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Literary Theories

Queered Visibility: Kinship, Urban Space, and Lesbian Subjectivity in Selected Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

Dr. S. Henry Kishore, Associate Professor, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. J. Jacintha Maria Florence, Assistant Professor, Department of English Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore.

Abstract: This article analyses the representation of lesbian and queer female subjectivity in selected contemporary Nigerian fiction, with particular attention to kinship, urban space, and visibility. Its core corpus comprises Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and Francesca Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread* (2020), supported by short fiction—Yvonne Fly Onakeme Etaghene's "Iyawo" and Lola Shoneyin's "Woman in Her Season"—and by Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) as a queer and gender-nonconforming reference text. Reading these works through African feminist thought, queer African studies, and queer spatial theory, the article argues that they perform a critical queering of visibility: for lesbian and queer female subjects, to be seen may mean recognition but also exposure to discipline, abandonment, or legal sanction. The texts therefore imagine visibility as a negotiated practice rather than a simple emancipatory goal. Three findings organise the analysis: biological kinship operates simultaneously as care and surveillance; chosen families constitute a fragile but meaningful counter-kinship; and the Nigerian metropolis functions as an ambivalent terrain of both regulation and possibility. The article advances the concept of queered visibility to name a literary mode that resists erasure without equating disclosure with liberation.

Keywords: Nigerian fiction; lesbian subjectivity; queer African studies; kinship; queer spatial theory; visibility.

Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian fiction has become an important literary site for examining the tensions between queer selfhood and heteronormative social order. In a national context where sexuality is regulated through family, religion, custom, and law, literary representations of queer lives do more than register marginality; they interrogate the conditions under which subjects are permitted to belong. A strand of twenty-first-century Nigerian fiction challenges the assumption that heterosexual marriage, reproductive futurity, and biological kinship are the only legitimate foundations of social identity and citizenship (Zabus; Green-Simms). Yet within African queer literary criticism, lesbian subjectivity remains unevenly theorised: female same-sex desire is often folded into broader LGBTQ+ frameworks rather than examined as a distinct formation shaped by gendered domestic discipline, familial surveillance, compulsory marriage, urban mobility, and the risks of visibility.

This article addresses that gap by analysing lesbian and queer female subjectivity in selected contemporary Nigerian fiction, attending to kinship, spatiality, and visibility. The core corpus consists of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, alongside supporting short fiction—Etaghene's "Iyawo" and Shoneyin's "Woman in Her Season." Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* serves as a supporting queer and gender-nonconforming text within the broader discussion of visibility, embodiment, and social legibility rather than as a lesbian-subjectivity narrative. Recent scholarship has established queer Nigerian fiction as a field (Green-Simms; Biswas) and has read *Under the Udala Trees* as a landmark lesbian narrative (Courtois; Serón Navas; Cruz-Gutiérrez). This article builds on that work but shifts the emphasis in three ways: it places Okparanta's novel in conversation with a wider archive; it foregrounds kinship as a regulatory institution through which heterosexuality is naturalised and female bodies disciplined into reproductive respectability; and it links kinship to spatiality by asking how queer subjects use the city to survive, desire, conceal, and build alternative belonging.

International Journal of English Literature and

The urgency of this inquiry is intensified by Nigeria's hostile socio-legal context. The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013 prohibits same-sex marriage and civil unions and criminalises the public visibility of gay associations and relationships. This context is central to understanding why queer visibility in Nigerian fiction cannot be read simply as recognition or liberation. The article does not, however, treat fiction as documentary evidence of lived queer experience; it reads literary narrative as a cultural form through which the pressures of law, family, religion, and public morality are imagined, contested, and reconfigured.

The central argument is that these texts perform a critical queering of visibility. Visibility here is not equivalent to public disclosure or liberal recognition; for lesbian and queer female subjects, to be visible may also mean to be exposed to discipline, abandonment, violence, or legal sanction. The narratives therefore imagine visibility as a negotiated practice, and their protagonists carve out forms of presence that are partial, coded, intimate, and spatially contingent. The article asks four related questions: How do the selected texts represent lesbian and queer female subjectivity within heteropatriarchal family structures? How do urban spaces enable, restrict, or reorganise queer belonging? In what ways do these narratives transform visibility from a condition of exposure into a form of resistant presence? And how do chosen families challenge biological kinship and dominant models of citizenship and belonging?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

