



**LESBIAN-SELF AND THE INTERSECTION OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN
NKABINDE'S *BLACK BULL, ANCESTORS AND ME: MY LIFE AS A LESBIAN SANGOMA*
AND AZUAH'S *EMBRACING MY SHADOW: GROWING UP LESBIAN IN NIGERIA***

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of lesbian-self and the intersections of multiple identities in Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* and Unoma Azuah's *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria*. Anchored in queer theory, particularly the concept of intersectionality as theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the paper interrogates how sexuality, spirituality, gender, culture and national identity coalesce in shaping the lesbian experience in Southern and West African contexts. Queer theory, which challenges heteronormative assumptions and embraces fluidity in gender and sexual identities, provides the lens for this critique. Intersectionality is deployed to understand how overlapping identities—such as being black, African, lesbian, female, and spiritual—contribute to unique experiences of marginalisation and resistance. The qualitative approach adopted utilises close textual analysis to examine the diverse self-representations and cultural negotiations by both authors. Nkabinde's narrative foregrounds the tension between traditional spirituality and sexual identity, offering insight into the complexities of being a lesbian sangoma in a society that spiritualises but simultaneously stigmatises non-heteronormative sexualities. Similarly, Azuah's memoir explores the burden of silence, shame and internal conflict within a hyper-religious and patriarchal Nigerian context, foregrounding how lesbian identity is both contested and self-affirming. By analysing these autobiographical texts, the paper reveals how the authors assert agency through storytelling and negotiate their identities within oppressive socio-cultural and spiritual frameworks. The paper contributes to African queer discourses by centring marginalised voices that challenge monolithic representations of African womanhood and sexuality. Evidently, it affirms literature as a vital site for identity reclamation and socio-political critique.

Keywords: Lesbian Identity, Intersectionality, Queer Theory, African Spirituality, Autobiographical Narratives

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Introduction

Queer identities in Africa remain a contested subject, often entangled in socio-cultural, religious, and political discourses that seek to marginalise non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality. The exploration of queer identities in African literature has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the wake of evolving discourses on gender and sexuality. While discussions on African queer identities often revolve around the tension between traditional cultural norms and Western conceptions of LGBTQ+ rights, it is imperative to recognise that African queer identities are not merely reactive but are shaped by complex intersections of culture, religion, gender, and spirituality. Queer theory, as a critical framework, provides the necessary lens to analyse these narratives, particularly through the concept of intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). Intersectionality highlights how multiple social categorisations—such as race, gender, and sexuality—intersect to create systems of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 139-167). Applying this theoretical perspective to African lesbian narratives provides a diverse understanding of how identity is negotiated in diverse socio-cultural settings.

In this regard, the autobiographical texts *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde and *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* by Unoma Azuah serve as critical case studies. Both narratives foreground the lived realities of African lesbians who navigate multiple, and at times, conflicting identities. Nkabinde, as a South African lesbian and traditional healer (sangoma), embodies an intersection of spiritual and sexual identities that challenges rigid societal binaries. Her life story accentuates the dynamic interplay between indigenous spirituality and non-conforming sexual identities, illustrating that African spiritual tradition in some cases, accommodates queerness (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 56). Azuah, on the other hand, presents a compelling narrative of growing up as a lesbian in Nigeria, a country where same-sex relationships are criminalised and deeply stigmatised (Azuah, 2020, p. 100). Her memoir illustrates the layered struggles of negotiating sexual identity within the confines of patriarchal and religious dogma. Apparently, the comparative discourse on the selected literary texts foregrounds the importance of intersectionality in shaping the representation of lesbian identity within literature. *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* emphasises the intersections of spirituality, culture, and sexuality in

the protagonist's journey of self-discovery, and portrays the unique challenges and triumphs of navigating multiple marginalised identities. On the other hand, *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* foregrounds the intersections of sexuality and gender, exploring the protagonist's experiences of self-acceptance and empowerment within the context of feminist consciousness and gender identity.

By situating these literary texts within the framework of queer theory and intersectionality, this paper argues that African lesbian identities are not monolithic but are deeply shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts. These memoirs not only document personal journeys of self-discovery but also challenge dominant narratives that either erase or homogenise African queer experiences. The intersection of sexuality, culture, and spirituality in these works reflects the struggles of African LGBTQ+ individuals in asserting their existence and legitimacy within spaces that often render them invisible or deviant. Furthermore, both Nkabinde and Azuah demonstrate resilience in their resistance to normative structures, offering alternative modes of belonging and self-definition that disrupt heteronormative and patriarchal expectations.

