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Alternative Sexualities in Ogochukwu Promise's *In the Middle of the Night*: Norm or Transgression

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ABSTRACT: Homosexuality has been one of the issues that have dominated world politics in the 21st century. In recent times, more technologically advanced countries such as Britain and the United States of America have threatened to discontinue aid to some African countries, notably Ghana and Guinea for not legalizing same sex marriage. The African countries' response to this threat is hinged on the fact that homosexuality is a concept alien to African culture. This paper examines the presentation of homosexuality in Ogochukwu Promise's *In the Middle of the Night*. It seeks to ascertain whether it is perceived of as a virtue or a vice in the novel. Relying on the metaphoric implications behind the description of certain acts as being performed only in the middle of the night, the paper concludes that Promise's treatment of homosexuality in the novel is in conformity with the dictates of the Nigerian culture which consider it debauchery.

Introduction

By the end of the 21st century, terrorism, climate change and other environmental concerns, economic meltdown, hunger, poverty, disease and homosexuality among other such issues would have been recorded as having occupied a central position in world politics. Homosexuality would be chronicled as being one of the weapons of intimidation used by the more technologically advanced countries on the less industrialized nations of the world. Indeed, African nations are being told to legalise same-sex marriage – a consequence of homosexuality- or risk the forfeiture of the much-needed aid to the countries of that continent by Euro-American nations. For instance, Britain and the United States of America threatened to cut aid to Ghana and Nigeria if these West-African countries refuse to legalise same-sex marriage. Not only the two countries concerned, but other African countries as well, rejected the proposal of sanctioning such a tradition of an alternative sexual practice different from the man/ woman union.

While Ghana simply said it would readily give up the aid, Nigeria reaffirmed the criminality of such a union by its Seventh National Assembly (2011-2015) when it reiterated the independence of the country, and indeed of all countries, to make laws for themselves. The Nigerian Senate also passed a bill recommending that anyone who engages in homosexuality is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years. In addition, it recommends the penalization of any organization which provides services to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual citizens. The House of Representatives is expected to vote on the bill. Earlier in 2006, the fifth National Assembly had criminalized homosexuality and same sex marriage by proposing a 5 year imprisonment for persons caught engaging in the act. Other countries such as Gambia and Uganda joined in the fray. The Gambian President said his people would rather starve, or as he metaphorically captured it, 'eat sand' than accede to such a demand. In Uganda, where homosexuality is

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illegal, a play on gay rights was banned from being staged (e.tvA News). All these African countries hinged their negative responses to authorizing same-sex marriage on the fact that homosexuality is an a taboo in their various cultures. However, South Africa offers a different story as it banned discrimination against homosexuality in its 1999 Constitution.

Alternative sexuality is not a popular thematic focus of imaginative African literature. It remains to be seen whether the fuss created by the pressure put on African countries to legalise same-sex marriage in recent times will change this. As far as Tejumola and Quayson, who are the editors of the comprehensive *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, a collection of essays by critics on diverse issues, are concerned, "queer criticism is yet to take hold in African literary criticism" (725). Following Dunton's conclusion in his article in the book, Tejumola and Quayson attribute this partly to the monothematic nature of queer representation in African literary works. They add that this feature of African literary works is a reflection of the African perception of homosexuality as an alien concept in the African culture. It must be quickly pointed out here that what Dunton, Tejumola and Quayson mean here is that African literary writers in their works believe that homosexuality as a sexual choice was imported from other civilizations, that is, that homosexuality was not in existence in Africa prior to the coming of the Arabs and the Western world. It is however our contention in this paper that this treatment of homosexuality by most African writers is rather a reflection of the fact that homosexuality is considered an anathema to the African culture and not because it is alien to Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Society informs literature; this does not, however, imply that literature does not have some autonomy. As Vasquez says, "Art is an autonomous sphere, but its autonomy exists only by, in and through its social conditioning" (98). Dunton's article "Wheying be dat?": The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature" examines the presentation of homosexuality in some African writings. The article is quite comprehensive in its coverage of African writings where homosexuality is presented. Some of these works include Maddy's *No Past, No Present, No Future* (1973) and *Big Berrin* (1984); Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977); Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1972) and *Season of Anomy* (1973); Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971); and Bâ's *Scarlet Song* (1985). In these novels, he asserts that "...the subject of homosexuality becomes liberated, in the special sense that whether or not it is treated sympathetically, it is granted a greater capacity to disturb, to call questions, than in texts where it merely forms part of the data of a social typology." (729)

