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Erotic Motherhood and Queer Desire in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*



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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines the relationship between motherhood and queer desire in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, arguing that maternal love and maternal violence are intertwined in the formation of queer subjectivity in Nigeria. Although scholarship has examined queer sexuality, religion, and state repression, less attention has been given to motherhood as a space where desire, authority, discipline, and resistance intersect. The paper explores maternal authority as a force that structures and unsettles queer identity, showing how maternal attachment can nurture possibilities it seeks to suppress.

Methodology: The study adopts a critical approach based on close readings of moments in Okparanta's narrative. It draws on African feminist and queer perspectives, including Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic as a source of power, Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and Michel Foucault's account of repression. These perspectives illuminate the relationship between Ijeoma and her mother, Adaora, with attention to affect, discipline, surveillance, and the negotiations through which queer subjectivity takes shape.

Findings: The study finds that maternal authority in *Under the Udala Trees* cannot be reduced to either care or control. Adaora's attempts to regulate Ijeoma through religious instruction, surveillance, and heterosexual marriage do not eliminate her daughter's queer desire. Instead, these efforts make that desire more visible to Ijeoma and deepen her awareness of her identity. Maternal discipline consequently becomes part of the process through which queer subjectivity is formed.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The paper contributes to theory by proposing "erotic motherhood" as a lens that brings African feminist, queer, and literary approaches into conversation. It offers a way of reading queer narratives beyond accounts of victimhood by emphasizing the intimacies within which queer identities develop. At the level of practice and policy, the study highlights the importance of relationships and attachments in discussions of sexual diversity. Fundamentally, it argues that motherhood in African queer literature is not merely a source of repression but a contradictory space where gender, sexuality, power, and belonging are negotiated.

Keywords: *Erotic Motherhood, African Queer Literature, Maternal Authority, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Postcolonial Sexuality*

Introduction

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* enters African literary discourse at an important historical and cultural moment in which questions of sexuality, belonging, family, religion, and national identity remain deeply contested. Published in 2015, the novel follows Ijeoma from childhood through adulthood as she negotiates the consequences of the Nigerian Civil War, the loss of her father, her relationship with Amina, her eventual marriage to Chibundu, and her later movement toward a more open recognition of her sexuality. The novel therefore presents queer desire not as an isolated personal experience but as something formed within a network of historical, religious, familial, and cultural relationships. Recent scholarship has similarly emphasized the relationship between Ijeoma's queer development and the wider structures of Nigerian society. Serón Navas (2021), for instance, reads the novel as a rewriting of Nigerian nationhood through the figure of the lesbian Nigerian woman, while Ofei and Oppong Adjei (2021) emphasize the novel's representation of queer identity and social bonding. Cruz Gutiérrez (2024) further understands Ijeoma's development through affective relationships that connect personal experience with the larger historical setting.

These readings are important because they demonstrate that Ijeoma's sexuality cannot be separated from the social environment in which she grows. Yet the maternal relationship deserves closer attention because Adaora, Ijeoma's mother is not merely another representative of the social order. She occupies a much more intimate position. She is the person who raises Ijeoma after the death of her husband, disciplines her, worries about her future, teaches her religious values, monitors her conduct, and eventually attempts to direct her toward heterosexual marriage. The force of Adaora's authority therefore comes partly from her position within the family. She does not exercise power over Ijeoma as an anonymous social institution might. She exercises it as a mother whose emotional investment in her daughter is profound. This makes their relationship particularly significant for understanding how queer desire develops under conditions of familial pressure.

The term "erotic motherhood" used in this study requires careful clarification. It does not suggest sexual attraction between mother and daughter, nor does it sexualize maternal affection. The term is used to describe the intensity through which maternal attachment becomes embodied, emotional, disciplinary, and formative. Audre Lorde's (1984, p. 54) understanding of the erotic is particularly useful here because she does not restrict the erotic to sexual activity. Rather, she describes it as a deep source of feeling and knowledge through which individuals recognize the possibility of fuller existence. When this idea is brought into conversation with motherhood, it allows us to examine the intensity of maternal attachment without confusing emotional intensity with sexual desire. Adaora's love for Ijeoma is powerful precisely because it is not detached from fear, expectation, authority, and cultural anxiety.

