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CONFRONTING THE NARRATIVE OF SILENCE: POST-MODERNISM AND IDENTITY
REINVENTION IN JUDE DIBIA'S *WALKING WITH SHADOWS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the conscious silence on homosexuality by writers and critics of African literature. The paper notes that, within the African context, the idea of sexuality has always been heterosexual and any other differing sexuality is seen as queer and non-normative. This accounts for the criminalization of homosexual relationship by some African States in their different laws. This is also why African writers and critics, over the years, consciously omit sexuality from the content of African literature. They rarely write about homosexuality as if it were not an aspect of African life and, where sexuality is ever mentioned, it is always given a favourable portraiture. It is against this backdrop that this paper is structured as a literary mutiny against the forces of hetero-patriarchy that has rendered homosexuals as individuals with fractured personality, overwhelmed with shame, guilt and dejection. Through an in-depth exploration of Jude Dibia's novel; *Walking with Shadows*, this paper does not only breaks out from the erstwhile culture of silence on homosexuality which characterized the African literature and also refutes, in strong terms, biased perceptions against people with strange sexuality. The paper concludes that it is time African writers and critics come out from the cocoon and begin to engage critically with homosexuality as a discourse.

Keywords: homosexuality, sexuality, mutiny, hetero-patriarchy, queer.

Introduction

Ezra Pound captures the essence of modernism with his famous dictum "Make it new" (4). Modernism therefore is the radical break from the past and the concurrent search for new forms of expression. In an era characterized by industrialization, rapid social change, advances in science and new ideas in psychology, philosophy and political theory, modernists felt a growing alienation incompatible with Victorian morality, optimism and convention, coupled with the disillusionment following world war 1, the breakout from the normative became almost inevitable. However, in the break of World War 11, as a reaction against the perceived failings of Modernism, Postmodernism arose to compete against modernism. It gained ascendancy over it in the

1960s and since then, Postmodernism has become a dominant, though not undisputed, force in art, literature, philosophy et cetera.

According to Michael Mckeating in his article "The Legacy of Postmodernism", Postmodernism is "the tipping point where all taboos are uprooted and all universal expectations are discarded" (2). For Adrienne Rich:

...postmodernism is a paradoxical recursive and problematic method of critique. It encourages transcendence through limitation, while simultaneously decentering the concept of absolute transcendence. To this end, it encourages the development of a heightened sense of self in relation to itself and the world around it. Postmodernism assumes ontology of fragmented being. Where modernism asserts the primacy of the subject in revealing universal truth, postmodernism challenges the authority of the subject and thus, universal truth based on it. Postmodernism aspires to reflect the critical knowledge as a process rather than a product. The truth therefore remains elusive, relative, partial and always incomplete (135).

Certainly, no study of Postmodernism's influence on human culture would be complete without an examination of how it has affected the views on human sexuality. The movement plunged the world into a universe of fragmentation with the Victorian principles abruptly rejected. New tenets reacting against some aspects of modernism emerged and consequently, traditional authority became false and corrupt, morality became subjected to personal opinion rather than societal opinions and sanctions, liberal ethics among others were embraced. These gave rise to the propagation of deviant sexual choices which dismantles the assertion of heterosexuality as the normative sexuality.

In poststructuralist and postmodernist structure, the idea is to reverse the binary structure so as to allow a discourse on the other. The structuralist creed therefore connotes that once a discourse is built, it automatically gives room for a counter discourse to be raised. With the workings of the postmodernism principles, grand narratives are dismantled to pave way for smaller narratives. The reason to hear from these smaller narratives is to have a balanced and more objective discourse. When the other is discoursed, a space is created for the differences to begin to emerge. Hence, this gives credence to the emergence of queer discourse.

