

“SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: IDENTITY CONFLICT AND SOCIAL REJECTION IN THE REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES IN CHUKWUEBUKA IBEH’S *BLESSINGS*”

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Abstract

This study examines the struggle for identity among LGBTQ+ characters in *Blessings*. Using Minority stress Theory by Ilan H. Meyer as its theoretical framework, the study explores how societal expectations, cultural norms, and legal restrictions contribute to the marginalization, discrimination and emotional distress experienced by queer individuals. Through qualitative textual analysis, the research reveals that LGBTQ+ characters in the novel are subjected to rejection, violence, identity concealment, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate resilience in their pursuit of self-acceptance, love and belonging. The study concludes that *Blessings* portray queer identity as a continuous struggle against societal oppression, highlighting the emotional and psychological consequences of living authentically in a heteronormative society.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, identity, societal expectation, Minority Stress Theory, discrimination.

Introduction

LGBTQ+ is an acronym that represents lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning individuals, while the plus sign (+) accommodates other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities that exist outside heterosexual and Cisgender frameworks. The concept is widely used in gender and sexuality studies to describe individual whose sexual orientations gender identity, or gender expression diverges from dominant societal forms and expectations. (American psychological Association).

In “*Blessings*”, Chukwuemeka Ibeh explores the struggle for identity among LGBTQ+ individuals in a society shaped by rigid cultural, religious, and social expectations. The novel portrays the tension between authenticity and conformity as LGBTQ+ character attempt to survive in an environment that condemns and marginalizes non-heteronormative identities. Through the metaphor of “Swimming against the tide,” Ibeh illustrates the emotional and psychological burden of resisting societal expectations while remaining true to one’s identity. The characters struggle to balance their personal identities with the expectations of family, friends, religion, and society, yet they are continually confronted with rejection and hostility because of prevailing social norms.

The experiences of rejection and marginalization portrayed in the novel are also reflected in scholarly discussions on LGBTQ+ experiences. Valentine E.S.etal. explain that many LGBTQ+ individuals experience trauma, discrimination, and post-Traumatic stress Disorder (PTSD) because of what the scholars describe as “Minority stressors”. These stressors include discrimination, violent victimization, internalized stigma, fear of rejection, and identity concealment (Valentine et al.). The study further argues this LGBTQ+ individuals often suppress their identities in order to avoid societal hostility, thereby leading to emotional distress and psychological trauma.

Similarly, Matsick et al argue that societal rejection weakens the sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ individuals. In their article, “A social Ecological Approach to Belonging in LGBTQ+ people”, they explain that discrimination within families, schools, workplaces and communities often produces loneliness, exclusion, and emotional instability. Likewise, Henriquez and Ahmend observe that many LGBTQ+ individuals feel invisible and invalidated with healthcare systems because society frequently dismisses their identities. Such experiences reinforce feelings of insecurity and social marginalization. Dechants, Jonah P., et al in their article “I just want to move forward” reveal that many LGBTQ+ youths experience abandonment, emotional neglect and homelessness after revealing their identities to family members. Religious institutions equally contribute to identity struggles, as many LGBTQ+ persons are often perceived as sinful or morally unacceptable. Consequently, many are forced into silence, concealment, and emotional suffering in order to gain societal acceptance.

These scholarly perspectives strongly relate to the experiences portrayed in *"Blessings"* where LGBTQ+ characters are compelled to struggle against oppressive societal expectations in search of self-acceptance, belonging and identity. The novel not only exposes the oppressive mechanisms through which society regulates non-conforming identities but also underscores the resilience of individuals who continue to assert their humanity despite systemic marginalization.

Ilan H. Meyer's Minority stress theory provides a useful framework for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in *"Blessings"*. Meyer argues that sexual minorities experience chronic psychological stress because they exist within societies that stigmatize and marginalize non-heteronormative identities. According to the theory, LGBTQ+ individuals are subjected to "Minority stressors" such as discrimination, social rejection, prejudice, internalized stigma, fear of exposure, and identity concealment, all of which negatively affect emotional and psychological wellbeing. This theoretical perspective is relevant to *"Blessings"* because the LGBTQ+ characters constantly struggle against societal expectations that seek to silence and regulate their identities. Their experiences of fear, rejection, alienation, and emotional conflict reflect Meyer's argument that marginalized individuals suffer psychological distress as a result of persistent social oppression Emerging Queer Desire and identity formation.

