

# Gender Taboos and Homophobia in *Unoma Azuah's Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria.*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53982/gtj.2025.0201.01-j>

## Abstract

In sexual politics, queer is a concept that describes atypical sexual preferences and descriptive of a minority that do not subscribe to the conventional gender heterosexual identity. The Nigerian society like many other heteronormative societies is fixated in its delineation and acceptance of sexuality and gender. Non-conformity by anyone to the same means can subject you to any form of homophobia. Nigeria has a queer community. However, legislation in Nigeria still prohibits homosexual relations, prescribing as much as fourteen years imprisonment as punishment for this in *Nigeria's Criminal Code Act*. With diverse calls for the respect of human rights across the globe, Nigeria and Africa at large still cringes at the knowledge of a queer identity and treat same as socio-culturally alien. Thus, this paper examines the emergent concept of queer in Nigerian literature and the relationship between queerness and selfhood

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in *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* using the Queer theory. The study finds that, Unoma Azuah's portrayal of queer characters in her memoir and Unoma's several attempts at asserting her queerness as a personal identity is consistent with ongoing agitation for LGBTQ rights. It argues that Azuah's narrative is contextualised within a social space with structures that challenge queer as an emerging norm of being. The paper has therefore argued that Nigeria's queer literature and the possibility of queer's search for selfhood and domesticity in Nigeria is characterised by taboos and limits that attest to the complexity of the society and its espoused sexual norms.

**Key words:** Gender, taboo, queer, homophobia, selfhood, sexuality, Memoir, Lesbian, Nigeria.

## Introduction

In heteronormative societies such as those found in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular, sexuality and gender are considered a fixed phenomenon. That is to say, gender and sexuality are biological constructs. The Nigerian society like many other heteronormative societies such as Ghana and Uganda, are fixated in their delineation and acceptance of sexuality and gender. Non-conformity by anyone to the same means subjection to any form of homophobia. The society, for this reason, has little or no regard for persons who identify, practice, or depict any form of sexuality other than what the society considers the norm.

The Nigerian society frowns at any form of sexuality that does not align with that which it sees as being biologically inherited at birth. It is as a result of this that persons of other sexualities, such as homosexuals of any kind, find it difficult to negotiate their sexual identity or sexuality in a society that is dangerously antipathetic to any form of sexuality other than what the society accepts. Unoma Azuah's *Embracing my Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* written in form of her memoirs is her attempt at showing her humanity while negotiating her sexuality in the midst of people averse to same and her attempt at amplifying her right to self-determination and

existence in societies such as the Nigerian society in which she lived at that time.

The greatest influence that postmodernism as a system of reasoning has had on humanity, particularly in Africa, is in the area of sexuality. Commenting on the effects of postmodernism in the world with particular reference to the continent of Africa, Okon et al (2021, 173) postulate:

The movement plunged the world into a universe of fragmentation, with the Victorian principles abruptly rejected. New tenets reacting against some aspects of modernism emerged, and consequently, traditional authority became false and corrupt, morality became subjected to personal opinion rather than societal opinions and sanctions, liberal ethics, among others, were embraced. These gave rise to the propagation of deviant sexual choices, which dismantle the assertion of heterosexuality as the normative sexuality.

In other words, one of postmodernism's achievements is the redefinition of sexuality and gender by upsetting the traditionally held views on gender and sexuality by homophobic societies. This re-examination of sexuality is not without its glitches, as noticed in the writings of the author whose work is under scrutiny. For the lead characters in the text, this paper observes that, besides the society's non-acceptance of their supposed sexuality, they have found it difficult to negotiate their professed sexualities.