Queer discourse (or criticism) is located in the gender discourse which in turn is located in the postmodernist discourse. The word "queer", as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of "odd," "peculiar, "out of the ordinary." Queer discourse concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are different from the normative behaviors and identities (i.e the binary opposites). Queerness has become a frontline issue in gender studies in recent times. Some societies, mostly western societies, have changed their laws to accommodate queerness in all its forms, but this acceptability exists side by side with homophobia and transphobia. There have been reported cases where these people have been ostracised, shamed, beaten and even killed. In such circumstances, identifying one's self as having a non-normative sexuality was difficult because of the inherent dangers. Therefore, it took great courage for people to start coming out in the 1990s. These were top celebrities who triggered series of agitations, rallies, public protests, demonstrations and many more which took years before lawmakers were persuaded to change the laws regarding the LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer) community and these laws was kicked a notch further with the legalisation of same sex marriages.

However, despite the accommodation of queer people by these western countries, most African countries have rigidly kicked against homosexuality. Homosexual acceptance is perhaps one of the most socially unwelcomed, touchy and politically thorny topics to broach in contemporary Africa. In 1995, the Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe stood out as the reference point for African homophobia when he proclaimed that "homosexuals are worse than pigs and dogs and deserve no rights whatsoever" (168). As cited by Philip in 1997, the Namibian President, Sam Nujoma, like his Zimbabwean counterpart, described homosexuality as gruesome inhuman perversion which should "be uprooted totally" from society (157). More recently, in 2009, a Malawian court sentenced a gay couple to 14 years jail time for what it considered lewd sexual behaviour (Guardian 2009, June 6). This ruling made sensational news in the Western media and elicited an outcry from human rights organisations. That same year anti-gay activists in Uganda tabled a bill before parliament proposing death

penalty for anyone convicted of homosexuality (BBC News 2009, September 8). In November 2011, a court in Cameroon slammed a five year jail sentence on three men convicted of homosexuality. Meanwhile in Ghana, one of Africa's most celebrated democracies, President John Mills stated that homosexuality was against Ghanaian values and he would "never initiate or support any attempt to legalize it" (BBC News, 2011, November 2). Most recently, Nigeria took its stance on the issue when in 2014, the Goodluck Jonathan led administration signed into law a bill criminalizing same-sex relationships and support of such relationships, making these offenses punishable by up to fourteen years in prison (Guardian 2014). In the northern Nigerian states precisely, the Sharia law dictates that the punishment is death by stoning.

Susan Cock as cited by Frida Lyonga, is of the opinion that the ferocious backlash against homosexuality that is characteristic of many African politicians and the strong homophobia within African populations is grounded in the "notion that homosexuality is 'unafican'(11). According to *African Stereotypes*, homosexuality is a disease/sickness; a possession by evil or demonic spirits; an occult practice; or simply a despicable influence from the 'morally decadent' West (51). Such anti-gay viewpoint have for a very long time been repeatedly espoused in African societies through Christian churches or Muslim doctrines, through strong political hate speech, customs and traditions and in day-to-day dialogue. In view of the foregoing, Chris Dunton submits that in Africa, non- normative sexuality is read or studied and criticised as not only "unchristian but also unAfrican"(4). Therefore, the rejection and criminalisation of homosexuality and the intense societal homophobia associated with it in the majority of African nations has forced most homosexuals in Africa to live closeted lives; hiding their sexuality from the society around them.

Within the African literary scene, the picture is not different. It is shocking that in Africa, there have been little or no studies on sexuality generally, nor on homosexuality specifically. The subject has been treated as a taboo, being met with complete silence or outright rebuff. Wills Ngyemi, the gender sociologist observes that "in most African societies, the subject of sexuality sparks angry reactions, when it sparks reaction at all" (22). Ngyemi also observes that "homosexuality is also considered 'a whiteman thing'-something most Africans only know exists in the white world somewhere across oceans, but which they do not, cannot, identify with them" (24). In other words, just like others discussed above, the idea of sexuality is generally considered foreign to Africa, supposedly having been introduced by the white man. This has led to the mystification of sexuality as something not to be discussed. The result of this is simple: African writers rarely write about sexuality, as though it were not an aspect of African life. In the same vein, African critics have not paid critical attention to the subject in their assessment of African literature, leading to what Joseph Duru and many others refer to as "conspiracy of silence" (22).

