

## From *Bildungsroman* to *Bildungsromance*: Physical and Affective War in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*<sup>1</sup>

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The *bildungsroman* has dominated the Nigerian literary landscape since the 1990s with novels such as Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* (2005), Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2012), and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). These coming-of-age stories place a special emphasis on the national evolution of Nigeria. Thus, by delving into such interrelation of the national and personal domains, I propose to theorize *Under the Udala Trees* as a "bildungsromance," or novel of affective and romantic development. I use the term "bildungsromance" to describe the growth of Okparanta's protagonist, Ijeoma, as intrinsically associated with the experiences gathered from her affective attachments both in the public and the private spheres. I will analyze Ijeoma's sentimental relationships as she discovers and naturalizes her queer identity. For this, I will delve into the negative affects – in the form of fear, shame and guilt (Braidotti 2009, 50) – that influence Ijeoma's experience as a result of her non-conforming to the dictums of Nigerian customary laws. Ironically, such negative affects will be introduced as tightly associated with "the promise of happiness" (Ahmed 2010, 14). In turn, I shall underline the role of Ijeoma's intimate and romantic relationships in prompting positive forms of affect such as self-love and pride. These affective experiences allow Ijeoma to acquire a critical perspective towards Nigerian customary laws and their impact on identity formation and on what has been referred to as

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the “democratisation of the private sphere” (Giddens 1992, 184). Ultimately, I will hinge upon Ijeoma’s awareness of her own affective advancements as a key element in her bildungsroman.

Keywords: Nigeria; affect; queer; bildungsroman; Biafra

## 1. Introduction

The bildungsroman, or novel of growth, denouncing abuses committed against children and adolescents has dominated the Nigerian literary landscape since the 1990s (Okuyade 2011, 141). Focusing on Nigerian women writing bildungsroman, Cédric Courtois claims that authors such as Chimamanda N. Adichie and Sefi Atta “show they are willing to destabilize the characteristics of this literary genre, by re-using it in a postcolonial milieu first, furthering this destabilization of borders, deploying the question of gender, and featuring strong-willed female characters” (2015, 110). In this line, Courtois sustains that the contemporary Nigerian bildungsroman places a fundamental focus on how “female transgression is needed, both for their own sake in the private sphere, but also for the common lot in the public sphere” (2015, 109). Arguably, such an association between the public and the private, the personal and the political, has led to a cross-generational interest in the recalling and reimagining of the Biafran War and its role in creating the Nigerian nation (Dalley 2013; Hawley 2008; Okuyade 2011). The concern on this particular episode of the creation of the Nigerian nation is present in novels either set during the Biafran war or recalling its aftermath such as Dulue Mbachu’s *War Games* (2005), Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Chimamanda N. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time* (2007), and Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). These narratives share stories of loss and war trauma linked to personal development in which the Biafran conflict shapes the individual experience of the bildungsroman which takes the center of the story. A feature that unites Nigerian novels about the Biafran period is that their young protagonists are forced to “acquire self-knowledge [and] comprehend the true nature of the Nigerian socio-cultural order in which they have to live as individuals and develop a *modus vivendi* in the ‘war’ in which they have been implicated as citizens, actors and victims” (Okuyade 2011, 142; italics in the original). In this vein, it will prove fruitful to clarify on the use of the word “war” in this context, which acts as an umbrella term to encompass injurious situations the protagonists have to endure ranging from physical abuse to labor exploitation and/or emotional neglect due to their sexual inclinations, ethnicity and gender.

Adults frequently become violent agents that dictate and perpetuate the disgraceful future of young victims who must endure social violence, political fraudulence, and family burdens associated with so-called traditions such as the continuation of ethnic legacy or the imposition of the heteronormative precept. Such critical view can be read as affective, as it prompts rage, shame, suffering, or even hope in a better future for the nation. My use of the term “affect” follows Eric Shouse’s postulate that affect is “what makes feelings feel” (2005, n.p.). In other words, affect is what defines and determines “the intensity (quantity) of a feeling (quality)” (n.p.). In this sense, affects can be read as social (Brennan 2004, 65), inasmuch as they are intensified forms of feelings and emotions “attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (Sedgwick 2002, 19). Hence, affect theory can be deployed to trace personal growth both in the public and private domains.

*Under the Udala Trees* narrates Ijeoma’s life from 1967, at the onset of the Biafran civil war, when Ijeoma relocates to a grammar-school teacher’s house and meets Amina, a Hausa girl working there as house girl, with whom Ijeoma will explore her (homo)sexuality. Both as an adolescent and as an adult, Ijeoma will have to cope with her wish to make her mother happy by finding a husband. The narrative moves forward until 2014, when President Goodluck Jonathan passed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which legitimized the demonization, persecution, and violence against LGBTQIA+ subjects in present-day Nigeria (UNHCR 2020). The novel places Ijeoma’s adult approach to her sexuality and the assaults endured by her LGBTQIA+ friends against the backdrop of a post-war Nigeria. In doing so, Okparanta traces a parallel between the belligerent attacks suffered by Biafrans and the hostile assaults towards queer individuals nowadays. Ijeoma’s affective and emotion evolution against such background shall constitute my focus of analysis in what I will describe as her “bildungsromance.”

