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Lesbian Identity and the Bildungsroman Journey of Self-Discovery 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

The paper examines lesbian identity and the Bildungsroman journey of self-discovery in Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008) and Unoma Azuah's *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* (2020). Anchored on queer theory with emphasis on performativity and intersectionality, the paper explores how the protagonists traverse the challenges of self-definition within patriarchal, heteronormative, and culturally conservative societies. Through close reading, the paper interrogates how the texts depict the protagonists' journeys toward self-acceptance, as they negotiate the complexities of sexual orientation, cultural expectations, and personal agency. It draws attention to the performative aspects of gender and sexuality, as well as the intersections of culture, and religion in shaping queer identities. The paper demonstrates that the Bildungsroman framework is crucial for understanding how lesbian identity is constructed and reconstructed in contexts that marginalise queer existence. It therefore, foregrounds the transformative power of self-discovery and resistance.

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Introduction

Lesbianism, as a concept, refers specifically to the romantic or sexual attraction between women. It represents a form of same-sex orientation and desire that is distinct from other sexual orientations such as heterosexuality or bisexuality. The term "lesbian" originates from the Greek island of Lesbos, associated with the poet Sappho (c. 630- c. 570 BCE), who wrote about love and desire between women in her poetry (Strabo 647). Over time, the term has come to signify not only same-sex desire but also a distinct social and cultural identity (Whitaker 195). At its core, lesbianism encompasses the emotional, romantic, and sexual connections that women form with one another. These connections may manifest in various forms, including intimate partnerships, romantic relationships, or sexual encounters. Lesbian relationships are characterised by emotional intimacy, mutual respect, and shared experiences, much like heterosexual or other forms of romantic partnerships. However, lesbian relationships also face unique challenges and dynamics shaped by societal attitudes towards same-sex desire and gender roles.

On the other hand, identity is a multidimensional concept that includes various aspects of an individual's self-perception, social positioning, and cultural affiliations. It is integral to understanding human experiences, behaviours, and interactions within literary discourse. Across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, arts, anthropology, and cultural studies, scholars have explored identity from diverse theoretical perspectives, portraying its dynamic nature and its significance in shaping individual lives and collective narratives. At its nucleus, identity refers to the sense of self that individuals construct through their lived experiences, relationships, and cultural contexts. It covers both internalised aspects such as self-concept and self-esteem, and external dimensions, including social roles, group affiliations, and cultural norms. Identity formation is an ongoing process that begins in infancy and continues throughout the lifespan, influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors.

One influential framework for understanding identity is James Marcia's (1966) proposed model of identity statuses that distinguishes between different levels of exploration and commitment. According to Marcia, individuals may achieve identity foreclosure by adopting beliefs and values without undergoing a period of exploration, or they may experience identity diffusion characterised by a lack of commitment

and direction. Achieving identity achievement involves actively exploring various identities and committing to those that resonate with one's values and aspirations. Building upon James Marcia's work, Erik Erikson (1968) establishes the theory of psychosocial development, which posits that individuals navigate a series of stages characterised by key psychosocial conflicts. Central to Erikson's theory is the concept of identity crisis, a period of exploration and self-discovery during adolescence in which individuals struggle with questions of whom they are, what they value, and where they belong to. Successful resolution of the crisis leads to the formation of a coherent and stable sense of identity, while unresolved identity issues may result in identity confusion or role diffusion.

In addition to these psychological perspectives, sociologists have examined identity through the lens of social constructionism, which emphasises the role of social processes and interactions in shaping individual and group identities. According to social constructionists, identities are not fixed or predetermined but are constructed through ongoing negotiations within social contexts. This perspective projects the fluidity and contingency of identity, as well as the power dynamics that influence its construction. Cultural theorists have also explored how identity is shaped by cultural narratives, discourses, and representations. Stuart Hall's (1992) concept of identity as a "process of becoming" emphasises the contingent and contested nature of identity, arguing that it is constantly negotiated and redefined in relation to shifting cultural contexts (Hall 276). Hall foregrounds the role of language, media, and symbolic representations in constructing identities and shaping collective understandings of self and other.

Power Dynamics in Lesbian Identity Formation

Lesbian identity is inherently tied to the experience of same-sex attraction and desire, forming the foundation upon which individual characters reconstruct their sense of self. The recognition and acceptance of one's lesbian identity often entail a process of self-discovery and self-affirmation, influenced by internal reflections and external social dynamics. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity presents a valuable framework for understanding how identity is not inherent but rather enacted through repeated behaviours and interactions within societal norms and expectations. In this sense, lesbian identity is not solely determined by one's sexual orientation but is also shaped by the performance of gender and the negotiation of power dynamics within a heteronormative society.

