as part of God's creation. The natural development of Ijeoma's love for women is emphasised: it is presented as not willed, but God-given.

4. A Fragmented Existence Between the 'Sacred' and the 'Profane' in *Under the Udala Trees*

While growing up in a heteronormative society, Ijeoma experiences moments of a fragmented existence: she is stuck between the expectations of her hetero-patriarchal Christian environment, her own Christian faith, and the amorous feelings she treasures for other women. This chapter describes an analysis of the experiences of fragmentation as represented in *Under the Udala Trees*. As explained in chapter 1, Van Klinken (2015) describes how in various African contexts, queer people keep a deep

affinity with religion, even though Christian doctrines are often used to condemn same-sex love (cf. chapter 2). This demonstrates a refutation of the idea that Christianity is inherently homophobic. Instead, many queer people attempt to find spaces for the legitimacy and normalisation of their sexualities within a Christian existence.

This process, however, consists of painful experiences. About queer men in a Zambian Christian environment, van Klinken (2015: 957) writes that "[t]heir narratives reflect a significant level of self-awareness, often achieved through painful experiences, that helps them to resist, question, and challenge prevailing perceptions and attitudes in church and society." By reflecting these painful experiences and consecutive struggles, the humanity of queer people is emphasised, and it simultaneously opens a space to disprove the power of religious doctrines to define who is fully human and whose humanity is denied (van Klinken 2015). This relates to the mentioned explanation of Phiri (referred to in van Klinken & Phiri 2015), who states that all forms of discrimination against fellow human beings deface the image of God. Christian practices should instead personify God's justice by acting accordingly.

In addition, the literary representations of pain indicate steps toward redemption and alternative hopeful opportunities. This is expressed by Keguro Macharia (referred to in Matebeni & Msibi: 2015), whose narrative intertwines loss and death with the creation of spaces for affirmation of non-normative sexualities (cf. chapter 5). Similarly, Osinubi (2018) argues, for the case of Nigeria, that Igbo writers such as Okparanta use the Biafran war as a space of liminality to deal with interpersonal questions, in which all sorts of marginalisation are treated. In this sense, the atrocity of war opens up new avenues to question the stigmatisation of sexuality as well.

The expression of pain in women's literature on the African continent re-writes their often neglected experiences, because the very description of embodied pain removes barriers (Hewett 2005). The expression of pain resulting from oppressive structures inspired by homophobia, likewise offers a critical reflection on such structures. *Under the Udala Trees* demonstrates how Ijeoma feels torn between her so-believed paradoxical forms of existence, which leads to embodied and psychological painful experiences (see also Courtois 2018). The novel literally indicates these oppressive structures as affecting the body: "Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, the weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends" (312).

4.1 Embodied Experiences of Pain and Madness Sequential to Fragmentation

4.1.1 Confusion and Trauma after Erotic Experiences

The painful experience of fragmentation remarkably manifests itself in *Under the Udala Trees* by means of repetitive feelings of guilt, anxiety and nightmares, which immediately follow moments of sexual pleasure. As explained in chapter 3, this painful awareness only starts revealing itself when adult characters indicate that romantic love between people of the same sex is 'sinful'. The first encounter happens when Ijeoma and Amina are caught in the act by the grammar school teacher. In this encounter, there is an immediate link between the and erotic experience and the Bible. The grammar school teacher's authoritarian fury is supported by his references to the book:

> "He walked over, pulled us off the mattress one at a time, slapped us on our cheeks. […] He must have noticed the Bible on the table when he grabbed the lantern, because he turned back to the table, set the lantern back down, and grabbed the Bible. Pointing to it, he cried, "An abomination!"" (125)

This is followed by the girls' pain and anxiety. Their experiences are expressed in relation to the biblical figures, Adam and Eve, who are responsible for the sinful nature of humanity:

> "Amina and I began to cry, deep cries that made our shoulders heave. […] We were naked and we felt our nakedness as Adam and Eve must have felt it in the garden, at the time of that evening breeze. Our eyes had become open and we too sought to hide ourselves. But we first had to endure the grammar school teacher's lecturing. […] He lectured and he lectured and he lectured. As God must have lectured Eve." (125)

Ijeoma's fear when being lectured about sin, is immediately related to the fear for an authoritarian God. However, the implicit connection between Eve and Ijeoma, meanwhile offers refuge, because the 'sin' in relation to Adam and Eve, is since the very beginning inherent to all human beings. This restores Amina's and Ijeoma's humanity, even after conducting something as 'grave' as making love to one another. About this passage, Courtois (2018) adds that the comparison of Ijeoma and Amina with Adam and Eve implements the indication of the need for a "rewriting of the Biblical texts" (123). This passage therefore illustrates how expressions of fear and pain have the capacity to engender hope.

The interference of adults in the girls' innocent amorous relationships, is also found in other short stories of African female writers. In "Jambula Tree" by the Ugandan Monica Arac de Nyeko, a similar shameful discovery of girls making love is described. After the discovery, like in *Under the Udala Trees,* both girls are separated in order for that 'sin' to leave. The protagonist is likewise being prayed for so that the so-believed 'demon of homosexuality' would stop haunting her. Another example is the story "Obsidian" (2016) by the South-African Ashley Makue in the magazine Emergence (in co-creation with Q-Zine). In this story the girls' intimate relationship is being robbed of its innocence by the warnings of an aunt.

Ijeoma and Amina's fearful experiences after erotic pleasure occur during the continuation of their education at a secondary boarding school. Right after making love, Amina is haunted by nightmares of hellish scenes and suffering. The agony manifests itself in her body:

> "Her body shook as she spoke, almost as if she were shivering from a fever. […] "The children," she cried, her voice shaky now. "Small children, sweat dripping from their heads. So much sweat that their clothes were soaking wet." […] Maybe it was a sign, she said. Maybe we were the falling children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue the path of righteousness." (155)

Although Ijeoma tries to comfort Amina with affirmative Bible themes and the explanation of God as a loving God, Amina's fear and suffering eventually rips them apart for good.

Ijeoma's own fragmentation caused by nightmares and fear, however, starts haunting her, and is more explicitly expressed in her second same-sex relationship with Ndidi. The fear screws with Ijeoma's mind during their whole period of dating, and beyond. The following passage reflects on an experience of a nightmare of another hellish scene, in which Ijeoma's fragmentation between happiness and self-condemnation is expressed:

> "Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream, as if to mockingly ask me how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach. […] [Mama] was screaming, "A heedless fly follows the devil to the grave."" (195)

The physical pain is represented in the metaphor of the condemnation as a rainstorm that aims to drown her. Her psychological pain is represented in the phrase that explains 'happiness' as something out of Ijeoma's reach. This sentence indicates the depression she will suffer from later on in the story.

