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18 Lesbians, Lesphobia and the Bible

Under the Udala Trees as Data

Abstract

Homophobia and other forms of discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community have drawn what is sometimes characterised as a divisive "pink line". This applies also to Nigeria and Uganda, two examples of countries with laws that target male homosexuals particularly harshly. Religious rhetoric, including use of the so-called biblical "clobber texts", plays a significant part in maintaining the pink line. This article centres lesbianism, which, while violent lesphobia is certainly attested in African and other settings, is often on the periphery of discussion. This applies to both depiction in and interpretation of the Bible and to wider discourse. The article discusses reasons for the lack of mention of lesbian sex and attraction in biblical writings before interrogating notions of lesphobia in what is widely depicted as "homophobic Africa". This interrogation applies the life-story of Dhalie, a Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugee, which was gathered during fieldwork in Kenya, alongside the fictional story of Ijeoma in Chinelo Okparanta's novel *Under the Udala Trees*. The article's conclusion is that both the texts of the Bible and representations from so-called "homophobic Africa" are more diversified and more nuanced than unmitigated claims of lesphobia permit.

Keywords: *LGBTQ+, Homophobia, Africa, Bible, Okparanta*

It is a pleasure to contribute to this publication in honour of Professor Joachim Kügler, on the occasion of his retirement. Joachim and I first met in person when I moved to Bamberg in August 2017. Joachim was my mentor during my year-long Humboldt fellowship and quickly became not just someone I admired for his scholarship and active support for re-

searchers working on the Bible in African contexts, but also a friend. Joachim is generous in every way, especially with his time. He is a delightful host, a formidable organiser, and he has a wonderful sense of humour. Joachim, I hope your retirement will create more time and more occasions for you to travel (including to come and visit us in Yorkshire) and to write about the things most dear to you. I wish you many years of good health and good spirits.

1. Introduction

South African journalist Mark Gevisser (2020) evocatively refers to LGBTQ+[1] rights as drawing a "pink line" that divides people, nations, and our planet. This line has become particularly pronounced in this millennium, which has seen both the legalisation of same-sex marriage, with the Netherlands in 2001 leading the way, and the passing of Anti-Homosexuality Acts, notably in Uganda (2014, 2023).[2] Such Acts constitute examples of legalised homophobia – that is, of the aversion to and prejudice against LGB persons.[3] Religion is very much enmeshed in homophobic "pink line" divisions. Hence, countries, or regions, where Islamic Sharia law is enforced are especially harsh regarding even consensual same-sex adult relationships, prescribing and sometimes exercising the death penalty. In

1 The abbreviation stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and/or Questioning, and more". This "more" can, for instance, include gender fluidity. Hence, the label is a shorthand that subsumes a great diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities.

2 At the time of writing, marriage between members of the same sex is legally recognized and performed in 35 countries. At the other extreme, two countries not only ban same-sex marriage but impose the death penalty for consensual same-sex sex-acts (Iran and Afghanistan). The death penalty also exists, though is not generally practised, in several more countries and is enforced as part of the adultery laws in northern Nigeria. Other types of LGBTQ+ rights, alongside marriage rights, that differ radically from place to place, pertain to laws concerning parenting and adoption, anti-discrimination in employment, housing, education and public accommodation, hate crime protection, access to sex-segregated facilities (for transgender persons), career opportunities in the military, access to reproductive technology, and laws proscribing some consensual sex-acts (e.g. the so-called "sodomy laws"), and laws pertaining to the age of consent.

3 As will be mentioned below, trans identity is denied by the 2023 Act – hence, the Act is transphobic also.

some Christian and Jewish settings, too, sacred texts are invoked to condemn LGBTQ+ expressions and identities.[4] Intersections of religion and homophobia are widely attested in African settings, even if homophobia is by no means an African problem per se.[5] Moreover, this is not the full picture: religion also plays active, inventive, and creative roles in affirming and celebrating LGBTQ+ expressions in many African settings (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021; van Klinken et al., 2021). Hence, while, yes, the Bible has been used in African settings, as elsewhere, to fuel homophobia and promote the status quo of heteronormativity. Such clichés as "It's Adam and Eve – not Adam and Steve", or the use of the biblical term "abomination" to malign homosexuality are examples of such Bible-propelled homophobia. But it is also the case that many same-sex loving Africans and their allies also turn to the Bible for inspiration and encouragement. The Bible is not the preserve of homophobic haters.

This paper contributes to the polarising debate on religion and same-sex loving in African contexts. It examines the Bible as a site of resistance and in doing so focuses most closely on same-sex loving women, or lesbians. Lesbians tend to be on the margins of debates on homosexuality, whether these centre on the Bible, or on contemporary African contexts. To illuminate the Bible as a site of resistance with reference to lesbian love in African settings, I will focus on both life stories and other data collected and published as part of a project in which I was involved,[6] and on an acclaimed novel of lesbian life and love by Nigerian-born author Chinelo Okparanta, namely *Under the Udala Trees* (first published in 2015).