Through an intersectional lens, therefore, this paper aims to determine the ways in which these autobiographical narratives negotiate identity, community, and agency within oppressive frameworks. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on African queerness, feminism, and the politics of identity formation in postcolonial contexts. Ultimately, an examination of these texts through Crenshaw's intersectionality and queer theoretical perspectives deepens the understanding of how African lesbian identities are shaped, contested and reclaimed.

Lesbian-Self: Negotiating Sexuality, Culture, Spirituality, Gender and Resistance

The concept of the “lesbian-self” has been a significant point of discussion in queer theory, feminist studies and African literary criticism. At its core, the lesbian-self refers to the multidimensional, often contradictory, experience of being a woman who is attracted to other women within a societal context that is largely heteronormative. This identity, however, is not simply defined by sexual orientation but is deeply shaped by intersecting social categories, cultural contexts, and political settings. It is through these intersections

that the lesbian-self emerges as a complex, sometimes fragmented, but ultimately resilient construct. In examining this concept, particularly within African contexts, it becomes clear that the lesbian-self cannot be fully understood without addressing the unique challenges that arise from navigating cultural, religious and societal norms that view homosexuality as foreign or immoral. This paper explores the construction of the lesbian-self, with a particular focus on the intersectional dimensions of identity, culture and resistance, as seen through the works of Nkabinde and Azuah.

The idea of the lesbian-self, especially in African literature, has often been overshadowed by the pressures of maintaining heterosexual norms. African societies, deeply embedded in patriarchal structures and religious traditions, have long marginalised non-heteronormative sexualities. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) aptly argues, the narrative of African womanhood is typically constructed around motherhood, heterosexuality and subservience to patriarchal authority, leaving little space for sexualities that deviate from this norm (p. 10). In this context, the lesbian-self emerges as both a transgressive and a resistant identity, often constructed through negotiation with societal expectations. Queer theorist, Judith Butler (1990), contends that gender and sexuality are performative acts, meaning that the lesbian-self is not an inherent, fixed essence but rather something that is constructed through repeated acts and expressions in specific socio-cultural contexts (p. 18). Therefore, for African lesbians, the negotiation of selfhood involves subverting the imposed performances of heterosexuality while simultaneously negotiating cultural and spiritual frameworks that are often hostile to their existence.

The intersectionality of the lesbian-self is essential to understanding how it is shaped by various overlapping systems of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to address how different forms of identity—race, gender, sexuality, class—interact to create unique experiences of marginalisation (p. 139). In the case of African lesbians, this intersectional approach is essential for understanding how their sexual identity is influenced by more than just gender or sexuality. The cultural and spiritual contexts in which African lesbians live and love are fundamental to how they experience their identity. For example, in *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Nkabinde explores the lesbian-self within the specific context of South

Africa's indigenous spiritual practices, demonstrating how lesbian identity intersects with ancestral belief systems. The protagonist's (Nkunzi) journey towards self-acceptance involves not only confronting societal homophobia but also navigating the complex spiritual and cultural frameworks that both support and constrain her identity as a lesbian sangoma (traditional healer). The narrative illustrates the tensions that arise when queer identities challenge deeply entrenched spiritual and cultural practices, yet also shows how identity is reconstructed through these very intersections.

Similarly, in *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria*, Azuah's narrative projects the psychological and emotional toll of living as a lesbian in Nigeria, a country where homosexuality is criminalised and socially stigmatised. Azuah's exploration of the lesbian-self is a journey of personal introspection, navigating religious dogma, patriarchy, and homophobia within the Nigerian context. In contrast to Nkabinde, Azuah's story does not have the spiritual reconciliation with ancestral forces; instead, her lesbian-self is constructed through moments of self-reflection and psychological resilience, where personal agency becomes a key site of resistance. The societal pressures faced by Unoma, the protagonist, reveal the intersection of gender and sexuality in a highly patriarchal society, where women's identities are often defined by their relationship to men or their roles within the family. Thus, Unoma's lesbian-self emerges through resistance to both heteronormative gender roles and the pervasive religious and cultural messages that suppress non-heterosexual desires.

