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## The Novel of Bits: Non-Normative Sexuality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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### ABSTRACT

*The traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality have always been assumed to be stable, fixed and natural. However, this understanding has become problematized to the extent that our basic comprehension of sexuality has been challenged. Through these new negotiated explorations, we manage to get new meanings of the assumed natural sexual categories and identities. This study situates itself within these intellectual engagements by incorporating a literary text that chronicle the problematization of the existing identity categories. This study will consider the literary representation of identity discourse and examine how the text blur the line between gender and sexuality and assert its inherent instability. In doing this, the study will first show how the exclusivist regimes of heteronormativity are challenged and disrupted within the selected text. Secondly, the study will investigate how specific characterizations cross, transform and abandon traditional demarcations of supposed stable sexual and gender categories and insist on a possibility of multiple sexualities. Finally, the study will interrogate the injustices inherent in heteronormativity in order to show how they are unable to inclusively locate disparate identities and desires. This study employs the theoretical arguments of queer studies, propagated by Sedgwick, Butler, Jagose, Fuss among others. The study utilizes library-based document analysis of the selected text and other critical secondary works to dismantle the hegemonic position of the assumed stable identity and sexual categories. The scope of this study is in the work of an African female author in Nigeria. The study therefore purposively picks Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* for its inherent quality to prove the instability of gender categories and therefore queer understanding of sexual and identity affiliations.*

**Keywords:** Queer, Identity, Chimamanda

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a proliferation of explorations in literature that attempts to challenge our most basic understandings about how we understand and conceptualize sex, gender and sexuality. This implies that there are new frontiers from which we garner understanding of how sex, gender and sexuality are constructed. Through these new and negotiated explorations, we manage to gain understandings of what the binary oppositions of sex and gender entail. These negotiated engagements occur within the traditional realms of the supposed stable categories of sex, gender and sexual desire.

As Rubin (1993) once noted, 'the realm of sexuality has its own internal politics, inequities and modes of oppression' and that 'the domain of erotic life is negotiated' (4). Spargo (2000:7) affirms Rubin's argument by asserting that this negotiation occurs 'through the exploration of how we understand sex in the ways that we do'. Central to these arguments was Foucault's (1972) assertions that sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category. Therefore, the current understanding of sex, gender and desire are problematized in the essence of their constructedness.

In conceptualizing the idea of identity categories as social constructs, that are amenable to be dynamic, Spargo contends that an individual shouldn't be viewed 'as an autonomous Cartesian subject' in the sense that he has 'innate or essential identity that exists independently' (2000:50). The idea that we know our selfhood and that we are supposed to be unique to ourselves is itself 'a social construct rather than a recognition of a natural fact' (51). In the same vein therefore, our perceived gender identity and supposed sexual categories which ordinarily emanates from our identity and therefore forms our sexual preferences, leanings and orientations and desires are also social constructs that are birthed by the 'very

discourses and their knowledges that produce and police sexuality as well as gender' (51).

Butler (1990) reinforced the idea that gender and sexuality are social constructs by restoring 'gender to a central position in the analysis of sexual desires and relations' (53). She powerfully argues that gender isn't a product of biological sex. The central question then becomes that if indeed sexuality is a social construct and that gender is discursively produced, why would we assume or ascribe sex to the binary divides of male and female; masculine and feminine; man and woman. Spargo summarizes it succinctly that 'we do not behave in certain ways because of our gender identity, we attain that identity through those behavioral patterns which sustain gender norms' (2000:56). The idea that normative sexuality is viewed as the norm, while non normative sexuality is viewed as out of the norm gets questioned. This works to enable the resistance of 'oppressive knowledges and practices' (65).

For a long time, sexuality has been central in gender identities because it is 'based on an implicit or sometimes explicit contention that sexuality is produced and maintained within gender relations' (Schippers, 2000: 748). However, such contentions become problematized when sexuality, gender and desire are stratified. Such stratifications that had understood sexuality as a binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality becomes challenged when the range of human sexuality is considered.

Sociologists argued that 'sexual meanings, identities and categories were...negotiated social constructs' (Epstein, 1994: 188) which led to the institutionalization of sexuality in two levels: First, in the understanding that human sexuality was biological and secondly in the acceptance of the binary models that certain expressions of sexuality were natural and others were not.