One of Dunton's conclusions in his paper is of significance to our study. According to Dunton, "the great majority of texts in which the subject occurs stigmatise homosexual practice as a profoundly un-African activity." (728) The examples he cites from African texts however, prove more the fact that homosexuality is unaccepted than that the practice is un-African and thus alien to African culture. He cites texts like J. P. Clark's *The Raft* (127) and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (65) where homosexuality is identified as one of the aspects of exploitation by the Western and Arab colonization process. Whether homosexuality was practised in Africa before the Arab and European colonization is not the focus of this paper. What is a fact is that it is frowned at, abhorred and perceived as an abomination in most African societies. It is because homosexuality is

abhorred that it becomes a tool that African writers use to accentuate the exploitation suffered in the hands of the East and the West during colonisation. Thus it would not be correct in concluding that this is why it is presented as an alien concept, imported into the continent alongside other vices.

However, we must point out what we consider a misconception of "traditional society" by Dunton (728). What he cites as traditional societies in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (120-8) and Bâ's *Scarlet Song* (70) are periods when Islam (Arab colonisation) and French colonization were already entrenched in the two societies of the novels. Therefore what Dunton struggles to do in his paper is to hinge the fact of the existence of homosexuality in African culture on the pointlessness of stigmatizing the practice. In any case, the fact is that, the existence of a practice in a culture does not confer or imply acceptability of that practice.

Our interpretation of the grandmother's speech in Maddy's play *Big Berrin*, where she says "Homosexuality? Wheyting be dat?" (16) differs from that offered by Dunton. To us, the grandmother is not unaware of the existence of the practice as Dunton claims. Rather, her speech is a dismissive statement that indicates that she does not perceive of homosexuality as an acceptable form of sexuality. It is therefore because of the unacceptability of the practice that Soyinka in *Season of Anomy* considers it as one of the reflections of a political system that is corrupt (120-8) while Bâ in *Scarlet Song* implies that a mother would not wish that her son were homosexual (70).

Desai says his article titled 'Out in Africa' is an attempt "to join hands with those African(ist)s who are interested in opening up a space for considerations of African sexual practices in all their fluid forms." (737). The ultimate aim of Desai's paper is to provide an alternative reading of Head's *Maru* as a homosexual romance. As far as Desai is concerned, the conclusion reached by critics like Dunton that African writers treat homosexuality monothematically is as a result of the adoption of a critical methodology that is inadequate:

If, as reader-response theorists would have us believe, texts are as much the product of the interpretive practices of readers as they are the products of authorial intentions, then could the supposedly monothematic treatment be a product not of authorial agency but rather of the critic's interpretive limitations. (737)

Desai, therefore, seeks a realignment of the rules of criticism in order "to open up different conditions of possibilities" or else, "certain kinds of claims remain unthought, or if at all thought, remain unintelligible and unallowable within the dominant discourse" (739).

Desai begins by offering alternative readings of Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*. He insists that Joe Golder, the homosexual African American professor of African history in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, is presented by the author as a sympathetic character and (in a footnote later in the paper) that the relationship between Raymond Kassoumi and Lambert in Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, unlike the other relationships in the novel, is presented as loving and tender. He then questions why critics would rather read them otherwise. Desai cites the development or otherwise of "this newly emergent discursive field" (740) in the relationship among anti-colonial politics, gay-lesbian liberation and feminism and thus also questions the assertion made by Amadiume in her *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (7) that the phenomenon of women marriages among the Nnobi was not an

indication of the practice and indeed acceptance of homosexuality in that period. Desia attributes the 'unnatural' connection between Amadiume's feminist tendencies and homophobia to Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (156) which he considers as responsible for the belief that homosexuality is alien to Africa.