The lesbian-self in these narratives reflects a trend in African queer literature, where identity is often negotiated through the lenses of both oppression and agency. As Simi Linton (1998) writes, the formation of a queer identity is deeply bound up with both the experience of exclusion and the process of claiming one's existence in the face of that exclusion (p. 57). The lesbian-self, therefore, is not a passive subject but an active site of resistance, continually resisting the erasure or silencing imposed by society. In the case of both Nkunzi and Unoma, their stories represent a refusal to remain invisible in a world that often denies them existence. Their lesbian identities are not passive reflections of societal norms but are instead shaped through acts of self-assertion and self-recognition.

The role of resistance in the construction of the lesbian-self is particularly evident in the ways these women reclaim space in narratives that traditionally exclude them. For Nkunzi, her lesbian-self is not only defined by her sexual orientation but also by her role as a sangoma, a spiritual leader in her community. Her identity is a form of resistance against the normative expectations placed on women in her society, especially those that would confine her to heterosexuality. Nkunzi's engagement with ancestral spirits allows her to bridge the gap between spirituality and sexuality, forging a path where the two are not contradictory but complementary. This interplay between spirituality and sexuality provides a new model for understanding the lesbian-self in African contexts, where spirituality often holds a central place in community life. For Unoma, resistance takes on a more personal form, expressed through introspection and a continuous struggle for self-acceptance. Her lesbian-self is shaped by her ability to challenge societal norms, often at great personal cost. Unoma's narrative is a proof to the emotional labour involved in accepting one's sexual identity in the face of a society that categorically rejects it. The psychological toll of growing up as a lesbian in a homophobic society is immense, yet Unoma's character reflects how resilience and self-love can be powerful forms of resistance. Her journey suggests that the process of reclaiming one's lesbian-self in Nigeria is not simply about defying external norms but about resisting the internalised homophobia that often comes with living in a repressive environment.

Dialectics of Identity, Resistance and Belonging in African Lesbian Experiences

The discourse surrounding lesbian identity and the intersectionality of multiple identities has been extensively explored in queer studies, feminist theory and African literary scholarship. This body of literature highlights the intricate ways in which lesbian identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested within socio-cultural and political contexts. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework serves as a foundational lens for understanding how various axes of identity—such as gender, sexuality, race, culture and spirituality—interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and resistance (p. 141). In African literary and theoretical studies, scholars have emphasised the impact of colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and religious fundamentalism on the formation of lesbian identities (Tamale, 2011, pp. 100-120; Ekine & Abbas, 2013, pp. 80-100). These studies offer critical insights into how lesbian women navigate their identities in contexts

where non-heteronormative sexualities are frequently marginalised or outrightly criminalised.

One of the dominant themes in the literature on African lesbian identities is the historical and cultural erasure of queerness. Scholars such as Epprecht (2008, pp. 10-30) and Murray & Roscoe (1998, pp. 50-75) challenge the prevailing notion that homosexuality is un-African, providing evidence of same-sex relationships and diverse sexual practices in pre-colonial African societies. Their research debunks the myth that African cultures have always adhered to strict heteronormative frameworks, instead arguing that colonialism played a significant role in criminalising and stigmatising queer identities. This historical context is crucial in understanding contemporary narratives of African lesbian identity, as the colonial legacy continues to inform legal, religious and societal attitudes towards non-heteronormative individuals. Tamale (2011) further argues that the regulation of African sexualities through colonial legal codes has been reinforced by postcolonial governments, many of which uphold these imported laws to police morality and maintain patriarchal power structures (p. 105).

The intersection of sexuality and spirituality has also been a focal point in African queer literature, particularly in texts that explore how indigenous belief systems interact with non-normative sexualities. Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* presents an alternative framework for understanding lesbian identity within an African spiritual context. Existing literature on African spirituality and sexuality, such as Amadiume's (1997) work on gender fluidity in indigenous religious practices, provides a theoretical foundation for analysing how Nkabinde's narrative disrupts colonial and patriarchal assumptions about sexuality (p. 34). Scholars have observed that African spiritual traditions often contain elements of fluidity and ambiguity that contrast with rigid Western binary structures of sexuality and gender (Epprecht, 2008, p. 15). Nkabinde's account demonstrates how the lesbian-self can be reconciled with traditional spiritual practices, challenging dominant narratives that frame homosexuality as incompatible with African culture.