However, the silence of African writers and critics on the subject of sexuality is gradually beginning to become insecure, what with the events of recent times. Indeed, the outlawing of homosexuality in many African countries and the spate of violence that has provoked has caused a stir in the entire world. This has prompted writers to begin to write. In Nigeria for instance, writers like Jude Dibia, Chinelo Okparanta, Arinze Ifekandu, Chimamanda Adichie etc. have begun to raise serious questions about sexuality through their works and advocacy campaigns. The same is true about writers like the late K. Sello Duker from South Africa, Tendai Huchu of Zimbabwe, Biyavanga Wainaina of Kenya, among others. This is what compels Irene Omolala to posit that "the contemporary generation of African writers do not seem to share in the silence on those subjects which the earlier generation considered unspeakable. They seem to grow interested in those aspects of human life that the previous writers shed away from, for reasons best known to them" (182).

It is in this spirit that this research critiques Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* as one of the disruptive pathfinders in the crusade to confront this long silence on African sexuality. The study is also structured not only to advocate a reverse of the binary structure of heterosexuality as the normative sexual culture, but also to canvass for an accommodative social space for every individual regardless of his or her sexual identity.

Broaching the Silence in *Walking with Shadows*

Walking with Shadows (2005) is Dibia's debut in literary craftsmanship. From the blurb, the novel is said to be "the first Nigerian novel that has a gay man as its central character and that treats his experience with

great insight, inviting a positive response to his situation” (about the author). In this novel, Dibia breaks the long silence on the prevalence of homosexuality in the Nigerian society, contrary to the popular-held opinion that the sexual preference is immoral and foreign. Alfred Whitehead’s quote in one of the preliminary pages in this novel bares it all: “What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like and immorality is what they dislike (ii). This catchy quote foregrounds the universe where the novel is set. The quote is also stylistically motivated and perhaps aims at emphasising the position of the author that morality is relative and dependent on the opinion of the “majority”. Hence, the acceptability of homosexuality basically lies in the hands of this majority who, through their whims and caprices, censor what they term “normative behavior” or “grand sexuality” in the process silencing the voices of the “deviant”, “odd”, “queer” or “non-normative” sexuality. The quote further give credence to Sokari’s assertion that “queer is the new colonised”(24).

The prologue of the novel which captures Ebele’s baptism and need for rebirth opens to the reader the world of the little Ebele which literally means “sympathy” and connotes weakness (Amonyeze:6). He is a young boy who battles with his sexual identity since childhood. For instance, on his way to this baptism, he is captured by the sight of one of the male vendors, his fondness of Obinna, his brother’s friend among others is the reason why “his ten years old mind was in a hurry to rid itself of the pathetic person it had always known as Ebele”(15). Hence, for him, the baptism is going to cause Ebele-the queer boy to die spiritually and give room for Adrian, the ideal man with a lifestyle in conformity to societal approval, to be born. Showing a mastery of linear plot and characterisation, Dibia creates Ebele as Adrian’s alter ego to represent all that society would have queers to be: weak, pathetic and in dire need of salvation. The prologue therefore showcases the plight of Ebele torn in between two identities and his resolve to embrace the personality of Adrian which is considered normative in the hetero-patriarchal Nigerian society.

Thus, *Walking with Shadows* is a pathetic story of Adrian, a young Nigerian head of risk business unit of a telecom firm, who battles to be accepted by his society despite his sexual identity. Largely set in Lagos, the novel reveals how Adrian’s previously perfect marital life with Ada comes crashing after Tayo Onasanya, a vindictive ex-colleague discloses information about his gay past to his family. Once Adrian’s sexual orientation becomes exposed to his family and general public, the author showcases with deep sympathy the crisis tearing Adrian’s family apart on account of his sexuality. Ada, his wife receives the news with great shock and retorts angrily: “you knew this and still deceived me and still married me and still had the guts to make love to me and put your thing in me” (23).