The study focuses on the struggle for identity among LGBTQ+ characters in *Blessings*, particularly Obiefuna, and examines how societal expectations, cultural values, religious beliefs, and legal restrictions shape their experiences of rejection, discrimination, identity concealment and emotional trauma. The study explores the resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals who continues to assert their identities despite persistent opposition from society.

Homosexuality, Family rejection and Identity suppression

In the opening passage, the writer uses the motif of gaze and observation to foreshadow Obiefuna's internal conflict between societal expectations and emerging sexual identity. Obiefuna's emerging queer desire is subtly developed through his instinctive attraction to the new apprentice (Aboy) brought by his father, Anozie, from the village. The narrative carefully constructs this attraction through visual emphasis suggesting an unspoken but growing same-sex desire. As the narrator observes, "but it was even the darkness of the boy's skin that Obiefuna's eyes linger on a while longer" (Ibeh 1). This moment is significant because Obiefuna's prolonged gaze disrupts normal expectations of heterosexual desire, instead, it reveals an attitude that signals queer possibilities prior to Aboy's arrival as an apprentice in Anozie's household, Obiefuna is portrayed as socially withdrawn and emotionally disconnected. His father, Anozie, describes him as "abnormal" because he "spoke little, kept few friends, was likely to come home with bruises from a fight he had lost" (Ibeh 13). These characterizations reflect the alienation and emotional isolation that define Obiefuna's early life. His inability to confirm to conventional masculine expectations within his society marks him as different and queer personality.

However, Aboy's arrival introduces a significant transformation in Obiefuna's emotional and psychological world. "Aboy appears to fit effortlessly into the fringes of their existence" (15). His presence awakens in Obiefuna a sense of happiness, comfort, and belonging that had previously been absent from his life. Through Aboy, Obiefuna begins to experience emotional fulfillment and self-awareness, suggesting the gradual emergence of queer desire and identity consciousness. The emotional bond between the two boys is marked by intimacy and mutual attraction, creating a space in which Obiefuna momentarily escapes the hostility and restrictions of the outside world. This connection is evident when as the narrator Observes "Obiefuna was convinced it was himself and Aboy alone in the world. It was a moment he wanted to live in forever" (19). The statement underscores the depth of the emotional attachment and reveals Obiefuna's longing for acceptance, intimacy and freedom from societal judgment.

Anozie's discovery of Obiefuna and Aboy while they attempt to express their emotional and sexual desire marks a turning point in Obiefuna's life and reflects the societal rejection emphasized in minority stress theory. According to Ilan H. Meyer, LGBTQ+ individuals living within heteronormative societies are often subjected to discrimination, hostility, rejection, and psychological trauma because their identities are perceived as deviant from accepted social norms. This theoretical perspective is evident in Anozie's violent reaction toward Obiefuna after discovering his intimacy with Aboy. Rather than responding with understanding, the father reacts with fear, anger, and physical punishment, reflecting society's intolerance toward same-sex relationships (gay). As then narrator Observes, Obiefuna "had primarily been conscious of the fear in his father's eyes... his back taut with pain (Ibeh 30). The statement reveals that beyond the physical violence, Obiefuna is deeply wounded by the realization that his identity has become a source of fear and shame within his family. The fear in Anozie's eyes symbolizes the

anxiety produced by rigid cultural and societal expectations that condemn non-heteronormative identities. Consequently, Anozie sends Obiefuna away to a boarding school in Port Harcourt against his wife's volition in an attempt to suppress or "Correct" his perceived abnormality. This separation reinforces Meyer's argument that LGBTQ+ individuals are often forced into concealment, isolation, and emotional distress as a result of societal rejection.