The argument of this paper is therefore that Adaora's motherhood operates in contradictory ways. It protects Ijeoma, but it also disciplines her. It gives her a sense of belonging, but it attempts to

determine the conditions under which she may belong. It seeks to protect her future, but it imagines that future almost exclusively through heterosexual marriage and socially approved womanhood. This contradiction is central to Okparanta's treatment of queer desire. Ijeoma does not become queer by simply stepping outside the family. Her understanding of herself develops through a continuous negotiation with the family, especially with her mother. Her queer becoming is consequently relational.

The study therefore reads Adaora through three connected theoretical perspectives. Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution helps explain why Adaora's personal love becomes entangled with cultural expectations. Lorde's understanding of the erotic provides a vocabulary for examining the emotional intensity of maternal attachment without reducing the erotic to sexuality. Michel Foucault's account of power and resistance helps explain why attempts to suppress Ijeoma's desire repeatedly produce greater awareness of that desire. These perspectives make it possible to understand motherhood as both a personal relationship and a cultural institution.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To examine "erotic motherhood" in *Under the Udala Trees*, it is essential to ground the discussion within feminist, queer, and African literary critical traditions. These frameworks provide the language and conceptual tools to interrogate the complex entanglements of motherhood, desire, and queer subjectivity in Okparanta's novel. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* provides an important starting point for understanding the contradiction within Adaora's maternal role. Rich distinguishes between motherhood as a lived experience and motherhood as an institution. The distinction matters because women may experience genuine attachment to their children while simultaneously performing a culturally prescribed maternal role. The institution of motherhood can therefore transform care into obligation and affection into a mechanism for social regulation. Rich captures this problem when she writes, "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self." (Rich, 1976, p. 42)

This observation is particularly useful in reading Adaora. Her actions are not adequately explained by a desire to punish Ijeoma. She genuinely believes that she is protecting her daughter. Her understanding of protection, however, is shaped by a social conception of proper womanhood. Ijeoma must be respectable, religious, married, and socially acceptable. Adaora's maternal care therefore becomes inseparable from the institution that defines what a respectable daughter should become.

The distinction between experience and institution also prevents the analysis from turning Adaora into a simple symbol of patriarchy. She is not merely an instrument through which an abstract social system acts upon Ijeoma. She is a woman with grief, memory, fear, and personal attachment. The death of her husband during the war intensifies her determination to protect her daughter. Her

anxiety is therefore both personal and social. She has lost the man around whom the family had been organized, and she becomes increasingly invested in preserving what she understands as the proper future for Ijeoma. Her insistence on heterosexual marriage emerges from this complicated mixture of affection, fear, religion, and cultural expectation.

Central to this paper is queer theory, particularly as it intersects with feminist understandings of the erotic. Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic offers a second important framework. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde argues that the erotic is a source of deep feeling and self-knowledge rather than simply a synonym for sexual activity. She writes:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde, 1984, p. 54)

This formulation helps clarify the meaning of "erotic motherhood" in this study. The erotic is understood here as intensity rather than sexualization. Adaora's relationship with Ijeoma is characterized by strong feeling. She watches, corrects worries, teaches, questions, and attempts to direct her daughter because Ijeoma matters profoundly to her. The problem is that the intensity of this attachment is expressed through control. Love becomes inseparable from regulation.

Lorde's conception also helps us understand the relationship between feeling and power. If the erotic is a source of knowledge about the self, then the denial of that knowledge can become a form of oppression. Ijeoma's queer desire is not simply a behavior that Adaora wishes to prevent. It is part of Ijeoma's developing knowledge of herself. The more her mother attempts to replace that knowledge with religious instruction and heterosexual expectations, the more sharply Ijeoma becomes aware of the distance between what she feels and what she is told she should feel.

Michel Foucault's theory of power further strengthens this interpretation. Foucault (1978) challenges the idea that sexuality is simply suppressed by power. Instead, he argues that power produces forms of knowledge and discourse through which sexuality becomes increasingly visible and discussable. His famous observation that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95) is particularly relevant to the relationship between Adaora and Ijeoma. Adaora's authority creates conditions against which Ijeoma must negotiate. The maternal attempt to regulate sexuality consequently becomes one of the contexts in which Ijeoma learns to recognize and articulate her own desires.

Judith Butler's work on gender also contributes to this reading because Ijeoma's experience demonstrates that womanhood is not simply a natural condition but a socially repeated set of expectations. Butler (2006) questions the assumption that gender identities exist independently of

social norms. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Adaora's understanding of femininity is closely connected to marriage, respectability, religion, and family continuity. Ijeoma is expected to perform womanhood according to these norms. Her difficulty arises because her desires do not comfortably fit the heterosexual model that structures those expectations.