Historically, the construction of lesbian identity has been influenced by prevailing cultural attitudes and socio-political contexts. In Western societies, the pathologisation of same-sex desire and the stigmatisation of non-heteronormative identities have marginalised and silenced lesbian experiences, relegating them to the margins of mainstream discourse. The medicalisation of homosexuality as a mental disorder, as seen in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until its removal in 1973, further perpetuates societal prejudices and hinders the formation of positive lesbian self-image. However, lesbian communities have long existed as sites of resistance and resilience, providing spaces for solidarity, visibility, and collective identity formation (Andrew and Nicholas 3). From the clandestine gatherings of early twentieth-century lesbian bars to the vibrant activism of the LGBTQ+ rights movements, these communities have challenged normative conceptions of gender and sexuality, asserting the validity and worth of lesbian lives. The emergence of lesbian feminism in the 1970s, with its emphasis on the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, and class, further expanded the discourse surrounding lesbian identity, and portrays the interconnectedness of personal experience and social structures.

In contemporary society, the concept of lesbian identity continues to evolve in response to shifting cultural norms and technological advancements. The proliferation of online spaces and social media platforms has facilitated greater visibility and connectivity among lesbian individuals, enabling the formation of virtual communities and the dissemination of diverse narratives. However, the digital setting also presents challenges, such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and algorithmic bias, which exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the autonomy of lesbian voices. The intersectional nature of identity complicates the singular portrayal of lesbianism, as individuals navigate multiple axes of oppression and privilege based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, and age. Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality establishes the interconnectedness of social identities and the need to address overlapping systems of oppression to achieve true liberation and equality. Thus, an inclusive understanding of lesbian identity must recognise and centre the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented communities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The ongoing discourse surrounding lesbian identity foregrounds the importance of recognising the diversity and fluidity inherent within the construct. Lesbianism, like all forms of identity, is not monolithic but rather encompasses a spectrum of experiences, expressions, and affiliations.

The concept of compulsory heterosexuality, as theorised by Adrienne Rich (1980), examines the societal pressure for individuals to conform to heterosexual norms and

expectations. The pressure is particularly pronounced for lesbians who face stigmatisation, discrimination, and even violence for deviating from heteronormative standards. The internalisation of heterosexist beliefs and the fear of rejection from family, friends, and society complicates the process of coming out and embracing one's lesbian identity. In response to these challenges, many lesbian individuals and communities have engaged in acts of resistance and activism, advocating for greater visibility, acceptance, and rights within society. Lesbian activism has played a crucial role in advancing LGBTQ+ rights, and challenging discriminatory laws and policies, and fostering community solidarity. From the Stonewall riots of 1969, often credited as the catalyst for the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, to contemporary campaigns for marriage equality and transgender rights, lesbian activists have been at the forefront of social change.

The cultural representation of lesbianism in media, literature, and the arts has evolved over time, reflecting shifting attitudes and social norms. While early depictions of lesbians in mainstream media often rely on harmful stereotypes and sensationalised narratives, there has been a gradual increase in diverse portrayals of lesbian characters and relationships. Television shows like *The L Word* (2004-2009), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), and *Pose* (2018-2021) have introduced audiences to complex and multidimensional lesbian characters, challenging stereotypes and humanising LGBTQ+ experiences. However, despite these advancements, challenges persist in achieving full recognition and equality for lesbian individuals within society. Legal barriers, such as the lack of federal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in many countries, continue to hinder the full realisation of LGBTQ+ rights. Moreover, the rise of conservative ideologies and backlash against LGBTQ+ progress poses a threat to the hard-won gains of previous generations, foregrounding the ongoing need for activism, advocacy, and community mobilisation.

Within the context of literary discourse, the lesbian sexual orientation has been observed and documented across different literary expressions, albeit often in varied degrees of acceptance or condemnation (Diamond 122). From ancient literary references to contemporary discussions, lesbianism has undergone a complex evolution, intertwined with societal norms, gender dynamics, and political movements. Scholars such as Watson (2005), McMormick (2013), Lockwood (2022), and Saroj Kumar (2023) have examined the literary, psychological, sociological, and cultural aspects of lesbian relationships, addressing issues such as identity formation, discrimination, empowerment, and visibility. Various critical perspectives, including

feminist, queer, and intersectional theories, have contributed to a critical understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by lesbians, examining the complexities of their lives and relationships.