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4 E.g., Uganda is a predominantly Christian country and has been called by implication "the worst place to be gay" in a BBC 3 documentary (2011) fronted by Scott Mills.

5 The United Nations report on discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, while making frequent reference to cases in African settings, makes the global reach and widespread harm caused by homophobia devastatingly clear (A/HRC/19/41 2011).

6 This project was funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grants scheme (SRG1819\190405) and led by Adriaan van Klinken. Research findings are recorded in van Klinken et al. (2021).

2. The "L" of LGBTQ+ and Lesphobia

The designation LGBTQ+ encapsulates diverse and variegated spectrums. The label is often used, as here, as an open-ended shorthand, to describe a "package" of manifold non-heteronormative sexual and gender expressions. Admittedly, the origins of the designation are Western-centric even if it is widely used in African contexts, too. In many settings where same-sex orientation is condemned, trans identity and gender fluidity (which are separate phenomena) are also condemned and even rejected and denied.[7] My focus here is on the Bible, because condemnation of LGBTQ+ persons, identities, or sexual expressions often appeals to the Bible, and most frequently, to the so-called "clobber" passages. These passages are: Genesis 19, the story of the destruction of Sodom; Judges 19, a narrative with similarities to the Sodom story where, again, male-male rape is threatened by a mob here identified as perverse (19:22); two verses in Leviticus referring to a male-male sex-act as an abomination (Lev 18:22, 20:13), with one prescribing the death penalty (Lev 20:13); and a number of Pauline New Testament passages (Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:10).[8] And yet, lesbian persons, identities, or sexual expressions are not clearly alluded to anywhere in the Bible, with the sole possible (if contestable) exception of Romans 1. Elsewhere, the clobber interpretations are based on interpretations of masculine words translated "fornicators… male prostitutes, sodomites" (NRSV) and on equations of male-male sex acts, including the threat of male-male rape, with same-sex

[7] See for instance the definitions for "female person" and "male person" in the Anti-Homosexuality Act of Uganda (2023). The Act denies female identity to anyone not born with a female sexual organ (and male identity to anyone not born with male sexual genitalia).

[8] Sometimes Jude 1:7 from The General Letters is included also. This verse associates Sodom and Gomorrah (of Genesis 19) with "sexual immorality" and "unnatural lust" (NRSV). The derivation of the word "sodomy" from "Sodom" has no doubt contributed to the identification of this "sexual immorality" with male-male homosexuality rather than rape. The cities are widely cited as symbolic of human sinfulness and the need for divine retribution. The crime of Sodom is sometimes identified as inhospitality rather than sexual deviance (e.g., Ezekiel 16:48–50; Okparanta 2017, pp. 75–76).

sexual orientation.[9] Something that is likely to pertain to a penetrative sexual act between males is mentioned in pejorative terms in a few biblical passages (e.g., Lev 18:22, 20:13); but insofar as this can be interpreted homophobically, as condemning female homosexuality, too, (that is, as lesphobically) such condemnation is extrapolated by extension.

In conservative Jewish interpretation, for instance, lesbian sexual activity is forbidden, even though it receives no mention and, consequently, no explicit prohibition, anywhere in Jewish Scripture. Hence, Rabbi Chaim Rapoport states it "must be avoided in all circumstances" (Rapoport, 2004, p. 105). Nevertheless, male homosexuality tends to receive more focus, more condemnation, and more vitriol. Hence, Rapoport mentions that (in Judaism) male homosexuality is "at least in theory, [...] a capital crime, and is also subject to the strictures of arayot – they are forbidden even if human life is at risk" (Rapoport, 2004, p. 105). Similarly, in much of public discourse, male homosexuality is particularly strongly abhorred.[10] This cannot, however, be interpreted as deriving from a more lenient or tolerant attitude to lesbianism vis-à-vis male homosexuality – including in African settings.

South Africa was the first African country to protect sexual orientation in its constitution and to grant LGBTQ+ persons equal rights with other citizens.[11] This has not, however, eradicated homophobia, including such vicious forms as homophobic rape targeting lesbians (sometimes called lesphobic rape).[12] The case of the lesphobic rape and murder of South Af-

[9] All of these biblical clobber passages and the various interpretations of them along a spectrum ranging from condemnation through to liberation are fully discussed and problematized by Holben (1999).

[10] In many countries with the harshest anti-homosexuality laws (e.g., Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen), the death penalty is reserved exclusively or predominantly for men.

[11] Cape Verde and Botswana are two more African nations ensuring some legal protections for LGBTQ+ persons.

[12] The crime has also been called "corrective rape" or "curative rape". These terms are harmful because they (like "gay conversion therapy") wrongfully suggest that such violence can "turn" a homosexual person heterosexual. By (heteronormative) implication, heterosexuality is proper, natural, and preferable.

rican footballer Eudy Simelane (2008) received particularly widespread attention but numerous other cases have been reported – predominantly in South Africa,[13] but also elsewhere in Africa, as well as other countries.