The main focus of this paper then is to interrogate the hegemonic patterns of sexuality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) in order to show how they are unable to position disparate identities and desires and explain their existence. See (2007) challenges 'readers, past and present, to revisit the habits of reading literary expressions of sexual experiences' (64). Indeed, the known identity categories cannot possibly explain how the events in literary texts occur. Their limitations are inherent in the limitations of the traditional definitions of sexuality and gender.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1 The Novel of Bits

Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* chronicle and problematize the location of sexuality and gender and thus at odds with the dominant patterns of heteronormativity. It shows how the author has subverted sex and sexuality and has debunked 'stable sexes...and sexuality.' (Jagose, 1996: 17). The novel uncovers and emphasizes 'sexuality in general and sexual difference in particular' (Slagle, 2003:132) in order to show how the traditional understandings of gender and sexuality are unable to adequately position sexual desire.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* was written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who was born in Nigeria in 1977. It chronicles modern Nigeria during wartime. The war in question is the Biafran war of the 1960s, during which the Southern region of Nigeria fought unsuccessfully to secede. The book mainly follows the fortunes of Olanna, Ugwu, Richard and a host of other characters. Through their daily lives and eventual destinies, is tied the sexual spectrum plot of the story. Adichie makes the characters interesting, compelling and open for various sexual interpretations.

The novel uses a 'feminist, gender-inflected notion of queer to consider the dialectic between the hegemonic and normative, on the one hand, and the marginalized or invisible, on the other' (Stobie, 2011: 119) to reveal the problematic qualities of the representation of sexuality and gender.

In analyzing the text, critical perspectives of sexuality and gender explore how the intimate relationships between the characters are constructed beyond the binary of normativity and outside the temporal markers of heterosexuality. In searching for the ways to connect and interact with each other in the novel, the characters stretch the limiting definitions of sexuality and gender and offered themselves as icons of non-normative sexuality. In other words, the novel 'insists that there is nothing necessarily 'normal' about being heterosexual' (Slagle, 2003: 135).

Several readings of this novel refer to aspects that do not expressly touch on non-normative sexuality but contribute immensely to its postulations. Ojinmah (2012) terms *Half of a Yellow Sun* as 'a story of love and betrayal' (5). Akinwale (2012) posits that Adichie builds her characters as quintessentially human in their actions or inactions (145). Onyerionwu (2010) reads Adichie's characters as dynamic. She (Adichie):

...does not compromise the fact that they have to be the reflections of real life figures. This is why she presents them

as human beings, in their strengths and weaknesses (323)

This is important for it positions the expressions of the character's selfhood in normal spaces and geographies. This works to help us identify with their challenges and experiences. The theme of love is strongly evident in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which leads to Uko's (2006) submission that the characters are 'free to love and express love' (93). This observation is followed by Norridge's (2012) assertions that in the novel the 'descriptions of the sexual attractions have proved fundamental to explorations of both male and female experiences' (18). Norridge argues that through the descriptions of the sexually explicit scenes, does the plot of the novel unravel. She says that the novel's powerful progression is achieved precisely 'through Adichie's sensual and sexually explicit descriptions' (19). Novak (2008) addresses the novel in relation to its 'depiction of the trauma of colonialism and neocolonialism and the problem of voice' (33). In this analysis, Novak primarily deals with trauma as a consequence of the Biafran war. I will appropriate violence in war as a strategy for sexual desire. Strehle (2011) on the other hand, looks at issues of diaspora and exile in examining Adichie's novel. She 'explores the novel's diasporic vision, first in the public and historical realm, showing how the novel traces the fracturing of community to British colonization of Nigerian lands and peoples' (653). This is crucial for it illuminates the eventual social fabric that is evident within the characters. This is more especially when the characters are forcibly displaced as a result of the war. Mabura (2008) reads *Half of a Yellow Sun* through an 'African Postcolonial Gothic' lens in which Adichie teases out the peculiarities of the 'Postcolonial Gothic in continental Africa as she dissects fraught African psyches and engages in reclamation of her Igbo heritage.' (206). Her insights on how experiences shape the character's development is crucial to argue on sexuality and gender. Oates (2007) argues that Adichie 'examines the fundamental difficulty of maintaining a coherent sense of self in a time of political turmoil' (163). I use this assertion to postulate that in the event of uncertainty, it's impossible to argue a coherent and stable sexual selfhood.