Furthermore, the fragmented feelings alternating between agony and bliss psychologically affect Ijeoma until the point of self-hatred and the imagination of herself as a demonised witch. The moment she allows herself the happiness of being together with Ndidi in a romantic way, she is traumatised by the always repeating voice of her mother shouting at her as in the described dream above. She narrates:

> "At the moment when I had found a community that should have been a source of support and security, an unexpected sort of self-loathing flared up. In that moment, I began to believe myself a witch under the influence of the devil." (196)

The idea that she is cursed, convinces Ijeoma to purify herself from the 'sin' of same-sex desire. Therefore, she attempts to seek God and often finds herself in church. In these scenes, her turmoil is stretched further when she experiences the inability to communicate with God.

Besides, Ijeoma's fragmentation is stressed by the relentless urge to spend time with Ndidi after each traumatic experience. In one trauma after her first erotic encounter with Ndidi, she explains that "the panicked dreams were worse than on all the preceding nights combined" (201). Ijeoma describes this inner conflict as a sickness, that both physically and psychologically affect her:

> "It was like having an addiction to chili peppers, or to beans. You sensed that eating too much of them would overwhelm your system. That afterward there would be consequences. Your mouth would burn; you would surely get the runs. The dreams would come again. But you did it anyway." (199)

4.1.2 Confusion and Fragmented Experiences of Faith

4.1.2.1 Traumatic Bible Studies

As explained in chapter 3, the Bible is a particularly important guide during Ijeoma's life. Her interpretations of the scripture provide her with ways to a legitimise the existence as a queer person of faith. Yet, the traumatic experiences during her process of self-acceptation are indicated by passages from the same Bible. This results in turmoil which is expressed profoundly when Ijeoma is subjected to her mother's Bible studies as a 'cure' for her same-sex desire. She describes her discomfort during

the lessons: "The session must have lasted all of fifteen minutes in total, but the discomfort of it made it feel as if it had lasted for much longer" (68). The story illustrates her distress both in the descriptions of bodily pain and psychological trauma that leads to confusion. Instead of finding any clarification, Ijeoma doubts the usefulness of the studies: "It was turning out that all that studying was not actually doing any good; if anything, it was making it a case between what I felt in my heart and what Mama and the grammar school teacher felt" (82).

An important expression of psychological confusion is when Ijeoma experiences a disability to connect with God. The impossibility to pray upsets her and makes her physically weak:

> "But now, I sat in church and for the first time I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. I wanted to ask God to help me turn my thoughts away from Amina, to turn me instead onto the path of righteousness. […] I opened my mouth to pray, but somehow the words of prayer would not come. It was as if they had become stuck in my throat." (72)

In this passage, there is another psychological level of self-condemnation when Ijeoma asks God to guide her to the path of righteousness. She apparently starts to believe that her desire for a woman is sinful. By accepting this assumption, Courtois (2018) suggests that Ijeoma "has interiorized a patriarchal world view whose shackles she will have to rid herself of" (125). This world view, which is patriarchal and heteronormative, is mainly the reason for Ijeoma's turmoil.

Another disorientation from faith occurs when Ijeoma fails to focus on Mama's prayers. In this passage, her body literally rejects Mama's prayer. Instead of feeling strengthened by the prayer, Ijeoma feels week. Her body refuses to form the final word 'Amen', which is understood as an embrace of the things prayed for:

> "I faded in and out of the prayer, my thoughts of what we had read, of Genesis and of Adam and Eve, and of me and Amina, distracting me. […] In that moment, I felt a weakness come over me. I opened my mouth to say "Amen," but it was a struggle for me to speak, a struggle for me to utter that tiny word along with her." (72)

It is not only her disturbed relationship with God that unsettles her. Ijeoma is resentful because of Mama's interpretation of certain horrific Bible stories as if they would reflect the 'sin' of same-sex desire (cf. chapter 3). Ijeoma literally feels confused and physically ill because of this:

> "My head felt as if it were about to explode. […] I felt a million questions churning in my mind […] I could have gone ahead and asked them, but the questions were like tiny bubbles in my head. I could feel them floating around," (76)

And:

> "A headache was rising in my temples. My heart was racing from bewilderment at what Mama was saying." (80)

These passages again illustrate how the struggles with her faith and the interpreted 'sin' of same-sex desire affect Ijeoma's physical and psychological health.

4.1.3 Depictions of a Depression and a Miscarriage During the Heterosexual Marriage

Ijeoma's most explicit hurtful experiences are expressed in her narrations about a heterosexual marriage with Chibundu. A remarkable notion of trauma and fragmentation is expressed in the way Ijeoma wonders about happiness. She explains happiness, on the one hand, as madness, sickness, confusion, loss and even death, which indicates her traumatic experiences. On the other hand, she meanwhile describes this state of being as angelic or even as God Himself:

> "Happiness was what she called it. But I knew that happiness was a word like **madness**, like **sickness**, like **confusion**, like **loss**, like **death**. Even like beautiful or pure or angelic or God. Happiness was a word that represented some deeper, inexplicable, heavy idea, the kind of idea that goes back and forth between **two different worlds**." (237, added emphasis in bold)

This quote literally reflects the fragmentation of Ijeoma's feelings toward what happiness should be. It becomes a bitter entity when expected from her in the marriage with Chibundu. By intertwining these deep feelings of pain with divine feelings of beauty, this again illustrates how these feelings are closely related, and how perhaps within her painful experiences redemption is present.

The heterosexual marriage causes a mental affliction in which Ijeoma ceases to feel human. Consequently, she slides into a depression. Dlamini (2016) explains how 'madness' is used as a tool to create a liminal space that legitimises male same-sex desire and gender non-conformity in Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. Dlamini (2016) develops the liminality of madness further as a refutation of gender categories, which is not my aim. Nevertheless, in *Under the Udala Trees* the mental affliction of the depression that Ijeoma endures offers a liminal space between humanity and inhumanity, which

provides a negotiation for her queer love. By causing her to lose her humanity, the heterosexual marriage disables her to reflect the image of God, which is usually reproduced in the shared love between human beings (See also van Klinken and Phiri 2015; Jungling 2010). This liminal zone questions compulsory marriages while provides the possibility of same-sex love as part of the *Imago Dei*.