3. Lesbianism and the Bible

While the Bible is widely drawn on to justify and propel homophobia, it does not, as already stated, provide much in the way of relevant content. Any mention of what might in today's terms be considered in the orbit of LGBTQ+ topics is isolated and sparse. This is particularly the case with lesbianism. Hence, there is no biblical proscription equivalent to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 that pertains to female-female sexual contact, and there is no narrative of female-female sexual attraction and love.[14]

But what might be the reason for this absence in the Bible?[15] After all, women are certainly depicted in the Bible as sexual, sometimes as dangerously and excessively so.[16] The idea that there either were no lesbians in ancient Israel, or that the very idea of female-female sex-acts was so taboo as to be entirely repressed, seems unlikely. Regarding the former, the idea that lesbianism is entirely a modern invention has no traction (Stiebert, 2016, p. 116), any more than the idea that homosexuality is un-African or imported to African contexts from "the West" (Kuloba, 2016; van Klinken

[13] See the United Nations report (A/HRC/19/41 2011: 10). In Western settings where such rape is reported the targets of violence are often trans men. The rape and murder of Brandon Teena, in the USA, is one violent example that received considerable publicity. As will be mentioned shortly, gendering in the Kenyan settings in which we conducted our research, was (as elsewhere) a fluid domain; hence determining whether homophobic violence is specifically lesphobic, or transphobic, can be complex.

[14] It has been proposed (Horner, 1978) that David and Jonathan were same-sex lovers. For a very full exploration of this idea, see Harding, 2013. Recently, Kahn-Harris (2023) has made the intriguing suggestion that the relationship of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz may have been a triadic, polyamorous one. This would permit for Ruth, Naomi, or both, being lesbian or bisexual.

[15] I discuss this much more fully elsewhere (Stiebert, 2016, pp. 114–132).

[16] Striking examples come from the lengthy and sordid prophetic descriptions of feminized Judah and Israel in Ezekiel 16 and 23. Hosea 1–3, drawing similarities between Hosea's adulterous wife Gomer and Israel's idolatry, is another example.

& Chitando, 2021).[17] Regarding the latter suggestion, it would seem strange to proscribe some female sexual practices deemed deviant (such as adultery, incest, and bestiality)[18] but for lesbian sex to be elided on account of being too taboo and hence repressed. Instead, more probably, lesbian sex was known of, and either disapproved of, maligned, even outlawed, without this being spelled out in the biblical text,[19] or it was known of but not outlawed, maybe because it did not count as "real sex". This demotion might be because it appears that all intentional abhorred sexual activity (be this male-female, male-male, or human-beast) involves penile penetration and emission, implying that it is penile penetration that "counts" as sex.[20] Something similar is implied by the – probably apocryphal – statement attributed to Queen Victoria, that lesbian sex is an impossibility (Stiebert, 2016, p. 116), as well as by the Jewish distinction between male homosexual acts as an abomination and arayot, and female homosexual acts as an indecency but not one that bars a woman from

[17] Both our life-story research with Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugees in Kenya and Okparanta's novel respond to and reject the fallacy of homosexuality in Africa being a Western import. Kyle reports in our book, "It's certainly not white people who taught me to be homosexual. I was born in a very deep village, and I didn't see any white person in my young age coming home [...] I disagree with that saying about white people teaching homosexuality" (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 52). Meanwhile, in Okparanta's novel the important detail (alluded to in the novel's title) that Ijeoma, the narrator and main character, and her friend Amina meet under an udala tree, is "a means to counter popular claims of homosexuality as exogenous" (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021, p. 169). The presence of white people is limited and peripheral in Okparanta's novel. Where they do appear, they represent the Red Cross and evangelical crusades (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 160–163).

[18] E.g., see Lev 18:23 and 20:16, which contain prohibitions against a woman approaching an animal for sexual relations. While sexual initiative is mostly ascribed to males, not females, female culpability or co-responsibility is implied in this law, as well as, possibly, in the death penalty for both a man and woman participating in adultery (Lev 20:10), some forms of incest (Lev 20:11–12), and bestiality (Lev 20:16). There seems no reason for deeming female-female sexual contact more deviant than the other acts proscribed in Leviticus 18 and 20.

[19] In Jewish sources recorded disapproval of lesbian activity does not predate rabbinical texts. Maimonides, for instance, refers to *mesolelut* (possibly female-female genital rubbing) as an indecency (Stiebert, 2016, p. 123).

[20] Women's menstrual emissions are also referred to as defiling to males. For a man to have sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is prohibited in Levitical law (Lev 18:19) and is punishable by eviction from the community (Lev 20:18).

marrying a man. Both reflect widespread and dismissive attitudes to lesbianism. Ignorance about sexuality and about lesbianism more particularly, alongside dismissal of lesbian sex as being not "proper" sex, have transpired in side-lining same-sex female sexuality, as well as in vicious claims about "curative" or "corrective" lesphobic rape that allegedly teaches women that "proper" sex is only with a man.[21] Given this context where dismissal and threat of violence coexist, lesbian sex is even more under the radar than male homosexuality (see United Nations report A/HRC/19/41). The situation, then, is that lesphobia is real, including in African settings, even if lesbianism is widely and insultingly dismissed and even though it receives little or no mention in the Bible.