This paper examines the emergent concept of queer sexuality in Nigerian literature and the relationship between queerness and selfhood in *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* using the Queer theory as a framework. The study finds that, Unoma Azuah's portrayal of queer characters in her memoir and the several attempts of Unoma, the protagonist to assert her queerness as a

personal identity is consistent with ongoing agitation for LGBTQ rights. However, it argues that Azuah's narrative is contextualised within a social space with structures that challenge queer as an emerging norm of being. The paper has therefore argued that Nigeria's queer literature and the possibility of queer's search for selfhood and domesticity in Nigeria is characterised by limits that attest to the complexity of the society and its espoused sexual norms.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Several studies have examined myths and taboos related to sex and sexuality in Africa. These discourses around sex and sexualities in Africa are themselves shrouded in the complexities related to perhaps discussing prohibited subject matters Bamgbose (2001) avers that while sexuality remains an internationally significant subject of discourse in contemporary times because of its connection to reproductive rights and human rights; in African culture, open discussions about certain aspects of sexuality are often considered taboo, as cultural norms discourage teaching about sexual relations, leaving individuals to learn through personal experience. Thus, a taboo in African Customary Law is something that is forbidden or prohibited by the religion or customs of a particular people in a locality or society. It is prohibited from being breached on the pains of either punishment or the realization of undesirable consequences (Bamgbose, 2001).

Nevertheless, Ekotto (2021) avers that global relations, membership in the international community, and access to information have increased visibility of African LGBTQ communities. This enhanced visibility of the African lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community has not gone unnoticed. The voices opposed to its recognition and the protection of LGBTQ rights have also grown louder and more pronounced. These forces proclaim same-sex sexuality as an aberration to traditional African values. So much are the criticisms that most governments in Africa pass LGBTQ laws prohibiting the practice in their domains. Homosexuals are treated

with disdain and hate, or even stigmatized and lynched where possible. For example, the Nigerian government like most African governments has a law in place that makes queer relationships of whatever sort a crime. There is also that heteronormative structure of its traditional societies that considers same sex relationships an anomaly or a taboo thus making it difficult for anyone to publicly identify with queer practices. It is important to note, however, that much as we try to conform to tradition, the concept of sexual diversity is essentially an individual's choice and cannot be disregarded. This study examines and interrogates lived experiences of sexual and gender diversity in Nigeria as documented in contemporary fiction.

The issue of sexuality, particularly regarding African society, is a concept that is traditionally determined chiefly by one's sex at birth, gender expectations, and nothing else. Anything outside of this is frowned at and regarded largely as taboo. Thus, heterosexuality for a vast majority of the African population remains the norm and one of those things that Africans, for no reason, would compromise. It should be noted that this cuts across cultures, religions, and socio-economic strata. The African society without any form of western interference can best be described as homophobic in its outlook towards its members with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other queer sexual orientations. Same-sex relations in Nigeria is shrouded in controversy although these queer sexualities have been in existence for a very long time albeit practiced in secrecy (Obidimma & Obidimma, 2013). This establishes the presence of same-sex relations in Nigeria as an old act. Wariboko & Eluke (2016) argue that same-sex relationships are far from being compatible with African culture, traditional religion, and other religions practiced in Nigeria, like Christianity and Islam; their permissibility in Nigeria is far-fetched. This, Wariboko & Eluke (2016) suggest, forms the background for its prohibition in Nigeria.

Nigeria is largely a queer-phobic society and thus replete with anti-gay rhetoric across social, religious, and traditional groups. *Bisi Alimi Foundation* (2021) insists that this is responsible for the

well-documented discrimination, abuse, and violence meted out on members of the LGBTQ community in Nigeria. He insists that this discrimination is backed by legislations criminalizing same-sex relationships [that] encourage Homo/Bi/Transphobic attitudes and abusive behaviour. Obidimma & Obidimma (2013) point that the Nigerian constitution which says every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, however, contradicts the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) prohibiting same-sex marriage, relations and association in Nigeria. Wariboko & Eluke (2016, 38-39) pointed out that:

This Act, which was well applauded by the majority of Nigerians, aroused a lot of outcry from the International Community, Human Rights Activists, and persons who refer to themselves as gay rights activists. They see this Act as an affront to the constitutional right to liberty of homosexuals. The Act has been interpreted by different groups in different ways. It has been tremendously commended as well as criticized.

While these controversies remain, these realities are today represented creatively in Nigerian literature. In the essay, “The Dynamics of Sexual Repression, Deceit, and Coming out in African Homosexual Narratives,” Onanuga (2022) explores the homophobic attitudes that continue to militate against the coming out of African homosexual characters. He examines what he refers to as the agentic forced outings and self-outings among the homosexual characters of African narratives (Onanuga, 2022). Onanuga (2022) argues that these characters, because of their forced outings, experience varying forms of sexual oppression, and they end up being subjected to psychological oppression. Most of them, he continues, are forced into lying, cheating, and all forms of deception just to be accepted by society. Onanuga (2022) therefore insists that this desire for social acceptance is what leads them to knowingly suppress their sexual

identities while performing the heteronormative that the society expects of them.