Although marriage is assumed to be the "wonderful will of God" (222), it fails to bring together Chibundu and Ijeoma in a sacred way. Instead, it even eliminates Ijeoma's zest for life. In the following passage, she describes herself as a snail to indicate the depression caused by her compromise with heterosexual marriage:

> "I acknowledge to myself that sometimes I am a snail. I move myself by gliding. I contract my muscles and produce a slime of tears. Sometimes you see the tears and sometimes you don't. It is my tears that allow me to glide. I glide slowly. But, slowly, I glide. It is a while before I am gone. That first night of our marriage, I was a snail. We were all of us once snails." (234)

By comparing herself to a snail, the decreased humanity is stressed, as well as a more passive way of existing. Ijeoma's pain is reflected in the way she describes the snail's slime to be her tears. When comparing this to the theological interpretation of the *Imago Dei*, the dehumanisation of Ijeoma to a snail remarkably goes against God's creation of humanity. The lost connection between her and the woman she loves, creates a distance between her and God, because it draws her from the human essence of devoted love.

Ijeoma's depression is further explicitly expressed when she calls her mother and explains her symptoms. Her mother then literally exclaims Ijeoma's sickness as a depression. The mental affliction is reflected her as embodied pain: "The headache was now beyond persistent. I could no longer continue. I marched into the kitchen, short of breath" (243).

Furthermore, the pain and affliction of her mind due to being separated from Ndidi are referred to with metaphors of known diseases such as tetanus:

> "The absence of any kind of communication from her was not at all like an absence. It was instead a presence: of **mind-pain**, like a thick, rusted arrow shooting straight into my head, poisoning my mind with something like **tetanus,** causing my thoughts to go haywire, a spasm here, a spasm there. If there were a muscle relaxant equivalent for the mind, I would have been first in line for it." (252, added emphasis in bold)

Likewise, the pain of Ijeoma's loss of Ndidi is literally described as a bad injury:

> "Either way, better to get out the things on my mind than to allow them to fester and grow mold and cause my insides to feel rotten. Better to get them out before they became the worst kind of wound: **oozing with pus and with a pungent kind of odor, oozing and decaying and stinking up the place like a dead and decomposing body**." (254, added emphasis in bold)

Furthermore, this experience of pain is emphasised all the more by explicitly linking her dispirited means of existence to "misuse and manhandling". The stress on the representation of misuse, which points at the normal expectations within a heterosexual marriage, is an important indicator that shows how it is not in Ijeoma's nature to love the man she married:

> "I lay in bed unable to get my limbs to move, my mind heavy with the realization of what I had become: the equivalent of a washrag, worn and limp, not from overuse, but rather from **misuse** and **manhandling**." (284, added emphasis in bold)

The choice for the word "manhandling" to address mistreat is remarkable because it includes the word 'man'. In this case, the misuse could directly be related to Ijeoma's engagement with a man while she craves for the love of a woman. Although Chibundu does not treat her badly, the fact that he is a man, and not the person she loves, makes it bad enough for Ijeoma to feel misused according to her nature.

To be cured, Ijeoma attempts to focus on motherhood as a way to fight off her sadness and to allow herself to be more concerned with marriage. She muses: "Maybe motherhood would make me feel more invested in the marriage. Maybe motherhood would cause me to forget Ndidi" (242).

However, Ijeoma's assumption of motherhood as a cure for the 'sin' of loving another woman, and for the sadness of the loss of that lover, eventually engenders more hurtful experiences. These are explicitly described in the embodied experiences of pain when giving birth, and, worse, in the representation of her miscarriage. Ijeoma is only partly able to enjoy "the joys of motherhood"[7]. During the moment of giving birth, the language remarkably emphasises the hurtfulness of the event:

[7] This ironic twist is borrowed from Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), which narrates the tragic life of a mother in colonised Nigeria. While everybody, herself included, makes her believe that motherhood brings joy, her life story is a sequence of catastrophes that are partly caused by the very same motherhood.

> "I squatted, grabbing on to the table, bracing myself that way and waiting for the pain to subside. But the pain only grew worse. I stayed there on the kitchen floor for what felt like hours, screaming, clenching and unclenching my fists, struggling to catch my breath." (262)

The pain Ijeoma endures at the moment of her miscarriage is described more fleshly:

> "And the pain turning into something sharper and many times more painful than all the moments before. Then, out of the blue, a cutting pain set in, and I felt myself reflexively squeeze the little hand in mine. […] I looked down, and beneath me I saw a pool of blood spreading out in clumps on the floor. Then there was a heavy odor of raw flesh all over, saturating the room, threatening even the air in my lungs." (305)

The fact that Ijeoma has a miscarriage already plays a huge role in the story, because this shows how, beyond her attempt to give Chibundu a son, she is incapable to do so. It is no longer only her mind that cannot bring up the love for her husband and forget Ndidi. Her body naturally rejects the heterosexual marriage. The miscarriage can be read as metaphor of the failure of forced marriage in general. The critique on this marriage is emphasised in the story by the narration of Mama's belief in the importance of marriage:

> "The man is one wheel," she continued, "the woman the other." […] "what is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a **partially functioning human being**?"(182, added emphasis in bold)

Mama's stress on companionship is in line with the understanding of the image of God (see van Klinken & Phiri 2015). However, the miscarriage demonstrates that within *this* marriage, Ijeoma is not able to be fully human either. It instead even leads to death: both of the unborn child and of Ijeoma herself: "How much longer could I continue to exist in this marriage with Chibundu? I was convinced that I would only grow **deader** were I to stay in it" (295, added emphasis in bold). She narrates further, that the companionship Mama described, is however possible with Ndidi: "These days, I think a lot about something Mama used to say: that a bicycle has two wheels. And, of course, it does. Ndidi is one, and I am the other" (320).

In brief, the heterosexual marriage between Chibundu and Ijeoma is an extremely hurtful and exhausting experience for Ijeoma. The emphasis on the represented physical and psychological pain the

marriage causes, is essential to illustrate how Ijeoma's same-sex desire is naturally part of her human existence in the image of God.