Aboy is equally subjected to punishment and rejection following the discovery of his relationship with Obiefuna. His expulsion from Anozie's household further demonstrates the intolerance and hostility directed towards LGBTQ+ individuals within a heteronormative society. As the narrator states, "Aboy left the house on a Saturday, a day before the deadline Anozie had given him" (Ibeh 42). This forced departure symbolizes social exclusion and displacement, which are central aspects of minority stress theory as propounded by Ilan H. Meyer. According to the theory, LGBTQ+ individuals frequently encounter rejection, isolation and victimization because their identities challenge dominant societal norm. Aboy's removal from the household reflects the broader societal attempt to erase or suppress non-heteronormative relationships through punishment and exclusion. His expulsion not only separates him physically from Obiefuna but also reinforces the emotional trauma and instability experienced by individuals whose identities are rejected by family and society. Through Aboy's suffering, Ibeh further exposes the destructive effects of societal prejudice and the harsh consequences faced by LGBTQ+ individuals who attempt to express their identities openly.

Homosexuality, institutional Discrimination and Social Stigma

While in boarding school, Obiefuna continues to grapple with his queer identity despite the oppressive social environment surrounding him. Although one of the senior students, Pablo attempts to initiate him into heterosexual relationships by introducing him to different girls, Obiefuna remains emotionally detached and uninterested in their advances. Pablo's statement, "This is the part where you ask her to be your girl" (Ibeh 82), highlights the heteronormative expectations imposed on young boys within the school environment, where heterosexuality is constructed as the acceptable norm. However, Obiefuna consistently resists these expectations, revealing his inability to conform to society prescribed standards of masculinity and sexuality. Instead, he develops a secret admiration for another senior student, Kachi, with whom he briefly shares an intimate emotional connection. Following this encounter, the narrator observes that "he woke up the next morning with a new lightness of being" (Ibeh 92), suggesting the emotional fulfillment, self awareness, and inner happiness Obiefuna experiences through same sex intimacy.

Nevertheless, homosexuality within the boarding school environment is treated as deviant and morally unacceptable, thereby forcing individuals like Obiefuna to conceal their identities for fear of condemnation and punishment. Obiefuna's continued attachment to boys further reinforces his struggle with identity within a society that strongly condemns homosexuality. While in boarding school, he develops an intimate relationship with another student named Sparrow, and the two are eventually discovered engaging in what the school authority describes as "Unnatural intercourse" (Ibeh 108). This incident further illustrates the central concern of this study, which examines the struggle for identity among LGBTQ+ characters in *Blessings* and the manner in which societal expectations and cultural norms resist, reject, and criminalize non-heteronormative identities. In the novel, every expression of homosexuality is met with hostility, condemnation, and punishment, thereby revealing the rigid heteronormative structure governing the society. The discovery of Obiefuna and Sparrow's relationship exposes them to shame, fear, and social rejection, reinforcing the emotional turmoil experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Following the discovery of the illicit relationship, the school authorities expel Sparrow, although he refuses to disclose the identity of his partner Obiefuna. The expulsion reveals how educational institutions function as instruments of social regulation that reinforce dominant moral and cultural values by criminalizing same-sex relationship. Through the experience of Obiefuna and Sparrow and social exclusion that accompany queer existence.

Although Obiefuna escapes expulsion because Sparrow refuses to reveal the identity of his partner, he is unable to escape the emotional and psychological consequences of the incident. Sparrow's sacrifice leaves Obiefuna burdened with intense feelings of guilt, fear, and shame, causing him to withdraw further into himself. Following Sparrow's expulsion, he becomes emotionally isolated and overwhelmed by self-reproach. The narrator notes that "he sat through the sermon awash with shame" (Ibeh 116), indicating the extent to which societal and religious condemnation has become internalized. Rather than finding comfort in religion, Obiefuna experiences it as a reminder of his perceived transgression and social exclusion. His psychological distress is further revealed through disturbing dreams, as "he jolted awake from nightmarish images of being in a steady, bottomless descent, his hands and feet bound, loud, sinister laughter about him" (Ibeh 116). The imagery of a "bottomless descent"

symbolizes his growing sense of hopelessness, fear, and emotional entrapment following Sparrow's punishment. This experience aligns with Minority Stress Theory, which posits that persistent exposure to stigma, discrimination, and fear of rejection often results in psychological distress among LGBTQ+ individuals. Obiefuna's feelings of shame, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal demonstrate the profound impact of societal hostility on queer individuals, even when they are not directly subjected to punishment. Through this episode, Ibeh highlights the psychological burden of living in constant fear and the emotional scars produced by a society that condemns non-heteronormative identities.