African Feminist and Queer Literary Criticism

African feminist criticism provides an important cultural dimension to these theories and helps situate the discussion within the specific realities of African women's lives. Ogundipe (1994) emphasizes the need to understand African women within the historical and social structures that shape their experiences rather than simply applying theoretical categories developed elsewhere. Her approach is useful because Adaora's maternal authority cannot be understood adequately through a universalized image of the oppressive mother. Her authority is connected to particular understandings of family, religion, respectability, and communal responsibility. From this perspective, motherhood becomes a social and cultural position shaped by relationships as much as by individual authority.

Nnaemeka's (1997) discussion of African feminism further strengthens this relational understanding by encouraging attention to negotiation and interconnectedness. African feminist thought has often emphasized the complexity of women's positions within family and community structures. Such an approach makes it possible to see Adaora as both constrained by social expectations and an active participant in reproducing them. She is not simply oppressed or oppressive. She occupies both positions at different moments, and this tension is important for understanding the contradictory nature of her relationship with Ijeoma. It also provides a useful foundation for considering how maternal authority intersects with the queer dimensions of the novel.

The queer dimension of the novel has received considerable scholarly attention, providing an important foundation for this study. Ofei and Oppong Adjei (2021) demonstrate how Okparanta creates narrative space for queer sexuality and social bonding. Serón Navas (2021) argues that the novel reimagines Nigerian nationhood through its representation of lesbian identity, while Cruz Gutiérrez (2024) examines Ijeoma's affective development and the role of intimate relationships in her formation. Mushwana (2025) emphasizes religious trauma and the disciplining of queer subjectivity. Amodu (2023) considers Black lesbian solidarity, while Amodu and Adereti (2025) examine queer identity politics and exclusion in the novel. Collectively, these studies establish the significance of sexuality, religion, identity, and belonging in *Under the Udala Trees*, but they leave room for a closer examination of motherhood as an intimate site where these forces converge.

These studies establish a strong critical foundation, but they also reveal an opening for a more sustained examination of motherhood as an intimate institution. The maternal relationship deserves particular attention because it connects private feeling with public norms. Adaora does not merely repeat social attitudes toward homosexuality. She carries those attitudes into the most intimate

relationship in Ijeoma's life. Consequently, the family becomes a space in which sexuality is taught, corrected, interpreted, feared, and negotiated.

Keguro Macharia's (2019) attention to intimacy in African and diasporic queer experience is also useful here. His work challenges rigid distinctions between normative and nonnormative identities and calls attention to the everyday spaces in which queer lives are negotiated. (p. 5) The mother daughter relationship in *Under the Udala Trees* is one such space. It is neither entirely liberating nor entirely oppressive. It is a space of friction in which Ijeoma learns what her family expects from her and gradually determines what she expects from herself.

The present study therefore brings these theoretical perspectives together without treating them as interchangeable. Rich explains the institutional pressures attached to motherhood. Lorde provides a way of thinking about intensity, feeling, and embodied knowledge. Foucault explains the relationship between regulation, discourse, and resistance. Butler helps clarify the social production of gendered expectations. African feminist and queer scholarship keeps the discussion attentive to the specific cultural and historical context in which Ijeoma and Adaora live. Through these combined perspectives, erotic motherhood becomes a way of naming the contradictory intensity of maternal attachment within a queer narrative.

Analysis

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* presents a narrative where the entanglement of motherhood and queer desire cannot be overlooked. The novel situates Ijeoma's sexual awakening and her later struggles within the continuous presence of her mother, Adaora. Far from a peripheral character, Adaora embodies the contradictions of maternal love, at once protective and suffocating, nurturing and violently repressive. Reading her maternal presence through the lens of "erotic motherhood" allows us to see how her intensity and control over Ijeoma paradoxically sustain the very queer desires she seeks to extinguish.

The earliest scenes between mother and daughter already reveal the overlapping registers of grief, intimacy, and authority that will come to define their relationship. When Ijeoma's father dies during the war, Adaora is left in charge of raising her only daughter. She does so with an obsessive energy, interpreting her husband's death as a divine call to keep her child morally pure. This charge manifests in deeply embodied ways: the constant monitoring of Ijeoma's speech, movements, and interactions with others. The text suggests that Adaora's authority is not abstract but visceral, experienced in the rhythms of daily life.