The role of religious fundamentalism in shaping lesbian identity is another critical area of

scholarly engagement. In contexts such as Nigeria, where Christianity and Islam wield significant influence over societal norms, lesbian individuals frequently face heightened marginalisation (Ekine & Abbas, 2013, pp. 80-100). Azuah's *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* provides a literary representation of this struggle, illustrating the psychological and emotional toll of reconciling one's sexuality with religious dogma. Existing studies on religion and sexuality in Africa, such as those by van Klinken (2019), highlight how religious discourses construct homosexuality as a moral and spiritual aberration, making self-acceptance a particularly arduous process for African lesbians (p. 45). These studies further emphasise how religious institutions act as gatekeepers of heteronormativity, reinforcing societal expectations that define womanhood through marriage and reproduction (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 21). Azuah's narrative aligns with scholarly arguments that religious fundamentalism does not merely regulate sexual behaviour but actively polices gender identity and self-expression, making it a crucial intersectional force in the construction of lesbian identity.

The intersection of gender and sexuality in African societies has been extensively analysed within feminist and queer theoretical frameworks. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity provides a useful lens for understanding how lesbian identities disrupt traditional gender norms (p. 28). In many African cultures, womanhood is defined through a hetero-patriarchal lens that prioritises reproductive labour and submission to male authority (Tamale, 2011, p. 110). The lesbian-self, by its very nature, challenges these normative expectations, existing outside the framework of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980, p. 648). Scholars such as Gqola (2015) have examined how African feminist movements have sought to deconstruct these patriarchal norms, arguing that lesbian visibility is a critical aspect of feminist resistance (p. 15). However, mainstream feminist movements in Africa have often been criticised for their heteronormative biases, failing to adequately address the unique struggles of queer women (Ekine & Abbas, 2013, p. 85). This exclusion further complicates the intersectionality of lesbian identity, as African lesbians must navigate both homophobia and the limitations of mainstream feminist discourse.

Class and economic status also play a significant role in shaping the experiences of African

lesbians, an aspect that is often underexplored in mainstream queer theory. Crenshaw (1991) argues that intersectionality must account for differences in access to resources, as class can mediate the extent to which individuals experience or resist oppression (p. 140). In the case of Nkabinde and Azuah, their respective social positions provide them with different forms of agency. Nkabinde's status as a sangoma allows her to claim a degree of cultural legitimacy, while Azuah's engagement with academia and literature grants her intellectual space to challenge homophobic narratives. However, as Tamale (2011) notes, many African lesbians who lack such access to cultural or intellectual capital face extreme marginalisation, as they are often economically dependent on families and communities that do not accept their identities (p. 100). This economic vulnerability makes coming out a more precarious act, as financial stability is frequently tied to adherence to heteronormative expectations.

Another critical area of African lesbian literary discourse focuses on the role of literature and storytelling in constructing and affirming lesbian identities. African queer literature has served as a powerful tool for resisting erasure and articulating alternative narratives of identity. Ekine and Abbas (2013) argue that storytelling is not merely a form of representation but an act of resistance against dominant structures that seek to silence queer voices (p. 88). The rise of African lesbian autobiographies and fictional works, including those by Nkabinde and Azuah, has created spaces for visibility and dialogue within African literary traditions. These texts challenge the notion that queerness is a Western import by situating lesbian identity within specific African historical, cultural and political contexts. The importance of literary representation is further underscored by scholars such as Arondekar (2009), who contend that the archive of queer narratives is essential for countering historical omissions and constructing new possibilities for identity (p. 38).

The scholarship on lesbian-self and intersectionality, therefore, draws attention to the necessity of an intersectional approach in analysing African queer identities. Rather than viewing lesbian identity as a singular, monolithic experience, the literature reveals that it is shaped by multiple, overlapping forces, including colonial histories, cultural traditions, religious discourses, gender expectations, economic realities, and literary representations. The works of Nkabinde and Azuah contribute to this growing body of knowledge by

offering deeply personal yet politically significant narratives that highlight the complexities of being a lesbian in African contexts. The literature collectively argues that intersectionality is not only a theoretical concept but a lived reality that demands diverse engagement, challenging simplistic and reductionist views of lesbian identity in Africa.