Desia's understanding of Fanon's position makes him arrive at a conclusion stated earlier in the paper that:

...an antihomophobic politics finds itself unable to open up gay-affirmative spaces without running the risk of being culturally insensitive. And yet, if no "culture" is so monolithic, so homogenous, as to be fully recuperable within a single sexual, aesthetic, economic, moral or epistemic order, if "culture," that is, always exceeds the limits it seeks to set out for itself, then what divides the "culturally sensitive" from the "culturally insensitive?" Could sensitivity to the needs and desire of *some* subjects mean risking insensitivity to the needs and desires of others? If so, to which subjects and voices must such a politics pay heed? (736-737)

Consequently, not only homosexuality but all manners of sexual alternatives will then become permissive.

Our rejection of Desia's position is hinged on the following reasons as discussed below. First, his reading of Soyinka's presentation of the character Joe Golder in *The Interpreters* as sympathetic is not consistent with his (Desia's) own admission that Joe Golder "comes to Africa hoping to erase at least one if not both of these sources of difference (his colour and sexuality). He fails" (739). One wonders how a character who fails in the two aspirations of integrating into a new society can be read as having been presented as sympathetic. Second, it is doubtful how his reading of Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, which is the only other example provided by Desia, can serve as an implication of the need for a "space-clearing project" brought about by what in Desia's own words are "the simultaneous growth of gay and lesbian political activism in Africa, and the emergence of gay and lesbian studies as legitimate foci for scholarly research." (740)

This second point takes us naturally to the third. Desia's article was first published in 1997. Yet fifteen years later, many African countries have refused to yield to pressure from foreign nations to legalise same sex marriage. This means that Desia's 1997 conclusion of a growing gay and lesbian political activism in Africa was hasty as the pressure was not even from any organizations internal to these African nations. Again, Desia's wish that in the construction of new nations or cultures, all the various positions and experiences of all individuals must be considered and taken, is more like a recipe for chaos, confusion and disorderliness in society. One then wonders what becomes of the role of society in fashioning for itself laws, customs and traditions it finds suitable for the generality of the people and how it sets about these tasks. Desia's position advocacy for individualism negates the African concept of the individual whose interests are subordinated to those of the group. Although Amuta speaks from a Marxist perspective, his declaration on the relationship between criticism and the society points to another angle:

As a vital component of the literary enterprise, the interpretations of the literary products of a given society can only command validity if they are rooted in theoretical paradigms that either organically derive from or are most directly relevant to the objective conditions of life in the society in question. (6)

Nfah-Abbenyi's 'Towards a Lesbian Continuum? Or Reclaiming the Erotic' recalls the odium with which lesbianism is held in the African culture in her interpretation of Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appellaras Tanga* and *Soleil*. In this article, Nfah-Abbenyi affirms that Beyala in the two works critiques institutionalised heterosexuality and patriarchal ideologies. However, the critic cites the contrary positions of other critics concerning lesbianism in Beyala's works. She quotes Tagne's observation that "Ateba's homosexual yearnings... will raise an outcry from a number of African countries" and Bjornson's argument that "Beyala's lesbian approach to the reality of contemporary Cameroon is unusual within the context of the country's literate culture" (749). Furthermore, in one of the notes, the critic says:

Calixthe Beyala has been known to adamantly reject the word "lesbian used in reference to her work by critics on the grounds that this word does not exist in African languages...It seems to me that Beyala wants to distance the limited sexual meanings by which "lesbianism" is often defined for possible cultural, political, or other personal reasons. (751)

These underscore the role that culture plays in the acceptance or otherwise by readers of the ideologies that are assumed to be liberating and which critics have insisted are present in literary works. For instance, in view of the opposition of the author to such an idea and in view of the cultural implications that frown against such, how acceptable, to the generality of the suffering Cameroonian women, will be the lesbianism which Nfah-Abbenyi insists is in Beyala's works? Rather than forcing a lesbian interpretation onto the texts, can another (culturally-acceptable) reading of the text not be of more value to the emancipation of the Cameroonian (and indeed African) woman? One of the functions of literature is "the sharpening and mobilization of social consciousness in pursuit or negation of qualitative change, an instrument for the preservation or subversion of the existing order" (Amuta 8). This paper intends to examine the presentation of homosexuality in Ogochukwu Promise's award-winning novel *In The Middle of The Night*.