Obiefuna's experiences at the university further demonstrate the persistence of his queer identity despite the intense social, cultural, and legal opposition directed against it. Upon gaining admission into the university, he becomes acquainted with Miebi, who introduces him to a community of gay individuals. Through this association, Obiefuna finds a sense of belonging and acceptance that had long been denied him. His emotional and sexual relationship with Miebi deepens over time, reflecting his growing acceptance of his identity. This is evident when he affectionately tells Miebi, "I guess I'm weird too" (Ibeh 196), a statement that signifies both self-recognition and his awareness of society's perception of homosexuality as abnormal. As Obiefuna spends more time in Miebi's apartment, he becomes increasingly attached to him and accustomed to a life where he can express himself freely, finding it difficult to imagine himself elsewhere.

The relationship between Obiefuna and his queer companions also highlights the emotional consequences of growing up in a society that condemns same-sex desire. They lament the opportunities and experiences denied them because of societal prejudice. Chinedum poignantly observes, "I often think of how much love is lost as gay kids grow up" (Ibeh 211), underscoring the deprivation of the innocence, affection, and emotional freedom typically associated with adolescence. This reflection reveals the emotional cost of living under constant fear, concealment, and rejection. Despite the fulfillment they derive from their relationships, they remain aware that their identities exist in direct opposition to dominant societal expectations.

The hostility directed toward homosexuality becomes even more pronounced when news emerges that Nigeria has officially criminalized same-sex unions (Ibeh 216). The legislation, which prohibits same-sex marriage and other forms of same-sex relationships, imposes severe penalties on both LGBTQ+ individuals and those associated with them. This development intensifies the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty already surrounding the characters. Reports of arrests, targeted raids, the detention of men suspected of being gay, and the persecution of individuals perceived as effeminate create widespread panic within the community. The narrator recounts incidents involving mass arrests in nightclubs and the systematic targeting of men whose appearance or behaviour deviates from accepted masculine norms (Ibeh 222). These events illustrate the extent to which the state and society collaborate in policing sexuality and enforcing heteronormativity.

Consequently, the members of the queer community are overwhelmed by anxiety and despair. Obiefuna is reduced to tears as he confronts the reality of living in a society determined to erase people like him. The situation becomes even more traumatic when one of their friends, Tunde, is abducted and brutally beaten. These experiences reinforce the central concern of this study, "Swimming Against the Tide," as Obiefuna's life from childhood to adulthood is characterized by a continuous struggle against social, cultural, religious, and legal forces that condemn his identity. Despite repeated punishment, rejection, displacement, and fear, he remains unable to suppress his authentic self. His persistence in pursuing same-sex relationships, even in the face of severe consequences, demonstrates that identity is not merely a matter of personal choice but an intrinsic aspect of selfhood. Through Obiefuna's journey, Ibeh illustrates the courage, resilience, and emotional cost involved in living authentically within a society that relentlessly opposes and criminalizes non-heteronormative identities. This aligns with Minority Stress Theory, which argues that LGBTQ+ individuals experience chronic psychological distress as a result of prejudice, discrimination, social exclusion, and the constant fear of victimization (Meyer). Thus, Obiefuna's story becomes a powerful representation of what it means to continuously swim against the tide of societal expectations in the pursuit of identity, belonging, and self-acceptance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Chukwuemeka Ibeh presents identity as a complex and continuous struggle for LGBTQ+ individuals living within a deeply conservative and heteronormative society. Through the experiences of Obiefuna and other queer characters, Ibeh demonstrates how societal expectations, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and legal institutions collectively function to suppress non heteronormative identities. The novel reveals that LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently subjected to rejection, discrimination, violence, exclusion, and identity,

concealment, resulting in profound emotional and psychological distress. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the characters continue to seek love, belonging, and self-expression, thereby exhibiting remarkable resilience in the face of oppression. Viewed through the lens of Minority Stress Theory, the novel highlights the damaging effects of societal prejudice on mental well-being while simultaneously emphasizing the enduring human desire for authenticity and acceptance. Ultimately, *Blessings* portrays the LGBTQ+ experience as one of constantly “swimming against the tide” of societal expectations in pursuit of identity, dignity, and freedom.

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