Empowering the Lesbian-self and the Intersection of Multiple Identities

The comparative analysis of *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* and *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* facilitates an exploration of how these texts reconstruct and represent lesbian identity within specific cultural and spiritual contexts. In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Nkabinde employs elements of magical realism and spiritual exploration to frame the protagonist's (Nkunzi) journey of self-discovery. Through mystical encounters with ancestral spirits and spiritual guidance, the text blurs the lines between the physical and spiritual realms, highlighting the profound interconnection between Nkunzi's cultural heritage, sexuality and spiritual identity. These experiences enable the protagonist to confront the internalised homophobia and societal expectations that constrain her, leading her to reclaim her identity as a proud lesbian sangoma. The use of magical realism becomes a powerful narrative tool that symbolises Nkunzi's emotional and spiritual transformation. It reflects not only her struggle against external societal norms but also her negotiation with ancestral forces that shape her identity. This spiritual and cultural reconfiguration emphasises the role of heritage in the process of identity reconstruction, ultimately illustrating how queer African identities can be re-imagined and affirmed within complex cultural and spiritual frameworks.

Nkunzi's self-discovery journey in the literary text is marked by a transformative recognition of intersectionality, an acknowledgment of the interconnected facets of her lesbian identity that significantly shapes her understanding of self. Her transformative experience begins with the development of intersectional resilience and empowerment. She believes that her identity as a sangoma intersects with her identity as a lesbian. She argues that if her dominant ancestor, Nkunzi, “. . . did not want me to be a lesbian I don't believe I would have had these feelings. . . Nkunzi accepts me as a lesbian” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 67). The recognition of her intersecting identities necessitates a resilience that enables her to withstand normative pressures and judgments. The resilience contributes to

her sense of empowerment, allowing her to assert her lesbian identity authentically and unapologetically within the intersecting realms of her womanhood, cultural background, and sexual orientation. The transformative experience of recognising intersectionality, however, leads to the formation of a holistic self-image for Nkunzi. Rather than viewing her lesbian identity in isolation, she begins to see herself as a multi-layered individual shaped by the interconnections of various identity components. Therefore, she is “. . . not ashamed of being a lesbian and a sangoma. . .” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 76). The holistic self-image is a foundation for authenticity and self-acceptance.

However, Nkunzi's self-discovery journey is knotted with the transformative experience of negotiating cultural expectations, a process that shapes her lesbian identity and advances personal growth within the context of her South African heritage. As a lesbian sangoma, she struggles with normative expectations deeply rooted in South African cultural traditions. Her coming out of the closet is a deliberate act of confrontation to the established normative norms and “People were surprised to see me in my traditional sangoma clothes and to hear about same-sex sangomas” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 78). The confrontation marks a critical moment where she recognises the conflict between her authentic self and the prescribed roles dictated by cultural expectations.

The transformative experience extends to empowerment through cultural synthesis. Nkunzi's negotiation process allows her to synthesise her cultural identity with her lesbian identity in a way that empowers her rather than diminishes her sense of self. The empowerment becomes a cornerstone for her continued self-discovery journey. However, Nkunzi's negotiation of cultural expectations spurs cultural evolution. Her transformative experience becomes part of a narrative that challenges and reshapes cultural norms surrounding sexual orientation. She is an agent of change that promotes inclusivity and acceptability of non-normative sexuality among sangomas. Therefore, her act of identity negotiation serves as evidence to her resilience and commitment to shaping a narrative that harmonises cultural identity with the authenticity of her lesbian self.

As a lesbian sangoma navigating cultural expectations, recognising the need for a network that understands and accepts her authentic self becomes crucial. It sets the stage for the

breaking away from the potential isolation that normative norms impose on individual characters with non-conforming identities. Supportive networks, therefore, are a source of connection, breaking the chains of isolation and cultivating a sense of belonging. When Grace introduces Nkunzi “. . . to other same-sex sangomas who lived some distance away from Soweto, in the Vaal area” (Nkabinde, 2008, pp. 122-123), she “. . . felt at home. . .” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 123). Connecting with individual characters that share similar struggles and understand the shades of her identity cultivates a sense of belonging and she decides not to attend “. . . heterosexual sangoma ceremonies anymore” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 123). The shared understanding is a powerful force in creating a supportive environment where Nkunzi's experiences are validated and embraced.