The evocative tale of *Half of a Yellow Sun* testifies to Adichie's 'imaginative ability, creativity and remarkable research skills' (Ojinmah, 2012: 1). Adichie's disposition indeed draws the characters to life. Odenigbo, Ugwu, Olanna, Kainene and Richard develop as the story progresses and thereby creating a powerful narrative. Perhaps of importance is the phenomenal development of Ugwu 'from the clumsy little village boy...who sleeps with pieces of chicken in his pocket, to a resourceful teacher and child soldier' (4).

The text opens wide several other doors of self consciousness and awareness examining the fluid, dynamic and multiplicity of possible selves and the intricacies of the body.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is a deeply multilayered text, a 'story of love' (Ojinmah, 2012:6) and betrayal and desire and Adichie achieves this through her masterful weaving of the characters. Using Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, Richard and Kainene, she 'weaves a compelling story' (6) of locating and positioning desire. Ojinmah asserts thus:

Using the exposition of the love and betrayals represented by Olanna/Odenigbo/Amala; Olanna/Odenigbo/Richard; Richard/Olanna/Kainene, Adichie probes the anatomy of human relations (7).

Indeed the novel's subtext nests itself in the characterization of a host of players including Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo and Richard. The obsession with sexual transgression sets the stage for a queer interpretation.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is a story that details the Biafran war and the memories of pain that accompany the war chronicling the lives of the witnesses to the pain. The plot progression and character development realized through Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu and Richard makes the novel a compelling history of Nigeria's turbulent past.

Using the family, one of the foremost normative institutions, Adichie mirrors the normative assumption of the family as a basic unit of society. Adichie positions several 'normal families' that have a man as an authoritative figurehead in the family which serves to uphold the male power. Kainene and Olanna are twin sisters whose parents are Chief and Mrs. Ozobia. They regularly attend social functions and parties together, a classic sign of a loving happy family. The first time we encounter the family was during a party at the Federal Palace Hotel (Adichie, 2006: 57). Uncle Mbaezi and Aunt Ifeka have been married for years and despite her confession to Olanna of his philandering ways, the marriage has withstood the test of time and their procreative quality is evident with Cousin Arinze who gets married to Nnakwanze and about to deliver their first child (128). Arinze's insistence on getting a husband and a child weaves perfectly into the normative narrative. She says 'I want a husband today and tomorrow' (41). Olanna tells her that she is young and should focus on her sewing training but she retorts 'is it sewing that will give me a child?' (41). This propagates the normative quality of marriage and highlights marriage and family as one of the dominant pattern of normative sexuality. However, Adichie effectively subverts this notion of sexuality and desire. The Ozobia family isn't a happy family as Adichie highlights. Chief Ozobia is accused of having an affair with another woman to the extent of buying her a house. Uncle Mbaezi is also accused of straying outside the matrimonial home by her wife, Aunt Ifeka.

Odenigbo and Olanna live in a cohabiting union at the University of Nsukka. Odenigbo constantly begs Olanna for them to be married but Olanna refuses, 'each time he suggested marriage, she said no' (52). But Odenigbo doesn't relent to fit into the heteronormative frame when he suggests they get married (244) and that if they can't get married, they can have a child together (106). Olanna's refusal could be read as a betrayal of the high premium placed on marriage and family. Olanna's refusal should be read with her inability to have a child which she shares with her twin sister Kainene. Adichie questions the normative rule of marriage as a suitable plan for women and which should lead to procreation. While she positions women who desire children like Odenigbo's mother and Cousin Arinze their prominence in the text is marginal unlike Olanna for example.

Adichie explicitly challenges the normative narratives the characters. As a female author, Adichie intentionally builds a narrative that is full of sexually transgressive and non normative undertexts that when explicated, challenge the narrow understandings of sexuality and gender.

Through her characters, Adichie shows how the patterns of normative sexuality is unable to inclusively locate and position disparate sexualities and desires. It must be noted that this inability to adequately locate disparate sexualities desires emanate from not only what the characters do, but also what they fail to do. In so doing, the characters disrupt and challenge the normative discourse for their inability to adequately explain disparate desires.

Non normative behaviours of the characters within the selected text's body are analysed as tropes linked to the disruption of the heteronormative hegemony. The authors use their stories to subvert, if only unconsciously, the heteropatriarchal regime and investments that run rampant in society. Further, through the plots' progressions, the author attempt to show that sexuality is not a fixed identifiable category from which we can appropriate judgment.