For Sokari, the infelicitous repetition of “still” signals her shock, anger and bewilderment (1). Ada’s shock and disdain is not far-fetched from the homophobic nature of Nigerians who see homosexuals as dirty, perverts and sex maniacs which is why she immediately opts for a HIV/AIDS test. For Ada, “being gay was certainly not in African culture. The whole idea was so foreign, so unnatural” (35). Not even Adrian’s pacification could suppress her anger and pain: “Being gay was my past and when I met you, all that didn’t matter since it wasn’t me anymore and I loved you. Honey, I never wanted you to find out about that part of my life” (23). Ada dismantles Adrian’s defense and revokes his ability to love as she utterly rejects him and sends him away. She exclaims: “Stop talking about love...I just need you to stay away from me and Ego...there is nothing for us to say to each other right now” (25). With this, Adrian leaves the house dejected and heartbroken unsure of where to turn to for support. In his indecisions, he finds himself back in the fold of his erstwhile gay friends who give him the sense of belonging he craves. The foot mat in front of Abdul and Femi’s apartment with the inscription “Welcome Home” offers calming reassurance to Adrian after Ada throws him out. His quick retreat to Abdul’s flat and his nostalgic return to Champaone, the gay bar, hints where his heart truly is. Thus, Abdul’s apartment becomes a safe haven for Adrian to negotiate his shaky identity. Amonyeze asserts that “the way the novel orders aspects of Adrian’s experiences in a cause and effect manner and creates an atmosphere of persecution buys into the fear of queer criticism” (14). Through this, Dibia showcases that the LGBTQ community which is constantly condemned by all and sundry is capable of showing deep love and providing one another with the support denied its members by the homophobic society.

Dibia explores Adrian's childhood for clues about his non-normative sexual desire. Even as a child, Adrian had known that he was gay, he had always known that he was different from his brothers. His experience with Ekene in the bathroom confirms this as: "he felt that his closeness to Ekene was not entirely platonic. He had no name for it then...but as he grew up experiencing this feeling for other boys and then men, he knew the words: homosexual, gay!" (24). Being the second of three boys, Adrian who was always ill and extremely shy knew early enough that he was not like Chiedu who was his mother's favourite or Chika who was his father's champion. Thus, he grew up a needy, attention-deprived child who would sneak behind his father while the father combs his hair after a shower for the tiny droplets of water to fall on him. For Adrian, these droplets were "showers of love", and this way he could be touched by his father because this was the closest he ever felt to his father. This fuels the queerness in Adrian's behavior. Adrian's fondness of Obinna, one of Chiedu's friends at school is queered. According to the narrator, "whenever Obinna was around, Adrian's eye lit up and he felt his heart flutter. When Obinna smiled at anything Adrian said, he was overjoyed for the rest of the day for being noticed (48-49).

Also, in movie choices, it is strange that Adrian's favourite; romantic comedy, was one with a hilarious gay character. Chiedu and his friends disrupt the movie with a gay character who the toddler obviously empathizes with and castigates the movie as "fagotty". Chiedu's non-challant use of such foul language at an early age opens Adrian's childish eye to the heteronormative experience of ordering and the likelihood of his abnormality. Also, his favourite game happens not to be the violent or "manly" kind which his brothers force him to play in their parent's absence from the house but rather the feminine game "ringa ringa poker". In view of this, Eugene Yakubu, asserts that "these are the psychological factors proffered by Dibia himself in the narrative that might have all contributed in Adrian's sexual identity" (5).

Furthermore, the reaction of Adrian's relatives and the society at large to his sexual identity illuminates the prevalence of homophobia in Nigeria. Adrian's brothers, Chiedu and Chika, like Ada, find it hard to recover from the shock. Chiedu in a state of confusion asks Adrian: "Why didn't you just keep this whole issue to yourself? No one had to know. We all could have just continued the way we were" (53). They would rather have Adrian live in denial in order not to stir up controversies in the family or society than come out of the closet and experience inner peace. Adrian feels elated that his "secret" is out in the open as he no longer feels the need to keep languishing in hurt and denial. Abdul sums up the plight of the gay man in the society thus:

Everyday in a gay man's life, he is constantly hurt by the people he loves most. His family, his friends, and even society. We have to live with rejection everyday and that hurts. We have to grin and bear it constantly so that other people are comfortable at our expense (33).