- **Queer Nigerian Literary Culture and the Gendered Limits of Criticism**

Queer Nigerian literary culture has emerged through sustained engagement with silence, stigma, law, religion, and the politics of recognition. Zabus identifies same-sex desire as a recurring but frequently displaced presence in African fiction, demonstrating that African literary texts long negotiated sexual nonconformity even when they did not name it directly—a point that prevents the field from treating queer African writing as a recent import. Green-Simms marks a significant shift by identifying the emergence of queer themes in twenty-first-century Nigerian fiction, where same-sex desire appears not as scandal or pathology but as part of a broader critique of homophobia and national belonging. Print and anthology culture has consolidated this expression: Xaba and Martin's *Queer Africa 2: New Stories* includes Etaghene's "Iyawo," which stages lesbian desire across Nigerian and diasporic spaces, and Macheso reads contemporary African queer short fiction as a mode that rehumanises queer subjects under heteropatriarchal pressure ("Fiction as Prosthesis"). African queer criticism has produced important work on sexuality, homophobia, law, and citizenship. Nyeck and Epprecht argue for the complexity of sexual diversity in Africa, challenging simplified binaries between Africa and queerness or tradition and modernity, while Otu and van Klinken describe "queer" as a productive but contested keyword that must be theorised from African histories rather than imported wholesale. A gendered limitation nonetheless persists: queer representation is often discussed through generalised LGBTQ+ frameworks or through narratives in which male same-sex desire occupies the most visible position.

This is not a total absence of lesbian-focused scholarship—Courtois reads *Under the Udala Trees* as a lesbian Bildungsroman shaped by patriarchal and homophobic pressure; Serón Navas argues that Okparanta’s lesbian protagonist revises narratives of Nigerian nationhood; and Cruz-Gutiérrez theorises the novel as a “bildungsromance” of affective development. The limitation is rather the concentration of attention around a few texts and the underdevelopment of frameworks that read lesbian subjectivity through kinship, spatial practice, and visibility together.

- **African Feminist Thought, Kinship, and Respectability**

Lesbian and queer female subjectivity in Nigerian fiction cannot be separated from gendered expectations surrounding family, marriage, reproduction, and respectability; the selected texts represent women not only as sexual subjects but as daughters, wives, mothers, and members of kinship systems. African feminist thought is therefore the first conceptual foundation. Oyěwùmí challenges the assumption that Western gender categories can be transferred uncritically into African contexts, while Nnaemeka’s theory of nego-feminism foregrounds negotiation, agency, and situated resistance, and Ogundipe-Leslie emphasises social transformation. Amadiume’s and Nzegwu’s attention to African kinship and family systems clarifies that family is a historically layered institution rather than a fixed or purely biological structure. These perspectives allow the analysis to recognise the force of heteropatriarchal structures without treating Nigerian women merely as oppressed subjects. Within this frame, biological kinship operates as both care structure and surveillance mechanism: the daughter is expected to become a wife, the wife a mother, and lesbian desire is read not simply as a prohibited act but as a failure of daughterhood and a threat to lineage. Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality remains useful here, provided it is read through African feminist scholarship so that it is not detached from Nigerian familial contexts.

- **Queer Spatial Theory and the Politics of Visibility**

The selected texts repeatedly show that queer subjectivity is spatially produced. Lefebvre’s account of space as socially produced rather than passively given, Massey’s understanding of space as relational and dynamic, and Ahmed’s work on orientation—how bodies are directed toward some objects and futures while turned away from others—provide tools for reading homes, churches, schools, rented rooms, streets, and diasporic routes as active elements in the production of queer belonging.

Halberstam's work on queer time and place clarifies how nonnormative lives disturb the expected sequence of marriage, reproduction, and respectable adulthood; Weston's account of chosen families shows how queer subjects create kinship outside biological descent; and Muñoz's notion of disidentification explains how marginal subjects negotiate dominant culture without wholly assimilating to or standing outside it. The city thus appears as ambivalent: it may offer anonymity, mobility, and access to queer networks, yet landlords, neighbours, churches, employers, and gossip may reproduce the disciplinary functions of the family.