Up until now I have spoken in binary terms about male homosexuality and female homosexuality, pointing out that in the Bible lesbianism receives virtually no mention, whereas some clobber passages appear to refer pejoratively to something sexual between males (i.e., male-male rape, a penetrative sexual act). For me, projecting and imposing these clobber texts on same-sex loving, consenting adults is abhorrent – but listing the reasons and justifications for this position need not detain me here and are thoroughly discussed elsewhere.[22] But a sharp or consistent dichotomy of "male and female" (and nothing other), deserves and needs to be challenged.[23] With the Bible this has been done very effectively and persuasively, primarily through queer-critical approaches, such as are explored in, for instance, *The Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest et al., 2006)

[21] See note 12.

[22] The distinction between sex-acts and orientation and the many reasons for reading the clobber passages in more nuanced ways is discussed fully and well by Holben (1999). Van Klinken et al. demonstrate how the Bible can be read to incite homophobia, but also as a friend (van Klinken et al., 2021).

[23] This is particularly important because attacks from on high denying trans and non-binary identity remain commonplace. This is apparent not only in Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) (see note 7). At the time of writing, the UK Conservative Party conference had just finished (October 2023). At this gathering several members in high office, including the Prime Minister, issued discriminatory statements towards this already vulnerable community (Billson, 2023). This coincided with a UK Home Office hate crime report attesting to a general fall in hate crimes but rising numbers of attacks on trans and non-binary persons (Home Office, 2023).

and in *Bible Trouble* (Hornsby & Stone, 2011).[24] But gender fluidity and queerness that contest binaries are not only evident in the Bible, they are a feature of human ontology, as was confirmed also in our research with LGBTQ+ refugees in Kenya – as discussed next.[25] This, in part, also indicates that lesbian identity and lesphobia also sometimes blurs with gender fluidity. This is the case with Dhalie's story – if less so in Okparanta's novel.

3.1 Dhalie's story

The community in Nairobi called The Nature Network, in whose midst and with whom we conducted our research published in *Sacred Queer Stories* (van Klinken et al., 2021), consists of mostly Ugandan refugees, with the majority identifying as gay men, and some as trans women. Indeed, these categories, too, are fluid, with our interviewees often switching pronouns, or using multiple terms to describe their sexuality and their gender in a variety of ways – for instance, as gay, trans, non-binary, and/or gender-fluid.[26] A small minority of the LGBTQ+ community I met identified as lesbian or as trans men. Of our twelve life story interviews, only one (Dhalie) identified as a trans man and as gender-fluid (with pronouns they/them) – but, in the terms of the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) they would be designated "female" and their sexual attraction to or activity with

[24] Conservative voices continue to deny the presence (let alone any positive mention) of gender fluidity in the Bible, insisting instead on the claim that the Bible plainly advocates gender binaries and complementarianism. Gender fluidity (sometimes called "gender confusion") is maligned as unbiblical by such advocates. For a full discussion with a focus on refuting the agenda of both the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and the Family Research Council, see Afzal & Stiebert (Afzal & Stiebert, 2024, pp. 12–35).

[25] Our project combining life stories and Bible stories to create new stories together with LGBTQ+ refugees in Kenya is now part of a growing queer African archive. To mention just a few, profiling lesbian stories (my emphasis in this article), see Azuah (2016), Mohammed, Nagarajan and Aliyu (2018) and Xaba and Biruk (2016). For a fuller discussion and more examples, see van Klinken et al. (van Klinken et al., 2021, pp. 8–12).

[26] There was only occasional reference to terminology pertaining to LGBTQ+ matters in any African language, such as the Luganda term *kuchu* (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 1, n.2).

anyone else designated female, consequently, as lesbian, and hence, illegal in their native Uganda.[27]

Dhalie recounts in their interview (van Klinken et al., 2021, pp. 72–80) how growing up they were a girl. Now, they say, "I know I'm a man but the hormone therapies are not accessible here and expensive" (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 79). At around age 16, Dhalie met a girl at school; the two wrote each other letters, shared lunch, and then a bed. Dhalie explains that at the time the two were expelled, they had no real understanding about their own sexuality or even done anything sexual. Nonetheless, on being discovered sharing a bed, Dhalie was beaten, sent before a disciplinary committee, and shamed, both by their school and their parents. Later, Dhalie suffered so-called "conversion therapies".[28] Once in Kenya, seeking asylum, even at the Refugee Affairs Secretariat, where they might have expected sensitive and inclusive treatment, they were asked inappropriate questions, like, "Why do you love girls? Why don't you want to get married? Why don't you want to have kids? [...] Why don't you just stop?" (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 76) – indicating profound ignorance about both lesbianism and about trans identity.