Zabus (2008) in a paper titled “Of Female Husbands and Boarding School Girls: Gender Bending in Unoma Azuah’s Fiction” stresses Azuah’s (2005) potential as a third-generation fiction writer with the abilities to twist Western gender assignment by bringing to the forefront the potential flexibility of the Igbo gender system is not in doubt. Zabus (2008) bases her studies on what she says has been an age-old tradition. In Zabus’ (2008, 93) words:

It is my contention here that Unoma Azuah’s fiction was not created out of a vacuum but taps, possibly unwittingly, into the Igbo ancestral matriarchal past, the practice of female husbandry documented by cultural anthropologists (both British and Nigerian), previous West African literary attempts at representing lesbian seduction, as well as her own and her relatives’ participation in gender bending.

In Zabus’ (2008) study of Azuah’s (2005) narrative, Zabus (2008) writes that Azuah (2005) tries to unmask the inherent power of the peculiar figure of the “female husband”, a widow without male offspring who is allowed to take wives to bear descendants (as cited in Gutierrez, 2021) thus bringing to fore the themes of sexuality, in this instance lesbianism, inherent in Azuah’s (2005) work. Zabus’ (2008) argument is premised on the theories of the cultural anthropologists Sylvia Leith-Ross (1939) and Ifi Amadiume (1987) as captured in their works *African Women, a Study of the Ibo of Nigeria and Male Daughters, Female Husbands* in which they harp on the tradition of women who the society allowed to marry other women for procreation. The system was such that these “wives” were allowed to take in male lovers, have children who were, in turn, handed over to the “female husbands”. It is important to note here that these women did not in any way engage in acts inimical to their original sexual orientations. That is to say, they were in no way lesbians. They

were just women whose lineages were in danger of dying out due to lack of male heirs; thus, either the eldest daughters were urged to stay home as the “son” of the family, take in lovers and bear children, hopefully sons to perpetuate the family (Zabus, 2008). This Practice, as Zabus (2008) concedes, cannot be said to have either practically or subtly promoted lesbianism and by extension any other sexual orientation other than the norm.

In the crux of Zabus’ (2008) argument lies her conclusion that Azuah’s (2005) appeals to Igbo gender bending in introducing female characters (sex) being assigned what Western cultures would read as masculine (gender) roles of husband or son ... even if not inherent in Igbo culture as a normalized practice, is ground-breaking. Reading through Zabus’s (2008) analysis of Azuah’s (2005) work, this paper opines that Zabus’s (2008) work leaves much to be desired on account of her treatment of the issues of sexual identities and sexuality, thus the need for this work.

### **Taboo: Sexual Crises in Unoma Azuah’s *Embracing My Shadow***

Unoma Nguemo Azuah is one of Nigeria’s first writers to give LGBTQ issues consistent visibility in Nigeria. Azuah has won multiple awards for her book, *Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria*. Azuah’s (2021) comment in her interview with Brittle Paper about her history as an activist fighting for the safety of LGBTQ rights in Nigeria gives an insight into her ideological orientation to queer writings. She says:

Growing up, there were no queer models out there. I felt alone. Pushed against a wall, as I felt at the time, I had to “fight” back. I felt that somebody had to speak up. People had to start speaking up against the oppression of homosexuals. I had no means, but the only tool I knew I had and could use I used: writing (Azuah, 2021, 1).



*Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* deals with the challenges the author experiences growing up in Nigeria. She captures the details of the abuse, ethnic discrimination, and homophobia she experiences in a hyper-religious and patriarchal Nigerian society. The struggles she faces while growing up because of her non-conformity to the standard form of sexual orientation are all captured in the novel. Same as the complicated relationship her father and mother had, which led to her estranged relationship with her father. Azuah's (2020) *Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* is the author's professed memoir of her journey beginning around when she was six and began noticing the difference in her sexuality with that of others around her. It is important to note here that, besides the society as represented by her mother and the other persons she interacted with at school, during her service year, and at work, finding it difficult to accept her the way she was, Unoma too battled with accepting her sexuality for some time.