The intensity of maternal surveillance becomes particularly visible after Ijeoma returns home from Nnewi. Having learned that Ijeoma and Amina were sexually involved, Adaora responds not simply with anger but with a sustained programme of religious discipline. She begins daily Bible lessons, presenting Ijeoma's desire as something that must be corrected and purified. During one

of these lessons, Adaora makes the purpose of this discipline explicit: “There’s nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul” (Okparanta, 2015, p. 65).

The statement captures the logic underlying Adaora’s maternal intervention. Her concern is expressed through the language of care, yet that care is inseparable from surveillance and correction. The word “cleansing” transforms Ijeoma’s desire into something imagined as contamination, positioning Adaora as both mother and moral authority responsible for restoring her daughter to what she understands as religious and social correctness. Maternal love therefore becomes disciplinary: Adaora’s emotional investment in Ijeoma intensifies her determination to regulate the daughter’s sexuality.

The insistence on corrective measures further demonstrates how maternal intimacy becomes inseparable from disciplinary structures. After Ijeoma is returned to her mother, Adaora begins daily Bible lessons in the hope of “cleansing” her daughter’s soul (Okparanta, 2015, p. 65). These lessons are not merely acts of religious instruction but sustained attempts to regulate Ijeoma’s desires and return her to the heterosexual order that Adaora considers morally acceptable. Over several months, Adaora moves through biblical passages that she interprets as condemnations of same sex desire, transforming the Bible into an instrument of maternal discipline. Yet the narrative makes clear that this religious discipline does not eliminate Ijeoma’s desire. Instead, it produces guilt, secrecy, and an increasingly conscious struggle over how she understands herself.

Here, Adaora’s maternal presence becomes erotically charged, not because it affirms Ijeoma’s queer love, but because it entwines itself with it, producing a constant reminder of what is forbidden. The more the mother insists on discipline, the more Ijeoma is forced to confront and name her own desires. In this sense, maternal repression paradoxically becomes constitutive of queer subjectivity.

Okparanta (2015) extends this paradox into Ijeoma’s adult life, where her mother continues to orchestrate her path toward heterosexual marriage. When Ijeoma and her mother receive the news of Amina’s marriage to a Hausa man, her mother quickly delves into a discussion of the importance of marriage between a man and a woman:

Marriage has a shape, Its shape is that of a bicycle. Doesn’t matter the size or color of the bicycle. All that matters is that the bicycle is complete, that the bicycle has two wheels. The man is one wheel...the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being? (p. 182).

Ijeoma then observes her mother’s belief in an even more direct form:

Under her breath, she said, ‘A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all.’ There was something self-deprecating about the way she said it. (p. 182)

This metaphor reflects the cultural weight of motherhood in Nigerian society. Adaora imagines her daughter only in relation to heterosexual kinship, casting her queerness as a threat to familial and national continuity. Yet this act of maternal imposition once again reveals the cracks in institutionalized motherhood. For even as Adaora seeks to root her daughter in heteronormativity, Ijeoma experiences the marriage as suffocating, alienating, and profoundly untrue to herself. The maternal voice, meant to stabilize, becomes instead a catalyst for dissonance.

The erotic charge of this maternal presence lies in its intensity and in its refusal to recede into the background of Ijeoma’s life. Even when Ijeoma attempts to assert her independence, her mother remains deeply present in her emotional and psychological world. This tension becomes especially clear when Ijeoma reflects on the growing distance between them:

There was a distance between us that had not existed before...There was a strain. She was my mother, and I should have leaned into her embrace...But things were different now. In this moment, she felt more like another warden than my own mother, more like a husk—more an emblem of motherhood than motherhood herself (Okparanta, 2015, p. 70).

Ijeoma’s confession captures the complicated meaning of motherhood within the novel. Adaora is not simply an external figure who imposes rules upon her daughter; her presence becomes internalized, shaping the way Ijeoma experiences love, desire, guilt, and selfhood. The image of the mother as “another warden” is particularly revealing because it transforms maternal care into a form of surveillance, while the image of the “husk” suggests that the emotional intimacy once associated with motherhood has been emptied out by conflict. Yet Ijeoma cannot simply reject this maternal presence. The mother remains bound to her sense of self, making it difficult to separate love from discipline or care from control. In this sense, the erotic dimension of motherhood emerges not from sexuality between mother and daughter, but from the profound affective intensity through which maternal attachment continues to shape Ijeoma’s desires and her understanding of herself.

