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Article

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### BETWEEN FAITH AND DESIRE: A METAMODERNIST READING OF CHINELO OKPARANTA'S *UNDER THE UDALA TREES*

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#### Abstract

In contemporary African literature, questions of identity, belief, and belonging are increasingly explored through nuanced and emotionally resonant narratives. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* presents a compelling site for such exploration, particularly through the lens of metamodernism, a theoretical framework marked by oscillation between sincerity and irony, belief and doubt, tradition and transformation. This paper applies a metamodernist critical lens to examine the novel's treatment of same-sex desire, religious ideology, emotional authenticity, and maternal resistance. It explores how a constant tension between the inherited structures of faith and culture and the innate human desire for love, truth, and self-expression shapes Ijeoma's journey toward self-acceptance. Central to the analysis is the symbolism of the *Udala* tree as a site of love, resistance, and rebirth, representing both nature's solidarity and its role as a metaphorical refuge for queer existence. The study also foregrounds the role of motherhood, not as a vehicle for overt rebellion, but as a form of quiet revolution, where emotional sincerity and intergenerational hope become acts of resistance. Through its restrained tone, spiritual ambiguity, and symbolic depth, *Under the Udala Trees* reflects the metamodern impulse to reconstruct meaning without abandoning complexity. By situating Okparanta's narrative within a metamodern paradigm, this paper reveals how the novel navigates the emotional and ideological terrain of a society in flux, offering not certainty, but a resilient and ethical hope grounded in the sincerity of lived experience.

**Keywords:** Faith, Desire, Metamodernism, Udala Tress.

## **Introduction**

The rise of metamodernism as a cultural and aesthetic paradigm has provided new ways to read literature that oscillates between hope and skepticism, tradition and innovation, and irony and sincerity. Coined by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), metamodernism is not a wholesale rejection of postmodern irony but a dynamic movement between modernist idealism and postmodernist doubt. It marks “a structure of feeling” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p. 5) in which artists and writers are aware of fragmentation, yet still pursue meaning, effect, and ethical depth. This sensibility becomes especially useful when reading contemporary African fiction that resists reductive binaries and embraces emotional and cultural complexity. Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) presents such a narrative: one that delicately balances the tensions between personal identity and collective belief systems. Set in post-civil war Nigeria, the novel follows Ijeoma, a young girl discovering her queerness within a deeply religious and patriarchal society. While the novel is often read through postcolonial or queer theoretical frameworks, this study proposes a metamodernist reading that illuminates how the narrative mediates between competing impulses: faith and freedom, silence and expression, cultural rootedness and personal autonomy. Through a tone that is neither fully ironic nor wholly earnest, Okparanta engages in what metamodernism allows, a sincere confrontation with existential and societal contradictions. Ijeoma’s journey is neither a triumphant rebellion nor a tragic submission, but an emotionally resonant negotiation of values, beliefs, and selfhood. This oscillatory structure, characteristic of metamodernism, reveals how African narratives can evolve beyond the frameworks of resistance and postmodern deconstruction toward what Gibbons (2015) calls a “reconstruction of feeling,” a space where doubt and hope co-exist.

modernism was fuelled by an enthusiasm for utopian thinking and an enlightened idealization of reason, and while postmodernism rejects such optimism in favor of nihilistic irony and distrust, metamodernism is flavored by the simultaneous and paradoxical sense of hope and future failure. Irony in metamodernist writing is, therefore, not a derisive apolitical performance but unreservedly committed to both promises that the locutionary act sets forth, both the surface meaning and its intended opposite (32).

Thus, this paper reads *Under the Udala Trees* as a metamodern African novel, one that affirms emotional sincerity, spiritual yearning, and ethical agency even within a constricting socio-cultural context. It explores how the novel’s symbolic, thematic, and tonal elements reflect the metamodern sensibility of embracing contradiction while striving for meaning. While Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) has received considerable scholarly attention through the lenses of postcolonial criticism, queer theory, and feminist critique (Eze, 2021; Ogunyemi, 2020), little to no critical scholarship has explored the novel using metamodernist theory, a contemporary framework that engages affective depth, ethical consciousness, and aesthetic sincerity in the wake of postmodern fragmentation. Most existing interpretations emphasize the novel’s subversive engagement with Nigerian socio-religious structures or its contribution to queer African literature. However, these approaches often frame the protagonist’s journey as a binary conflict between repression and resistance, tradition and liberation.