Apparently, the portrayal of lesbian identity in literature, media, and the arts has provided platforms for both representation and exploration of lesbian identities, paving the way for increased visibility and acceptance. While significant progress has been made in advocating for the rights and recognition of lesbian individuals, challenges such as discrimination, prejudice, and societal stigmatisation continue to persist in many parts of the world, which foregrounds the ongoing need for continued research, education, and advocacy to promote inclusivity and equality for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation (Harper, et al 192). The study of lesbian identity examines the key themes, debates, and developments that have shaped the understanding of lesbian identity within African literary discourse. Historically, lesbian identity has often been marginalised or overlooked in the mainstream of African literary discourse, particularly within heteronormative frameworks. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly sought to challenge the marginalisation, portraying the need for a diverse and inclusive understanding of lesbian experiences and identities in African literature. Researchers have examined the complexities of sexual orientation, desire, and intimate relationships among women who identify as lesbian, which contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of human sexuality (Garnets 122).

However, lesbian writing within the African literary context emerges as a powerful tool for challenging and reshaping societal norms, particularly in the exploration of gender, sexuality, and identity (Gunkel 539). Despite the historical marginalisation and silencing of queer voices in African literature, lesbian writers have carved out a space for their narratives, offering diverse perspectives on same-sex relationships, love, desire, and personal experiences. Through their works, these writers confront the intersecting issues of homophobia, patriarchy, and cultural constraints, unveiling the complexities and challenges faced by lesbian individuals in African societies. Focusing on themes of self-discovery, resilience, and defiance against societal constraints, African lesbian writers have contributed to a growing body of literature that not only amplifies the voices of marginalised communities but also prompts critical discussions on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and culture. Moreover, their narratives often emphasise the importance of solidarity, community, and empowerment, fostering a sense of belonging and visibility for lesbian individuals in African societies. While the journey toward inclusivity and acceptance remains

fraught with obstacles, the presence and impact of lesbian writing in the African literary landscape continue to pave the way for greater representation and understanding, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and diverse literary discourse.

Scholars such as Koller (2011) have explored the intersectionality of lesbian sexuality, emphasising the multilayered ways in which gender, race, class, and other social identities intersect and influence the experiences of lesbian individuals. This intersectional approach has projected the unique challenges and forms of discrimination faced by lesbian women from diverse backgrounds, portraying the importance of acknowledging the complex interplay of various social factors in shaping their identities and lived experiences. The study of lesbian sexuality has addressed the impact of societal attitudes, cultural norms, and political dynamics on the visibility and acceptance of lesbian identities. Researchers such as Lake (2017) have examined the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the representation of lesbian sexuality in literature, media, and popular culture, highlighting the role of stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination in perpetuating negative attitudes and misconceptions about lesbian relationships and identities.

Lake's examination of the increased visibility of black lesbian identities in South Africa provides a crucial analysis of the challenges faced by the community, particularly concerning the phenomenon of corrective rape and its portrayal in mainstream media and cultural texts. Exploring literary and visual representations, Lake foregrounds the prevalence of homophobic discourse and violence in post-apartheid South Africa, and portrays the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. However, a significant research gap emerges on the exploration of socio-political and cultural contexts shaping the visibility and representation of black lesbian identities. While Lake's analysis focuses on the experiences within South Africa, there is a need for comparative studies that examine how similar issues manifest in other African countries and across different cultural contexts. Additionally, further research could investigate the role of institutions such as the government, media, and civil society in perpetuating or challenging harmful narratives and stereotypes about black lesbian women. Moreover, while Lake discusses the potential for counter-discourses that emphasise lesbian agency and resistance, there is a lack of empirical studies examining the effectiveness of such discourses in challenging societal attitudes and addressing systemic inequalities. Future research could thus explore the impact of cultural production, activism, and advocacy efforts in reshaping narratives surrounding black lesbian identities and promoting social justice and inclusivity within African societies.

Scholarly discourse on lesbian sexuality has also engaged with the psychological and physiological dimensions of sexual orientation, exploring the origins and development of lesbian identities from various theoretical perspectives. Researchers such as Green-Simms and Azuah (2012) and Yakubu (2020) have investigated the biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to the formation of sexual orientation, emphasising the need for a holistic approach that considers both innate and environmental influences on the expression of lesbian sexuality. Moreover, the advocacy for the rights and visibility of lesbian individuals has been a crucial aspect of contemporary scholarship on lesbian sexuality. Researchers have contributed to the LGBTQ+ rights movement by advocating for legal protections, anti-discrimination policies, and inclusive societal attitudes that affirm the rights and dignity of lesbian individual characters. This advocacy has played a pivotal role in challenging heteronormative structures and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society for individual characters with diverse sexual orientations.