4.1.4 Representations of Physical Pain Due to Homophobic Violence

Apart from the explicit descriptions of Ijeoma's pain caused by the condemnation of non-normative desire, *Under the Udala Trees* represents the atrocities experienced by other queer people as a result of homophobia. These description can be related to Phiri's argument that any form of stigmatisation is an injustice to the image of God (referred to in van Klinken and Phiri 2015).

In the novel, such an experience is represented when Ndidi tells Ijeoma about two men who were killed by village people because of their sexualities. She explains that there were

> "whispers about a pair of 'sissies' being beaten by a crowd of people. She went to the bushes behind the dirt road not far from where they lived, and she found the two of them there, naked and beaten to death." (205)

Ijeoma experiences her fellows' pain form nearby when a friend is set on fire in the church they usually use as a night club for women who love women:

> "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." (209)

Furthermore, in the Epilogue, *Under the Udala Trees* describes an incident that happened in the dorms of the school where Ijeoma's daughter, Chidinma, teaches. Two girls were discovered by their fellow students while making love: "They stripped the lovers of their clothes and beat them all over until they were black and blue. They shouted "666" in their faces, and "God punish you!"" (318). Although this passage explains a sad and horrible scene, it provides a hopeful note. Next to the violent acts of the schoolgirls, Chidinma's affirmation of same-sex love is depicted. Moreover, even Mama reacts to this incident with a "God forbid! What has this world turned into?" (318), while she used to be the first to condemn same-sex love. The experiences of pain in this passage are supplemented by the hopes for justice and re-imagination of the treatment of sexual diversity and queer people.

In short, Under the Udala Trees explicitly depicts embodied and psychological experiences of pain. Many of these illustrations, however, are connected to an underlying hope for justice. By representing

Ijeoma's fragmentation, trauma and harm, the novel lifts a 'veil of secrecy' covering this taboo in the first place. Meanwhile it offers ways and opportunities to grow from the experiences, as it demands the recognition of her humanness.

5. Embodied Experiences of Pleasure Represented in *Under the Udala Trees*

Similarly to the representations of embodied experiences of pain as a means to create a space for the legitimacy of female same-sex desire, this chapter provides an analysis of the embodied experiences of sexual pleasure in *Under the Udala Trees*. As explained in the theoretical framework of this study, the description of female pleasure is taboo. Describing the underrepresented experiences of pleasure creates an interesting space to debunk this neglect. Ground-breaking Nigerian writers Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa have previously represented women's sexual pleasure in their writings; however, these representations remained within the heterosexual framework of desire. Within this context of the literary imagination, *Under the Udala Trees* lifts the 'veil of secrecy' even higher, by not only describing specific embodied desires of women, but by queering them as well.

Mainstream theologies use the body and its sexuality as a geographical entity onto which the sacred and the profane are projected in regards to hetero-patriarchal binaries (Kamitsuka 2010; Quero 2006; Athaus-Reid 1997). The representation of women's sexual desire and experiences, especially those between two women, are perceived as 'sinful'. However, the radical notion of God's love and the human capacity to love as a holy reflection of God's entity, form a theological way to legitimise a queer existence of faith.

Furthermore, the erotic, which contributes to the ultimate expression of love, is argued to be a source of female empowerment (Jungling 2010; Lorde 1984). A similar statement is made by Green-Simms (2016), Hewett (2005), and Veit-Wild and Naguschewski (2011), who argue that the explicit descriptions of erotic experiences in women's writing provides them with a voice in an overtly exclusionary canon. By explicitly describing the erotic experiences Ijeoma shared with the women she loved, *Under the Udala Trees* demonstrates the importance of the essence of love and the power it offers to the protagonist. Although many of the encounters are followed by confusion and feelings of guilt, the represented experiences are a source of power that keep her alive. The representations of these powerful moments,

in between experiences of misery, offer a way for Ijeoma to 'free her imaginations'[8] from the oppression in which her love stories take place.

5.1 Experiences of the Erotic as Empowering

5.1.1 The Erotic as a Source of Power and Fulfilment

The importance of the erotic as fulfilment and empowerment in the way Lorde (1984) describes, relates to the understanding of control over the body and sexuality. This control is part of a patriarchal authority that is both political and religious (Osinubi 2016). Especially in contexts where patriarchal authority is exercised on the body, the attention for representations of sexualities that find fulfilment outside of male intervention, is extremely powerful. It disproves Mama's belief that "A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all" (181). With reference to the erotic representation in *Under the Udala Trees*, Courtois (2018: 125) argues that

> "Women in the novel do not need men in order to reach orgasm. They define pleasure outside the masculine law […] "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."

Under the Udala Trees remarkably represents explicit erotic experiences of Ijeoma, with herself or with her female lovers, in which the descriptions of the flesh are directly linked to a sense of fulfilment. This is simultaneously taking off the 'veil of secrecy', and emphasising the erotic as a human need. The presented sexual encounters empower Ijeoma throughout the narrative, even though they are frequently followed by confusion and anxiety. As explained above, Lorde (1984) describes how erotic pleasure is crucial in the lives of women, because it enables them to recognise a power that is inherently theirs. It contests forms of oppression, and functions simply as a "lifeforce" or "nursemaid" to connect with our deepest knowledge. Lorde (1984: 54) states that "[t]he erotic is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire".

[8] Drawn from the series of Binyavanga Wainaina "We Must Free Our Imaginations". Accessed 24 JUN 2019, retrieved at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uMwppw5AgU

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma experiences that sense of her Self and her fullness of being when allowing herself pleasure through masturbation (also described by Courtois 2018):

> "I went about it very quietly, slowly at first and then faster and faster. Before long my throat was catching with **fulfillment and relief**, and there was not an ounce of guilt accompanying it. I fell asleep with a sense of **satisfaction**." (194-195, added emphasis in bold)

This verse demonstrates the way in which the erotic as an unoppressed source of power enables Ijeoma to feel complete and satisfied. Additionally, as Courtois (2018) suggests, the scene of masturbation indicates the rejection of a patriarchal notion of the coitus as the ultimate factor of fulfilment. Ijeoma is able to stimulate her own satisfaction by pleasuring herself, while thinking about a woman. The absence of a man is not a limitation whatsoever.