Adichie ascribes non normative sexual images to the characters and make significant statements about their sexuality. The experiences of the individual characters relate to one another and how they queer understanding of what is sexual. Of note, are the relationships the characters in the text build and/or destroy. In so doing, images of the erotic are juxtaposed with normative or non normative sexuality to mesh out the possibilities for alternate sexuality.

For example, Ugwu is a repository of non normative sexual images in the text *Half of a Yellow Sun*. His actions and sometimes inactions queer his character and thereby serve as a means to identify the cultural otherness in gender and sexual orientation in the text. We first encounter him when he is brought as a houseboy in Odenigbo's homestead. He is a village boy, possibly thirteen years of age. He is a people's pleaser; this fact is alluded by his aunt who tells Odenigbo, 'he is a very good boy. Just tell him what he should do.' (5) From the onset, the author intentionally draws us towards the sexual spectrum of Ugwu's character. Upon being introduced to his Master, the author chimes 'Master's Igbo felt feathery in Ugwu's ears' (4). This assertion is deliberate and is not singular. Of note, and what introduces Ugwu as a repository of non normative sexual images is his description of Master from the onset. He thought Master's toes 'seemed feminine' (6) and he wears 'something that looked like a woman's coat' (9). He fell in love with Master's voice to the point that 'he wanted Master to keep talking, so he could listen to the sonorous voice, the musical blend' (10). These descriptions early on in the text marks Ugwu as a significant player in the text. Adichie's decision to enable him as a narrator further heightens his prominence and his close scrutiny becomes inevitable.

Perhaps what becomes a significant factor in Ugwu's character was his reaction when he burned Master's socks while ironing. Odenigbo was angry that he had ironed his socks and Ugwu was worried that he had failed his boss, 'his chest felt weighty' (14). This indeed is common among the employed people who may feel worried about their job security once they make a mistake and Ugwu, to be fair, is no different. However, and this becomes the game changer, his reaction to the whole saga becomes suspect and indeed

reinforces his character as a non-normative sexual subject. He decides to look for *arigbe* leaves, a traditional potent herb in order to lace his master's food with, in order to placate him. It should be remembered that the leaves were used by women in order to 'soften a man's heart' (15). Ugwu remembers what his grandmother told him:

She used to say that *arigbe* softened a man's heart. She was the second of three wives and did not have the special position that came with being the first or last, so before she asked her husband for anything, she told Ugwu, she cooked him spicy yam porridge with *arigbe*, it had worked, always. Perhaps it would work with Master (15)

The fact that Ugwu decided to appropriate a space that is traditionally reserved for women and claim the privileges that accrue with the space becomes a manifestation of his deviant desires. He manages to destabilize and dismantle the traditional gender specificities that have long been in practice in order to gain a particular advantage over Odenigbo. In retrospect, Ugwu transforms to become a 'woman' angling for attention from her husband. Later, this assertion would be strengthened when Ugwu's position in the house becomes challenged by the entry of another character: a woman.

Odenigbo, the militant academic that ran an intellectual salon in his house where academic staff of the University who felt that the country was being run down by the ruling elite met and discussed the affairs of the Nation. In fact, the historical Biafran war traced its roots from the University of Nsukka. Several people visited Odenigbo, and Ugwu, being the houseboy would usually serve the guests food and drinks. Ordinarily he enjoyed the attention while serving the guests. The author says he felt 'a warm glow of pride' and 'liked it when Master introduced him' (18). He liked the company of the guests and described them affectionately. There was Professor Lehman, Dr Patel, Okeoma and Professor Ezeka. However, Ugwu has unkind words for one of the visitors in the house – Miss Adebayo. He did not like her at all. The author puts it well:

He...did not like how her voice rose above Master's in the living room, challenging and arguing. He often fought the urge to raise his own voice from behind the kitchen door and tell her to shut up, especially when she called Master a sophist. He did not know what *sophist* meant, but he did not like that he called Master that. Nor did he like the way she looked at Master (19-20)

Ugwu is threatened by this woman. The immediate question would be why. He is not worried at all by the other male visitors in the house. But Miss Adebayo seems a danger to

him. One would wonder why he did not even 'like the way she looked at Master' (20). The explanation is that Ugwu has non normative feelings towards his Master. This would explain his actions towards pleasing Master almost to a fault. Just like his grandmother who would feel threatened by the other women and therefore resort to using the *arigbe* leaves, Ugwu too is threatened by this woman Miss Adebayo. Chambers (2005) describes this as 'a supplement [that] complements and tends to complete an object that it does not replace, but in which the very existence of the supplement indicates some perhaps previously unnoticed lack or deficiency' (19). Ugwu's action of looking for the herbal leaves and his feelings of being threatened becomes representation of his non normative sexual expression.