This binary reading overlooks the emotional oscillation, spiritual ambiguity, and ethical complexity that characterize the novel’s deeper structure and tone, qualities that

align more closely with the metamodernist sensibility as described by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) and Gibbons (2015). Ijeoma's narrative voice, for example, is not marked by irony or rebellion, but by a profound sincerity that acknowledges cultural trauma while still affirming the human capacity for love, belief, and personal growth. There remains a gap in the literature regarding how such texts, particularly those emerging from the Global South, can be read not only as sites of ideological critique but as affective negotiations of identity, faith, and meaning. This study seeks to address that gap by reading *Under the Udala Trees* through the lens of metamodernism. This study contributes to contemporary African literary criticism by introducing metamodernism as a fresh theoretical framework for analyzing narratives that resist both the totalizing structures of modernism and the irony-driven detachment of postmodernism. By applying this sensibility to *Under the Udala Trees*, the research expands existing interpretations of African literature beyond themes of resistance and postcolonial identity, proposing instead a model of reading that values emotional sincerity, ethical ambiguity, and spiritual yearning. As Gibbons (2012) argues, metamodern literature is marked by "depth and affect."

Multimodality, in its most fundamental sense, is the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context. More generally, multimodality is an everyday reality. It is the experience of living; we experience everyday life in multimodal terms through sight, sound, movement. Even the simplest conversation entails language, intonation, gesture, and so forth. Indeed, many of its theorists have acknowledged that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a monomodal text... (8).

This is evident in how Okparanta's protagonist navigates her sexual identity within the deeply conservative frameworks of family, religion, and nation. The significance of this study also lies in its potential to reshape understandings of queer African narratives not as sites of unidirectional struggle, but as emotionally and spiritually complex journeys reflective of metamodern oscillation. Furthermore, it contributes to global literary studies by showing how African fiction participates in wider cultural shifts toward meaning-making in a fragmented world (James & Seshagiri, 2014). By positioning *Under the Udala Trees* within this evolving discourse, the study challenges the geographic and epistemological boundaries that have historically limited the application of emerging critical paradigms like metamodernism to African texts. It underscores the necessity of rethinking African narrative forms through global yet locally attentive lenses, allowing for richer, more textured understandings of contemporary literature from the continent.

Scholarship on *Under the Udala Trees* has primarily been rooted in postcolonial, feminist, and queer theoretical frameworks, emphasizing its subversion of heteronormative ideology and its critique of Nigerian religious and socio-political institutions. Scholars such as Ogunyemi (2020) and Nfah-Abbenyi (2019) examine Okparanta's novel as part of a broader tradition of African women's writing that challenges patriarchal control over the female body and sexuality. From this perspective, the novel's strength lies in its bold representation of lesbian desire in a context where such identities are criminalized and culturally suppressed. Similarly, Eze (2021) situates *Under the Udala Trees* within the matrix of Afro-modernity, arguing that the novel foregrounds the human need for belonging and spiritual coherence in postcolonial African societies. He explores how Ijeoma's journey reflects the collision of inherited colonial religious systems and indigenous understandings of identity and love. These critical insights underscore the novel's contribution to conversations around

queer African identity, religious trauma, and postcolonial subjectivity. However, while these studies enrich our understanding of the text's social and ideological dimensions, they tend to read the novel through the binary oppositions of resistance versus conformity, oppression versus liberation. Such readings, though valid, often overlook the emotional complexity, tonal nuance, and ethical ambiguity that define Ijeoma's interior world. The novel's power does not solely lie in its critique of Nigerian heteropatriarchy, but in its delicate portrayal of spiritual longing, affective oscillation, and emotional sincerity—elements central to the metamodern sensibility.