Synopsis of *In The Middle of The Night*

In *In The Middle of The Night*, Promise borrows from contemporary Nigerian history to tell the story of some individuals who, working for what they perceive as a better society, are themselves battling negative tendencies. The story centres on a High-Court judge, Elena who has been chosen by the President to head a probe panel to investigate corrupt practices and human rights infringement by government officials. But Elena herself is morally bankrupt as she is revealed to be unfaithful to her poet-husband, Nuru, whose love for her is true and untainted. The evil that Elena perpetrates in her marriage is highlighted not only by the juxtaposition of her treachery with that of her husband's unquestioning love for her, but also by the choice of her lover – her husband's brother, Kim. The narrative describes Kim as devious, temperamental and a batterer of women, "Yet Elena was infatuated with him" (*In the Middle of the Night* 56).

Other characters in the novel are also portrayed as morally corrupt. The President, who is another major character, is morally corrupt. He sets up the probe panel, not with good intentions but as part of plans for the next election (106). He is also involved in malevolent spirituality (411-413). The President's choice of sexuality makes his wife unhappy (246-255). The acts of other government officials like Captain Kreg, Governor

Tolu and private individuals like Seye Falase combine together to paint the picture of a depraved people. It is, however, not a completely doomed situation for the country in the novel. Characters like Elena's husband, Nuru, Governor Oni, Chuks Oko, Prophet Jeremiah, and Nene Obinna offer the optimism that there is some hope in the horizon.

However, of all the characters, it is Elena who is the most realistic as she has both good and bad attributes. The other characters are either wholly good or entirely bad with no hope for redemption.

Homosexuality in *In The Middle of the Night*

Four characters in Promise's *In The Middle of the Night* engage in homosexual relationships. The first is the gay affair between the President and another government official, Captain Kreg. The other is the lesbian relationship between Sigi, Kreg's girlfriend and Mercy, Elena's maid. Promise presents homosexuality as a transgression in the society of the novel.

The President and Kreg

The first indication that the President's homosexual relationship with Captain Kreg is disliked is that the President's choice of sexuality is the cause of Memuna, his wife's unhappiness. The President attempts to keep it away from her when he implores Elena not to inform his wife of the scene she witnesses on the night of the party in her house. This is in spite of the fact that Elena herself at that time is not aware he is homosexual as she does not look closely enough that night to determine who is with the President: "She nodded as she remembered the moving tree in the garden, a giant figure and the one that was obscure" (149). Memuna is an emotionally disturbed woman in spite of the glamour of being First Lady and the many expensive gifts with which her husband pampers her (252-3). Memuna is described as a "distinguished, but very sad guest" who just wanted to unburden herself, to feel close to someone, to get a little affection, a little understanding, just a little" (250). Memuna captures her frustration thus: "I am full of love, love weighing me down, but there is no one to give it to" (252).

Memuna voices out her suspicion of the President's sexual preference as "... a man that hang out with women" (255) and declares that this was apparent right from the beginning of their relationship; a preference that he tries to mask by buying her gifts and claiming to be busy. She laments:

What ways, Elena, can make up for the neglect of his wife? This jet
he bought, can it hold me, can it console me when I cry alone at
night in that massive bed of mine over there in the hottest part of hell?
Can it kiss me, and can it make love to me? (252)

The effect of the President's homosexuality on his wife leads to the disclosure of the secret to Elena. When Captain Kreg asks if Memuna is taking solace in Elena's house, "hibernating" as he puts it, Sigi retorts, "Why won't she when you won't leave her husband alone" (327). The narrative tells the reader how Elena and Nuru, who are both present, react: "Elena stood aghast. Nuru tried to ignore it" (327). However, later he admits his amazement at not knowing about it all the while. (334) While Nuru seems to think Kreg's choice of sexuality is his (Kreg's) business, Elena is shocked as she asks Kreg:

"So this terrible vice is in our country too" The look of horror on Elena's face remained. "What did you call it?" Kreg asked. "For how long do we go on pretending that we do not know that these things happen here too.

And I don't know why you think it is a vice." "But it is, Kreg, it is horrible," Elena felt disgusted. "These things happen. Nuru, you won't crucify me, will you?" Kreg asked. Nuru smiled. "There is more to life than can be found in sex." (334)

It is worthy of note that Captain Kreg is an army officer and, therefore, the relationship can also be interpreted as a metaphor of the unholy alliance between politicians and the military. These are the two groups that make up the highest rung of the Nigerian leadership and who have been responsible for its woes. Elena recalls the President telling Kreg that "That is how you and your people agree with me, Kreg until you wake up one morning and slot in the martial music" (328). Nuru's ease of acceptance of Kreg's and the President's homosexual relationship may give the impression of an acceptance of alternative sexualities. However, because Elena is the protagonist, her view supersedes that of Nuru's and it is more acceptable.