Visibility is the framework's fourth concept, and this article does not treat it as synonymous with "coming out." Under conditions of familial surveillance, religious condemnation, and legal hostility, visibility may expose queer subjects to abandonment, outing, or violence. The article therefore distinguishes among three related terms. Exposure refers to being made vulnerable through being seen, named, reported, or rendered publicly legible in a hostile environment. Recognition refers to being perceived as a subject with desire, agency, and interiority—a perception that may occur in intimate, textual, or communal forms rather than only public ones. Queered visibility, the concept most central to the article, names a negotiated literary mode that resists erasure without reducing lesbian subjectivity to public disclosure. Sedgwick's analysis of the closet, which treats secrecy and disclosure as structures of knowledge and power rather than simple opposites, and Butler's account of recognisability under restrictive norms, help explain why queer characters often appear through coded practices: silence, memory, bodily proximity, shared rooms, and forms of care that exceed biological kinship.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary methodology based on comparative close reading, thematic analysis, and theoretically informed interpretation. Because it examines fictional representations of lesbian and queer female subjectivity, its method is interpretive rather than statistical, ethnographic, or sociological: it does not measure lived queer experience in Nigeria, nor present data from interviews or fieldwork. Instead, it investigates how the selected texts construct subjectivity through narrative voice, characterization, spatial setting, kinship relations, and the politics of visibility. To make the interpretive process explicit and reproducible, the study follows a defined procedure—identifying relevant textual scenes, grouping them under recurring analytic categories, comparing patterns across the corpus, and interpreting those patterns through African feminist thought and queer spatial theory—so that claims arise from textual evidence rather than generalized assumptions about Nigerian society.

The corpus was selected purposively, not exhaustively, according to four criteria: the texts are contemporary Nigerian fiction (or fiction by Nigerian writers centrally concerned with Nigerian contexts); they represent lesbian, queer female, or queer/gender-nonconforming subjectivity as a significant narrative concern; they engage substantially with family, urban space, visibility, or belonging; and, taken together, they span more than one literary form. *Under the Udala Trees* and *Butter Honey Pig Bread* form the main basis because they substantially engage female same-sex desire, gendered family expectations, and alternative belonging. “Iyawo” and “Woman in Her Season” extend the analysis beyond the novel, while *The Death of Vivek Oji* is included as a supporting text because it clarifies the broader politics of queer visibility, embodiment, and social legibility (Macheso, “Queering”; van Klinken).

Analysis proceeds in five stages: identifying scenes of family, marriage, motherhood, and religious instruction to examine the family as both care and surveillance; identifying scenes of urban movement, concealment, and informal networks to examine how space regulates queer bodies and enables clandestine belonging; tracking how subjectivity is narrated through voice, focalization, silence, and bodily presence; comparing how each text constructs visibility, belonging, and resistance; and interpreting these findings through the concept of queered visibility. The study’s scope is deliberately limited: it is literary and interpretive rather than ethnographic, examines representation rather than reception, and uses “lesbian subjectivity” only where the textual representation supports it, preferring “queer female” or “queer/gender-nonconforming subjectivity” where a broader term is more accurate—most notably for *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Because it analyses published literary texts and publicly available scholarship, the study involves no human participants and requires no ethical approval, though it attends ethically to its subject by recognising both vulnerability and agency rather than presenting queer Nigerian subjects only through victimhood.

Analysis: Kinship, Urban Space, and Queered Visibility

- **Biological Kinship as Care and Surveillance**

In the selected texts, biological kinship is not a neutral or purely private structure but a social institution through which gender, sexuality, religious morality, marriage, and respectability are regulated. For lesbian and queer female subjects, the family becomes one of the first institutions through which heterosexuality is naturalised and enforced. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma's lesbian subjectivity emerges under the pressure of war, religion, and maternal authority. Her relationship with Amina introduces same-sex desire as embodied intimacy formed in conditions of displacement, but the intimacy is quickly placed under religious and familial surveillance: Ijeoma's mother treats her daughter's desire as a moral and spiritual crisis, and her use of biblical instruction makes the family an extension of heteronormative discipline. This discipline is bound to the expectation that Ijeoma inhabit the roles of wife and mother; her eventual marriage to Chibundu demonstrates the force of compulsory heterosexuality not because it resolves desire but because it exposes the violence of demanding that queer women become legible through heterosexual domesticity (Okparanta). The crisis of lesbian subjectivity is thus also a crisis of daughterhood, aligning with Courtois's reading of the novel as a lesbian Bildungsroman while shifting emphasis onto kinship as a regulatory apparatus.