To date, there has been little scholarly application of metamodernist theory to African literature, and virtually none to *Under the Udala Trees*. The term "metamodernism," as developed by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), describes a cultural condition marked by the simultaneous embrace of sincerity and irony, faith and doubt, and hope and despair. Gibbons (2015) expands on this by identifying metamodern literature as an aesthetic that restores "depth and affect" in the wake of postmodern skepticism (p. 38). Though mostly applied to Western texts, the metamodern framework is increasingly recognized as a global phenomenon with the potential to illuminate literary expressions outside the Euro-American canon (James & Seshagiri, 2014). This study addresses a gap in the literature by introducing metamodernism as a theoretical framework for understanding the emotional, spiritual, and narrative complexity in Okparanta's novel. By doing so, it not only expands the interpretive possibilities of *Under the Udala Trees* but also contributes to the broader project of decentering Western applications of metamodern theory by demonstrating its relevance to African storytelling.

### **Metamodernism: Concepts and Context**

Metamodernism, as a cultural and theoretical framework, emerged in response to the perceived exhaustion of postmodern irony and the growing cultural desire for sincerity, meaning, and ethical engagement. First articulated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010), metamodernism:

Oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern (4-5).

Rather than choosing between the absolutist tendencies of modernism or the relativist cynicism of postmodernism, metamodernism occupies the dynamic space between these poles. It is a structure of feeling that captures the spirit of the early twenty-first century: hopeful, emotionally invested, yet fully conscious of cultural complexity and historical fragmentation. At its core, metamodernism is not a fixed ideology or aesthetic but a mood or sensibility, a way of being in the world that embraces contradiction without collapsing into nihilism. The metamodern subject, therefore, dares to long for connection, truth, and beauty while remaining aware of the precariousness of such ideals. Alison Gibbons (2015) explains that metamodernism invites "depth and affect back into fiction" and promotes a renewed investment in sincerity, empathy, and ethical imagination (p. 40). This movement marks a deliberate departure from postmodern pastiche and self-referential detachment, offering instead a reconstruction of meaning that is both critically aware and emotionally authentic.

In literature, metamodernism manifests through characters and narratives that wrestle with uncertainty while still striving for emotional coherence and moral clarity. Works associated with this sensibility often engage in what David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014) call a "metamodern form of realism," a realism that is stylistically experimental yet ethically grounded. This type of fiction resists finality or resolution, instead offering a sustained negotiation of tension between competing forces: tradition and innovation, belief and doubt, irony and sincerity. Within the African literary context, metamodernism provides a promising lens for reading narratives that are emotionally rich, morally complex, and stylistically fluid. Unlike the often-oppositional tone of postcolonial or deconstructive criticism, a metamodernist reading embraces the possibility that African literature can engage faith, love, and memory not only as ideological battlegrounds but as intimate, affective experiences. This framework is particularly relevant to Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, which does not simply critique Nigerian society but explores how one might continue to love, hope, and believe within it.

### **Ijeoma's Oscillation Between Faith and Desire, and Between Faith and Doubt**

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Chinelo Okparanta presents a protagonist who is suspended in an emotional and spiritual limbo—a space between the dogmas of faith and the urgencies of desire, between the absolutism of religion and the ambiguity of lived experience. This narrative tension exemplifies what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) describe as metamodern "oscillation," where the subject fluctuates between modernist belief and postmodern skepticism without settling in either extreme (p. 6). Ijeoma's journey is marked not by a decisive break from religious tradition but by a metamodern negotiation that holds both faith and doubt in dynamic tension.

### **Faith vs. Desire: The Body as Sacred and Sinful**

Ijeoma's same-sex desire first awakened during the Biafran War, and emerges not as a rebellion but as a quiet, natural unfolding of the self. Her feelings for Amina are tender, cautious, and imbued with innocence. However, these desires come into immediate conflict with the religious teachings internalized from her mother and reinforced by the Nigerian society. Ijeoma is taught to believe that homosexuality is a sin, a perversion of God's design. Yet her body and her heart testify to something else: love, connection, and wholeness. This contradiction reflects what Gibbons (2015) calls the metamodern tension between emotional sincerity and ethical conflict (p. 43). Ijeoma does not dismiss faith entirely; rather, she attempts to reconcile it with her lived truth. The novel never constructs faith and queerness as mutually exclusive; it dramatizes their coexistence within a deeply spiritual character. As such, Ijeoma's oscillation is not between sin and virtue, but between socially coded faith and privately embodied desire. Even in moments of apparent submission, such as her decision to enter a heterosexual marriage, Ijeoma's desire does not vanish; it retreats, only to re-emerge. This cyclical repression and resurfacing of desire reflects a metamodern emotional rhythm: belief is tested, desire persists, and the character continues to hope for integration.