Prado-Castro and Graham (2017), Azuah (2019), and Nahole (2023) provide insights into the experiences and representations of LGBTQ+ individuals within African contexts. Prado-Castro and Graham's study presents a thorough examination of lesbian identity expression within the university setting, and foregrounds the influence of institutional policies and socio-cultural factors. Azuah's auto-ethnographic analysis provides a poignant exploration of the intersection of religious constructs and queer identity in Nigeria and portrays the complexities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in navigating societal norms. Nahole's exploration of LGBTQI characters in African literature further expands the discourse by examining literary representations of sexuality and gender, and determines both the challenges and coping strategies depicted in the narratives. While each study provides insights into specific aspects of LGBTQ+ experiences, there is a need for research that examines how factors such as culture, religion, race, class, ethnicity, and disability intersect with sexual orientation and gender identity to shape individuals and characters' experiences and representation within African societies and literature.

Lesbian Identity Formation, and the Challenges of Self-discovery

The textual analysis explores the bildungsroman narrative of self-discovery within the context of lesbian identity in Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008) and Unoma Azuah's *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* (2020). These literary texts foreground the journeys of their protagonists as they steer the complex terrain of

understanding and embracing their authentic lesbian selves, portraying the challenges that shape their identities and relationships. Through the exploration of cultural, normative, and personal dimensions, both texts present insights into the interplay between self-discovery, sexuality, and identity formation.

In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, the protagonist, Nkunzi, embarks on a reflective and introspective journey of self-discovery as she struggles with the complexities of her lesbian identity within the framework of her cultural and ancestral heritage. Set against the backdrop of a South African community rich with traditions and customs, Nkunzi traverses the tension between her personal desires and normative expectations within the world of the text. Through her experiences, the text portrays how the process of self-discovery becomes a process of reconciling her identity with her cultural roots. The seeds of awareness foreground in her interest in masculinity mark the initial inklings and subtle hints that something within Nkunzi's identity is different. It is obvious "...when my mother made me wear a dress, tears would come to my eyes because I felt so uncomfortable..." (Nkabinde 24). It is a stage of intrigue, confusion, and curiosity where the first stirrings of her true sexuality manifest in various ways, gradually pushing her towards an understanding of herself. Nkunzi reveals that she "...wanted to tell her, my mom, that there is something in me that make me like this and I am free when I am like this..." (Nkabinde 24). That is, when she portrays masculinity instead of femininity.

Therefore, Nkunzi's journey begins with a series of unexplained emotions that she struggles to comprehend. These feelings emerge as moments of heightened sensitivity, particularly around her fellow girls. Nkunzi reflects that she "...used to play a game with some of the girls in the neighbourhood...when we are in the dark, I would kiss them..." (Nkabinde 24). She is nine years old when she first did it. She feels more captivated and intrigued by girls, which sparks a curiosity that prompts her to question the nature of these emotions. Nkunzi experiences subtle physical reactions that catch her off guard. A fleeting touch, a shared laugh, or even a casual conversation triggers a heightened sense of awareness that feels foreign to her. The physical reactions serve as hints of the emotions she is beginning to uncover. Nkunzi admits that "...when I played with girls, I used to kiss them and then I wanted to touch them but I felt scared... I didn't know that I liked girls..." (Nkabinde 24). Nkunzi, however, becomes increasingly aware of her emotional and physical responses to girls. The sense of awareness of her sexual attraction to girls at a tender age stirs when all the elders watch a programme on TV, Nkunzi goes "...outside

with one of the other girls...took her to the box and when we were inside I started to kiss her. It felt nice..." (Nkabinde 24). Never did she wonder if the intensity of her feelings is unusual. She is convinced that her lesbian "...sexuality is from childhood" (Nkabinde 38). It is with her "...from birth. It is not from my ancestors, but my ancestors supported me..." (Nkabinde 38).