In the opinion of Abdul, the society would rather have that queer sexual choices or preferences are kept silent in a bid to emphasize the pretense that they do not exist and that the only form of sexuality prevalent in the Nigerian society is heterosexuality. For queer theorists like Chris Dunton, Ifeyinwa Okolo, Chinenye Amoyeze among others, this is the height of hetero-patriarchy. For Lopang, "the oppression and subjugation of the queer nation is the reason why earlier African novelists failed to adequately represent queerness in their works of art because for them, the need to project a worthy masculine picture to counter the stereotype of the African set by the westerners overrode the need to pay attention to such "unimportant things"(81).

The reactions of Adrian's family to his sexual identity buttress the fact that even the family unit is not left out of the homophobia as they all reject him as soon as the news breaks out. This reaction is typical in Nigeria today as families have overtime taken to social media, newspapers etc. to openly reject their children's queer lifestyle. A recent example is Khadija Omolara whose father took to the Vanguard newspaper to announce his disapproval of her lesbian lifestyle and openly disown her. However, there are cases of more liberal and supportive families who are tolerant of the emerging postmodernity. For instance, it is after much deliberations that Chika and Ada then decide to accept Adrian and give him their support with Ada resolving to train Ego, their daughter, to be more liberal and accommodative of the LGBTQ nation more than she ever was. Dibia utilizes this part of the plot to advocate for a more liberal approach to queerness in the Nigerian society. This has proven to be a welcome approach as only few days ago, showbiz personality Charles Oputa popularly known as "Charlie

boy” took to his Instagram handle to express his support for his lesbian daughter Dewey Oputa whose lesbian status has paved way for her cyber bullying and backlash from religious bodies.

Dibia reechoes the fact that tolerance and support by the family unit especially is very paramount to the LGBTQ nation who at this juncture is quite vulnerable and in dire need of love and affection. Thus in this narrative, when Chika tells the wincing Adrian “I love you Bro”(160) after his torture in the hands of Pastor Matthew, Adrian is suffused with emotion and delightfully hugs Chika. Amonyeze asserts that Chika is the “author’s fantasy of Nigeria as initially hostile, mocking, unsympathetic but finally transforming to empathise and accept the individual for who he is” (14). Dibia also presents the character of Rotimi as one of the novel’s voices of reason through which he buttresses his point that right thinking people should always stand with the oppressed minorities.

In addition, Dibia satirizes the attitude of the religious bodies like the church, which has established itself as a core homophobic structure in Nigeria. Karl Marx in his *The Communist Manifesto* showcases how religion which he regards as the “opium of the masses” has overtime been deployed as an avenue for oppression and manipulation. Adrian’s baptism and wish for rebirth at the beginning of the novel launches a broadside at the absurd belief that religion can correct sexual orientation. In Nigeria, the notion is that everything is fixable through religion and spirituality. Hence, it is not uncommon to hear people proffer churches as solutions to typhoid, malaria, poverty, and of course homosexuality which is termed “demonic”. Adrian’s flogging by Pastor Matthew reveals the dynamics of homophobic violence perpetrated by the religious bodies which people naturally turn to for love and support. In the opinion of Ogede Ode, “the religious correction reflects the possibilities offered by satire as a vehicle for socio-political and cultural commentary within the institution of the novel” (71). Thus, rather than being an agent of support for the debilitated and displaced homosexual, religion becomes an agency which metes out judgment to him.

Through the conversation among the women in Carol Obosi’s house, reality dawns on Ada that homosexuality is seriously entrenched in the Nigerian society but homosexuals have chosen to live a “closeted” lives to avoid the harsh stings of stigmatization of the homophobic Nigerian society. Ada comes in contact with characters such as Carol, Temi, Hadjiya etc who all admit to having gay husbands who practice their sexuality in secret but present a picture of heterosexual men to the world. Again, Dibia propagates the argument of queer critics who assert that queerness transcends the sexual act itself to include attitudes, bondings, closeness and even thoughts. Hence, for the author, sexuality is biological and an individual could be homosexual by orientation but still indulge in heterosexual relationships. This is possible through heteronormativity which Gaudio describes thus:

Heteronormativity is not just a matter of acting or feigning one’s desire for intimacy with someone of the opposite sex. Rather, it involves concluding one’s self as heterosexual citizen, in accordance with prevailing social norms. And in Nigeria, as elsewhere, heterosexual citizenship is a rather complicated, difficult affair (62).