Departing from the conceptual implications of the *bildungsroman*, I propose to read *Under the Udala Trees* as a “bildungsromance”: a story which traces the intimate and romantic life of a female protagonist from childhood to adulthood, and her emotional frustrations before her inability to reach the affective goals envisaged by the Nigerian family as a national institution. The premise of a “bildungsromance” is that, as a novel of development, it specifically traces the emotional journey of a female protagonist as dependent upon her affective experiences and romantic encounters. A “bildungsromance” follows such evolution and reflects how, as a consequence of her affective attachments, the protagonist nurtures critical thinking. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma’s experiences allow her to acquire a critical perspective both towards the idealization or romanticization of Nigerian customary laws and towards their

ruling of the public and private domains. In this sense, a “bildungsromance” does not merely focus on romance but on the de-romanticization or de-idealization of traditional practices and customary laws oppressing women. Departing from this, in the first section of this paper I will focus on the interval encompassing the Nigerian civil war and the immediate post-war years, from 1968 up until 1975. This period, which covers Ijeoma’s childhood and adolescence, coincides with General Gowon’s rule in Nigeria. I will examine Okparanta’s portrayal of the warfare situation and the feelings it prompts in Ijeoma, who intertwines her personal story with the retelling of the war. Since Ijeoma has her first romantic relationship with Amina during this period, I will sketch the initial steps of her “bildungsromance.” The focus will be on the impact of tradition being lessened during the war as a result of the socio-political state of emergency. The second section will deal with Ijeoma’s adult life from the mid-1970s, coinciding with the moment Gowon is ceased from power after Murtala Muhammed’s 1975 coup. This historical moment coincides with Ijeoma’s meeting her second love interest, Ndidi. Focusing on the progress of this “bildungsromance,” I will unfold how traditional practices and socio-cultural dictums re-gain power in a post-war context. As a result, I will discuss the affective and political tactics deployed to encourage queer assimilation into the Nigerian heteronormative reality.

## 2. Intimacy in Biafra: A Curse and a Blessing

Following the steps of authors such as Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, and Chimamanda N. Adichie, in *Under the Udala Trees* Chinelo Okparanta inscribes “women into the nation in complex ways that contrast with the tendency in nationalist rhetoric to invoke women primarily in simplistically symbolic (usually maternal) roles” (Gagiano 2013, 48). *Under the Udala Trees* offers a unique perspective among novels set in Biafra, as it is the first to introduce a self-identified lesbian protagonist. Okparanta thus joins other contemporary female authors such as Lola Shoneyin, Unoma Azuah, Temilola Bioye and Promise Okekwe as pioneers in portraying outspoken and visible lesbian characters (Azuah 2005, 130). Albeit following their steps, Okparanta is innovative in introducing explicit sexual encounters. This trait contrasts with novels published in the early 2000s such as Unoma Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames*, which also tackles lesbianism during Biafra, but does not explicitly refer to physical encounters between the protagonist and other women. In this line, Dotrova Pucherova analyzes Lola Shoneyin’s short story “Woman in her Season” (1997) as featuring a lesbian character whose fantasizing with is but “a substitute passion” or “the symptom of a loveless marriage and remains a fantasy” (2019, 109). Pucherova inscribes these instances as part of a writing tendency in which, before the 2000s, female to female desire was

“expressed as platonic desire, intimate friendship, or nurturing mother-daughter relationships” (109). Unlike Shoneyin’s and Azuah’s works, Okparanta offers a new way of narrating female desire and has her female protagonist openly discussing, describing, and reflecting about her emotions and sexual practices as she discovers her attraction towards women. This is precisely what marks this novel as a “bildungsromance,” since the open discussion of affects becomes an essential part of the novel. This section shall underline the relevance of affects in a “bildungsromance.” For this, I will analyze the impact of positive and negative forms of affect upon Ijeoma’s experiences during the war and its immediate aftermath. In particular, I will emphasize the role of customary law in exerting “negative affect” (Braidotti 2009, 50) upon Ijeoma’s relationship with Amina.

After a brief First Republic between 1963 to 1966, a coup, a counter-coup, and the Biafran secession, *Under the Udala Trees* starts with the first-person voice of a young Ijeoma who recalls the anxiety experienced by Biafrans in 1968, the second year of the war, as Biafra was losing ground before Nigeria. In the midst of this confusion, Ijeoma deftly links her personal destiny to Biafra when she explains that the very act of Nigerians bombing her village, Ojoto, has affected her own fate (*UUT*, 4). The young protagonist underscores that connection by stating that she might have never met Amina, her first love, if her mother, Adaora, had not sent her away in 1968:

there is no way to tell the story of what happened with Amina without first telling the story of Mama’s sending me off. Likewise, there is no way to tell the story of Mama’s sending me off without also telling of Papa’s [suicidal] refusal to go to the bunker. Without his refusal, the sending away might never have occurred, and if the sending away had not occurred, then I might never have met Amina. If I had not met Amina, who knows, there might be no story to tell. (*UUT*, 4)

Ijeoma’s reference to Amina highlights the relevance of affect as a drawing force in her personal development. As a result of the war, Adaora sends her off to be taken care by an acquaintance (*UUT*, 33). In underlining that only as a consequence of the war does she have the chance to meet Amina, Ijeoma hints at a positive side-effect of the conflict and the confusion stemming from it.