### **Faith vs. Doubt: A Spiritual Reawakening**

While postmodern literature often deconstructs religion through irony, Okparanta approaches the subject with sincere ambivalence. Ijeoma does not wholly reject Christianity, even as she questions its interpretations. Her eventual re-reading of the Bible, where she finds no condemnation of her sexuality, signifies a metamodern move toward reclaiming

belief with a critical, personal lens. As she remarks: After reading aloud the contents of the posterboard, Mama said, “You really must understand that that kind of behavior between you and that girl is the influence of demonic spirits. I ne ghe nti? Are you listening?” I nodded.

“Satan finds a way to influence us all the way from hell,” she said. “But I will continue to pray for you, and you must continue to pray for yourself. There’s nothing that can’t be conquered when we receive Jesus as our Lord and our Savior.”... A week before I was to leave to board at the secondary school, two or three days after that last Bible study session, Mama turned to me again and asked, “Do you still think of her in that way?” I looked into her eyes, knowing better than to tell the truth, but I could not get myself to speak the lie. I shook my head. I forced myself to shake it with authority, making sure not to blink. It was the first time that I had lied to Mama. I comforted myself with the thought that at least I had not spoken the lie (83).

This is not merely a theological argument; it is a metamodern act of re-enchantment. Ijeoma neither discards religion nor blindly accepts it. Instead, she constructs a faith grounded in empathy and personal truth, exemplifying what James and Seshagiri (2014) describe as the metamodern desire for “continuity amid crisis” (p. 91). Ijeoma’s refusal to abandon faith entirely, despite its weaponization against her identity, marks a radical sincerity. She still seeks transcendence, not in the afterlife, but in human connection and personal integrity. This tension between inherited belief and inner conviction is the spiritual heart of the novel and the clearest evidence of its metamodern ethos.

### **Religion, Spirituality, and Same-Sex Desire in *Under the Udala Trees***

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Chinelo Okparanta intricately weaves the spiritual and the sensual, portraying same-sex desire not as an antagonistic force to faith but as a site of inner conflict and possible reconciliation. Within the Nigerian society, where Christian fundamentalism has been both internalized and institutionalized, same-sex desire is often construed as morally deviant and incompatible with religious doctrine. Ijeoma’s experience is emblematic of this collision: her awakening to desire is swiftly met with religious condemnation, not only from her mother but from the broader moral regime of postcolonial Nigeria. Much of the critical scholarship on African queer narratives focuses on the external social violence and institutional repression queer characters face (Epprecht, 2013; Nfah-Abbenyi, 2019). While *Under the Udala Trees* acknowledges these forces, it is equally invested in the internal, spiritual struggle of the queer subject who desires both religious belonging and romantic fulfillment. This tension reflects what Gqola (2010) calls “the spiritual dissonance of queer African womanhood,” a conflict not simply with the Church, but with a self that has been shaped by scriptural fear. Okparanta, however, does not render religion as a flat oppressive force. Instead, she complicates it by distinguishing between organized religion and personal spirituality. As Ijeoma grows, she begins to read the Bible not as a tool of judgment, but as a text open to interpretation and human compassion. She challenges the inherited religious narratives that equate her love with sin, asking:

The thought occurred to me: Yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But so what if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did that have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? Just because the story

happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. Just because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man? Infinite possibilities, and each one of them is perfectly viable (75).

This reframing of scripture exemplifies a metamodern approach to spirituality, not the rejection of belief, but its ethical reconstruction. As Gibbons (2015) notes, metamodern narratives often seek “a sincere spiritual and ethical grounding, even amid epistemological doubt” (p. 44). Ijeoma’s spiritual journey does not lead to atheism or dogma but to a deeply personal theology rooted in love and truth. This spiritual reclamation also foregrounds African-centered epistemologies of the body and desire. In traditional Igbo cosmology, for example, the concept of *chi* (personal god) allows for individual destiny to coexist with communal values (Achebe, 1958). Okparanta implicitly gestures to this indigenous spirituality as Ijeoma’s love finds meaning not in doctrine, but in lived, embodied experience. Here, same-sex desire becomes not a threat to spirituality but an expression of it. Thus, religion and same-sex desire are not binary opposites in *Under the Udala Trees*, but complex forces in dialogue. Through Ijeoma’s narrative, Okparanta articulates a spiritual metamodernism: one that refuses rigid theology and instead affirms belief, not as certainty, but as a felt search for meaning, a spiritual yearning that holds both faith and freedom in tension.