Lorde (1984) explains how this sexual power can form a bridge between people who share their deepest feelings with mutual respect. She argues that this enables individuals to connect and create understandings that are only shareable in a sexual connection. The capacity to share these understandings and experiences of joy are essential to feel fully human: "the need for sharing deep feeling is a human need" (Lorde 1984: 58). Moreover, Jungling (2010) legitimises the erotic connection between people in a Christian context. She explains that humanity related to the image of God is found in faithful relationality, which is inherently erotic: "Through God's erotic desire to create, humans can truly know the fullness of God's love and the eros that is revealed in human relations" (Jungling 2010: 222). Furthermore, as explained in chapter 1, it is inherent to (queer) theology that the affirmation of the erotic is powerful. Bostic (2010) explains that sexuality is an affirmation of God, who has an erotic notion Himself, because of the incarnation of the Word in the flesh of Jesus Christ. She claims that

> "To deny the erotic is to deny the incarnation itself and perpetuate the death-dealing effects of systemic evil. To affirm the erotic is to affirm God's creation of human beings made of flesh and enlivened by spirit, who are called to seek loving, just, and mutual relationships with the rest of God's creations." (2010: 294)

Ijeoma's feeling of wholeness is expressed in the relational erotic experiences she has with her second lover Ndidi. The sexual experience is described in detail with an emphasis on the flesh and the fulfilment in the connection of both bodies:

> "I moved to her front, knelt before her. I pressed her wet flesh firmly with the tips of my fingers, then my fingers found themselves inside, enveloped by her warmth. She gasped. The gasping transformed into moaning. I moved my fingers slowly in and out. […] It did not take much time. She let out a cry, and I found myself overcome by emotion — **warm feelings, feelings of affection, of happiness, of something like love; feelings of elation at being able to connect so intimately with her,** at being able to elicit such an intense reaction from her. It was as if her pleasure was in that moment my own, ours, a shared **fulfillment**." (200, added emphasis in bold)

The fulfilment which came with the deep sharing of feelings with Ndidi is sharply contrasted in the story by the experiences of anxiety Ijeoma endures on her wedding night with her husband Chibundu. In both fragments, for instance, the way in which each partner of Ijeoma unzips their clothes is described. In the case with Ndidi, Ijeoma experiences intense craving and love, as highlighted above. She narrates: "In one swift motion, she unzipped her skirt at the side zipper. The skirt loosened, and she brought my hand inside. She wore no undergarments, not even a slip" (200). This is opposed to the moment Chibundu unzips his pants, which is literally linked to an image of physical pain for Ijeoma:

> "He made a sudden movement with his hands, and I watched as he began tugging at the front of his trousers. Then came that dreaded sound: just the sound of a man undoing his zipper, but it was **as if a sharp object had somehow been jabbed into my ears**. A roomful of alarm." (235, added emphasis in bold)

That Ijeoma only finds fulfilment with her female lover Ndidi, is further explicitly stated when Ndidi attempts to convince Ijeoma of a marriage with Chibundu for her own safety. Ijeoma emphasises that apart from Ndidi, there is no other source that would make her feel complete:

> "How could she imply that it was that simple — that I should just go on and order myself to try things out with a boy? […] My heart and soul and mind were centered around her. *She* was the one I wanted, and *she* was enough for me. She was the one I loved, the one who had a hold on my heart." (215, italics in original)

In short, the experiences of sexual pleasure with women, including herself, propel Ijeoma to a sense of completeness and satisfaction in a way that experiences with men do not.

5.1.2 The Erotic as Power in Painful Situations

It is possible to read the erotic in certain passages of *Under the Udala Trees* as a means to redeem one's humanity when facing pain, loss and death. This is in line with the erotic as a means of empowerment in the confrontation of authoritarian control over the body, and as a means of fulfilment in the image of God. In situations of dehumanisation, sexual experiences afford comfort and an escape from misery. Osinubi (2018) argues that "A major contribution of *Under the Udala Trees* […] is its attention to deployment of sex and sexuality as idioms in scenes of dehumanization" (678).

Matebeni and Msibi (2015) describe how, with reference to work by Macharia Keguro, sexual possibilities arise out of painful experiences. They argue that "[Macharia's work] is a provoking narrative suggesting that rethinking and imagining loss, pain, and death can offer affective possibilities" (4). Remarkably, this is the case in an erotic experience of love between Ijeoma and Amina. As a war orphan, Amina is scarred by the loss of her family which manifests itself in a consistent wave of sadness surrounding her, but which opens opportunities for intimacy with Ijeoma:

> "There was a sadness to the way she moved, to the way her lips lingered in the crook of my neck. She might have stopped out of all that sadness, but she continued, as if she were determined to fight off the sadness this way." (123)

Complementary to Amina's sadness, Ijeoma has to cope with painful experiences. She is sent off by her mother to serve the grammar school teacher's family in return for primary care. She lost her father during the Biafran war and is left alone with a mother who is, psychologically affected by the death of her husband, not able to take care of Ijeoma. This makes Ijeoma feel rejected by the person she needs most. Both girls are surrounded by death everywhere as a result of the war. The notion of 'flesh' is related to misery and corpses: "Corpses flanked the road. Decapitated bodies. Bodies with missing limbs. All around was the persistent smell of decaying flesh" (48). Yet, a moment of intimacy with Amina gives Ijeoma back some joy. The spark of hope that they find in each other's company leading to affection, in the midst of misery, becomes evident in the description of their very first encounter:

> "We looked down at the ground as we did, but I sneaked peeks at her, and I'm sure she did at me. […] Finally we gathered the courage to look into each other's faces. The moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her." (105)

This spark metaphorically develops into 'fire' between the girls: "The saying goes that wood already touched by fire isn't hard to set alight" (117). This 'fire' is explicitly described as a sexual encounter. The 'flesh', which was first related to "decapitated bodies" described above, now becomes something desirable and beautiful:

> "In the near darkness, our hands moved across our bodies. We took in with our fingers the curves of our flesh, the grooves. Our hands, rather than our voices, seemed to be speaking. Our breaths mingled with the night sounds. Eventually our lips met. This was the beginning, our bodies being touched by the fire that was each other's flesh." (117)

This scene of deeply shared feelings of love that Ijeoma experiences with Amina, is contrasted with the first experiences of intimacy she and Chibundu engaged in as children. Instead of longing for Chibundu, Ijeoma described the kiss she gave him as a relief for the awkward situation he created. She did it out of pity, and compares the experience to the sufferance of malaria: "It was like taking a spoonful of chloroquine when you had malaria. There was hardly another option, so you just did it" (46).