Though Azuah (2020) begins her narrative in the text with her escapades with Star at an all-female's school, it is as she recounts the story her mother tells of how she met her father that the reader notices that the crisis Unoma experiences with her sexuality and personality is deeply rooted in events dating back to the civil war and the period immediately after:

The war, her story, always made me conflicted, as if there were two people that didn't belong together living inside my being. My parents, a union that morphed into a monster that lived inside me: a lesbian. I bore my double consciousness like the mark of the beast: a burden I often wished I could strip away. I wanted to be one: one person, from one ethnic group, whole, straight, like everybody else (Azuah, 2020, 16).

According to Mitra and Majumder (2023), a person's identity is the total of their memories, experiences, relationships, and values

of self. It is all of these together with the external characteristics over which a person has little or no control, such as height, race, or socio-economic class, that form a person's identity. The confusion Unoma experiences with her sexuality, this paper argues, aligns with assertions such as this. One cannot help but also notice that the dysfunctional nature of her formative years contributed immensely to the crisis of identity she experiences beginning very early in life. Unoma, at a very young age, living at Umunede, would rather play with boys instead of with girls at her age.

At that point, she had already made a habit of playing a horse-riding game with the boys in her area, one of which is Ezekiel, a fourteen-year-old boy much older than her, since she was just six at that time. He would try to poke his penis inside her, lure her to an isolated space a few blocks away from their house, lift and place her on top of the garri bags stored there and hump away. Though she writes of the intense pains she felt in her groin area, thus; I did want to tell my mother at some point that he hurt me when we played, but I didn't want her to stop me from playing entirely (Azuah, 2020, 17). Funny enough, she also says, though their neighbours saw these things, they did not complain, so she too thought nothing of it (Azuah, 2020, 17). Even after she stopped playing with Ezekiel because of the pain he had subjected her to because of his desperate attempts to violate her, she formed a team of rat hunters made up of mostly boys. It is interesting to note that, unlike the other girls in the village who stayed indoors performing other chores and cleaning, Unoma preferred playing with boys to any of those things.

A close look at Unoma's problematic sexuality with her age also implicitly alludes to what the queer studies scholar, Stockton (2009) calls children's inherent queerness, or their capacities to grow sideways, outside accepted frameworks of knowing. Stockton also avers that, as the gay child emerges as an idea, it begins to outline, in shadowy form, the pain, closets, emotional labors, sexual motives, and sideways movements that attend all children, however

we deny it. A gay child illuminates the darkness of the child. Stockton's (2009) assertion, according to all purposes and intent, fits Unoma's condition. Of the many things Azuah (2020) captures in her memoir, if anything were to be considered a pointer to the crisis she experiences with her identity in the text, it will be that overwhelming feeling of rejection that always overcame her. This, she says, happened mostly when she was given yams and stew at her Uncle's without meat. In her words:

An overwhelming feeling of rejection overcame me. I thought about my father's people, who didn't want us because we had an Igbo mother. I thought about the strange feeling I had about girls, and how that seemed bad. I concluded that maybe I deserved what I got. I was unfit and of no value (Azuah, 2020, 56).

And the incident she experiences with one of her classmates at the University primary school. She narrates:

It was there I met two girls I really liked. One of them was Ihu. I had an intense attraction to her. Intermittently, I visited her, but I didn't realize how strongly I felt about her until we were sprawled on the floor of her living room, just chitchatting. My private parts tingled, and I suddenly leaned over to kiss her. She gently pushed me off and said, "I am sorry, but I'm not a lesbian!" I wanted to ask her the meaning of the word, because of the way she seemed alarmed by my attempt to kiss her, I knew the word was not something good. I felt so embarrassed and wished that the earth would open up and swallow me. ... The incident made me begin to think of who and why I liked certain people and not others (Azuah, 2020, 57).