### **The Struggle to Belong and Believe in *Under the Udala Trees***

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Chinelo Okparanta constructs a narrative in which the protagonist’s emotional and spiritual growth is shaped by a persistent tension between the desire to belong to a community and the need to believe in oneself. This dual longing reflects what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) describe as the metamodern condition: an “oscillation” between contradictory poles such as conformity and autonomy, faith and skepticism, community and individuality (p. 6). Ijeoma’s struggle, then, is not just about sexual identity but also about locating herself within a cultural, spiritual, and emotional landscape that offers no space for her full self to exist.

I wondered about the Bible as a whole. Maybe the entire thing was just a history of a certain culture, specific to that particular time and place, which made it hard for us now to understand, and which maybe even made it not applicable for us today. Like Exodus. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk. Deuteronomy said it too. But what did it mean? What did it mean back then? Was the boiling of the young goat in its mother’s milk a metaphor for insensitivity, for coldness of heart? Or did it refer to some ancient ritual that nobody performed anymore? But still, there it was in the Bible, open to whatever meaning people decided to give to it (75).

The need to belong is inscribed in the fabric of Ijeoma’s upbringing. As a Nigerian girl raised by a devout Christian mother in the aftermath of the Biafran War, she is socialized into a religious and patriarchal system that offers clear rules for acceptance. Yet these same

structures mark her queerness as deviant, thereby rendering her longing for belonging a source of internal fragmentation. According to Ogunyemi (2020), African female characters often internalize a double consciousness, navigating between the expectations of the collective and the desires of the self. In Ijeoma's case, this double consciousness manifests as a spiritual and emotional fracture; her need to be loved by God and accepted by society stands in direct opposition to her same-sex desires.

Also, what if Adam and Eve were merely symbols of companionship?  
And Eve, different from him, woman instead of man, was simply a  
tool by which God noted that companionship was something you  
got from a person outside of yourself? What if that was all it was?  
And why not? (76).

What complicates her condition, and what makes the novel profoundly metamodern, is that Ijeoma does not fully reject her faith or her community. Instead, she remains emotionally tethered to them even as she questions their values. Her attendance at religious meetings, her conversations with her mother, and her silent prayers all reflect a longing for connection, not merely in the social sense, but in the spiritual and existential sense as well. Gibbons (2015) argues that metamodern fiction is defined by characters who engage in "a sincere search for meaning, ethics, and affective grounding in the wake of disbelief" (p. 44). Ijeoma embodies this search; she does not wish to escape her world, but to reconfigure her place within it.

Suddenly I felt an urge to pray. 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. Not a day had passed when I did not crave those things, when I did not find myself 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. I wanted to ask Him to guide me, to allow His word to echo in my heart. I opened my mouth to pray, but somehow the words of prayer would not come. It was as if they had become stuck in my throat. I tried over and over again. Still no luck. After a while, I stood up and took myself back home (66).

Her eventual act of reclaiming belief, interpreting the Bible for herself, embracing her queerness, and choosing to live authentically signals not a rejection of belief, but a metamodern reconstruction of it. This mirrors James and Seshagiri's (2014) notion that metamodernism allows for "continuity amid crisis," where identity and belief are not fixed absolutes but ongoing negotiations shaped by emotion, trauma, and moral intuition (p. 91).

We had been standing side by side, but she turned to look directly at me now. "All right," she said. "All right." This was an understanding. Discernment like tepid light, very understated, but an understanding nonetheless. And now she began muttering to herself. "God, who created you, must have known what He did. Enough is enough." Who knows how long she'd been deliberating it this way. She cleared her throat, and she finished: "Ka udo di, ka ndu di." Let peace be. Let life be (279).

By the novel's conclusion, Ijeoma has not fully resolved her struggle to belong or believe; rather, she has carved out a personal sanctuary of partial belonging, a life lived in openness with her daughter, even as societal acceptance remains elusive. Mama finally accepts peace, peace drawn from a need to accept the daughter for who she is, but not accept her way of life. This precarious but sincere stance is at the heart of metamodern consciousness: the attempt to believe while doubting, to belong while resisting, and to hope without guarantees.