However, Nkunzi's friendship with her girlfriends takes on a different hue. She realises that her desire to spend time with girls surpasses ordinary friendship, leaving her to struggle with the realisation that her feelings are more complex than she has initially thought. At the time of realisation, Nkunzi's internal curiosity intensifies. She finds herself contemplating her feelings, examining her reactions, emotions and attraction. The curiosity reflects the beginning of her journey towards self-understanding. Nkunzi struggles with a growing list of unspoken questions that linger at the back of her mind. She wrestles with uncertainty, unable to put a name to her feelings or to find a clear explanation for the emotions that slowly but surely shapes her perspective. Nkunzi's thoughts are punctuated by unspoken questions: Why do I feel this way around girls? Is this normal? Does everyone experience these emotions? The answers remain elusive, buried beneath a sea of uncertainty until she meets the social worker who tells her that she "...is a lesbian..." (Nkabinde 32). Nkunzi picks up "...the dictionary to look up the word, 'lesbian' and after reading what it says, she "thought, okay, that's what I am..." (Nkabinde 33). Therefore, the seed of awareness is a crucial and delicate stage in Nkunzi's journey of self-discovery. She admits that the social worker "...gave me an opportunity to find out about my sexuality and I couldn't turn it down" (Nkabinde 33). It lays the foundation for her subsequent exploration, as she struggles with the initial hints of her true identity as a lesbian. These subtle emotional and physical reactions set the stage for her to further explore her feelings and ultimately embark on the path to self-understanding and acceptance.

Nkunzi's journey of self-discovery continues as she explores the unfamiliar marked by a series of significant steps and efforts she takes to understand her feelings and emotions. It's a time of self-exploration, learning, and seeking answers that ultimately lead her to a critical understanding of her lesbian identity. Nkunzi's growing awareness of her emotions prompts her to learn "...what is expected of a Zulu girl and... about the life of a Zulu man" (Nkabinde 20). She realises that she is "...more interested in the life of a Zulu man" and "Some of the girls' things did not feel right..." (Nkabinde 20). It is characterised by her assertion that she does not see herself "...as someone who would get pregnant and be the mother of children" (Nkabinde 20). Through her

relationship with the social worker, Nkunzi encounters new terms and concepts that accurately capture her feelings. She learns about the concept of sexual orientation, the spectrum of identities, and the differences between friendship and romantic attraction. The newfound knowledge empowers her to find language for her emotions. Through the story she reads in a magazine at the social worker's house, Nkunzi's understanding deepens. It is evident "When my social worker came out of the bath she took the magazine away from me and started to kiss me... run her fingers over my vagina and... suck me" (Nkabinde 34). Nkunzi affirms that "She played with my body and I let her do whatever she wanted to do. I tried to be one of the girls in the story and started to touch her and suck her as well" (Nkabinde 34). The terms 'lesbian' and 'sexual orientation' resonate with her experiences, which provide a framework for the emotions she has been struggling with. She finds solace in realising that her feelings are valid and are shared by other lesbians.

The exploration of the unfamiliar prompts Nkunzi to reflect on her emotional reactions in different situations. She starts to identify patterns, and recognising moments when her heart races or when she feels a deep connection to certain girls. The self-reflection is a critical step towards acknowledging her lesbian identity. Nkunzi begins to catalogue her emotional responses. She notes how she sweats whenever a certain girl who shares a desk with her touches her. The warmth of her feelings also lingers long after her love making with the social worker. The observation affirms the growing awareness of her romantic lesbian inclination which is marked by an internal dialogue where Nkunzi engages in conversations with herself, exploring imaginary scenarios but not questioning her reactions. She loses her boyfriend, Siphiwe, because she takes the initiative of kissing him. She imagines possible outcomes and faces the emotional turmoil that accompanies her self-discovery journey noting that, "I knew I was more of a boy than a girl. Siphiwe helped me to decide who I was..." (Nkabinde 34). However, the exploration of the unfamiliar is critical in Nkunzi's journey. Her engagement with her emotions, combined with her active pursuit of knowledge and terminology, lays the groundwork for her eventual acceptance of her identity as a lesbian. It represents a bridge between her initial awareness and her deepening self-understanding, which leads her closer to embrace her authentic self.