It is worth noting that when Victor, a boy in their neighborhood at Nsukka, lured Unoma behind her uncle's garage and kissed her. Her cousins who were in the know did not call her a lesbian, they rather encouraged her. However, anytime she focused on the thought, something sinister hung over her like a dark cloud. Ihu had given her dark cloud a name, and she was determined to find out its meaning, for maybe she was possessed, she thought (Azuah, 2020).

### **Homophobia: Socio-Cultural and Religious Crises**

Perhaps, the most problematic aspect of the society persons of queer sexualities have to contend with is in their socio-cultural relationships. It is in this area that persons of non-heteronormative sexualities experience the most hostility. These hostilities, in most instances, begin with members of their immediate family before snowballing into the entire society's problem. The problems Unoma has to contend with begin first of all with her mother at the homestead. Though not in the know of her daughter's sexuality at this point, Unoma's mother can already begin to sense something was wrong with her daughter's excessive hatred for household chores and the remarks that follow some of their conversations.

At the homestead, Unoma was already beginning to experience some challenges with her mother's aversion to her indulging in what the mother considered male sports. To avoid getting into a fight with the mother as she records; whenever she dozed off in the middle of telling me a story, I would sneak off to our neighbors to play soccer with some of the boys that lived close to our neighborhood ... my mother would often find me at makeshift football pitches (Azuah, 2020, 52). Unoma claims to have been startled just about when she was to score on a particular day by her mother's piercing voice of disapproval:

She wanted me to stop playing soccer with boys. Instead, I was to hasten to the kitchen, wash the dishes, and tidy up. I was so mad. I dared to question

her why I was always the one being constantly called upon to do chores, to cook, to clean, and wash dishes, but none of that for my brothers (Azuah, 2020, 52).

As Unoma herself notes, she could not express the shock on her mother's face after she asked that question. If she had not torn into the wildest race of her life, the wrath she stirred in her mother was enough for her mother to beat her into pulp. In Azuah's (2020) *Embracing My Shadow*, Unoma begins to meet stiff resistance to her lesbian tendencies at the socio-cultural level from her mother. Her mother, who is not only a heterosexual but from all indications homophobic, despises Unoma's association with boys at every point. As Unoma herself concedes, it was at that age that I became more assertive. I also observed that my mother was quick to yell at me for something I did wrong (Azuah, 2020, 53). A list of some of the things her mother hated to see her do includes: sitting with her legs wide open and aggressively playing soccer with the boys. These are things considered unfeminine within the African society. Women are expected to carry themselves with decorum; thus, sitting in a compromising way is believed to send the wrong signals to males. Little wonder Unoma's mother would chastise her for not knowing her place. Unoma further notes:

I was always at loggerheads with my mother. I disliked domestic chores. I hated dresses. I would rather climb trees and challenge boys. My mother watched all these, hell-bent on setting me straight before the larger world sank its teeth into me. Try, she did. She was always either chasing after me or jabbing her chubby hands under the bed to reach me, where I hid. I was neither her first daughter nor last child, but between the two of us, we kept each other busy (Azuah, 2020, 53).

For the postmodernist theorist, these acts by Unoma's mother, which, from all indications, are a miniature picture of the heterosexual

culture in the text, are a homophobic way of denouncing the lesbian tendencies Unoma begins exhibiting at a very early stage in life, which these two women exhibit as unorthodox and un-African. This is evident when she says: it is that same behavior that led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the very same behavior... man lying with man (Azuah, 2020, 84).

Another incident of societal aversion to her sexuality, she recalls, is the humiliation she experiences at the hands of a senior student, Ano, and other seniors at the girls' college. She had approached Ano with the hope that she would accept her as a school daughter. Ano, besides scoffing at her, refers to her by very derogatory terms, some of which include "a fool". She also asked her to kneel next to her bedpost, saying: "See you, cockroach, you have such guts". And as if that was not enough, she calls on other seniors to help her deal with this puppy, this little lesbian that keeps following me around like a stray dog? (Azuah, 2020, 62). The seniors surrounded, pushed her head, and kicked her around. Some called her a "toad" or "useless goat" before they dispersed and left her to her shame. This incident, Unoma recalls, had a telling effect on her. Psychologically, she lost her balance. She says:

The day after the incident, I became somewhat withdrawn and ashamed of myself. I formed a routine of walking around on our large school field, brooding and reflecting on whether I was sick, to find myself often intensely drawn to women. I also wondered why my father left. He left me. I also wondered why my mother didn't visit often (Azuah, 2020, 64).