### **Emotional Authenticity and Narrative Tone**

One of the most compelling aspects of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is its narrative tone, measured, contemplative, and restrained, yet deeply emotional. This tonal quality reflects what Gibbons (2015) identifies as a hallmark of metamodernist literature: a "reinvestment in sincerity and affect" after the ironic distance of postmodern fiction (p. 42). Rather than adopting an overtly political or polemical voice, Okparanta crafts a narrative style that privileges emotional clarity, inner voice, and quiet resilience. Through the protagonist Ijeoma, the novel offers a deeply authentic emotional register that sustains the reader's empathy without resorting to sentimentality. Narrated in the first person, the novel allows readers intimate access to Ijeoma's internal world, her anxieties, her hopes, and her fears. However, what is striking is the understated tone with which she recounts traumatic and transformative experiences. The narrative voice is devoid of melodrama; it instead leans toward a sober, reflective tone that paradoxically amplifies the emotional intensity of her story. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), metamodernist narratives often adopt "a both-neither approach," oscillating between detachment and deep feeling, between irony and belief (p. 6). This oscillation is evident in how Ijeoma simultaneously critiques and clings to the systems: religious, familial, and cultural that constrain her. Her tone is neither rebellious nor compliant; it is instead honest, tentative, and searching, allowing space for vulnerability without collapse.

She rose from her seat and knelt in front of her chair. I followed her lead, knelt on the floor in front of my chair. She rested her elbows on the chair seat, and I did the same. "Almighty God in heaven," she began, "protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away. Zoputa ya n'ajo ihe. Protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell. Lead her not into temptation. E kwela ka o kwenye na nlanye. Give her the strength to resist and do Your will. May her heart remember the lessons You have given, the lesson of our beginning, of Adam and of Eve." I faded in and out of the prayer, my thoughts of what we had read, of Genesis and of Adam and Eve, and of me and Amina, distracting me (66).

Her honesty at the beginning of Amina as a spiritual distraction changed to a force of reasoning and questioning her being, which is why, in the beginning of the novel, Ijeoma made an honest confession on how important Amina is in the narrative:

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 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 at all to tell (13).

Amina is presented as the reason for the story, but she did not forget to mention the different scenarios that made her to meet Amina. Another beautiful narrative captured by Okparanta is the instance when Ijeoma enters into a heterosexual marriage in an attempt to conform; her tone is not one of ideological betrayal or bitterness, but of conflicted sadness and hope.

Chibundu was staring at me, just staring at me. "What?" I asked in a whisper. He remained silent, but continued to stare... Some seconds went by. There was an awkwardness to it all. I knew Chibundu felt the awkwardness too. I knew that he bore the brunt of it. As well he should. He was, after all, responsible for it much more than I was... I felt distressed on his behalf—felt his distress as if it were my own. And so, after no more than a few seconds, I leaned in and gave him the kiss I knew he sought (46).

Her reflections are imbued with a kind of emotional realism that recognizes the complexity of choice within coercive structures. This honesty mirrors the metamodern ethic of emotional authenticity, which Gibbons (2015) describes as "the refusal of easy resolutions and the embrace of affective contradictions" (p. 45). Ijeoma's voice does not tell us what to think; it invites us to feel with her.

How would I face Mama when it got back to her that Chibundu had proposed and I had declined? She would be devastated, would most likely be heartbroken at the fact that I had passed up the life she wanted for me— and perhaps the only opportunity that I was likely to have with a man. And anyway, here was Chibundu, sweating before me, stammering, promising to make me happy. What if he actually could? What if I only had to give it a real try to see? Because when I thought of it, I did want to be normal. I did want to lead a normal life. I did want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out... I looked at Chibundu, I nodded, and, wordlessly, I accepted his ring. The next thing I knew, Chibundu was picking me up and twirling around with me in his arms, right there in the open air (192).