Embracing her authenticity marks a crucial turning point in Nkunzi's journey. It is a period of reflective self-acceptance, courage, and a growing understanding of her lesbian identity. During the passage, Nkunzi confronts her fears, and starts to build a foundation of self-love and empowerment. She ventures deeper into the

journey of her self-discovery, and begins to recognise her intrinsic self-worth. She acknowledges that her feelings and lesbian identity are valid and deserving of respect, irrespective of normative expectations or preconceived notions (Nkabinde 122). Embracing her authenticity requires Nkunzi to confront her deepest fears head-on. She acknowledges the potential challenges and biases that she might encounter as an openly lesbian individual. While these fears are real, she begins to find the strength to face them with newfound resilience. Nkunzi's heart races as she considers the possibility of coming out to her family. The fear of rejection looms large, but she reminds herself that living authentically is worth the risk. With each breath, she feels a surge of courage. The manner at which Nkunzi comes out to her mother about her sexuality is instructive. She asks her mother "what will you feel if you have a child like that?" after they watch a programme on TV about gays and lesbians (Nkabinde 35). Her mother's response throws her off balance. Her mother says to her: "I know you are like that... God gave you to me as my disabled child... if I throw you out, who is going to take you? I love you like all other children" (Nkabinde 36).

Nkunzi's mother opens up to "the rest of the family" members about her lesbian identity (Nkabinde 36). The conversation is filled with raw honesty. "First she told my sisters. They were furious. They said, this is wrong. We will not accept it" (Nkabinde 36). Nkunzi admits that her mother "...paved the way for me to come out" (Nkabinde 36). Her mother tells her sisters: "if you are not going to accept her you will have to leave the house with only the things you bought for yourselves" (Nkabinde 36). Nkunzi, therefore, embraces her authenticity and her mother becomes a support network that affirms her lesbian identity. Embracing her authenticity involves a journey towards self-pride. Nkunzi learns to not only accept but celebrate her lesbian identity. She "...could go around with my girlfriends, even at night" (Nkabinde 38). Nkunzi reveals that she "...grew up in a protective community. The boys respected me and I respected them. I didn't get involved in fights with them" (Nkabinde 38). She finds empowerment in her mom who says to her "You don't need to keep any more secrets. If anything happens, come and tell me about it" (Nkabinde 36). The courage to embrace her authenticity is a culmination of Nkunzi's journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance. It is a transformative period where she sheds the weight of internalised fears, emerges as a more resilient lesbian individual, and starts to shape her narrative on her own terms.

However, *Embracing My Shadow: Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria* presents a captivating exploration of self-discovery and acceptance within the context of lesbian identity, but with emphasis on the Nigerian socio-cultural background. The

protagonist's journey unfolds as she struggles with the intersection of her sexual orientation, and family expectations. The text examines Unoma's struggle to reconcile her authentic self with the normative pressures that attempt to suppress her true identity. Portraying the intersection of family dynamics, and personal desires, the text presents a poignant glimpse into the emotional complexities and courage required to embrace one's true self. Unoma's journey of self-discovering of her identity as a lesbian begins with subtle yet significant moments that pique her curiosity and prompt her to question her emotions and attractions. Unoma on a first visit to her mother's school finds herself admiring "...a girl with a dimple" (Azuah 44). The young girl introduces herself as Isioma. Unoma admits that she "liked her instantly and moved closer to her" (Azuah 44). She notices how Isioma's expression lights up when she "...drew her closer and kissed her cheek" (Azuah 44). Unoma "...hugged her tight" after Isioma "...giggled and kissed me back on my cheek" (Azuah 44). Unoma feels unexplainable warmth when they "...clung to each other until..." (Azuah 45) she sees her mother and disentangles herself "...from pretty Isioma..." (Azuah 45).

Unoma and her high school friend named Star, have deep, soul-baring intimacy that leaves her feeling strangely elated. She realises that her connection with Star runs deeper than mere friendship, but she cannot quite put her finger on why the intimacy feels so meaningful. To explore their feelings they "snuck out of our dormitory into the night, clung to each other as we thrust our tongues back and forth deep into each other's mouth" (Azuah 3). Unoma feels a deep sense of comfort and connection, to the point that "a tingling sensation made me grind my thighs together to ease the itch" (Azuah 3). However, Unoma's thoughts occasionally drift towards romantic scenarios involving girls, and she is startled by the vividness of these daydreams. She finds herself wondering about holding hands, sharing secrets, and stealing kisses, although these thoughts seem both exciting and confusing. She feels a sense of exhilaration whenever she is with "...girls who I really liked" (Azuah 57). Unoma observes her feelings towards her female lovers in comparison to her feelings for her male lovers. She admits: "I didn't like boys. I didn't like men. The kiss was never the same. I didn't feel the kind of glow I felt in the pit of my belly when Nelo kissed me..." (Azuah 138). Nkadi's advice to try out a romantic relationship with men leads her into the sly arms of Victor, the poet, who caress and kiss her in his room. Unoma feels relaxed thinking "...it was going to spark some feelings inside of me the way Nelo's and Star's kisses did. Nothing..." (Azuah 138). She notices that there is an added layer of emotion and intensity when she is around certain girls, leaving her curious about the nature of these differences. Referring to her girlfriend,

Ihu, she admits: "...I didn't realise how strongly I felt about her until we were sprawled on the floor of her living room, just chitchatting. My private parts tingled, and I suddenly leaned over to kiss her" (Azuah 57).