Dhalie's story, with its details of being discovered with a girl and then being shamed and rebuked, of "conversion therapies" experienced as frightening and self-denying, of having religious texts weaponized against them, and of pressure to get married and have children, all resonate with Okparanta's novel (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 124–125, 129), which I will turn

[27] See note 7. The Anti-Homosexuality Act of Uganda (2023) makes mention of intersex persons but does not acknowledge their existence, let alone rights, of trans persons.

[28] The name is dangerously misleading. There is nothing therapeutic about such practices and it is not possible to reprogramme or convert someone's sexual orientation. Claims to the contrary, including by religious figures (e.g., Rapoport, 2004, pp. 102, 107), must be recognized as dangerous, and rejected. The documentary Pray Away (Stolakis, 2021) discusses the dangers and reasons for rejection fully. In Okparanta's novel, too, following Ijeoma's mother's efforts to convert her daughter through systematic study of the Bible, when they reach the end of the Old Testament, Ijeoma, truthfully says, "Yes, I still think of her [Amina] in that way" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 85). This leads to Ijeoma's mother redoubling her forcefulness (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 86–89). All this achieves is for Ijeoma to lie to her mother the next time she is asked (Okparanta, 2017, p. 92). The harm of the attempts at conversion, however, lingers, for all their ultimate ineffectiveness (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 192, 195).

to next. I argue that the novel, while a work of fiction, like Dhalie's story, reflects and illuminates aspects of lesbian life and love in an African setting. It does so, moreover, in a way that also reflects and illuminates the significant role and influence of the Bible in such a setting.[29] I am justifying my extensive focus on a novel, over empirical data for two reasons. First, as already established, such data, while growing, is still scarce and second, I agree with African literary critics (e.g., Ojaide, 1992; Gyasi, 1999) that African fiction is not art for art's sake but is characterised by its reflection and refraction of actualities. Okparanta's novel both gives an evocative and believable voice to Nigeria's marginalized lesbian citizens and engages extensively with the Bible. Let me turn to the novel next.

3.2 *Under the Udala Trees*

Chinelo Okparanta's novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) tells a story of both violence and tenderness, lesbian eroticism and lesphobia. It is narrated by Ijeoma, beginning in her early girlhood at the height of the Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran war (1967–1970). The story follows Ijeoma through these violent early years, that claim the life of her gentle, newspaper-reading father, and bring trauma to her mother. Ijeoma is separated from her mother and goes to work for a childless couple who can pay for her education. While with them, Ijeoma becomes attached to another uprooted, lonely child, Amina, whom she first meets under an udala tree. While Ijeoma is Igbo and Christian, Amina is Hausa and Muslim. When the teacher who has given both girls a home and a prospect of a future discovers them in flagrante, he is shocked and insists that Ijeoma return to her mother, while Amina remains with him. Ijeoma's mother, battling her own guilt and trauma, is horrified at and shamed by her daughter and becomes determined to root out what she considers

[29] On the Bible as an African text, see van Klinken et al. (van Klinken et al., 2012, 6–8). Dhalie's life story was the book's sole example by a Muslim. Dhalie, too, however, approached the Bible as a sacred text with sacred authority, through which God's voice could be discerned. Dhalie was a full and active participant in the reclaiming of one of the Bible stories (Daniel in the Lions' Den) (van Klinken et al., 2021, pp. 4, 152–177).

Ijeoma's sinful deviance with prayer and Bible study (a kind of home-grown attempt at "conversion therapy").[30] Eventually, Amina marries and fades from Ijeoma's life, and Ijeoma falls in love with another woman, Ndidi. Threats of multiple kinds put their relationship under pressure and Ijeoma, encouraged by her mother, marries Chibundu, who has loved her since their childhood. The marriage cannot fulfil either Ijeoma, or Chibundu. They have one child, Chidinma, who for a time fulfils Ijeoma and brings her closer to her mother. But it is when Ijeoma sees her own unhappiness reflected in her daughter, and then learns of Ndidi's persistent love for her, that she leaves Chibundu, goes to her mother, and returns to Ndidi. The story ends with a peace of sorts, albeit one that has to keep its head down, because the love between the women, Ijeoma and Ndidi, cannot ever be open, or public.

The novel is beautifully told, incorporating seemingly floating snippets of recollection, of dreams, or stories, without explaining their inclusion. It is a novel that captures moods and feelings; it tells of people and relationships in a way that makes us apprehend rather than fully understand them. No character is "flat", or easily made sense of in their entirety – be it the intelligent, affectionate father who submits to dying in a military attack, rather than abiding with his wife and daughter; be it the mother who is both perceptive but also represses and resists what she sees and intuits; or be it the distant grammar school teacher who feels shock but also compassion for Ijeoma and Amina and who fulfils his duty to them both.