Ijeoma draws us to her fear and her desire not to be found out. Because deep within, she never wanted a heterosexual relationship, but the love she had for her mother and the way society would react drove her into accepting Chibundu as her husband. Moreover, the novel's tone contributes to a broader aesthetic of quiet resistance. Unlike protest novels that dramatize overt confrontation, *Under the Udala Trees* resists through stillness, through the act of speaking softly in a world that demands silence or rage. This tonal restraint echoes what James and Seshagiri (2014) refer to as "a metamodern ethics of care," in which narrative voice becomes a tool for ethical attention, not just ideological critique (p. 96). Ijeoma's story does not resolve neatly, nor does it collapse into despair. It ends with a tone of cautious hope; an emotional register that is neither utopian nor nihilistic but affirmatively metamodern. In this way, *Under the Udala Trees* offers more than a story of queerness and repression; it presents a narrative mode grounded in emotional honesty, ethical subtlety,

and tonal complexity. The voice of Ijeoma is the voice of a metamodern subject: one who yearns to feel deeply, believes tentatively, and narrates sincerely even when the world does not validate her truths.

### **The Symbolism of the Udala Tree: Nature as a Site of Love, Resistance, and Rebirth**

In Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, the udala (African star apple) tree functions not only as a physical setting but as a richly layered symbol of emotional sanctuary, defiance, and cyclical renewal. Through the presence of this tree, Okparanta inscribes nature with profound spiritual and political meanings, evoking a metamodernist sensibility that embraces emotional authenticity, ambivalence, and symbolic depth. As both a literal and metaphorical shelter, the udala tree is central to understanding how the novel frames queer love not in opposition to nature or culture but in alignment with them, thus challenging dominant religious and heteronormative narratives in Nigerian society. The tree first appears as a site of emotional awakening, where Ijeoma and Amina experience their earliest moments of intimacy, away from the prying eyes of a society steeped in war, trauma, and rigid morality. In this context, nature becomes a haven for queer expression, offering what cultural systems deny. As Eze (2021) notes, African literature has often turned to natural spaces to "explore forms of being and becoming that are repressed in social structures" (p. 118). The udala tree becomes such a space, where love can emerge unthreatened, however briefly. Moreover, the tree also embodies resistance. Though it does not speak or act, its symbolic endurance across Ijeoma's memory and development testifies to its function as a quiet witness and protector of forbidden love. In a society where the human-built institutions, church, school, and family are steeped in repression, the udala tree stands as a non-human ally, silently affirming what the world condemns. This environmental resistance parallels the metamodern shift toward re-sacralizing the natural world, not in a mystical sense, but as a deeply affective and symbolic domain. As Gibbons (2015) asserts, metamodern literature often "returns to nature not as pure essence, but as a site of ethical and emotional inquiry" (p. 44).

The motif of the tree gains deeper meaning as the novel progresses, becoming a symbol of rebirth and continuity. Though the physical space of the tree is left behind, it remains alive in Ijeoma's memory, guiding her spiritual and emotional reawakening. She eventually reclaims her identity, embraces her role as a mother, and builds a life rooted in self-acceptance. The tree, then, becomes an emblem of cyclical growth, echoing indigenous African cosmologies that view trees as ancestral presences and portals of generational wisdom (Ogude, 2019). In this reading, the udala tree is not merely a backdrop for narrative events; it is a metamodern symbol of love's persistence, the body's legitimacy, and the soul's endurance. It represents the possibility that nature itself bears witness to truth and that even when culture fails, nature holds space for rebirth. The udala tree thus functions as a metamodern aesthetic structure, holding together emotion, belief, memory, and resistance in the symbolic unity of a tree that continues to stand, grow, and fruit.

### **Motherhood and Quiet Revolution: Not Loud Rebellion, but Resilient Metamodern Hope**

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Chinelo Okparanta reimagines motherhood not as a static archetype of nurturance or repression, but as a dynamic site of quiet resistance and metamodern reformation. Both Ijeoma and her mother embody forms of maternal authority, yet they diverge in how they negotiate the cultural, religious, and emotional pressures surrounding womanhood and sexuality. While the mother initially embodies a rigid, doctrinal view of faith and morality, her later softening gestures toward what Gibbons (2015) calls