It should be noted that Miss Adebayo became a threat after an incident that Ugwu witnessed. While in one of their numerous intellectual arguments, Miss Adebayo 'got up laughing and went over to Master and pressed his lips closed together' (21). Ugwu witnessed it all 'imagined Master's brandy-diluted saliva touching her fingers' (21). He 'stiffened' angry that master just sat there 'shaking his head as if the whole thing were very funny' (21). Indeed Ugwu has strong feelings for Master which, in this context, cannot be reciprocated. The author sums up Ugwu's ordeal in the face of

Miss Adebayo thus: 'Miss Adebayo became a threat after that'. Ugwu starts behaving like a jilted lover, a scorned 'woman'. 'She' describes Miss Adebayo as a 'fruit bat' with a 'pinched face' and 'cloudy complexion' (21). Ugwu intentionally serves her drinks the last and takes his time before opening the front door when she knocks. Ugwu is worried that 'she would marry Master' (21). It is obvious that Ugwu is jealous of her. McGavran notes that non normative readings primarily look at 'intense but safe spaces' for non-normative sexual expression (2000: 49) and Ugwu becomes the poster boy. His obsession with his master, projected as the male body, signifies his desire to manipulate, explore and control non normativity corporeality through dilution of the sexuality and gender spectrum .

Adichie makes it clear that indeed Ugwu has feelings for his Master. She says:

He (Ugwu) did not want Miss Adebayo – or any woman – coming in to intrude and disrupt their lives...All Ugwu needed was the deep voice, the melody of the English inflected Igbo, the glint of the thick eyeglasses. (21)

This conclusion, of Ugwu's desire, is important for two reasons. First, it implies that as things were, Ugwu was perfectly contented and any addition to the family would be unwelcome. Secondly, and this is crucial for the unraveling of the plot, that he was prepared to fight for his position with Miss Adebayo or any other woman. This is significant because later in the text Olanna moves in to live with Odenigbo and a shift of power occurs.

When Odenigbo announces that 'a special woman is coming for the weekend' (21) and that he (Odenigbo) will order food from the staff club, Ugwu is agonized insisting that he can cook. When Master tells him the house isn't clean enough, he blames the woman. He says:

Master had never complained about his work before. It was this woman's fault, this woman that Master considered too special even for him to cook for (22).

Ugwu felt his position in danger, that the appearance of this new woman would shift Master's attention from him to her. When the woman arrived, Ugwu goes into overdrive, imagining 'their hug, and her ugly body pressed to Master's' (22). Ugwu did not know this woman, he had never met her but the vitriol he apports to her are signs of the conflicting spectrum of sexuality and gender.

When he overhears that Olanna, the new woman would move in to live with them, he is shattered, he says 'his life would change' and 'he felt sad' (24). He knew that the decision of Olanna to move in was irreversible and he had to live with it. He summarizes the feelings he had at that instant:

He did not want to share the job of caring for Master with anyone, did not want to disrupt the balance of his life with Master (25).

At this point, it should be undeniable that Ugwu indeed harboured strong feelings towards his Master, Odenigbo. But given the circumstances, he could not express the same feelings. The keen attention that he paid Odenigbo was one of the ways he showed his feelings and his reluctance to have any woman in the house except him reflects a familiar guarding of territory. However, with the appearance of Olanna, a lot had to change. He decides to use the disadvantage as an advantage. In Ugwu's mind, she becomes a conduit through which he can satiate his feelings towards Odenigbo. With the knowledge that Olanna would move in, he becomes understandably sad but 'his sadness was incomplete; he felt expectant, too, an excitement he did not entirely understand' (24). To his imagination, Olanna would become useful in the expression and investment of his feelings. He acknowledges that while he did not want to share Master with anyone, 'it was suddenly unbearable to think of not seeing her again' (25).

Because he couldn't get to Master, Ugwu reaches to him through Olanna. An instance is described when Ugwu eavesdrops while Master and Olanna are making love. The first time he heard the two making love was the day Olanna came to the house. Adichie says:

...he tiptoed to Master's bedroom and rested his ear on the door. She was moaning loudly, sounds that seemed so unlike her, so uncontrolled and stirring and throaty. He stood there for a long time, until the moans stopped, and then he went back to his room (25).