What makes Okparanta’s treatment of motherhood radical is not only her depiction of repression but also her insistence that maternal love, however fraught, remains a constant. Adaora’s acts of control are never depicted as arising from hatred but from a love that has been distorted by religious and cultural frameworks. This distortion, however, does not neutralize its power; rather, it reveals how maternal love, in its embodied and affective form, cannot be separated from the queer negotiations it produces. The novel refuses to present motherhood as a flatly antagonistic force. Instead, it reveals its contradictions, insisting that even in repression, there is intimacy; even in control, there is intensity; and even in prohibition, there is queer possibility.

By staging motherhood in this way, Okparanta challenges both Western and African literary conventions. In Western queer narratives, mothers often appear as obstacles to queer liberation, while in African literature, they are frequently idealized as custodians of culture, morality, and tradition. *Under the Udala Trees* unsettles both representations by presenting a mother who is neither simply villainous nor wholly virtuous, but deeply human, capable of both wounding and shaping her queer child.

In this light, the politics of queer becoming in Okparanta's novel cannot be separated from the politics of motherhood. Ijeoma's queer subjectivity develops not simply in spite of her mother's repression, but through her continuous negotiation with it. The erotic charge of this maternal presence ensures that desire and repression are never completely separate, but remain intertwined within the intimate textures of everyday life.

Discussion

The entanglement of erotic motherhood and queer desire in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* invites a reconsideration of how motherhood operates as both a personal and political force in African literature. Adaora's maternal presence is not simply an accessory to the plot but a structuring force that shapes Ijeoma's subjectivity, embodying what Adrienne Rich famously termed the "institution of motherhood" while also exceeding it in unpredictable ways. To read Adaora solely as a repressive figure would flatten the novel's complexity; instead, her presence demonstrates the intimate contradictions of maternal love contradictions that are central to the politics of queer becoming.

Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic as a source of power and profound feeling provides a useful framework for interpreting Adaora's role in Ijeoma's development. For Lorde, the erotic is not restricted to sexual experience; it is rooted in deep feeling and constitutes a source of power and knowledge within women's lives (Lorde, 1984, p. 53–54). When mapped onto motherhood in Okparanta's novel, this concept reveals how Adaora's emotional investments in Ijeoma cannot be neatly categorized as either love or repression. They are both. Consider the moment when Adaora confronts Ijeoma after her reluctance to marry: "...My child, what do you want me to do? A woman and a woman cannot be. That's not the way it's done. You must let go of any remaining thoughts you have of that." (Okparanta, 2015, p. 223)

Here, the intensity of maternal feeling becomes inseparable from the desire to direct and control the daughter's life. Adaora's plea is not simply an expression of religious or social disapproval; it emerges from a powerful attachment to Ijeoma and from her conviction that she must protect her daughter by restoring her to the life she considers proper. Her words therefore reveal the double character of maternal intimacy: love becomes entangled with vigilance, while care becomes a means of regulating desire. In this sense, Adaora embodies what can be understood as erotic motherhood, a form of maternal attachment whose emotional intensity gives it both sustaining and disciplinary force. Her love does not disappear because she rejects Ijeoma's sexuality; rather, its

intensity makes the conflict more painful, demonstrating how affection and repression can exist within the same maternal relationship.

Queer theorist Sara Ahmed helps us understand this ambivalence when she describes how emotions “stick” to bodies, shaping how we experience intimacy and power (Ahmed, 2014, p.11). In *Under the Udala Trees*, Adaora’s emotions stick to Ijeoma in ways that cannot be easily shed. Her mother’s words, glances, and gestures become part of the daughter’s psychic and bodily memory, lingering long after physical separation. Even when Ijeoma seeks independence, she carries Adaora within her, proof that maternal love cannot be disentangled from queer desire but is instead woven into its very fabric.

Maternal Discipline and the Productive Paradox of Repression

Okparanta’s novel also complicates the apparent divide between queer liberation and maternal repression. Adaora’s interventions, including Bible lessons, the pressure of arranged marriage, and constant surveillance, clearly reflect the heteronormative expectations surrounding Ijeoma. Yet these efforts to regulate her daughter’s desires have an unintended effect: they make Ijeoma increasingly conscious of her queerness. The more her desire is questioned, condemned, and subjected to control, the more clearly she comes to recognize and articulate it. In this sense, maternal discipline paradoxically becomes part of the process through which Ijeoma develops a queer subjectivity, revealing that repression does not always silence desire but can also make its presence more visible and difficult to deny.