When it comes to the relevance of affect in African coming-of-age narratives, it has been claimed that such works portray a “variety of forces that inhibit or prevent the protagonist from achieving self-realization. These forces include exile or dislocation, problems of transcultural interaction, poverty, and the difficulties of preserving personal, familial, and cultural memories” (Kurtz 2012, 12). In my definition of a “bildungsromance,” I refer to the forces preventing self-realization

as influenced by “negative affects” (Braidotti 2009, 50) such as shame, anger, anxiety, or suffering. Rosi Braidotti underlines the pervasive impact of negative affects upon self-perception, describing them as “an act of violence, betrayal, [and] trauma” (53), which counter positive forms of affect such as love, pride, or empathy. In the context of Nigeria, Kurtz’s reference to personal, familial and cultural memories hints at the negative impact of social conventions and so-called traditional practices such as arranged marriages, polygyny, or heterosexuality. I thus refer to such customs as the source of negative affects against women’s exercise of their rights. In this line, Fatai A. Olasupo describes customary laws as tyrannical practices which “combine in different ways to suppress and repress women” (2013, 177). Olasupo specifically enumerates the acts of patriarchal tyranny as follows: “monopolization of traditional rule, despotism, [and] abuses of the institution of polygyny, religion, custom, tradition” (177). In this sense, I read Okparanta’s narrative as a “bildungsromance” which intertwines Ijeoma’s evolution with the gaining of knowledge on how to juggle with positive and negative affects. This does not entail that Ijeoma’s growth will be merely the result of her relationship with Amina, or other subsequent relationships she shall have. Instead, I use the term “bildungsromance” to describe the growth of the female protagonist as intrinsically associated with affect as a force of change which prompts the deconstruction of the social dictums behind Nigerian traditions. At this stage, Ijeoma’s progress will be the result of the power of the Biafran war in the formation of the self, and of her emotional attachment to Amina. Those events, illustrated through affinity, passion, commitment, and even pain and agony, prompt Ijeoma to discover traits of her character such as critical thinking and self-determination, crucial to evolve towards a free self.

It is in the analysis of Ijeoma’s affective and emotional flourishing where a duality between the war as pain but also as freedom emerges as a middle ground for individual experimentation away from the expectations and surveillance stemming from tradition. In the middle of the belligerent horror, Ijeoma narrates Yakubu Gowon’s blockade of the Red Cross food cargo sent to Biafra in 1968 (Mudge 1970, 258). This real episode is used to describe Ijeoma’s reflections on the changes taking place in her body and her realization that she is more interested in staring at the chests and skin of two girls waiting for the relief lorry than in the food itself: “beyond their skin there was something else that made me think: their chests. [...] Maybe it was a side effect of envy, or maybe it was a side effect of the awe I felt for them. Or maybe it was something else” (*UUT*, 35). At this point, Ijeoma has not fully realized her sexual orientation, in the same manner in which she is not yet fully aware of the hunger that will strike Biafrans in months to come. In this respect, it is no coincidence that her first experience of sexual arousal is set against the background of Gowon’s Red Cross blockade.

It is in this horrid war-time moment when paradoxically she is free enough to go alone to fetch food, to look at the girls and to ponder upon desire without being patronized nor controlled by her mother.

The first example of Ijeoma's experiencing a negative form of affect occurs when she is sent to Nnewi, where she spends a year and a half working as a house girl for a teacher and his wife until she is thirteen (*UUT*, 46). When her friend Chibundu goes to see her off, the boy causes a situation of uncomfortable heterosexual closeness. Ijeoma describes Chibundu's farewell scene as "pitiful", perhaps due to "the effect the war was having on him" (*UUT*, 43). As a gesture of charity, Ijeoma kisses the boy "giv[ing] him the kiss I knew he sought" (*UUT*, 46), and in turn provoking a sense of "awkwardness" in herself (*UUT*, 46). This non-desired act of sentimental and physical proximity gives pleasure to Chibundu but creates discomfort in Ijeoma. Significantly, the kiss episode is followed by horrid descriptions of the war as Ijeoma observes death and devastation from the back of the lorry taking her to Nnewi:

Decapitated bodies. Bodies with missing limbs. All around was the persistent smell of decaying flesh. Even if I was no stranger to these sights and smells [...], still I felt a lurching in my stomach. [...] For the rest of the trip, it was more of the same thing: more corpses, more soldiers marching, more chanting, all of the typical sights and sounds of a nation in war. (*UUT*, 48-49)

Her fragmented description loaded with affect in the form of loss and disgust is a response both towards the situation with Chibundu and to the dismembered bodies she is forced to look at. Soon enough, Ijeoma learns to assimilate fear, loss, and misplacement, negative affects which can indeed also be attached to the queer communities in African countries. The kiss and the lorry scenes can be read as a double violation, since an eleven-year-old Ijeoma is forced to accept the tragic consequences of the war while facing social expectations about her sexual behavior conceived in heterosexual terms at a very young age.

Okparanta further intertwines personal and public turmoil when Ijeoma arrives in Nnewi, where the war and national confusion set in motion Ijeoma's sexual and emotional awakening. Once again, the chaos of the war plays in her favor and allows her to explore her sexuality without maternal surveillance. The grammar-school teacher and his wife relegate Amina and Ijeoma to an independent hut, where they are not exposed to the same degree of surveillance that Adaora imposed on her daughter. The war propitiates Ijeoma's first encounter with Amina under an udala tree when Ijeoma goes to fetch kerosene because there is no electricity after a bombing near the teacher's house (*UUT*, 104). Described as "a shadow" that does not fade away (*UUT*, 104), which is there to stay, Amina

attracts Ijeoma up to the extent that “the moment [their] eyes locked” she knows she will not leave without her (*UUT*, 105). To further connect Ijeoma’s destiny with that of Nigeria, it is not until January 1970, the very same night on which Gowon declares that the Biafran war is over, that the first physical encounter between the girls takes place. As Ijeoma and Amina work together in the kitchen, the radio announces that Gowon is to make a statement (*UUT*, 116). Okparanta employs the actual words deployed by Gowon to declare the end of the war and the re-incorporation of Biafran territories to Nigeria: “citizens of Nigeria, [...] the so-called Rising Sun of Biafra is set forever. [...]. The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have the opportunity to build a new nation” (*UUT*, 116). Gowon’s offer to build a new nation, unpolluted by the offenses of the past, aimed to present Nigeria as a newly-born territory in need of protection and loyalty. His encouragement that citizens contribute to building the nation out of their common efforts hints at the power which social conventions and non-written norms are to re-gain in a new Nigeria. By the same token, those not contributing to the building of such a collective fantasy are to be punished. The very same night of Gowon’s discourse Amina and Ijeoma have their first sexual encounter (*UUT*, 117). Ijeoma describes how, without even thinking what was happening, “towels fell to the floor [and their] lips met” (*UUT*, 117). Unfortunately, their emotional entanglement threatens Gowon’s intentions as it threatens traditional and oppressive notions of Nigerian womanhood.