The opportunities for affection between both girls are not solely intimate and sexual. Boehmer (2005; See also Courtois 2018) stresses that erotic possibilities between women do not always have to be explicitly sexual, they are also visible in the sharing of quotidian activities. Lorde (1984) states that the erotic does not manifest only in the explicit sexual experiences of women, but is similarly found in a means of solidarity and profound love (see also Boehmer 2005). *Under the Udala Trees* entwines the attraction of the girls with the mundane descriptions of simply being together, chatting, bathing, plaiting hair cooking etc. (See also Courtois 2018; Osinubi 2018).

Ijeoma recalls a moment of deep love between her and Amina, which takes place within a quotidian scene: "Late one evening, Amina and I, having finished our chores for the day, took our evening baths, then sat together in our nightgowns on the stoop of our hovel while I plaited her hair with thread." (111) This intimate moment of a shared everyday task is part of the process of re-humanisation after being left behind by their parents. When drawing to the experiences of the affirmation of queerness in queer theology, it becomes clear that all themes of intimacy, explicitly sexual or not, are similar to the described need for affection that would enable human beings' integration in the image of God which van Klinken and Phiri (2015) described.

Building on their first experiences of sexuality, Ijeoma and Amina's experiences of love become more intense and explicit. Their second sexual description is strikingly preceded by a conversation about a

Bible story. The illustration connects erotic love with faith. The girls discuss the story of Jacob's son Joseph, who was sold as a slave by his brothers, because of a prophetic dream that expressed his specialness and power in comparison to theirs. The brothers interpreted this as idleness and decided to get rid of him. After years of misery, Joseph becomes one of the most powerful leaders of Egypt and eventually saves his brothers from starving. Ijeoma concludes that the lesson to take from this story might be that human life is never straightforward, because by going through misery, a person is able to learn from the past. This story has a prophetic character that could be read as a metaphor for Ijeoma's own life story. She has "to go through all that wahala" (123) to finally find peace with who she is as a woman with same-sex desires.

The conversation between Amina and Ijeoma about misery, ends with both girls seeking the power of "each other's flesh" (117) again, which brings Ijeoma to a state of euphoria. The explicit descriptions of the sexual encounter and the human experiences of joy could again be interpreted as a means of re-humanisation and normalisation of same-sex love:

> "She cupped her hands around my breasts, took turns with them, fondling and stroking and caressing them 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." (123-124, added emphasis in bold)

In a totally different environment, Ijeoma's dreams of her second lover Ndidi remain a source of empowerment during her marriage with a man she does not love. During this period, in which she falls into a depression, she keeps having erotic imaginations of both women she loved, through which her life regains some colour. This reminds of Lorde (1984: 57) describing the erotic shared with a person she loves as "a reminder of [her] capacity for feeling." The following explains a dream Ijeoma had of Ndidi:

> ". . . *Last night I dreamed of you. You were merging into me and I was merging into you. There were no clothes between us, nothing but our flesh and our warmth. And my lips reaching longingly for yours* . . ." (280, italics in original)

Representations of the erotic in relation to tense and painful situations in which they take place, offer the women a way to explore themselves and to regain their sense of human fulfilment. Their needs for this intimacy are all the more justified.

5.1.3 A Re-imagination and Hope for the Future Embedded in the Erotic

The sense of power of the erotic, as Lorde (1984) describes, lies partially in the sexual act, and partially in the deeper sense of solidarity between women who love each other. This allows them to feel connected on a level that trespasses the boundaries of oppression normally restraining them to hetero-patriarchal norms. In *Under the Udala Trees*, the bonds and forms of companionship create an optimistic capacity in which Ijeoma and Ndidi are able to imagine a space in which they are allowed to love one another without the fear of being murdered. In an intimate moment, they explicitly imagine this safe space:

> "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. […] With each passing night she names more towns: Ojoto and Nnewi, Onitsha and Nsukka, Port Harcourt and Lagos, Uyo and Oba, Kaduna and Sokoto." (321)

About this passage Courtois (2018) argues that the utopian moment of imaginaion engenders possibilities of hope for a future society in which all sorts of combinations of love are allowed. He suggests that the repetition of the word 'and' in the list of Ndidi's offered combination of people stresses this hope for endless possibilities. Ijeoma and Ndidi as a couple, Courtois (2018) states, could be read as the model for all the possible combinations of couples of the future.

When looking especially at the capacity of re-imagination and therefore deconstruction of oppressive structures, Nfah-Abbenyi argues that women writers are able to stretch that capacity and overthrow binary ways of thinking. More specifically, this is possible by reclaiming the erotic: "True change can begin with women, one that consequently would invade and subvert the collective consciousness constructed by the Law of the Father, thus exploding the very foundations and boundaries erected by that consciousness" (2010: 747). Although Nfah-Abbenyi distances herself from the 'lesbian' readings

of women's mutual affection, she describes female same-sex sexual pleasure as the most potential space for the debunking of oppressive patriarchal structures.

5.1.3.1 A Metaphor of the Church as an Erotic Space of Refuge

Under the Udala Trees defines remarkable links between same-sex sexual pleasure and Christianity, divinity, faith and scripture. As described previously, some references to Bible stories and characters occur and are discussed in relation with sexual acts. This is sometimes done in a positive light, such as the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, which initiates a sexual encounter between Ijeoma and Amina. However, more oppressive insinuations appear in the form of nightmares after erotic fulfilment, as seen with the Bible-led condemnation by the grammar school teacher who catches Ijeoma and Amina in the act. Despite these experiences, the novel provides a hopeful and striking re-imagination of the 'church' as a place for refuge and erotic pleasure for people with queer desires. In the novel, the church is a pillar in Ijeoma's development. More than once, she describes the importance of being in this holy building. The concept of 'church' is represented as "that holy construction of a place that was responsible for keeping our faith and hope intact" (43).

The 'church' as an affirmative space for queer love, is an important shift in the story, which could be linked to the prophetic critique Binyavanga Wainaina offers for anti-gay rhetoric by African Christian leaders (van Klinken 2016). As mentioned in chapter 1, he argues that instead of using the church as a place to spread hatred against people whose sexuality does not fit into the heterosexual normativity, it should provide safety for marginalised people.