To dismiss Ugwu's actions as that of a young naughty kid would be wrong at two levels. First, Ugwu indeed harboured strong feelings towards Odenigbo and secondly this was not a

singular occurrence. It happened again. Through these nightly visits to the bedroom door, Ugwu seems to connect to Odenigbo in a way that he could not ordinarily do. He is indeed connecting with Odenigbo through Olanna who becomes the mule, a conduit. He becomes both a subject and an object in the love making process. He appropriates a space in Odenigbo's bedroom and becomes a participant both in the act itself and in the benefits that accrue. He listens in until the moans stop then he leaves. Through this process, he shares whatever remunerations that occur to Olanna. From a sexuality perspective, the moans cease to be appropriated to Olanna as the object, but they are assigned to Odenigbo as the Subject. To Ugwu, the moans are assigned to Odenigbo and when they stopped, he (Ugwu) becomes satisfied and leaves.

This same principle is applied when he fantasizes about Nnesinachi, a girl he was seeing. He 'hoped she would not be silent like Chinyere; he hoped she would make the same sounds he heard from Olanna when he pressed his ear to the bedroom door' (177). While the sounds are made by Olanna, they reflect Odenigbo's actions and this is what Ugwu is emphasizing. When he wishes that Nnesinachi makes the same sounds, he claims Odenigbo's space thereby, in a way, satiating the feelings he has for him. This process becomes an admission of Ugwu's desire to express his desire to his employer. The admission of and action upon his desires and urges proves Ugwu is no longer inhibiting his attraction to master but is fully occupied in expressing it albeit in the closet.

The 'bone-sucking-ritual' becomes an important phase in Ugwu's expression of his conflicted sexuality. This ritual involved Ugwu clearing the dinner table. He would keep Olanna's plate aside while emptying the rest in the dust bin. Then he would sit down '...and selected one (chicken bone from Olanna's plate) and closed his eyes as he sucked it, imagining Olanna's mouth enclosing the same bone.' (83).

This ritual usually occurred early afternoon when 'the house was always quietest' (83). Odenigbo and Olanna having gone to the staff club and he was alone in the house. The atmosphere too becomes a perfect backdrop for his conflicted feelings. With privacy assured, and the 'kitchen bathed in incandescent sunlight' (83), his mind can indeed wander. This atmosphere is reminiscent of what McGavran term as 'pre orgasmic language' (61). He confesses that the first time he sucked her bones was when he saw them (Odenigbo and Olanna) kissing.

The first time he sucked her bones, weeks ago, it was after he saw her and Master kissing in the living room on a Saturday morning, their open mouths pressed together (84).

It was this act that was sufficient motivation for him. While sucking the bones may mean nothing in isolation, but weaved together with his history as a sexual subject becomes interesting. While sucking the bones, 'he imagined that the taste of Olanna's mouth was in his' (84). When read together with his confession that he started the ritual when he saw Odenigbo and Olanna kissing, then the implied reading would be that in as much as he imagined Olanna's mouth in his, in reality he was imagining Odenigbo's mouth in his. Just like in the love making scenario, Olanna is simply a conduit, a channel through which he can direct his feelings towards

Odenigbo. Indeed, to Ugwu the role of Olanna seems to be that of a surrogate sexual object for his own unarticulated desire for Odenigbo.

He says, 'the thought of her saliva in Master's mouth had both repelled and excited him. It still did' (84). This is a very important and crucial confession from Ugwu. He acknowledges his sexual self. And in a moment of honest candour he bares it all:

It was the same way he felt about her moaning at night; he did not like to hear her and yet often went to their door to press his ear against the cold wood and listen (85).

Of note further, is the colloquial meaning of the word 'bone'. The word denotes a male phallus. Therefore, and further to the above argument, Ugwu's bone-sucking-ritual would in effect be a ritual of sucking at a male phallus. However, put in context, it is not any other phallus but Odenigbo's. The kitchen atmosphere allows for Ugwu to explore his desires that are otherwise considered at odds with heteronormativity.

Still however, with Olanna's presence comes the pain of knowing he can't direct his feelings right to him. He knows that he cannot get to Master directly. He laments so:

He missed the old days with Master. He missed the evenings when he would sit on the floor of the living room while Master talked in his deep voice and the mornings when he served Master's breakfast, knowing that the only voices that could be heard were theirs (85).