While Azuah has analyzed the scarce corpus of novels featuring lesbian characters and argued that those characters confront their homosexuality once they have undergone “rejection or humiliation” (2005, 138), Okparanta adopts an entirely different approach. Ijeoma’s acceptance of her of love and physical attraction to Amina comes as something natural. This hints at the initial steps of Ijeoma’s “bildungsromance” as marked by self-acceptance. The background of the war has created the circumstances for customary practices not to interfere in their free will. The embracement of such affect towards Amina is normalized and described with the same spontaneity, and passion as heterosexual love. After kissing for the first time, they start exploring their sexuality without censoring their mutual desire. Proof of this is that they joke about marrying:

“we might as well be married,” Amina said one day. [...] I mean that it would be nice to be married to you. [...] “Have you kissed anyone before?” I asked. She shook her head. “No. Not at all. Where would I ever have kissed anyone before?” [...] “What about you? [...] All this time it had been troubling me, feeling a little like a betrayal. Perhaps she would hate me for it, for having done this thing we did, this thing that was supposed to be special and only between

us, with somebody else. But I owed her the truth. I said “Someone kissed me once before.” [...] “I promise it didn’t feel as good as with you.” (*UUT*, 119)

This conversation evinces not only the innocence of two adolescents experimenting with their bodies but also the fact that Ijeoma’s only preoccupation is telling Amina that she once let Chibundu kiss her. Ijeoma’s lack of knowledge about censorship and customary laws allows her not to be troubled about whether it was a boy or a girl that she had kissed.

That Ijeoma and Amina’s first physical encounters take place the very first night that the war ends could be interpreted as the sentimental and affective union of both Hausa and Igbo, first through the intimacy of friendship and then through passion and love. The union of these two characters could have stood for a new beginning, an unprejudiced onset both in ethnicity, customary, and sexual terms. Such an inter-ethnic union, born in Biafra and consolidated with the alleged birth of a new Nigeria, could have signified true national reconciliation, just as Gowon promised. Yet, the girls are discovered after a few months into Biafra’s aftermath, when the teacher finds them having sex:

the whole incident was startling [...], and must have been startling to Amina as well, not only for our having to endure the discomfort of his looking at us in this way, but also for our having to endure the misfortune of being forced to see ourselves through his eyes. [...] Pointing to [the Bible], he cried, “An Abomination!” The word reverberated in my head. [...] Amina and I began to cry, deep cries that made our shoulders heave. [...] We were naked, and we felt our nakedness as Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden, at the time of that evening breeze. Our eyes had become open, and we too sought to hide ourselves. (*UUT*, 125)

This becomes a turning point in the “*bildungsromance*,” as customary laws abruptly interfere in their unprejudiced affective development. Referring to the Original sin, the teacher’s heteropatriarchal perspective casts a shadow on Amina and Ijeoma’s unpolluted affective growth. The reprimand he gives them can be traced to what Ahmed refers to as “the production of the ordinary” (2014, 43), as Ijeoma and Amina become “others whose proximity becomes a crime” (43) against the ordinary heterosexual subject. Here homophobia is disguised as a defense of traditions and the Nigerian family, and the girls’ intimacy becomes a threat to the ordinary, the normalized. The teacher turns into an agent of fear as the girls are pressured to see things through his eyes. His words aim to pass a hetero-national discourse of condemnation towards the girls, to socialize the youngsters, for creating a nation requires socializing citizens into conforming

to expectations which determine “the bases of inclusion and exclusion in the body politic” (Obadare 2015, 65). The judgment experienced by the girls, clearly portrayed as mesmerized before the accusations they receive, situates Okparanta in tune with other Nigerian contemporary female writers such as Shoneyin, Adichie, and Azuah, whose narratives of women desiring women urge readers to identify with characters who symbolize “human vulnerability, resilience, and complexity” (Munro 2016, 2). Thus, homosexuality is portrayed in a positive and sympathetic light that seeks identification and, very possibly, empathy on the part of the reader.

The characters are penalized for emancipating from Nigerian patriarchal dictums, in the same manner in which Biafrans were punished for emancipating from Nigeria. Their free exercise of sexual choice is a double-folded threat for the development of a new Nigeria. For their intimate choice does not suit Nigeria’s needs for complete emotional and ideological submission of Biafran citizens, who are meant to leave their hopes and dreams of a nation behind and collaborate with the Nigerian nation-building project. This is worsened by the fact that they are two women using their bodies for non-normative private and intimate pleasure, without experimenting guilt until instructed to do so. That they are interrupted and reprimanded by the teacher signifies that Gowon’s speech is but a charade, that good-old national values and constraints are to be reinforced and new beginnings are to be punished, shut down for pre-Biafran cultural and social practices to prevail.