Another indication that homosexuality is abhorred in the text is located in the major metaphor used by Promise to depict the depravity into which those in the leadership class have sunk. The characters are sharply divided into the good and the evil. Only Elena has attributes of the two traits and the novel details her struggle to overcome her passion for her brother-in-law. The leadership of the country is made up of morally bankrupt men and women whose insincerity is revealed in the sponsorship of assassinations of perceived enemies, homosexual and pedophilic acts, and the practice of a religion that involves the worship of a goddess. These are acts that cannot be done openly so Promise employs the metaphor of the night, at a period of the night when it is the darkest, that is, the middle of the night, to depict the fact that these acts are odious.

This is aptly captured in Elena's house on the night of the party she and her husband hosted for friends including the president. During the party, Kim takes her to her garden which she describes as the garden of Eden. It is instructive that rather than her 'innocent' husband, it is Kim, her lover and brother-in-law who takes her round the garden. The narrative says: "The night smelled of fornication", as Elena asks Kim:

"What is in the air?" she asked him "Love, I guess"

"it reeks rather of adultery."

"Which is in vogue," he winked at her.

"I perceive a foul odour, the smell of what the land has become. It Seems as if all these people have brought all the vices in the land to this house tonight. I feel uncomfortable." (52)

The most significant of the acts which Elena witnesses in the garden is that of the President:

There was no light at all in the garden...She observed a funny movement in the garden, a figure leaning on a mango tree was covering another or so it seemed. It was quite dark in there, so she was not certain who she saw. But she strongly suspected that they were figures in human form, figures savouring their obscurity in the dark...Now she thought she knew who was rocking the tree...Kim pulled her back but she shook him off and went right on to His Excellency. (50-6)

Sigi and Mercy

The second homosexual relationship in the novel is the one between Sigi, Kreg's girlfriend

and Mercy, Elena's maid. Sigi is portrayed as a bi sexual who is obsessed with sex. She wants to get married to Kreg but Kreg never gives her a definite answer or date (335). She also attempts to seduce Nuru (533-6) and at the same time, her eye catches Mercy, Elena's maid whom she surreptitiously tells to visit her on the day she and Kreg visit Elena and Nuru (330).

Unlike Nuru, Mercy is easy prey for Sigi. After Sigi lures Mercy into her house, she entices her with gifts of clothes. After encouraging her to try one of them on, she completes the temptation by stroking the girl and the narrative declares categorically that "from then on, they did things that their society frowned at" (540). That the Nigerian society abhors homosexuality is further revealed in the fact of Sigi and Mercy having to leave the country as is contained in Mercy's note to Elena: "I and she will move from Nigeria. She say people here don't like us." (580).

We also interpret the act of lesbianism between Sigi and Mercy as being done in the 'night' since as revealed above, the society frowns on it and thus cannot be done openly, with the knowledge of people without their being sanctioned.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the presentation of homosexuality in *In The Middle of The Night* by Ogochukwu Promise. Homosexuality is treated as a transgression in the novel. This is achieved mostly through the metaphor of the night, the cover of darkness that is used to perpetrate all manner of vices. The homosexual relationship between the President and Captain Kreg first illustrates this. The relationship between these two is also interpreted as the alliance between the military and politicians – a union which is equally repugnant in view of the low quality of leadership that has been provided by the two at various times of Nigeria's history. The second relationship, the lesbian one between Sigi and Mercy can also be interpreted as being done in the 'night' since we are told that it is a relationship the society frowns at. Furthermore, they are forced to leave Nigeria for another country where such a relationship is accepted. Thus, these are acts that are performed not only at night but in the middle of the night, when it is darkest and those engaging in them cannot be seen or when most people are asleep and unlikely to be aware that these acts are being performed. The paper concludes that the treatment of homosexuality in the novel reflects the odium with which the act is currently being held in Nigerian society.

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