The lament seems an indictment of the heteronormative investment that the novel has put. In the text, the heteronormative assumptions remind Ugwu, and the reader, that a sexual identity that threatens the institutionalized patriarchy is forbidden. However, this does not stop Ugwu from expressing his desires and thereby challenging and disrupting the ideological patterns of sexual normativity.

Adichie's plot is also manufactured around delayed or marginalized heterosexual relationships. Richard and Kainene's is one such example. Richard and Kainene are read to highlight the instability of gender specificities. They are in a heteronormative union which from the outset seems like a normal romantic relationship between two people of the opposite sex. However, with close examination, the relationship reveals itself as a repository of discordant sexual images and signs that only serve to disrupt the heteronormative narrative of the same union.

Richard is ascribed female features and is highly described as effeminate. Susan's friends at the parties he takes him call him 'pretty boy' (53). At the parties, Susan would nudge him to 'join the men' (53) which, by his own admission, he felt awkward and out of place. He is interested in aesthetical Igbo-Ukwu art unlike macho enterprises like the business opportunities in Nigeria. Adichie paints Richard as unable to

sustain a sensible conversation with the men and he therefore 'preferred women' (54). Richard in effect inhabits a non-space, a sexual no-man's land, so to speak, within the real, tangible, material heterosexual world and remains voiceless within the heteronormative discourse. Heathcote weighs in that Richard's characterization 'cross, combine and proliferate...normative gender roles' (1994: 68). As seen throughout the text, Adichie goes to extreme lengths to ascribe feminine characteristics to Richard unlike Kainene who is described in more masculine terms.

Kainene is a twin sister to Olanna. She is not as beautiful as Olanna, in fact 'she was not pretty at all' (57). When Richard first saw her, she thought her a mistress because 'she was smoking' and wore 'brazenly red lipstick' (57). She was very tall and very thin and 'her collarbones jutted out sharply' (58). Adichie draws sharp contrast between her and her sister. She says:

Kainene looked even thinner next to Olanna, almost androgynous, her tight maxi outlining the boyishness of her hips (60).

For Adichie, Kainene is more masculine than Richard. Richard writes her a 'tall, ebony coloured woman with a near flat chest' (60). Unlike Richard, Kainene is into more tough, masculine activities. She took after her father's construction business and runs its operations. Her father, Chief Ozobia, acknowledges as much: 'Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two' (31). Therefore, the two 'combine, perform and transcend masculine and feminine gender identities' (Iovannonne, 2009: 39). Adichie therefore successfully merge the traditional understandings of what it meant to be a 'man' and a 'woman' into 'new understandings of gender that transcend binary categorizations' (41).

It therefore comes as no surprise when the relationship between the two becomes lopsided and hopelessly unbalanced. Kainene is more in charge than Richard, which is usually not the case. They meet on the first date at Kainene's hotel, an establishment that Kainene suggested. When they met she 'moved close so that he could kiss her cheek and then led the way upstairs' (61). Throughout the conversation, she was the one asking questions unlike Richard who just sat there answering. Every time they meet, Adichie is determined to show the power relations that disrupt the heteronormative assumptions in the union:

Each time (they met), she led the way to the suite and they sat on the terrace and ate rice and drank cold beer (62).

It should be noted that it was Kainene who initiated the romantic relationship in the first place. She was the one who 'pressed her mouth to his, lips parted' (63). Ordinarily, it was Richard who was supposed to initiate the kissing, but the 'man' in the relationship was Kainene. To further compound the plot, when they go to one of the rooms, Richard fails to have an erection thereby preventing any sexual intercourse. The failure of Richard to sustain an erection is an indictment

on his 'manhood'. This failure alone could imply he cannot perform his supposed 'manly' duties and therefore may not qualify to be called a man in the strictest sense. Therefore, within the normative union that privileges the male and demands of them domination and control over women, Richard loses the privilege to be the man.