The artistic endeavours of Unoma reflect her growing intrigue. She finds herself "...brooding poems and sob stories..." more often, and capturing her expressions and gestures with an intimacy that surprises her (Azuah 94). These scribbles become a mirror to the emotions she is starting to recognise. Unoma's poems and sob stories are filled with imageries of her father. The way she depicts herself as "...the main character with my father as the hero who would come and take me to a paradise..." reveals a depth of emotion that she has not consciously acknowledged yet (Azuah 94). Mr. Ogugua, her teacher, wonders why her poems feel different, with "...constant image in most of my poems: my father" like unspoken language she is discovering (Azuah 94). Therefore, Unoma's seeds of intrigue signify the beginning of her journey of self-discovery. The moments of curiosity and heightened awareness lay the foundation for her eventual exploration of her feelings and the realisation of her true identity as a lesbian.

However, Unoma's journey of self-discovering of her lesbian identity is also marked by internal turmoil as she traverses conflicting emotions, normative expectations, and the fear of being true to herself. She finds herself torn between her authentic feelings and the normative expectations she has internalised. She experiences a whirlwind of emotions, ranging from elation to anxiety, as she struggles with desires that seem to deviate from what she has been taught. Unoma intones "I had sinned" after she makes love with Star (Azuah 3). She feels, it is a sin to have sexual desires for same-sex. This feeling is punctuated with the principal's "...every lash...saying remember this pain when you commit your sinful act!" (Azuah 88).

The fear of rejection looms large in Unoma's thoughts. She worries about why her society sees her same-gender attractions as abnormal and sinful. The fear of damnation adds layers of anxiety to her turbulent emotions. Unoma engages in an internal debate, constantly weighing the pros and cons of acknowledging her feelings. It affects momentarily her romantic affair with Nelo after she is being punished over same-sex relationship in high school. Unoma admits that "the intensity of what I felt for her terrified me, and the constant attacks, beatings, condemnation, chastising, and judgement had overwhelmed me" (Azuah 97). She debates whether to be true to herself or to suppress her emotions to fit into the mould she believes society expects her to conform to. But she finally submits that "perhaps my feelings for her

were sinful, but to her bosom I had fled. I was no longer me but hers. Maybe God would be merciful to me" (Azuah 85).

The weight of societal pressure within the world of the text intensifies Unoma's inner turmoil. She struggles with the pressure to conform, knowing that her feelings are not in line with what is considered 'normal'. She experiments sexual intercourse with her another male lover, Zaachi, because she "...needed to know if I could have sex with a man... I had to have an open mind and relax to receive any transformation that was to happen...I didn't know if I could still be redeemed" (Azuah 160). The pressure adds to her confusion and sense of isolation from men after she admits after her failed sexual encounter with Zaachi that she "...had to know for sure that I didn't like sex with men" (Azuah 160). But Unoma's inner turmoil still feeds into self-doubt, causing her to question her worth and identity. She wonders if her same-sex feelings are valid or if she is simply going through a phase but Nkadi, her high school mate she meets in the university, puts it to her categorically that "...we did it because there were no boys. There are plenty of boys now, so you have no excuse" (Azuah 133). Nkadi further stresses that "...what we did in secondary school was a phase. It is in the past. It is gone..." (Azuah 134).

The lack of clarity fuels her uncertainty. Unoma tries to mask her conflicting emotions, putting on a facade to fit in and avoid suspicion. She becomes skilled at suppressing her true feelings, yet the effort required to maintain this facade takes a toll on her emotional well-being. Unoma and her same-sex lover, Nelo, "...bore a love that was too heavy for our small frames" (Azuah 159). She laments that "every step we trod with that love threatened to hurl us down; it was too weighty for us... I wonder why this love that could never express itself was to be borne or made to exist" (Azuah 159). Amid the chaos of her inner turmoil, Unoma has moments of vulnerability when her true emotions bubble to the surface. She questions the rationality of her love for her same-sex lover, Nelo, asking: "why make us prisoners even before we had a chance for trial?" (Azuah 159). Therefore, these moments reveal the depth of her feelings and the conflict she is experiencing. Unoma's inner turmoil is a central aspect of her self-discovery journey. It foregrounds the complexities of navigating a path that challenges normative norms and expectations, while also portraying the emotional toll of suppressing authentic feelings. This phase is a critical part of her growth toward self-acceptance and understanding.