The Bible plays a prominent role in the novel. At the novel's beginning, there is a biblical quotation (Hebrews 11:1); at the conclusion there are two short notes by the author. The first states that on 7 January 2014 Nigeria's president Goodluck Jonathan signed into law a bill criminalizing same-sex relationships, which are punishable with up to fourteen years imprisonment. Okparanta adds, "This novel attempts to give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history." The second note points out that in a 2012 Win-Gallup

[30] Ijeoma's mother is organised and systematic in her attempt to "cure" her daughter of lesbian orientation. She has, for instance, written copious notes "to serve as her guide" and for Ijeoma's "benefit" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 77).

International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism, Nigeria ranked second only to Ghana for religiosity.

Homophobic uses of the Bible are certainly not obscured in *Under the Udala Trees* (e.g., Okparanta, 2017, pp. 68, 85–92;[31] 125, 318),[32] nor is the impact of these minimized. At one point, for instance, Ijeoma, recalling her mother's attempts to exorcise her orientation through ongoing Bible study, describes how this sets in motion a "witch-hunt against [her]self" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 196). During her unhappy marriage, too, she finds her mind constantly going back to the Bible, "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" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 229). Okparanta also, however, shows that the Bible belongs not only to Christians and other religious homophobes but also to LGBTQ+ persons who also find in its pages affirmation and inclusion.[33] This is particularly strong in the novel's epilogue where Hebrews 8 "fills [Ijeoma's]

[31] In these passages, Ijeoma's mother is conducting her version of "conversion therapy" through rigorous Bible study. To Ijeoma, her mother feels "more like another warden than my own mother" (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 70, cf. 197). Reading the story of Adam and Eve, her mother concludes with the rhetorical question, "The bottom line [...] is that if God wanted it to be otherwise [i.e. for women to be with women], would He not have included it that other way in the Bible?" This is the "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" argument, which reads the mythological account in ways both literalistic and prescriptive. Ijeoma is subjected to months of Bible study, and to a summary of clobber texts (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 90–92). Unsurprisingly, none of this changes her orientation; it only teaches her to lie about it (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 92, 150). The participants in our project also reported homophobic applications of the Bible (e.g. Keeya and Doreen, van Klinken et al., 2021, pp. 113–114, 225).

[32] The teacher who discovers Ijeoma and Amina sees and points to the Bible, crying out that their bond is an "abomination" and reviled also by the Qur'an (Okparanta, 2017, p. 125). Two lesbian students are stripped, beaten and have "666" (the number of the Beast in Revelation) shouted at them (Okparanta, 2017, p. 318). Chibundu, on the other hand, mitigates the force of religion and the Bible, claiming them to represent "basically a business, a very large corporation" with self-interest at their heart (Okparanta, 2017, p. 231). In this way, too, the novel shows nuance in its depiction of the setting and its people. The refugees in our story reported both homophobic uses of the Bible against them (see note 31 for examples) and ways of reading the Bible for vindication, affirmation, and solace (van Klinken et al., 2021, pp. 226–227).

[33] Again, there is a parallel with our Sacred Queer project, which centres the reality that the Bible is not only a tool for homophobia in African settings but also a tool for liberation (van Klinken et al., 2021, passim). Just as the refugees at The Nature

mind these days", with its distillation of 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" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 322).

3.3 The Bible in *Under the Udala Trees*: A Closer Look

As van Klinken and Chitando point out, the novel "sketches a religious culture of fervent worship, intense prayer and conservative biblical interpretation" (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021, p. 167).[34] Ijeoma makes frequent reference to church attendance but also to Christian co-existence with African traditional rites, such as those pertaining to ancestors (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 21–22), and African proverbs (Okparanta, 2017, p. 51). The Bible, moreover, is cited in Igbo (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 66–67). Indeed, the novel is saturated with references to Christianity, to tensions between Christians and Muslims (drawn along ethnic lines of Igbo and Hausa),[35]

Network reclaimed biblical stories (of Daniel in the lions' den and of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery) to speak to and defend them, so Ijeoma in the novel applies John 3:16 to include herself and her love for Amina in God's love (Okparanta, 2017, p. 159). There is a particularly subversive and striking example that links our Sacred Queer project with the novel. In our research, when the refugees at The Nature Network retold and reclaimed the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, they set their retelling in a club called Little Temple. On the one hand, this points to a detail in the biblical story, where Jesus "went back to the temple" (John 8:2) but on the other, it names an actual one-time club in Nairobi that was frequented by queer people (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 188). In Okparanta's novel, meanwhile, which also alludes to this gospel story in John 8 in an affirming way (Okparanta, 2017, p. 202), there is a lesbian club hidden under the disguise of a church purporting to be called "Friend in Jesus Church of God" (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 190–191). Both names, possibly, assert divine protection. As van Klinken and Chitando point out, "This name can be read as a subversive suggestion by the author that Jesus was a friend of same-sex loving folk" (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021, p. 168). In both Narobi and in the novel's setting, however, this protection is not enough, and homophobic attacks ensue. At the same time, for Ijeoma the "protection" of marriage to a man, Chibundu, also proves harmful (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 215, 220–221, 228).