This incident, she concludes, awakened the poet in her. Her poems came in the form of questions directed towards God. When Unoma decides to flee the country for her safety, the reader understands it was due to society's aversion to her sexuality. While working for the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), she wrote an article on

homosexuals, and that became her undoing. She experienced the first homophobic attack when she was attacked by two men in a semi-dark corner at the Anthony bus stop under the bridge in Lagos State. This attack led her to contact Leslye Huff, who facilitated her move into a scholarship program in Ohio.

In Africa, particularly Nigeria, religious organisations wield a lot of influence in the way society thinks and debates over the issues of sexuality and morality. A lot of the homophobia, persons of non-heterosexual sexuality experience has its roots in the church or mosques. Wherever there has been any form of legislation against the homosexual community by political leaders or any member of society, such legislation in most cases began from religious centres of worship.

In addition to her depiction of the other challenges she experiences because of her sexuality, Azuah (2020) satirises the attitude of some so-called religious personalities and bodies in the text. For example, the Priest in Unoma's school who tells her not to touch girls, otherwise she would burn in hell, is seen cupping Chekwebe's breasts and kissing her to Unoma's bewilderment. In his *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx (1848) portrays religion as a tool of oppression and manipulation. Azuah (2020) in *Embracing My Shadow* has more questions than answers for God regarding her sexuality in the text. After her humiliating experience at school with Ano and the other seniors, her poetry is directed to God, and what she randomly scribbles down comes in the form of questions: *Why are we here on earth? Why are things difficult? Why do some have, and others do not have?* Questions never seemed to be answered by the end of the book.

She also does everything in her power to debunk the claim that everything can be fixed with religion and spirituality in the text, using her relationship with Nelo. They meet and fall in love at school. Nelo appears to be the perfect religious type from the outside. Her bed space at school is secluded. She is always seen praying the rosary

and is considered a perfect candidate for the convent. However, some of the raunchiest times Unoma has had with her lesbian lovers and those she had with Nelo. It is with Nelo that the first mulls the idea of their joining the convent as a way of escape, as evidenced in the following conversation:

“I want to give my life to God,” she said solemnly. “We can do it together. Call it our escape”. She dug her fingers into my short afro. “What are we escaping from?” I asked, pinching her hand. “The world,” She laughed and pinched back, she pulled away before I could reach out for another pinch. I told her I needed more time to think about it ... Inasmuch as I would be the happiest person on earth ... I wondered what I would do to achieve that (Azuah, 2020, 115-116).

Postmodernists everywhere believe the greatest opposition to consenting adult homosexuality and lesbianism in the world mostly stems from cultures whose religious leaning is either Christianity or Islam. It is these two sects principally that have scriptures that paint these sexual orientations as sodomy and punishable by God. When Unoma’s mother learns about Nelo through her diaries that her daughter may be into sodomy, she does everything conventionally and traditionally to exorcise that spirit from her. She begins by questioning her desire to escape with her to a convent when she does not have a boyfriend and is Anglican, not Catholic.

Her next move was to take her to a spiritist at Cherubim Ministries to have the demon exorcised from her. To Pastor Nwite’s prayers of “Get out of her wicked gods of the sea! Vamos!” Unoma wondered, “Gods of the sea?” “Another fool,” she muttered” (Azuah, 2020, 173). His prayers to her meant nothing. It is interesting to note during one of these deliverance sessions, Pastor Nwite would even try to rape her by claiming “your vagina is locked. I need to anoint it with oil and then break the chains in them” (Azuah, 2020, 176).



The reader cannot help but see the paradox in this scene and the bigotry these religious bodies play.

Another scene Unoma paints in *Embracing my Shadow* that also touches on the insincerity of the church or Christian community is her love affair with a mother superior during Youth Service days in the northwestern part of the country. She claims it was:

A loving and genuine connection ... We wine and dined at high tables, and I tasted the luxury of the reverent life. Bishops mansions. Servants. Huge kitchens. Resourceful cooks. Well fed. Content and swaddled in the soft cotton sheets on some of the nights, we soaked ourselves in the lavender-laced fragrance of the pillows. Restless, though cushioned in that cot, wrapped in each other's arms, The Fugees' "Killing Me Softly" serenaded our slumber (Azuah, 2020, 187).