Unoma's journey toward self-discovery and labelling is a transformative phase where she struggles with her identity, acknowledges her true feelings, and starts to embrace her authentic self. Over time, Unoma's inner turmoil leads her to a moment

of realisation. She acknowledges the consistent patterns of attraction she feels towards individuals of the same gender and recognises that her emotions are valid and deserving of acknowledgment. Unoma stumbles upon the term 'lesbian' when she attempts to kiss Ihu who gently pushes her off saying "I am sorry, but I am not a lesbian" (Azuah 57). The term resonates with her experiences and offers a framework to describe her feelings. She finds solace in the knowledge that there is a word that encapsulates her identity. The process of labelling her feelings as lesbian is a significant step toward self-discovery. It makes her "...begin to think of who and why I liked certain people and not others" (Azuah 57).

Unoma's short-lived romance with Victor, "...one of the boys in our neighbourhood at Nsukka...," brings her to the awareness that her emotions for girls are a deviation from the norm but a valid and authentic part of who she is (Azuah 57). While Victor lures her to her uncle's garage to kiss her, her cousins cheer her up. Unoma observes that "my cousins always smiled when they saw us. They didn't call it 'lesbian'. They didn't disapprove or try to shove me away from him, so that must have been the right thing: kissing a boy and not a girl" (Azuah 57). It holds both weight and relief, because she says: "Maybe I was possessed...", a declaration of self-acceptance that reverberates within her (Azuah 58).

Unoma opens up to her trusted cousin, Buchi, about her realisation of her lesbian identity and self-acceptance. Sharing her newfound understanding allows her to vocalise her feelings and reinforces her journey toward self-discovery. The weight of the confession mingles with the sense of relief that comes from being honest about one's identity. She acknowledges that Buchi is "...one of the few lights in the tunnels I traversed in search of answers and in search of the right to be" (Azuah 159). It is Buchi who "...assured me that my love for Nelo or any other women I fell in love with was legitimate and that love had the right to live" (Azuah 159). Unoma's self-discovery does not erase her previous turmoil. She often feels "...unworthy, and all that people saw when they tried to peek into my soul was a woman unworthy, clad in rags of sin and abominable stench" (Azuah 159-60).

She struggles with a mix of emotions – relief, excitement, but also lingering fear. Despite this, she feels a newfound sense of empowerment and clarity. In spite of being proud of whom she is, the fear of judgment still lingers. Unoma laments: "...I gathered my rags around me to stop them from flailing in the wind; a shameful sight. My incessant apologies for my offensive existence wouldn't do. Glares and angry scowls chased me deeper into a suffocating hole" (Azuah 160). At least she is being true to her sexuality. As Unoma becomes more comfortable with her identity as a

lesbian, she finds a growing sense of empowerment. Embracing her label and being open about her feelings allows her to take ownership of her identity and narrative. Unoma's journey of acceptance and labelling is a critical phase in her self-discovery. The period of embracing her identity allows her to move beyond confusion and fear, and to step into her authentic self with newfound courage and pride.

Conclusion

Evidently, the examination of the lesbian identity formation, and the bildungsroman journey of self-discovery journey within the context of lesbian identity in the texts presents a deep understanding of the complex journeys undertaken by their protagonists, Nkunzi and Unoma, as they traverse the complex backdrop of understanding and embracing their authentic lesbian selves. Through careful textual analysis, the paper has explored the deep narrative of self-exploration, portraying the challenges that shape their identities and relationships. Through the examination of the cultural, societal, and personal dimensions of their narratives, both texts provide poignant insights into the interplay between self-discovery, sexuality, and identity formation. Therefore, both texts foreground the universal nature of the journey of self-discovery, irrespective of cultural and geographical contexts. Nkunzi's journey in South Africa and Unoma's journey in Nigeria both project the shared themes of curiosity, confusion, fear, and empowerment that characterise the process of coming to terms with one's lesbian identity. Both protagonists negotiate the delicate balance between personal desires and societal norms, leading to introspection, self-awareness, and eventual acceptance. The subtle shades of their journeys, while influenced by cultural differences, ultimately reflect the shared human experience of understanding and embracing one's authentic self.

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