[34] Van Klinken and Chitando devote a chapter to the novel (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021, pp. 165–180) with separate sections on the udala tree as tree of knowledge of good and evil, as well as on prayer, deliverance, and the Bible. Spirit children are said to gather above udala trees (Okparanta, 2017, p. 309), and udala trees come to Ijoema in her dream (Okparanta, 2017, p. 310).

[35] There is frequent mention of Igbo and Hausa divisions (e.g. Okparanta, 2017, pp. 76, 125, 153).

with visits to church, and with the Bible (my primary focus here). Early on, Ijeoma refers to her father's love for his radio-gramophone, which he cherished "the way things that matter to us are cherished: Bibles and old photos, water and air" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 5). When Ijeoma's mother leaves her in the care of the teacher and his wife, her parting gift to her daughter is her father's Bible (Okparanta, 2017, p. 51), to which Ijeoma later clings for comfort (Okparanta, 2017, p. 56). Later, too, when she is a mother and in an unhappy marriage, the Bible is stored with her essentials and brings her peace (Okparanta, 2017, p. 254). Everyday words – like "rest" and "restless" – immediately call the Bible to Ijeoma's mind (Okparanta, 2017, p. 144); the Bible even features in her dreams (Okparanta, 2017, p. 311). The Bible is central to sermons (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 11, 37), to school (Okparanta, 2017, p. 23), and to private prayer (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 35, 197). Oaths are sworn on the Bible (Okparanta, 2017, p. 60); and biblical stories are told to provide comfort and explain day-to-day mysteries, like nightmares (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 122–123, 155). Biblical imagery suffuses the novel – not only does the udala tree of the title allude to the tree of knowledge of good and evil in Genesis (van Klinken & Chitando, 2021, pp. 169–171), but Ijeoma's father, refusing to take shelter from an imminent military attack, is "like Lot's wife, a pillar of salt" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 9); bombs are contrasted with manna from heaven (Okparanta, 2017, p. 40); a boy child emerging from a pile of corpses at the height of the war is "like a resurrection" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 97); the frightening attack on the lesbian club is described by Ijeoma as "like the pillars of the Temple of Dagon, the walls of our pit crumbling all around us, and we, Samson-like in our decline, crumbling along with the walls" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 208).

The Bible moves to the centre of the novel after Ijeoma and Amina have been discovered and separated. Ijeoma returns to the home of her mother who is resolved to cleanse her daughter's soul, teach her penitence for sin (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 65–67), and rid her from the devil (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 72, 150). In the service of this aim, Ijeoma's mother leads an intensive study of the Bible. After pressing the point about Adam and Eve setting the template for heterosexual coupling,[36] the next biblical story she lingers

[36] For elaboration on this complementarian argument, see Afzal and Stiebert (Afzal & Stiebert, 2024, pp. 19–20).

on is the infamous clobber text of Genesis 19, narrating the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 73–74). Ijeoma's mother refers to the behaviour transpiring in the cities' destruction as "the very same behavior that you and that girl [...] engaged in" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 73). This is an illustration of extrapolating from the biblical text. The narrative, after all, has nothing to say about sexual attraction or activity between women; instead, a story of male violence and threat of male-male rape becomes a cautionary tale aimed at two girls with a consenting and affectionate bond. Ijeoma is quick to challenge her mother's interpretation that this brutal story is an invective against same-sex relationships. Instead, she points out that Lot is not a worthy man, given that he offers his virgin daughters to a violent mob, but that inhospitality to visitors may be the crux of the story. Reflecting conventional conservative readings of this story (which are aided and abetted by the derivation of the word "sodomy" from "Sodom"), Ijeoma's mother insists that "Everybody knows what lesson we should take from that story. Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 74). Ijeoma asks (reasonably enough), "It couldn't have been because they were selfish and inhospitable and violent?" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 74). Indeed, this kind of questioning is typical of what has been called a hermeneutics of suspicion: hence, Ijeoma is probing the text and resisting the notion of a single "obvious" meaning.[37]

Something similar happens when Ijeoma's mother pauses on the clobber verses from Leviticus (Okparanta, 2017, pp. 75–77). Ijeoma's mother explains that "abomination" refers to "something disgusting, disgraceful, a scandal" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 75). For her, the verses are clear and condemning of all same-sex sexual relations (not just the male-male sex-act alluded to here),[38] not least because they cannot transpire in reproduction.

[37] Such questioning of this very story is becoming more common, including in African settings (e.g. West, 2016). On a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of trust, see van Klinken and Stiebert (forthcoming).