The “. . . Sangoma Coming Out group. . .” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 123) formed by Grace and Nkunzi becomes a space where Nkunzi's authentic self is not only accepted but celebrated. The validation received from supportive connections which the group provides contributes to a positive self-image and cultivates confidence in her journey of self-discovery. It provides emotional sustenance and encouragement and serves as a pillar of strength for Nkunzi. Therefore, her transformative experience lies in leaning on these connections during challenging moments, finding solace in the understanding and encouragement it offers. The emotional support it provides is a catalyst for her personal resilience and growth. Within the network, however, individual characters share insights, perspectives, and resources that enhance Nkunzi's understanding of herself and the world around her.

Nkunzi's connections become allies in the struggle for acceptance and understanding. Together, they challenge normative constructs, and contribute to a transformative shift in normative attitudes towards diverse identities. At every given opportunity, they make bold to say that “. . . being a lesbian was as African as being a straight person” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 121). Therefore, supportive networks serve as bridges between different communities, which advance understanding and connection. Nkunzi's transformative experience, however, is seen in her quest for building bridges that connect her cultural community with the LGBTQ+ community, and facilitates dialogue and mutual respect among normative and non-normative characters. Her goal is “. . .to help other same-sex sangomas who were being judged and oppressed by the sangoma community” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 122). The

transformative experience, therefore, includes empowerment through the unity of supportive networks. Nkunzi reveals that “Bongiwe taught me how to live a free lesbian life as a sangoma in Johannesburg” (Nkabinde, 2008, pp. 119-120), whereas “Hlengiwe has helped me to become a more powerful healer” (Nkabinde, 2008, p. 120). The connections, therefore, has empowered her to embrace her authentic self with pride. In a different light, the collective empowerment is seen as a driving force for positive change, both within individual lesbian characters' lives and in the context of normative perceptions.

However, Azuah's *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* adopts an introspective and psychological approach to explore the protagonist's (Unoma) journey toward self-acceptance within a culturally repressive context. Through deep moments of self-reflection and personal growth, the text ventures into Unoma's inner turmoil and the emotional complexities of coming to terms with her sexuality amidst the pressures of Nigerian societal and religious norms. By foregrounding individual agency and resilience, Azuah emphasises the significance of self-love, self-acceptance, and personal empowerment in the protagonist's path to liberation. The use of introspective narration provides an intimate portrayal of the protagonist's internal struggles, capturing the diverse process of navigating normative expectations and resisting cultural repression. This approach not only foregrounds the challenges faced by a lesbian woman in a heteronormative society but also draws attention to the transformative potential of reclaiming one's authentic identity. In line with the framework of intersectionality, Azuah's narrative illustrates how the protagonist's journey is shaped by multiple layers of identity, including gender, sexuality, religion, and national culture, all of which influence her struggle for self-determination and acceptance.

Unoma's self-discovery journey, however, is a transformative process of cultivating a positive self-image, and a crucial aspect that significantly shapes her understanding of her lesbian identity. The cultivation of a positive self-image starts with her acknowledgment of her uniqueness. Commenting on her relationship with Ukamaka, Unoma says: “. . . there were rumours that we were lovers, but we were not fazed by that” (Azuah, 2020, p. 122). She recognises that her lesbian identity is a distinctive and integral aspect of who she is, which contributes to the richness of her individuality. The acknowledgment lays the

foundation for a positive self-image. Unoma's journey involves a transformative shift in perspective, from seeing her lesbian identity as potentially stigmatised to celebrating it. Her relationship with Ukamaka "...did something to my self-esteem; it soared" (Azuah, 2020, p. 122). The shift is marked by a conscious decision to view her identity positively, and appreciates the diversity it brings to her overall self.

The cultivation of a positive self-image also includes the use of affirmations and positive reflection. Unoma recalls an incident that reinforces positive thoughts about her lesbian identity. It is the words of the medicine man that has looked into her future: "this child will neither marry a man as a life partner, nor bear children" (Azuah, 2020, p. 106). Affirming her worth, beauty, and validity as a lesbian woman becomes a daily ritual that contributes to a positive self-perception. Unoma actively surrounds herself with positivity, and seeks out supportive environments, relationships, and communities that uplift and affirm her lesbian identity unlike the character of Ona who seems to be living a cover up life "...for whatever deeper meaning and desires" (Azuah, 2020, p. 168) she seeks. Creating a social and emotional ecosystem that advances positivity becomes an essential component of her self-discovery journey. A transformative aspect of cultivating a positive self-image is the redefinition of beauty and identity. Unoma challenges normative norms and standards, creating her own definition of beauty and romantic attraction that align with her authentic self: "my eyes shot straight to her supple breasts...her curvy body looked like well-carved wood; it was tantalizing like aesthetically pleasing work of art" (Azuah, 2020, p. 152).