Though Unoma takes quality time and flowery language to put together her love story with the mother superior, one cannot help but notice how she ridicules the religious angle of their relationship. This, the paper opines, is the postmodernist way of getting back at religion as a major antagonist of persons of non-heterosexual sexuality. As she continues: "The parts of our trips that became drudgery were the long prayers and masses. In convents, I couldn't focus. My eyes always found a way to settle on the rumps of sisters. With every salacious glimpse, I whispered a prayer" (Azuah, 2020, 187). Incidentally, it was this relationship that extinguished the desire to be a nun in her. As she emphatically states, "I was flustered. I was no longer sure I wanted to become and remain a nun. I did not want to have sex with women in the shadows of a church" (Azuah, 2020, 188).

A major reason why in African cosmology queer sexuality is looked upon with disdain is its perceived averseness to the family structure.

According to Benard Lombardi (2020), Africa's condemnation of sexual minorities is borne out of the fact that queerness is a threat to the African family structure, which African philosophy holds to the utmost regard and often presents as a metaphor for the African nation. This informs Unoma's mother's advice to her when she returns home on her successful completion of her mandatory one-year service to the nation. It was this that led to her parting ways with her mother. As she states, "My mother was happy for me for the successful completion of university. However, she was still eager to see me with a man. A couple of months into my stay at home, she practically kicked me out. Go and marry or find a job!" (Azuah, 2020, 188), she said. The next day, Unoma leaves home, not to marry, though.

As Unoma herself states elsewhere in the text, even her elder sister, who was obsessed with the idea of "marriage and motherhood," would taunt Unoma about how she would never find a man to marry her. So, when Unoma meets and tries to catch up with a college friend whom she had not seen in more than 20 years, after they exchanged pleasantries, he inquired about Unoma's husband and children, and she told him that she has neither children nor a husband. He became concerned enough to ask me why. Unoma told him that she was a lesbian. His demeanour changed. He told Unoma that her life is an abomination and proceeded to quote the Bible, specifically Romans 1:24, 26, and 27:

24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:

26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet (Azuah, 2019, 154).

She was so incensed by his judgmental attitude. This, she says, became a repeat of an emotional stress often triggered by a society that wants to police her body. She considered his lecture an attack on her sexuality, and it aroused in her a desire to defend herself against a conscious attempt to place sexuality at the point at which various systems that regulate the social (Azuah, 2019). Azuah (2019) says his refusal to reason with her made her understand how she had allowed for too long the doggedness the African society displayed in its insistence on heteronormative gender roles for everybody to develop into her having a low self-esteem and self-hate to grow in a homophobic society like Nigeria and became determined to fight her rights as a sexual minority. Also quoting from scriptures, she acknowledges that there are also biblical verses that speak to the likes of her disparaging schoolmate, like Romans 2:1: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself” (Azuah, 2019, 155).

## Conclusion

While the law in Nigeria still prohibits homosexual relations, prescribing as much as fourteen years imprisonment as punishment for this in Nigeria’s Criminal Code Act, Nigeria’s growing LGBTQ community, it seems, remains silent or abused as a result of their sexual preference. Irrespective of diverse calls for the respect of human rights across the globe, Nigeria and Africa at large still cringes at the knowledge of a queer identity and treat same as socio-culturally alien. Through the lens of Unoma Azuah’s memoir, *Embracing my Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria*, queer sexuality

is presented as a personal identity and also projected as a taboo, while Nigeria's socio-religious and cultural spaces are presented as homophobic. Herein lies the complexity of this gender taboo. The paper concludes that, the Nigerian society like many other predominantly heteronormative societies remain fixated in its delineation and acceptance of sexuality and gender. Thus, non-conformity by anyone to same presents complex possibilities that are inclusive of various forms that are expressive of homophobia (verbal abuse, exclusion, excommunication, ostracism, physical torture and even death) considering strict cultural and social norms that still question queerness as a form of being and continue to present limits to the agitation for rights in this regard for the LGBTQ in Nigeria.

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