This needs to be understood in the framework of Butler's (1990) concept of heterosexual matrix, which explains that the manifestation of sex, gender and sexual desire are only conceivable only if they project themselves toward each other in a particular way. A particular sex should be accompanied by a particular gender, and therefore manifest itself as a particular sexual desire and act. It follows thus, that it is impractical, and impossible, to disconnect sex from gender, but also problematic to separate the sex/gender binary from sexuality. What should be deduced from this explanation is that when Richard becomes, at least partly a woman, is actually hegemonic heteronormativity at play as conceptualized by the reversal of gender roles within the heteronormative union of Kainene and himself. Gender here reveals 'itself as discursively constructed' and thus created and defined by the performance. (Lonngren, 2012: 215). This works backwards to question the very same heteronormative hegemony that the gender reversals seem to promote. That indeed there are 'further possibilities of questioning the hegemony of different sex desire which relies on the connection to a supposedly stable, nature given sex' (216). She continues rather fluently:

If sex is 'discursively produced', different sex desire is deprived of its status as hegemonic nature-given sexuality (216)

Indeed this becomes true of the text and as Gamson (2004) points out, that 'sexual identities are plural and ever moving, and...queer visibility undercuts and challenges heteronormative assumptions' (51). This argument is further strengthened by O'Driscoll when he avers:

If a man and a woman can so easily be mistaken for each other, then the public and domestic spheres of...[heteronormativity]...cannot easily be justified. (1996: 41).

Indeed, Richard and Kainene's unique position in the text 'challenges normative dictates about sexual and gender identities' (Slagle, 2003: 141) and more specifically what it means to be a man and woman.

Days later when they met again, Richard could not suggest that they get a room. It was the man, Kainene who 'finally asked if he wanted to go inside' (64). Even when they went inside, he failed her again. The discursive gender matrix in the plot is highlighted when Kainene consoles him that 'there are other ways' (68) which could imply that there are other non-traditional ways that could be used to achieve sexual gratification. This further throws into question the normative procreative mechanism of heteronormative regime.

They meet on dates at Kainene's hotel and later during the war they lived in Kainene's Port Harcourt house. Port Harcourt serves as an ideal backdrop of the unbalanced nature of Richard and Kainene's relationship. Away from known friends and family, Port Harcourt serves as one of 'the liminal spaces never entirely exterior to the normal world but can be recognized as constituting places of difference' (Rigby, 2009: 46). Isolated by mangrove plantations, Richard and Kainene's relationship is different because they can only preserve their deviant union outside of the confines of heteronormative patriarchy. In this space, Richard unnaturally submits to Kainene, a blatant challenge to heteronormative discourse invested in the text and their union. He, in effect, enacts the repressed fantasy of erotic submission to his object. Richard is fully aware of Kainene's higher position and by living in her house in Port Harcourt, he expressed the subconscious desire to be overpowered by her. Because he cannot wield power over her, Richard agrees to a submissive role thereby challenging the supposed privileged position of heteronormative hegemony.

A more subtle, but powerful, signifier of the conflicting sexual nature of their union was Richard's infidelity with Olanna, Kainene's sister. First, it should be noted that it was Olanna who seduced him but that isn't the point. The point is that Richard sexually performed satisfactorily well with Olanna unlike the failed attempts with Kainene. He acknowledges it himself:

He had never been so firm, never lasted so long as he had with her (235).

This implies an admission of the unbalanced power relations between Richard and Kainene. That he could perform so well with Olanna, a more softer and demure woman is an indictment on his relationship with Kainene which only serves to disrupt the heteronormative investments of the novel.

Adichie opens up imaginative spaces [that] expose the persistence of heteronormativity while simultaneously positing alternative understandings of sexuality' (Murray, 2012: 89). The novel's handling of sexual transgression creates a nuance that disrupts and destabilizes the heterosexual narrative, creating in the process a sexually woolly novel. This paper insists that transgression should be understood as a 'subaltern break or space' (Beasley, 2011:29), a disconnect emergent in the dominant ideology which resembles Deleuze's (2002) conceptualizations of deterritorialization.

As Beasley (2011) argues:

absence of discussion of transgression in relation to heterosexuality is certainly related to its privileged status...[but]...considering the notion that subversion might be intrinsic within dominant practices like heterosexuality (rather than necessarily always external to them) opens up hopeful possibilities' (26).

The novel establishes that the characters blur the masculine and gender roles in ways that Barak (1996) describes as 'exhibiting or in some ways acting out opposite sex role mannerisms or behaviours' (51). From the characters in the novel, the erotic dynamics and its potential for engaging with mainstream spaces and its simultaneous liminality are realized. Gender and sexuality categories are socially constructed and this fluidity opens up possibilities for readings of multiple sexualities. Transgressive sexuality involves such practices that 'in some way represent a challenge to normativity' (Beasley, 2011:32).

Indeed, a text's dalliance with transgressive sexuality brings into light and questions the rules of traditional heteronormativity and opens the door for the realization and re-imagination of all kinds of sexualities.

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