[38] Most commentators propose that the verses refer to a penetrative sex-act (possibly penile anal penetration) and possibly intercrural sex also. Some argue that something more specific is at issue here, namely a male-male sex-act that is not only penetrative but incestuous (Lings, 2009). Much is left unclear in the terse and probably technical diction of the verses. It is disturbing that while the penetrator is designated a man, the penetrated one is designated only "a male", with no specification

Ijeoma, rather like her father who had taught her to probe the surface or literal meanings (Okparanta, 2017, p. 78), feels questions "like tiny bubbles in [her] head", including questions that ask whether all sex that does not transpire in reproduction is therefore "abomination". Ijeoma cannot accept this – just as she cannot accept that Judges 19 (the violent story of the rape, killing and dismemberment of the Levite's wife) is a story about the sinfulness of homosexuality (Okparanta, 2017, p. 80). The Bible study does not have the effect on Ijeoma that her mother desires. Instead of accepting a plain meaning, Ijeoma asks questions, wonders if many passages have allegorical rather than literalistic meaning and becomes frustrated that church teaches acceptance rather than an interrogation of the Bible (Okparanta, 2017, p. 81). As Ijeoma continues to raise questions and ponder, the Bible sometimes come to feel to her "almost negligible" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 82), as she feels the gulf between the meaning in her own heart and what her mother and the teacher who had felt such shock on discovering her with Amina felt (Okparanta, 2017, p. 82). Yet Ijeoma cannot reject the Bible, as much as it is turned against what is in her own heart during the relentless Bible studies led by her mother. Instead, she comes to think of the stories in the Bible as recording specific threads of events and specific histories, asking herself, "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?" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 83) She also asks if the story of Adam and Eve is instead about the importance of companionship, irrespective of gender.[39] This fills her with a "joy of discovery" – even if she knows she cannot share this with her mother (Okparanta, 2017, p.

as to either adult age, or agency, let alone consent. Given the death penalty is prescribed for both parties (Lev 20:13) this could condemn to death a raped boy-child. Such should certainly be condemned (as it is in the Homosexuality Act of Uganda, where it constitutes an occurrence of what is called 'aggravated homosexuality') but on the basis of brutality not on the basis of orientation per se. Abuse of a child should be criminalized irrespective of the gender of either the perpetrator or victim.

[39] In a flashback recounting Amina and Ijeoma's bond, the two speak of it as being marriage-like (Okparanta, 2017, p. 118) and Edenic. Ijeoma's words are that the relationship is, "Tingly and good and like everything is perfect in the world" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 119). Suitably, when the two are discovered and shamed, they feel "as Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden" (Okparanta, 2017, p. 125).

84).[40] Ultimately, then, Ijeoma succeeds in finding a way for the Bible to speak to and include and validate her – much as the refugees of The Nature Network found ways to read themselves into the Bible and have it affirm and embrace them (van Klinken et al, *passim*).

4. Conclusion

The Bible comprises a diverse library of texts, polyvocal texts translated into many languages that speak in their different voices to multifarious audiences in the far-flung places where they are read and heard. This paper aims to contribute to an area of study close to Joachim's heart: namely, the reading and interpretation of the Bible in African settings, with a special focus on topics of gender and sexuality.

I have focused particularly on the "L" of LGBTQ+, acknowledging that categories of gender can be blurry, as Dhalie describes. I have tried to emphasise the "L" because – whether in the Bible, or in contemporary discourses on homosexuality – "L" is often on the margins. The paper draws on both fieldwork with The Nature Network, a community of mostly Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugees in Nairobi, as published in *Sacred Queer Stories* (2021), and on the novel *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta, which seeks to give "a more powerful voice" to marginalized communities of Nigeria. Uganda and Nigeria are African countries where the Bible has considerable presence and influence. On the one hand, the Bible functions in both as a weapon of homophobia, including lesphobia, within a wider environment where the police,[41] media,[42] and churches, also play homophobic roles. But this is not all, because the Bible does not belong to homophobes alone.

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[40] Later, Ijeoma also resists that the story of Onan (Genesis 38:8–10) is really about condemnation of self-pleasuring (Okparanta, 2017, p. 194). She is not prepared to be told what the Bible means, when for her other meanings are clearly possible.

[41] The police is repeatedly identified as hostile to members of the LGBTQ+ community. In his life story, Kyle, for instance reports being tortured by police officers (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 55). Okparanta also describes obstructive treatment by police officers (Okparanta, 2017, p. 205).

[42] Both Raymond in their life story (van Klinken et al., 2021, p. 36–37) and Okparanta in her novel (Okparanta, 2017, p. 317) report on the damaging contribution of inflammatory homophobic press coverage.

Hence, taken together, the sources examined here, read alongside the Bible, illuminate also perspectives that are contributing to the growing mosaic of a queer African archive. Significantly, at the end of Okparanta's novel, Ijeoma sits with her Bible in her hands. She reflects that in the Bible "change is the point of it all" and she finds comfort that God is still speaking, including to her (Okparanta, 2017, p. 322). As much as a voice such as hers may often be drowned out by hatred against members of the LGBTQ+ community, we do well to hear it, and – more importantly – to listen.

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