To highlight the importance of prophetic affirmation and reconnection with the erotic in a divine space, *Under the Udala Trees* can be read along Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Bostic (2010) describes how 'hush harbours', divine hidden spaces for instance in the woods, provided former enslaved black people in the USA with methods of healing. Throughout their lives, being dominated by white masters who defined and dehumanised them and their sexualities, the 'hush harbours' enabled them to reconnect with their bodies and their spirits. In *Beloved* (1987) there is one space in the woods called the Clearing, where Baby Suggs, the prophetic grandmother in the story, leads a communal meeting every Saturday for healing processes of her fellow black neighbours (Bostic 2010). During the holy ceremony, she tells them that

> "they [white people] don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. […] This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. […] love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. […] more than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart." (Morrison 1988: 88-89, italics in original)

Because of the dehumanisation of their bodies, this passage stresses how the body becomes a very important space for self-love. Bostic (2010) argues that Baby Suggs has a prophetic voice that campaigns for erotic justice in this 'hush harbour' or 'prophetic church' that the divine space offers. She explains that

> "erotic justice calls for affirmations and strategies that enable members of the community to freely exercise a spirituality that is embodied in order to realize and reclaim their erotic power. It is critical that community members are enabled to reimagine who they are as spiritual and sexual beings." (Bostic 2010: 291)

This justice and the divine space provides healing for broken, abused and marginalised people, which is linked to the re-imagination of the erotic and spiritual self that was destroyed by white oppressors. Bostic (2010) goes even further by emphasising the importance of erotic justice in this 'prophetic church'. She argues that the central aim of the ministry of Jesus Christ was to heal and offer liberation to those that were oppressed and marginalised; and so His ministry was prophetic in essence.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ndidi takes Ijeoma to a nightclub that is established by and for women who love women. Remarkably, the building chosen for this club is a church called "FRIEND IN JESUS CHURCH OF GOD" – "FOUNTAIN OF LOVE" (190). The Christian notion of the church offering a new family is taken seriously in this passage; whereby people, marginalised because of their sexuality, are able to find a new community that cares for them and in which they are able to be freely themselves, such as Baby Suggs' Clearing does in *Beloved* (1987). Although there is no guided ceremony as in *Beloved*, this 'church' offers the same means of liberation. The fact that the church is normally used for Christian services, sermons and worship during the day, gives the space another sacred dimension. The capacities of liberation are illustrated in the following:

> "The music grew loud then, overpowering my thoughts. Ndidi held me tighter, pressed her body into mine, and there was a reassurance in it. Never before had I danced this way with a woman, never before so freely. […] We danced together for a long time, Ndidi and I, and I felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known." (192-193)

The dancing aspect is stressed by Bostic (2010) as a means to re-connect the spiritual with the body, which demands to go beyond the theological between spirit and body.

The queer theological notion of radical love could be found in the description "Fountain of Love". The stress on the word 'love' is able to ask for Christian justice, since, widely addressed in queer theology, the core of all theology should be 'love': "we may say that to reflect theologically is always an activity done with a presupposition of love "(Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2007: 303). Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007: 303) state that "[t]heological themes are themes of love, even if perhaps this has been obscured by centuries of using a terminology which may have lost their original transparency." The connection with love in the novel, is taken very literally and manifests in erotic experiences:

> "Then we pushed ourselves deep into the comer of the church, at the rear, where the table of beer and jugs of kai kai and crates of soft drinks sat. We had become like all the other girls by now, kissing and fondling and making out in the dark." (206)

However, the feeling of refuge this church offers is only temporarily, because at one moment it is discovered by neighbours and one of the attendants is burnt to death, which leaves a tragic imprint on all the women seeking refuge in that space. In addition, Ijeoma's visits to this church with Ndidi, are alternated with moments of fragmentation and anxiety in which Ijeoma seeks refuge in her 'official' church.

Yet, the indication of the church as a place for being free and sharing love still enables to imagine the possibilities of a space for the simple legitimacy of existence in a Christian space. Apart from the horrific memories of death of one of the other girls in the church, Ijeoma remembers the building as a space in which she and Ndidi could be together:

> *"I am pregnant with Chibundu's child, and yet I keep thinking of you. Last night I dreamed you in a field of dandelion clocks, and in* ***our church****. Do you still think of me?"* (254, italics in original, added emphasis in bold)

The use of the church as the space for liberation and communal affirmation of the erotic, could be read as an image of hope, in which the dimension of humanity for marginalised people might, after all, find a space in the Christian sacred.

To summarise, *Under the Udala Trees* remarkably describes explicit, and implicit, erotic features and sexual experiences of pleasure between women. These representations dispose of the capacities to resist the

hetero-patriarchal powers that be, and to create a space for reconnection with the body and with the ultimate love, which could be interpreted as being related to the image of God. The sacredness of sexual satisfaction is emphasised by the metaphor of a church that allows refuge, liberation and affirmation of erotic intimacy, to people who are marginalised.

Conclusion

This thesis considers Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* as prophetic, because of the novel's capacities to anticipate a space for the Christian legitimacy of female same-sex desire. The importance of this novel and its questioning attitude is immediately evident when considering the contemporary homophobic atmosphere in Nigeria, and many other countries on the African continent, fostered by religious and political leaders. The essence is specifically emphasised in the author's note at the end of the novel:

> "This novel attempts to give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history.
>
> According to a 2012 Win-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism, Nigeria ranks as the second-most-religious country surveyed, following very closely behind Ghana." (325)

In this note, religion is indicated as a force behind the stigmatisation of queer sexualities. However, *Under the Udala Trees* does not turn away from Christianity, as done by many activists for queer rights (e.g. Binyavanga Wainaina). Instead, it narrates the experience of a girl growing up with same-sex desires, from within a Christian perspective. While my study has built on the analyses of Osinubi (2018) and Courtois (2018), this thesis extends their arguments by focusing on the novel's internal Christian legitimacy.

In order to analyse how the novel enables the creation of an affirmative space within Christian faith, this thesis concentrates on specific questions from the angles of queer theology. The main question of this study goes as follows: which strategies does *Under the Udala Trees* employ to negotiate a Christian space for the legitimacy of queer women? This is borrowed from Dlamini's study on Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. The examined strategies of *Under the Udala Trees* are especially embedded in a theoretical framework of academic and grassroots queer theology. 'Queer theology' is used here to refer to a theology that represents a queer perspective on talking about a Christian God. This generally means

that it departs from the experiences and viewpoints of people with non-heteronormative sexualities or gender non-conformity concerning their Christian faith. My thesis explains, methodologically based on a close reading of the novel, how issues discussed in queer theology are reflected upon in the narration of the life story of the protagonist, Ijeoma.