As part of the national acculturation and “the production of the ordinary” (Ahmed 2017, 43) which takes place after the two adolescents are discovered, Ijeoma’s mother starts teaching her Bible lessons in 1970. The indoctrination resulting from those lessons provokes that Ijeoma finally decides “to ask forgiveness” while continuing to crave intimate moments with Amina, which in turn generates a “sense of guilt” (*UUT*, 71-72). Yet, Ijeoma quickly learns to question such a guilt. Adaora draws a direct interrelation between the contents of the Bible and what she considers Ijeoma’s duty towards Nigeria (*UUT*, 76). This is evinced in the lesson: “Leviticus 19: *‘Thou shall not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind’*” (*UUT*, 76; italics in the original). However, Ijeoma is unable to ascertain why and how this applies to her and Amina. Without even making an effort, Ijeoma’s incapacity to understand the lesson challenges not only the master narrative encapsulated in the Bible but the colonial interpretation of love and gender. The criticism Okparanta raises towards religion as a mechanism to oppress divergent groups is evident in Ijeoma’s asking herself whether “the entire thing was just a history of a certain culture, specific to that particular time and place” (*UUT*, 83). This background inscribes to the common trope of contemporary narratives dealing with LGBTQIA+ subjects in which families are

introduced as a “source of suffering [and] a site of oppression and hurt feelings” (Munro 2016, 11). In turn, Adaora’s teachings echoes those of Nigerian religious leaders who “construct a narrative in which moral decadence in the country, ostensibly epitomised by homosexuality and other forms of ‘sexual deviancy,’ is used as a scapegoat for the country’s economic and social problems” (Obadare 2015, 64).

As part of her “bildungsromance” Ijeoma learns to hide her positive affect towards Amina as a defense mechanism. Similarly, she learns to pretend that her mother’s negative affect has exerted an impact on her. Evidence of this is her answering “no” when asked whether she intimately thinks of Amina as she used to. In this aspect *Under the Udala Trees* introduces a well-recognized trope in contemporary fiction: the female protagonist’s self-knowledge is parallel to her understanding of “the true nature of the Nigerian socio-cultural order in which [she has] to live” (Okuyade 2011, 142). Ogaga Okuyade compares the true nature of the Nigerian socio-cultural order to a “‘war’ in which Nigerians have been implicated as citizens, actors and victims” (142). It can thus be inferred that any divergent, or non-conforming citizen, either woman, queer, or Biafran supporter, is to live in a permanent war against the customary laws they cannot or do not want to abide by. The trope of socio-cultural war becomes of double relevance in the novel, for it can be contended that Ijeoma’s experience of the Biafran war is later on substituted by the endurance of a metaphorical war against homosexuals. Arguably, the weapons of such a social war are negative affects encouraging assimilation and conformity or compliance with Nigerian so-called customary practices.

Ijeoma goes to boarding school between 1971 and 1975. Adaora knows that Amina will be there but she cannot afford to send Ijeoma to another school, thus the war plays again in their favor, as its aftermath becomes less of a burden and more of a stroke of luck. Even with the Bible lessons in her head, Ijeoma confesses: “I could not help myself. [...] We were in love, or at least I believed myself completely to be” (*UUT*, 150). Although love wins terrain in the war against hegemonic forces, its affective power only lasts for a year. Eventually, Amina confesses that she feels like the “fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness” (*UUT*, 155). Amina’s change of mind is the consequence of the influence which negative affects have exerted upon her. As processes developing “below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning” (Leys 2011, 437), affects should be conceived as acute and profound enough to be involuntary and uncontrollable. The impact of affect upon the body is such that it entails the “augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, xvi). Tragically, the scars of indoctrination are too deep for Amina. By 1974, the girls do not even speak to

each other anymore (*UUT*, 167), and, soon enough, Ijeoma learns that Amina is about to marry a Hausa boy (*UUT*, 170). This is traumatic for Ijeoma, as she feels rejected by her beloved, who lets herself be guided by Nigerian patriarchal and Muslim customs.

Nevertheless, this sentimental disappointment does not negatively influence her self-acceptance, for she does not share Amina's guilt. Although Amina stops reciprocating her, Ijeoma takes a step forward in her evolution towards self-completeness, a step which is put in motion after meeting Amina but which nonetheless does not depend upon Amina's will. Hence, Ijeoma's development is linked to affect but not dependent upon romantic stability. The protagonist's determination to stick to her beliefs and wishes allows me to read her personal progression not merely as typical of a bildungsroman novel but as exemplifying the notion of "bildungsromance," for affect towards another person is paradoxically a driving force of self-empowerment. Letting her incommensurable love towards Amina be her guide and principal opposition against institutional oppression, Ijeoma digests Adaora's Bible lessons without absorbing much. The intensified emotions stemming from her relationship with Amina lead Ijeoma towards self-acceptance and to develop resistance towards indoctrination. As a result of the pain, Ijeoma also learns that social forces will seek to oppress her desires.

### 3. "A Questionable Sense of Guilt": Democratizing the Private Sphere

After graduating in 1975, Ijeoma starts working in her mother's corner store in Aba. At that particular moment, the political landscape of the post-war was marked by Murtala Muhammed's coup (1975), which overthrew Gowon's rule. In turn, Muhammed's death in 1976 precipitated Olusegun Obasanjo's rule. This unstable political period coincides with Ijeoma's reframing her emotional and romantic landscape and thus with a new stage in her "bildungsromance." In my analysis of this stage, I will focus on the effects that negative affect exerts upon an adult Ijeoma, and on how positive affects such as love and passion neutralize the effects of shame and guilt. In this context, I will refer to what Anthony Giddens calls the "democratisation of the private sphere" (1992, 184) and to its being countered by the attacks against queer Nigerians. In turn, I shall argue that Ijeoma's individual evolution depends upon the establishment of personal affective boundaries.