Butter Honey Pig Bread offers a related but different configuration. Ekwuyasi's novel is not organised around a single coming-of-age narrative; it places sexuality in relation to family trauma, estrangement, migration, and repair. Taiye's queer desire exists within a broader story of fractured kinship, and her relationships and culinary practices are shaped by the unresolved histories of her family (Ekwuyasi). Here family is neither simply repressive nor simply restorative but a damaged, persistent structure through which characters negotiate abandonment, guilt, and return. This complexity prevents the analysis of queer female subjectivity from becoming narrowly oppositional: queer desire appears not only as rebellion against family but within attempts to survive familial injury. The supporting short fiction extends this concern. In "Iyawo," Etaghene brings same-sex intimacy into contact with the Yoruba term for wife, reworking the language of kinship and marriage rather than simply rejecting it, while Shoneyin's "Woman in Her Season" shows how women's sexuality is shaped by expectation, secrecy, and gendered timing. Across the corpus, biological kinship both enables and restricts belonging, functioning as an extension of social and national heteronormativity.

Chosen Families and Counter-Kinship

If biological kinship often appears as a mechanism of discipline, the selected texts also imagine alternative belonging—rarely as stable queer households, more often as fragile, affective, and tactical arrangements: lovers, friends, roommates, temporary shelters, shared meals, and networks of recognition. Chosen family in these narratives is less a romantic ideal than a survival practice. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma's relationships with Amina and later Ndid create intimacy that challenges the authority of biological family and heterosexual marriage; these relationships provide recognition and companionship outside the terms imposed by religious and familial discipline, allowing Ijeoma to inhabit a self that cannot be acknowledged within her family home. Okparanta does not, however, romanticise chosen kinship as safety: Ijeoma's relationships are shaped by fear and the constant threat of exposure, so that chosen family offers recognition without guaranteed protection.

In *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, counter-kinship is expressed through food, friendship, and the creation of affective networks beyond the damaged biological family. Through cooking, feeding, and shared meals, the novel imagines belonging as something made through practice rather than inherited through blood (Ekwuyasi). Because Taiye's attachments are shaped by desire but also by loneliness, travel, and grief, the novel complicates Weston's influential account of chosen families by showing that, in Nigerian and diasporic contexts, chosen kinship may be marked by mobility, secrecy, and instability rather than secure communal formation. The short fiction reinforces this pattern: "Iyawo" reclaims marital language for same-sex intimacy, altering the symbolic vocabulary through which belonging is understood, while "Woman in Her Season" presses female desire against social scripts of timing and marriageability. Together these texts rework kinship by showing that belonging can be built through affective solidarity rather than blood, marriage, or reproduction—yet they insist such belonging is never easily secured. Chosen family appears as care under pressure, meaningful precisely because it emerges where biological family fails to recognise queer life.

Urban Space as Surveillance and Possibility

Urban space in these texts is never merely a setting; it is an active structure through which queer subjects experience danger, mobility, anonymity, and recognition. The city offers possibilities the family home forecloses, but it does not guarantee freedom. In *Under the Udala Trees*, spatial movement is central to Ijeoma's development: movement between domestic, religious, and public spaces creates conditions for encounter but also for discipline, and the regulation of sexuality follows her across spaces. The boundary between public and private proves fragile, since a room may appear private yet become scandal once neighbours, relatives, or religious authorities intrude. *Butter Honey Pig Bread* presents a wider geography of Nigerian, diasporic, and transnational spaces that allow movement, reinvention, and intimacy more difficult under the immediate surveillance of family; yet these spaces are marked by alienation, racialisation, and loneliness, so that mobility enables encounter while also dispersing belonging.

Reading the metropolis through Lefebvre and Massey as a contested field of power rather than a neutral background, the analysis treats the city as a structure that determines what queer life can become. *The Death of Vivek Oji* strengthens this argument by showing how queer and gender-nonconforming embodiment is negotiated within spaces of family, friendship, and community: Vivek becomes legible in some intimate spaces while remaining misrecognised or endangered in others, so that visibility is shown to depend not only on identity but on where, how, and before whom a body appears (Emezi; Macheso, "Queering"). The selected fiction therefore challenges any simple opposition between an oppressive traditional village and a liberating modern city. Heteronormativity travels across spaces, reproduced in churches, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and gossip networks, even as queer subjects appropriate parts of the city for survival through coded recognition, hidden intimacy, shared rooms, and temporary withdrawal from familial surveillance. Urban belonging is thus not a stable achievement but a practice of negotiation (Ahmed; Lefebvre; Massey).