In the analysis of specific queer theological strategies, an important notion is the description of biblical scripture amongst juxtaposed perspectives. The mother and the grammar school teacher in the story, refer to the Bible as the word of condemnation of same-sex desire, calling the non-normative an 'abomination'. In opposition, Ijeoma questions and attempts to contextualise the verses frequently used for the condemnation of queer people. The juxtaposition of both voices has prophetic capacities because Ijeoma speaks up against the 'powers that be'. She goes further by referring to biblical verses from the New Testament, which stress the radical love of a God who does not differentiate between His children, and who enables 'change'. The separation of the Old and the New Testament becomes an indication of a God who changes what was bad into something better. This re-imagination of biblical scripture is able to provide hope for queer people of faith, and is emphasised in Ijeoma's statement: "This is to me the lesson of the Bible: this affirmation of the importance of reflection, and of revision, enough revision to do away with tired, old, even faulty laws" (321).

In addition to the usage of biblical scripture and the notion of change, the space for the Christian legitimacy of female same-sex desire is fostered by the representations of queer love that are closely related to the academic and 'grassroots' queer theological understanding of 'creation' in the image of God. Such an understanding is underpinned by the Christian assumption that humanity in all its forms is created by God in His own image. As described by van Klinken and Phiri (2015), queer people refer to this belief to understand their sexualities as being part of how God created them. In *Under the Udala Trees*, the conviction of creation is important for Ijeoma's acceptance of her same-sex desire. This is most explicitly highlighted by her mother at the end of the story, who affirms: "God, who created you, must have known what He did" (323). The naturalness of Ijeoma's sexuality, as being crated beyond individual choice, is further stressed by her body's repulsion of heterosexuality.

The novel suggests that an alternative interpretation of the Bible is a possibility, as in the end even Ijeoma's mother, initially one of the characters representing a condemning interpretation of same-sex desires through Biblical explanations, accepts her daughter's non-normative sexuality. Through this shift of the mother's evaluation, the way is paved for Ijeoma's doubts, critical attitude, and alternative

proposals of interpreting biblical scripture. Another example of this alternative imagination is provided by the description of the birth of Ijeoma's daughter as a perfectly healthy baby. While Ijeoma feared that her baby would be cursed because of her own 'sinful' desires, this success debunks the popular myth of a punishing God. Instead of punishing people with same-sex desires, He allows them to be fertile.

This thesis questions how representations of embodied experiences of pain and sexual pleasure offer similar ways to the creation of a space for the legitimacy and normalisation of female same-sex love within Christianity. The depiction of pleasure and pain is connected to the queer theological notion of creation in the image of God. By describing the experiences of physical and psychological pain as a result of the condemnation of non-normative sexuality, the novel gives a voice to the unheard subaltern, and emphasises the humanity of queer people. It stresses how the mistreatment of queer people, is actually a mutilation of God's image. This relates to Phiri's argument that "[a]ny form of discrimination and oppression mars the image of God in creation and humanity, for God is a God of justice and the practice of Christianity is supposed to reflect the justice of God" (qtd. by van Klinken & Phiri 2015: 42).

Another capacity of the representation of pain is how depictions of harm, allow opportunities to establish intimate relations, which is described by Macharia (referred to in Matebeni & Msibi 2016). *Under the Udala Trees* illustrates this capacity by the encounter and intimate relationship between Ijeoma and Amina, who are both (semi-)orphaned due to the Biafran war and whose relationship helps to cope with the daily reminders of death.

Explicit descriptions of the erotic, are ways to engage with the humanisation and legitimacy of queer desire. These representations are inherently prophetic, since the description of women's sexual pleasure, especially among two women, displays a taboo that refutes the hetero-patriarchal rhetoric in which this novel is contextualised. Queer and indecent theologies offer ways to legitimise this taboo of female sexuality within a Christian framework. This is again done by drawing on the image of God, which is found in the relationality and sharing of the ultimate feelings of love between two people in mutual respect. This argument is for instance stressed by Jungling (2010) who describes

> "eros as the divine call into life as embodied relationality that has been freely and faithfully given in and through God's ongoing creation. Erotic love is the force that gives life the relational essence that fills and empowers all of creation." (Jungling 2010: 217)

Lorde's (1984) definition of the female erotic likewise emphasises the need for sharing deep feelings on a basis of mutual respect. The ultimate erotic fulfilment is in *Under the Udala Trees* illustrated by many cases of sexual pleasure between Ijeoma and her female lovers.

The novel describes these representations of erotic liberation to the Christian sacred by using a 'church' as metaphor for the holy space of refuge in a scene of erotic love-making. Here, the thesis makes a comparison between the novel and *Beloved* (1987), by the American writer Toni Morrison, to emphasise the reconnection of the spirit, the body and the erotic in a Christian understanding.

Furthermore, the prophetic representation of the erotic offers a space for re-imagination and hope, which is the aim of the novel. The importance of the imaginative potentiality is stressed by Ijeoma's erotic dreams of her lovers, when she has lost her lover Ndidi, due to the semi-enforced heterosexual marriage she become a part of. The imagination is more strongly reflected in an intimate scene where Ndidi and her are sleeping together while Ndidi dreams of a space where all forms of couples, same-sex and interethnic, are affirmed. Ndidi prophesises that "[t]his place will be all of Nigeria" (321).

This thesis concludes that the prophetic character of the novel, with its strategies to negotiate a space for the Christian legitimacy of female same-sex desire, enables to re-imagine experiences of marginalised people within a heteronormative environment. My study is by no means the only possible reading of Okparanta's novel; further research is thus recommended. A deeper study on the possible linkages between this novel and previous female writing of Nigeria would be crucial. Such a female writers' literary history of Nigeria could lead to a clearer understanding of the way in which Okparanta engages with the work of her predecessors. The novel's prophetic features could moreover be emphasised by conducting a study that engages in a comparison of the novel and queer novels from South-Africa, other African countries or the USA. In addition, different conclusions can probably made by a study of the construction of the plot or the characters of the narrative, which is not profoundly described in my work. I studied, based on a close-reading methodology, the various ways in which the Bible and the church are evaluated in the novel, and how this is related to pleasure, pain and the body. This has enabled me to illustrate that *Under the Udala Trees* voices the hope for queer people of faith from *within* their Christian faith, which disproves the use of religion in homophobic rhetoric and propaganda.

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