Nigerian non-written norms dictate that a person is simply not considered Nigerian if they are regarded as sexually deviant, to the extent that in the early 2000s the then president Olusegun Obasanjo declared that homosexuals did not exist in Nigeria (Sogunro 2014, 58). In the post-war context of the novel, Nigeria could not afford further rebellions, and homosexuals were punished as

heterosexuality was delineated as the path conducive to procreation, the banner of true Nigerianness. As a result, in spite of Ijeoma's rejection of Adaora's biblical doctrines, her mother does not cease in her attempts to impose heterosexuality upon her. Adora's message echoes Christian and traditional religions in Nigeria which subscribe that "traditional ways should always be upheld" (Ehiemua 2020, 98). Non-coincidentally, it is precisely through repetition that social forms—the family, heterosexuality, and the nation—have become legitimized traditional institutions (Ahmed 2014, 12).

Ijeoma experiences guilt, rejection and shame as she is forced to idealize Nigerian beliefs and practices stemming from what Ahmed refers to as "the promise of happiness" (2010, 14). This promise stands for affective hope and follows a very basic principle: "if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows" (40). This is how heterosexual romance has come to function as a social glue which is to give instant gratification and social approval (Antwi et al. 2013, 6). The promise of happiness becomes a menace to Ijeoma's self-acceptance, as it comes hand in hand with fear of being discovered. The situation escalates when Ijeoma meets Ndidi (*UUT*, 184), a client in Adaora's store the protagonist feels instantly attracted to.

Interestingly, Ijeoma meets Ndidi when she is being supervised by Adaora. Ijeoma must then juggle her queer identity and her façade as a normative Nigerian citizen when she flirts with Ndidi before Adaora, who approves of their friendship as long as Ndidi helps her daughter to socialize her way into a husband. Ijeoma has already learned that silence is her best asset, and half-jokingly reasons that "going out with Ndidi seemed a good middle ground between what [she] wanted and what Mama wanted" (*UUT*, 185). This situation evinces that "the overlap of the public and the private realms have an immense impact on the redefinition of the concept of citizenship" (Oleksy 2009, 5). Soon enough, Ijeoma's connection with Ndidi defeats Adaora's imposed traditions:

I found myself overcome by emotion – warm feelings, feelings of affection, of happiness, of something like love; feeling of elation at being able to connect so intimately with her, at being able to elicit such an intense reaction from her. It was as if her pleasure was in that moment my own, ours, a shared fulfillment. (*UUT*, 200)

Love and passion shackle Ijeoma's guilt as part of the effect through which affects agitate one's emotions, senses, and even one's body (Brinkema 2014, xii). In spite of the conscious risk that being a homosexual in Nigeria entails, Ndidi and her unorthodox group of friends instill in Ijeoma a "sense of liberation that [she] had not until then known" (*UUT*, 193). Ijeoma's a "sense of liberation" in finding

new allies is in tune with Pucherova's description of twenty-first century African lesbian fiction as redefining the ideas of family, society and femininity in favor of fostering individual "freedom [as] a prerequisite for personal responsibility and social transformation" (2019, 111).

The power that passion and freedom exert on Ijeoma testifies to Giddens' claim that "the possibility of intimacy means the promise of democracy" (1992, 188). Thanks to Ndidi, and the intimacy they reach together, Ijeoma experiences support and gratification which accelerate her social emancipation. The possibility of rebellion arises out of the confrontation between shame and intimate comfort. Only when the latter is present, freedom can triumph through affective self-government. That possibility of choice is what Giddens refers to as the "democratisation of the private sphere" (184) in which democracy stands as a synonym of emancipated discussion (186). Intimacy thus allows Ijeoma to set personal boundaries and engage in dialogue with other queer fellows. This becomes central in this "bildungsromance," since dialogue leads to honest interchange of emotions, convictions, and beliefs not only with Ndidi but with other LGBTQIA+ citizens of Aba.

The democratization of the private sphere stands as a counter-narrative of the promise of happiness and the heterosexual traditional values it promotes. For this reason, as months go by Ijeoma is overcome by the emotions stemming from living with Adaora and having an affair with Ndidi. Aware of her contradictory thoughts and sensations, Ijeoma refers to her experiencing a "questionable form of guilt" (*UUT*, 201). This self-questioning, together with the coexistent negative and positive affects taking turns dominating Ijeoma's thoughts, can be read in terms of how feelings, affects, and sensations operate beyond the logical level, or rather the coercive heteronormative logics forced onto her. Ijeoma then starts what she calls a "witch-hunt" against herself in search of "self-purification" (*UUT*, 196). Two events accelerate her decision: Aba awakes to find a gay couple beaten to death and left naked behind some bushes (*UUT*, 205); and Adanna, a lesbian friend of Ijeoma and Ndidi, is burned alive (*UUT*, 207). When the incident concerning the gay couple is reported to the police, officers bark: "let them rot like the faggots they are" (*UUT*, 205). Likewise, when the neighbors discover that Adanna has been brutally murdered, they "seem to agree that all of it was necessary, [since] an example needed to be set" (*UUT*, 210). In this manner the persecution of the members of the LGBTQIA+ community takes its toll on Ijeoma, as anxiety and panic hinder the positive affective growth which had until now characterized her "bildungsromance." Ijeoma's dread is the result of her being subjected to "bodily regulations" exerted by Nigeria (Obadare 2015, 72), which stands for the homogenization of the body of the nation. In this sense, Giddens argues that a complete democratization of the private sphere and

the autonomy stemming from it “could not be developed while political rights and obligations were closely tied to tradition and fixed prerogatives of property” (1992, 185). This goes in detriment of what otherwise would be Ijeoma’s personal emancipation. In a different context, her development would stand as self-govern not only in her romance with Ndidi but in the public sphere, which Giddens suggests is a driving force for the democratization of the public domain (195). The process would run counter to the exercise of democratic practices of respect, equality, and individuality within affective relationships (195). Indeed, these democratic practices at the level of relationships can have implications in a larger community (195) if counter-discourses promulgated by customary laws do not hinder their development.