“emotional sincerity and ethical re-evaluation” in metamodernist literature (p. 43). Ijeoma, on the other hand, becomes a mother on her terms, rearing her daughter not in fear, but in understanding and truth. Through this evolution, the novel articulates a quiet revolution, not grounded in overt political agitation, but in the transformative practices of parenting, compassion, and emotional truth-telling. The traditional mother figure in Nigerian literature often serves either as the guardian of cultural continuity or as the enforcer of patriarchal norms (Ogunyemi, 1985). Okparanta’s portrayal of Ijeoma’s mother initially fits this mold. She is deeply religious, emotionally stoic, and resistant to alternative worldviews. Her efforts to correct Ijeoma’s “unnatural” behavior through scripture and silence reflect a culturally coded maternal responsibility: to raise children within socially acceptable norms. However, as the narrative progresses, even this rigid maternal figure undergoes a subtle but profound metamorphosis. Though she never fully embraces Ijeoma’s sexuality, she gradually moves from condemnation to muted tolerance, a movement that mirrors the metamodern oscillation between belief and doubt, rigidity and openness (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p. 6).

More radical is Ijeoma’s redefinition of motherhood. Her quiet revolution lies in refusing to replicate the emotional and ideological repression she endured. By choosing to raise her daughter in an environment of honesty, love, and self-definition, she disrupts the generational cycle of fear and silence. She does not stage a loud rebellion against her upbringing; rather, she performs a metamodern act of constructive reimagining, holding onto faith, family, and identity, but reinterpreting them through the lens of compassion. As James and Seshagiri (2014) argue, metamodern literature often performs “revolution through continuity,” forging hope from within traditional structures rather than by rejecting them outright (p. 91). Motherhood, in this context, becomes a metamodern site of cultural and emotional reinvention. Ijeoma’s maternal love is not idealized; it is cautious, protective, and self-aware. Her decision to live openly and to tell her daughter the truth about who she is reflects a belief in future possibility, a hope that the next generation may not have to struggle as she did. This hope is not utopian but grounded in the ethical ambiguity of lived experience; what Gibbons (2015) calls “affective realism,” a hallmark of metamodernist narrative ethics (p. 45). Thus, Okparanta’s vision of motherhood is both deeply African and metamodern. It honors cultural roles but interrogates the ideologies that underwrite them. It does not offer rebellion in the form of rupture, but in the form of resilient redefinition, a quiet, powerful act of claiming space, voice, and emotional truth in a world that demands silence. This is the novel’s most enduring revolution: not the sound of rebellion, but the pulse of metamodern hope passed from mother to child.

## **Conclusion**

Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* is a powerful testament to the quiet revolutions of the human spirit. Through its emotionally authentic tone, symbolic use of nature, and richly drawn characters, the novel transcends simplistic binaries of tradition and rebellion, belief and doubt, repression and freedom. At its core, the narrative performs a metamodern negotiation: oscillating between the modernist longing for meaning and the postmodern suspicion of grand narratives (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). The result is a work that embraces the complexity of identity and the fragility of becoming, without lapsing into either despair or naïve optimism. Ijeoma’s story is not one of triumphant resistance in the conventional sense. Rather, her journey is marked by spiritual searching, ethical ambiguity, and emotional sincerity, hallmarks of metamodernist fiction (Gibbons, 2015). She neither

wholly rejects her religious upbringing nor uncritically accepts her cultural conditioning; instead, she reinterprets faith, community, and love on her terms. Her decisions to live openly, to raise her daughter with truth, and to hold space for both belief and selfhood mark her as a metamodern subject, one who resists the erasures of ideology not through confrontation alone, but through redefinition and rehumanization. Nature, particularly the udala tree, emerges as a resilient metaphor for this metamodern ethic. It shelters, remembers, and symbolically rebirths the very possibility of love and life outside societal constraints. Similarly, motherhood, rather than functioning as a vehicle of moral surveillance, is reconfigured into a quiet site of resistance, where new generations may inherit not fear but possibility. Okparanta thus constructs a world in which even within the constraints of religion, war, and patriarchy, hope remains a vital force, not loud, but insistent; not perfect, but alive. Ultimately, *Under the Udala Trees* affirms that metamodern hope is not a negation of hardship but an affirmation of emotional depth, relational sincerity, and ethical transformation. It is in the interstices between doubt and faith, desire and duty, silence and speech that the novel locates its most enduring truth: that love, though often denied, can still take root, flower, and offer shade under the broad canopy of human complexity.

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