However, Unoma integrates her lesbian identity seamlessly into her overall self-concept. Rather than viewing it as a separate or isolating aspect, she sees her lesbian identity as an integral part of the beautiful mosaic that makes up her entire being. Unoma comes about the conviction after she learns from her grandmother the words of the medicine man: "What makes your life worthwhile may not make the life of another worthwhile. We can't all have the same path. This is her destiny, and you can't say it is not good as any others" (Azuah, 2020, p. 107). The integration, therefore, brings to limelight a holistic and positive self-image. Unoma grows to express her lesbian identity creatively through literature that allows her to celebrate and portray the beauty of her identity. "Though I never discussed my love for girls with Mr. Ogugua, he was more accepting of me, especially when he read the

poems I dedicated to the girls in school. He would call my poems beautiful and not ask me personal questions” (Azuah, 2020, p. 80). For Unoma, creative expression becomes a transformative outlet for reinforcing positive self-perceptions.

Cultivating a positive self-image entails championing individuality. Unoma embraces her lesbian identity as a unique and valuable aspect of her individual self. The championing of individuality creates a sense of pride and confidence in her self-discovery journey. Unoma's positive self-image is fortified by resilience against external judgments. She learns to shield herself from negative external influences that challenge her self-perception. The resilience becomes a protective factor, allowing her to navigate the world with confidence. The transformative experience of cultivating a positive self-image positively impacts Unoma's overall well-being and mental health. A healthy self-image contributes to increased self-esteem, reduced stress, and a resilient mind-set, enhancing her ability to traverse challenges and setbacks.

Unoma's journey entails a transformative process of harmonising dual identities, particularly in the context of her lesbian identity coexisting with other facets of her being. The transformative experience begins with Unoma's acknowledgment of the multiplicity of her identities. She recognises that being a lesbian is just one aspect of her diverse and multi-layered self. The acknowledgment sets the stage for harmonisation. Unoma explores the interconnectedness of her various identities. Instead of viewing her lesbian identity in isolation, she examines how it intertwines with elements such as her cultural background, personal beliefs, and other defining aspects of who she is.

The transformative journey entails recognising the concept of intersectionality. Unoma understands that her identities intersect and influence each other. The recognition prompts her to negotiate the interplay between being a lesbian and other dimensions of her identity. Unoma struggles with internal tensions arising from conflicting aspects of her identity. Being a Christian, she “didn't want to have sex with women in the shadows of a church” (Azuah, 2020, p. 188). The transformative process involves actively working towards resolving these tensions, and seeking a balance that allows her to authentically embrace all facets of herself. Therefore, Unoma negotiates cultural expectations that conflict with her

lesbian identity. She “...asked my mother if she believed that I was under the spell of water spirits” (Azuah, 2020, p. 179). Unoma is curious to finding common ground and understanding how her cultural background coexists harmoniously with her authentic self. Her mother replies that “If you are under any spell of any water spirit, it is not a bad spell. I just want you to marry the man of your dreams, have children like every other woman and be happy” (Azuah, 2020, p. 179). The negotiation, however, becomes a key aspect of harmonising her identities.

Unoma's journey also involves a transformative process of steering romantic relationships within the context of her lesbian identity. As an aspect of her self-discovery, it is crucial and influences her understanding of love, connection, and authenticity. In regards to her romantic relationship with Nelo, Unoma admits that “My whole body responded to her, and it was scary; something I couldn't explain. My attraction to her was intense” (Azuah, 2020, p. 84). Steering romantic relationships begins with the discovery of Unoma's authentic desires because “...I couldn't believe that my fantasy of her wanting me as much as I wanted her was possible...All the comfort and peace I sought, I seemed to have found here, on her thigh” (Azuah, 2020, p. 84). The transformative process entails understanding her genuine emotional and romantic inclinations, which provides a foundation for forming meaningful connections. Engaging in romantic relationships requires Unoma to explore vulnerability. She reveals that when she “...first met Star and had a crush on her, I was eager to explore my attraction to her. She made me feel comfortable with discovering parts of my body that lit up at her touch...She opened me up to love” (Azuah, 2020, p. 67). The transformative experience allows her to be open and exposed emotionally, and shares her authentic self with a romantic partner. Unoma admits that with Star, she “...started a relationship, but I didn't see us as exclusive because I wanted to meet other people and make more friends” (Azuah, 2020, p. 67). The exploration advances an understanding of herself and her capacity for intimacy.