Right after such violent attacks, Ijeoma and Chibundu are reunited as he moves to Aba. Ijeoma soon realizes that her friend “still hold[s] a romantic feeling” for her (*UUT*, 211). This recalls the episode when Ijeoma witnesses death and decay after kissing Chibundu as a boy. Soon enough, Adaora entices Chibundu to propose to Ijeoma (*UUT*, 213). When Ijeoma tells Ndidi, she is shocked by Ndidi’s suggestion that she should consider marrying Chibundu. Interestingly, Ndidi’s relinquishing to the democratization of her intimate sphere echoes Biafrans’ surrendering before Nigerians’ incessant offensives. The attack against the queer community, together with Ndidi’s apparent surrender, constitutes a downside in Ijeoma’s “*bildungsromance*,” which is now dominated by frustration, fear and pain. Ironically enough, it is when Ijeoma feels stronger, supported by the community, and finally emotionally stable, that the brutal manifestation of conventional social norms prompts Ndidi to suggest a change in detriment of their relationship.

In 1979 Ijeoma starts having second thoughts and seeks stability in accepting Chibundu’s proposal (*UUT*, 221). Her desire of being at ease and happy are directly linked with discourses which bind the “reproduction of life” with “the reproduction of culture” (Ahmed 2014, 144), with the traditional family as a necessary agent in this arrangement. In the same manner in which customary laws are presented as constantly under attack in order to encourage their protection, the family is presented as threatened, vulnerable, in need “to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction” (144). Even in present-day Nigeria, Daniel Jordan Smith points out “the projects of marriage and childrearing continue to be a social effort, strongly embedded in the relationships and values of the extended family system” (2016, 47).

I read Ijeoma’s relationship with Chibundu as a self-imposed form of affective control that a homosexual character forces herself to undergo. Her decision resembles that of other lesbian characters in contemporary Nigerian novels by Abioye, Azuah, Okekwe, or Shoneyin, who live a double life as they marry and keep

their homosexual desires hidden (Azuah 2005, 131). Similarly, her self-sacrificing act is still a common practice in a country in which lesbian citizens engage in

self-censoring behavior [in] significantly and consciously altering their gender presentation to avoid detection or suspicion by members of the public and to avoid arrest and extortion. [...] Increasingly, they find themselves compelled to marry an opposite-sex partner, have children, and conform to socially prescribed gender norms. (Human Rights Watch 2016)

Ijeoma agrees to eventually accept Chibundu's proposal, not without pondering that "sometimes we get confused about what happiness really means. Sometimes we get confused about what path to take to get to happiness" (*UUT*, 221). This statement proves her awareness that the promise of happiness has pressured her into a heterosexual life. Her self-awareness becomes the banner of a "bildungsromance" to the extent that Ijeoma directly addresses the reader to underline the disastrous consequences of surrendering to the pressures of negative affects. Both the protagonist and her now ex-lover Ndidi have given up their hopes of democratizing their private sphere and have surrendered to the dictatorship of tradition. Unlike Amina, they are not brainwashed into following customary laws but scared into them. To Ijeoma, leaving Ndidi behind becomes the hardest sacrifice, and thus the one she must undo in an emancipatory act.

Eventually, Ijeoma manages to abandon her abusive husband in the late 1980s, only after realizing the life-threatening toxicity of their marriage. Ijeoma specifically refers to Chibundu as someone "trying to fulfill the dream despite the unpromising circumstances" (*UUT*, 231). Although Ijeoma suspects that Chibundu knows about her being what she now defines as "an abomination" (*UUT*, 231), he is unable to have the affective interchange that an honest conversation would entail. After having a baby daughter, Chidinma, Ijeoma insists on establishing personal, intimate, and physical boundaries and confronts her husband. Unable to cope with the disenchanting news, Chibundu's idealization of marriage turns into aggressive delusion when, referring to Ndidi, he exclaims: "before there was her, there was me. I just know that we will make it work. [...] You haven't tried enough. [...] And if all else fails, I really do want my son" (*UUT*, 285). Arguably, his anger and desperation are the result of not obtaining the promised happiness or reward of a wife and a son, even after following all the prescribed masculine, cultural, and social steps he perceives as actual laws. The promise of happiness is full of an "emptiness that haunts the subject in the very restlessness of its desire" (Ahmed 2010, 16). His inability to deal with affective disappointment stems from customary law not teaching him that Ijeoma could want to establish personal boundaries.

Before abandoning Chibundu, Ijeoma endures marital rape, which has been normalized in Nigeria to the extent that, even today, it is “commonly considered an oxymoron” (Smith 2016, 42). Unable to detach herself from the burden or tradition, Ijeoma ponders on the affective and ideological obstacles which hinder her emancipation. She sustains that both she and Chidinma are “choking under the weight of something larger than [them], something heavy and weighty of tradition and superstition and of all [their] legends” (*UUT*, 312). Thus, Ijeoma specifically voices that customary make-belief practices are the very cause of her disgrace. It is only when she has taken the resolution to leave Chibundu that she asks herself “why had it taken this long for [her] to act?” (*UUT*, 313). This statement shows a new stage in her “bildungsromance,” as she has now re-gained her critical thinking and the emotional strength to fight social expectations.