Homosexuals therefore are forced by societal norms to settle down with the opposite sex whereas their hearts yearns deeply for something different. This therefore explains Adrian’s disinterest in sexual activities with his wife, how he is able to stay for six years without seeking male relationships and how he is able to resist the advances of Yahaya and Rotimi respectively. A confused Rotimi who claims to be heterosexual recounts his experience with Ella, (a suspected gay back in secondary school, who was always withdrawn and sober), his sexual experience with Debo his male friend and his attempt to initiate an affair with Adrian perhaps to show an affinity with the latter. He ponders that although “he was not gay yet he would have kissed another man. He would have kissed Adrian” (153). Heteronormativity causes the queer individual to live in denial, embrace heterosexual relationships but all the while feeling incomplete. Even the young ones exhibit tendencies of being queer. For instance, Nkechi’s little son, Kamdi is also perceived as queered. Like Adrian when he was little, Kamdi seems to prefer female toys, games and acts like a girl. This of course terrifies Nkechi who immediately tries every measure to make sure he does not turn out to be gay. These characterizations are Dibia’s tools for

showcasing the magnitude of homosexuality which has taken over the country, continent and the world in general.

Also, Dibia highlights the extent of the homophobic attitude of Nigerians to the LGBTQ nation. Mr John amidst his enlightenment and qualifications treats Adrian with contempt when he discovers Adrian is gay. As the narrator describes:

Though John acted as pleasantly as always, Adrian could discover an uneasiness in his normally cool countenance. He offered Adrian a seat but quickly withdrew his hand after a brief handshake. It was as if John was afraid that by touching him, he would be infected (69).

Others at the office as well do not hide their resentment of the one-time heroic colleague who was the toast of all. They murmur greetings at him, avoid eye contact and treat him with disdain. Even the security officers who used to be at his beck and call suddenly stop washing his car or hanging around to receive wads of naira notes which he frequently doles out to them.

Dibia also identifies gossip as a tool of social sanction on not only Adrian at his work place but also Ada who feels its harsh stings at the wedding reception. It is the society's way of passing judgment on the queer individual and family who would then become the topic of the day. In the grand scheme of things, Dibia projects a country which would be more liberal and accommodating of the emerging forms of sexualities featured in the postmodern world. For instance, Ada's promise to train her daughter to be tolerant and liberal to the LGBTQ nation is a typical echo of the author's wish for Nigeria to be totally purged of homophobia.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that Jude Dibia through his work has lent out his voice to queer activism. He has unpretentiously, skillfully crafted the narrative to showcase the plight of the oppressed gay and lesbian in the Nigerian society. His commendable dexterity in setting off the queer discourse in the Nigerian literary scene may as well be one of the reasons why queer activism is fast becoming a trend in Nigeria. Dibia therefore breaks out of the erstwhile culture of silence which surrounds the discourse of homosexuality in Nigerian literature before now.

Following the events of the narrative, Ifeyinwa Okolo succinctly puts it thus: "Dibia aims to clearly acknowledge that homosexuality exists in Nigeria, to assign normalcy to gay people, to highlight the hostility of the Nigerian society for gay people and finally, to use his writing as a tool of advocacy for tolerance" (100-103). Through his activism, the author has become agents of change in the homophobic and hetero-patriarchal Nigerian society. His has also become the mouth piece of the LGBTQ people and thus, conscientize the masses on the need for equal and fair treatment of homosexuals in the society.

This paper candidly concludes that every human deserves to be treated with love and respect, irrespective of their gender, class, race or sexuality. This is when equilibrium can be achieved.

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