Unoma steers romantic relationships with a focus on alignment with her personal values. The transformative aspect involves consciously choosing partners and dynamics that resonate with her beliefs, which creates a sense of authenticity and integrity in her romantic experiences. In relation to her friendship with Ng on campus, Unoma reveals that if she tells

her that she likes girls, “...it might make her accept me as something more than a friend. But I worried about rejection...” (Azuah, 2020, p. 139). Steering romantic relationships, therefore, necessitates the negotiation of expectations. Unoma undergoes a transformative process of clearly communicating her needs, desires, and boundaries, and cultivates a healthy dynamic built on mutual understanding and respect. Before she engages on a romantic relationship with Girlie, she informs her that “I always found dancing with women erotic” (Azuah, 2020, p. 201). Unoma “...had to be cautious about how I approached them because my past experiences of being yelled at or slammed with the bible when I tried to be seductive always left me feeling like a thief caught in the middle of the act” (Azuah, 2020, p. 201). Romantic relationships become a platform for Unoma to confront societal norms surrounding same-sex relationships. The transformative experience entails challenging external judgments and normative expectations, which cultivates resilience and self-advocacy in her pursuit of authentic love. It is so because “At the end of the dance, we found a place and smooched. That became our routine until the workshop ended” (Azuah, 2020, p. 202).

Unoma engages in open communication, vulnerability, and emotional sharing, creating a connection with her partners which contributes to her overall self-discovery. She steers romantic relationships with a mindset of celebrating love in its diverse forms. She “...did imagine a scenario where a queen and a queen would be crowned as royalties of the day...” (Azuah, 2020, p. 141). It is spurred after she witnesses when “A female student was crowned queen, while a male student was crowned king” (Azuah, 2020, p. 141) during students' celebration of “. . .Ofala day” (Azuah, 2020, p. 141) on campus “. . .as it would be done in a traditional village setting” (Azuah, 2020, p. 141). The transformative perspective entails embracing the uniqueness of her lesbian relationships, and promoting a positive and affirming approach to love that transcends normative norms. Same-sex romantic relationships present challenges due to societal prejudices or personal struggles but Unoma's transformative experience builds on resilience, and facing challenges head-on. Each romantic relationship becomes a catalyst for personal growth. Unoma learns more about herself through the dynamics of love and partnership, which contributes to her ongoing self-discovery journey and provides opportunities for introspection and self-improvement. Therefore, the transformative nature of navigating romantic relationships

lies in the empowerment derived from healthy connections. Unoma's ability to form relationships that align with her authentic self creates a sense of empowerment, autonomy, and fulfilment within her self-discovery journey. These experiences collectively shape her understanding of love, intimacy, and self-authenticity within the context of her lesbian identity.

Conclusion

The exploration of the lesbian-self through the lens of intersectionality reveals the complexity and fluidity of lesbian identities in African contexts, where multiple layers of oppression and resilience intersect. Drawing on Queer theory with specific emphasis on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, this paper has shown how African lesbian identities are shaped by the interconnected forces of colonial histories, religious dogma, cultural traditions, gender expectations, and economic realities. The narratives of Nkabinde and Azuah serve as critical examples of how these forces are negotiated, contested and resisted. In Nkunzi's case, the convergence of spirituality and sexuality provides a path to self-acceptance and cultural reclamation, while Unoma's journey demonstrates the psychological and emotional complexities of navigating lesbian identity within a religiously conservative Nigerian context. Both authors illustrate the transformative power of reclaiming space within these intersecting structures, providing valuable insights into how African lesbians carve out their existence despite societal rejection. Ultimately, the lesbian-self, as a conceptual entity, is not merely defined by sexual orientation but is a product of the intersection of various identities that shape and inform the experiences of African lesbians. Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding the diverse realities of these individuals, emphasising the need for an inclusive and multi-faceted discussions within African queer studies. The continued marginalisation of lesbian voices and experiences in both academic and socio-political spheres calls for ongoing resistance and affirmation, making it essential to foreground intersectional approaches that embrace the diversity and complexity of African lesbian identities. As the works of Nkabinde and Azuah demonstrate, the lesbian-self is not simply a site of oppression but a dynamic space of agency, resilience, and resist

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