Okparanta’s narrative moves from Ijeoma’s abandonment of Chibundu to her life in Aba with Ndidi in 2008. Skillfully interconnecting the present and the past of queer oppression in Nigeria, Okparanta chooses 2008 to continue with the narration of Ijeoma’s journey, for it was in 2008 when President Yar’Adua proposed the Same Gender Marriage (Prohibition) Bill. Although Amnesty International denounced the bill’s flagrant violation of Nigeria’s constitution (2009), in 2013 the Jonathan’s administration passed the “Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act.”<sup>2</sup> With this act, customary laws turn into actual laws in order to prevent the democratization of the personal sphere of queer Nigerians. The law validates and endorses negative affects such as hate and shame, aiming to portray homosexuality as a moral degeneracy that threatens traditional African familial structures and African identity as well (Obadare 2015, 64). Okparanta denounces the effects of legalized violence by introducing a reference to two Lagos University lesbian students being stripped of their clothes and beaten “until they were black and blue” while the perpetrators shouted “666” (*UUT*, 317-318). This incident is used to introduce Chidinma, Ijeoma’s daughter, a professor at Lagos University, described by her mother as belonging to a “new generation of Nigerians with a stronger bent toward love than fear” (*UUT*, 317). Ijeoma explains that if Chidinma had been there, she would have stopped the aggression (*UUT*, 317), which suggests a hope in younger Nigerians. That Ijeoma is able to raise an activist daughter in such a context demonstrates that the protagonist is

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2 Section 5.1 illustrates how customary laws actually become legalized practices with the passing of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act: “A person who enters into a same-sex marriage or contract or civil union commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of 14 years’ imprisonment” (UNHCR 2020). For additional information regarding this draconian law and the homophobia and transphobia that it legitimizes read the report: “‘Not dancing to their music’: The Effects of Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia on the lives of LGBT people in Nigeria” (Bisi Alimi Foundation 2017).

capable of developing and passing affective strategies to overcome surveillance and the burden of traditions. This brings a positive note to the ending of this “bildungsromance,” as Ijeoma has transmitted positives forms of affect such as pride and empathy to a new generation.

The socio-political oppression that the Nigerian state exerts upon the LGBTQIA+ collective prevents Ijeoma from coming out as a lesbian in the public sphere, as this act would automatically put her life at risk. Yet, that Ijeoma does not specifically out herself in the Nigerian public sphere does not affect the positive outcome of her “bildungsromance.” That this act is not performed does not prevent her progressive self-emancipation. Rather, this particular trait of the narrative reinforces the need to change oppressive customary practices that dominate the Nigerian public domain. In the same line, the absence of a coming out act is present in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* (2018). This has been read as the novel being “interested in modes of privacy and publicness that are more complex than ‘out’ or ‘closeted,’ but that are unavailable to these characters” (Green-Simms and Munro 2023). This very same reading could be attributed to *Under the Udala Trees*, as Chinelo Okparanta choose to set her protagonist against the background of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act.

Curiously enough, it can be argued that the drastic attempts at imposing customary-law practices through law enforcement hint at a change in customs in which sexual freedom is becoming normalized by progressive sectors of the population. *Under the Udala Trees* ends on an evident promising note with regards to the democratization of the personal sphere. The message is introduced through the story that Ndidi tells Ijeoma every night before going to sleep. Ndidi whispers a tale about “a town where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani” (*UT*, 321). When Ijeoma asks about the name of such a place, Ndidi tells her it is Aba, then Ojoto, Nnewi, Nsukka, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Kaduna, Oba, Sokoto, and Onitsha, so that it becomes a different Nigerian city every day. In this manner, Ndidi’s bedtime story recalls Enaruna Edosa’s postulate that for Nigerians to feel a sense of belonging, the nation needs to foster “cooperation, understanding and unanimity” based on “difference in behavior becom[ing] less important” (2017, 184). Hence, Chidinma’s progressiveness, together with Ndidi’s bedtime story, delineate a hopeful future for Nigeria and the democratization of citizens’ personal spheres.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has explored Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* as a “bildungsromance” which depicts Ijeoma’s journey towards self-emancipation

as a constant battle against societal expectations, traditions and the pressure to conform in a Nigerian nation which rejects her queer identity. The novel deviates from earlier representations of female-to-female desire as platonic, thus introducing a shift towards more explicit discussions of lesbian sexuality. Such discussions are profoundly intertwined with notions of nationalism, emotions and affect. Okparanta denounces customary laws and religious teachings as sources of cultural indoctrination and negative affect exerting a negative impact on the evolution of Ijeoma, as she is forced to conform to social expectations not only to be accepted but to merely survive. When it comes to the relation between personal and political, the notion of democratizing the personal sphere becomes fundamental, as Ijeoma's self-emancipation is ultimately dependent upon the development of critical thinking towards the Nigerian public sphere and the establishment of personal boundaries in the private domain and against the public intrusions of social dictums shaming her lesbian identity. In this respect, it is not a coincidence that the novel was published in 2015, a year after the Same-sex Marriage Prohibition Act was passed. Okparanta explicitly refers to this when she states that *Under the Udala Trees* "attempts to give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history" (*UUT*, Author's Note). This, together with the hopeful ending of the novel, can read as Okparanta encouraging queer Nigerians to fight for the democratization of their personal sphere.

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