This paradox resonates with Michel Foucault’s argument in *The History of Sexuality* that repression does not simply silence sexuality but instead produces and proliferates discourse around it (Foucault, 1990, p. 18). Adaora’s insistence on Bible study illustrates this dynamic. Intended as a corrective measure, these lessons instead make Ijeoma increasingly conscious of her queerness, repeatedly directing her attention toward the very desires that her mother seeks to suppress. The more Ijeoma is instructed to understand her feelings as sinful, the more intensely she is compelled to confront their persistence. As Ijeoma reflects:

I wanted to ask for forgiveness for the things I had done in Nnewi. Not a day had passed when I did not remember those things... crave those things; ... wanting to repeat them. But now, I sat in church and for the first time I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. I wanted to ask God to help me turn my thoughts away from Amina, to turn me instead onto the path of righteousness ... but somehow the words of prayer would not come. (Okparanta, 2015, pp. 72–73)

The passage reveals the limits of religious and maternal discipline. Ijeoma experiences guilt, but guilt does not eliminate desire. Instead, the attempt to suppress her feelings keeps Amina present in her thoughts, making desire something she must continually confront and negotiate. Maternal

discipline therefore does not eradicate queer desire but inscribes it more firmly within the daughter's self-understanding. The erotic force of motherhood lies precisely in this paradox: in seeking to regulate desire, it intensifies the daughter's awareness of it; in seeking to erase it, it makes the desire increasingly difficult to disavow.

This contradiction is particularly striking within the Nigerian sociopolitical context, where mothers are often positioned as custodians of morality, culture, family continuity, and social respectability. Adaora's authority reflects this role, especially in her determination to guide Ijeoma toward the religious and heterosexual ideals she considers necessary for her daughter's survival and social acceptance. Yet her failure to secure Ijeoma's conformity also exposes the limits of maternal power. Ijeoma may be disciplined, instructed, and pressured, but her desire cannot simply be commanded out of existence. In dramatizing this tension, Okparanta presents motherhood as both a mechanism of social regulation and an intimate space through which queer subjectivity develops. The novel therefore contributes to a broader discourse in African literature that challenges fixed assumptions about family, gender, sexuality, and belonging.

Conclusion

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* offers a powerful exploration of the complicated relationship between motherhood, sexuality, and queer becoming in contemporary African fiction. Through Ijeoma's relationship with her mother, Adaora, the novel shows that motherhood cannot easily be placed on one side of the divide between love and oppression. Adaora loves her daughter deeply, yet that love is also shaped by fear, religious conviction, and the desire to protect Ijeoma from a society she knows can be unforgiving. It is within this tension that "erotic motherhood" becomes important, not as a sexual understanding of motherhood, but as a way of describing the emotional intensity through which maternal love and authority shape Ijeoma's understanding of herself and her desires.

Okparanta also challenges the idea of the African mother as simply the keeper of tradition and family morality. Adaora certainly tries to fulfil this role. Her Bible lessons, her concern about Ijeoma's relationships, and her insistence on heterosexual marriage all reveal her determination to guide her daughter toward what she believes is a safe and acceptable life. Yet these efforts do not produce the conformity she expects. Instead, they make Ijeoma more aware of the desires she is being taught to reject. What Adaora attempts to suppress therefore becomes part of Ijeoma's journey toward recognizing who she is.

What makes Adaora particularly compelling is that Okparanta does not present her as a villain. She is a mother who is afraid, loving, religious, and deeply influenced by the world around her. Her actions are sometimes painful and damaging, but they also come from a genuine concern for her daughter. This complexity makes the conflict between mother and daughter more believable. Ijeoma's struggle is not simply a struggle against her mother; it is also a struggle to remain connected to her while refusing to surrender her sense of self.

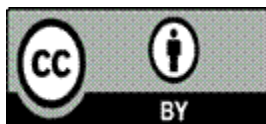
The novel therefore suggests that queer becoming does not always require a complete rejection of family or kinship. For Ijeoma, identity develops through negotiation, conflict, memory, and attachment. Her experience shows that family can be both the place where queer desire is challenged and the place from which the desire for belonging continues to emerge.

Ultimately, *Under the Udala Trees* brings motherhood into the centre of discussions about African queer experience. Okparanta shows that maternal love can discipline and wound, but it can also create the emotional space in which resistance and self-recognition become possible. “Erotic motherhood” captures this contradiction and helps us see that Ijeoma’s journey is not simply from repression to freedom. It is a more complicated movement toward accepting desire, preserving love, and finding a place where she can belong without denying herself.

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