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

Queered Visibility: Beyond Exposure

The forms of liberation represented in these texts are rarely grand, public, or institutionally protected. They appear in partial and clandestine forms—hidden rooms, private conversations, coded gestures, remembered touch, shared meals, and friendship circles—which resist the assumption that queer liberation must take the form of public disclosure. In *Under the Udala Trees*, secrecy is not merely repression but also tactical practice: silence may protect even as it wounds, and concealment may allow intimacy to survive even as it restricts self-expression. Okparanta does not romanticise this,

making clear that concealment carries psychological costs, yet the novel refuses a model in which liberation requires total disclosure, presenting queer freedom as partial, fragile, and historically conditioned. In *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, queer spatial practice is organised less around prohibition than through movement, intimacy, and repair, where cooking, feeding, touching, and returning become the everyday practices through which damaged subjects build livable relations.

These observations crystallise in the article's principal theoretical contribution: the model of queered visibility. In the context represented by the selected texts, visibility is deeply ambivalent. The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2013 and broader structures of familial and religious condemnation make public queer visibility potentially dangerous, so that to be seen may mean to be punished or exposed to violence; yet invisibility is also damaging because it erases queer desire and interiority. Queered visibility emerges from this tension as a negotiated literary form through which queer subjects become perceptible without being reduced to spectacle or risk. It depends on the three distinctions established earlier—exposure, recognition, and queered visibility—and the texts enact it differently. *Under the Udala Trees* makes Ijeoma's subjectivity narratively visible to the reader while showing that social visibility invites discipline, separating recognition from mere disclosure; *Butter Honey Pig Bread* renders queer female desire through embodied memory, food, and movement rather than confession, refusing to make queer life legible only through trauma; and *The Death of Vivek Oji* demonstrates how misrecognition itself becomes a form of violence, even as the intimate recognition offered by friends affirms what biological family denies. The concept thus advances African queer literary criticism in two ways: it resists the erasure of lesbian and queer female subjectivity, and it avoids a visibility politics that assumes public disclosure is always the safest endpoint of queer representation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that selected contemporary Nigerian fiction represents lesbian and queer female subjectivity through the intersecting pressures of biological kinship, urban spatial regulation, and visibility. Rather than treating queer identity as a purely private matter of desire, the texts show that female same-sex desire is shaped by family expectation, religious morality, marriage, motherhood, spatial movement, secrecy, and the risks attached to being seen. Their central achievement is a critical queering of visibility: they resist the erasure of lesbian and queer female life while refusing to present public exposure as an uncomplicated form of liberation.

Three findings organise this claim. First, biological kinship emerges as a structure of surveillance as well as care—most starkly in *Under the Udala Trees*, where religious instruction, maternal discipline, and marriage expectation enforce heterosexuality, and more diffusely in *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, where kinship is a damaged field of memory and possible repair. Second, the texts rework kinship by imagining chosen family and affective solidarity as forms of counter-kinship that are meaningful precisely because they remain fragile and shaped by secrecy. Third, urban space appears as ambivalent terrain that offers anonymity and encounter while reproducing surveillance through neighbours, religious communities, and gossip, so that the city is neither simple refuge nor purely hostile environment. Across these findings, visibility operates as negotiated literary resistance, and the article has distinguished exposure, recognition, and queered visibility to name the mode through which these works make lesbian and queer female subjectivity legible while attending to the dangers of disclosure.

The study's contribution is fourfold: to African queer literary criticism, by treating lesbian and queer female subjectivity as a distinct analytic concern rather than a minor part of generalized LGBTQ+ representation; to Nigerian literary studies, by showing how these texts revise ideas of family, citizenship, and domesticity; to African feminist thought, by reading female same-sex desire in relation to daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood, and respectability; and to queer spatial theory, by demonstrating that urban belonging in Nigerian fiction is a process of negotiating space, secrecy, and risk. Its limitations are real: the corpus is selective, the method literary rather than ethnographic, and the category of lesbian subjectivity has been used carefully across texts that represent a range of female same-sex and gender-nonconforming experiences. Future research might extend the analysis to queer women's representation in Nigerian digital fiction, to lesbian subjectivity in African short fiction more broadly, and to comparative studies of how cities such as Lagos, Accra, Johannesburg, and Nairobi are imagined as spaces of risk, intimacy, and survival. In the end, these texts do not merely make lesbian and queer female subjects visible; they ask what visibility costs, where it becomes possible, and how it may be negotiated without surrendering to either silence or exposure.

According to Jean Baudrillard: "Post modernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, electricity, nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random of swirl of an empty signal".

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