



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Egbunike, L. (2018). Set apart. TLS - The Times Literary Supplement, 2018-July(6015), 23-.

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/20609/>

Link to published version:

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Uzodinma Iweala's second novel *See No Evil* is the latest work in a growing corpus produced by Nigerian writers examining the lives of LGBT Nigerians. Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 further criminalised homosexuality in the country, building upon the anti-gay laws introduced by the British whilst Nigeria was still a crown colony. In the wake of the country's increasingly draconian treatment of same-sex relationships, Nigeria's literary sphere has seen a series of both fictional and biographical narratives providing windows into the experiences of Nigeria's LGBT community. Novels by Jude Dibia and Chinelo Okparanta and biographies and memoirs by Chike Frankie Edozien and Unoma Azuah have sought to centre the lives of this marginalised community. Iweala's contribution to this body of works locates its narrative within Nigeria's burgeoning diaspora. *See No Evil*'s protagonist Niru is an eighteen year old man of Nigerian parentage, growing up in America's capital. This bildungsroman presents Niru's sexual awakening and as such, forces him to come to terms with his sexuality which is viewed as deviant in the eyes of his family and within the Nigerian Christian community to which he belongs. In many ways, Niru exists on the margins – as a child of the diaspora who struggles to live up to familial and cultural expectations; as a black student in an affluent white school and as gay man in a conservative Christian Nigerian household. Over the course of this novel there are moments of reprieve from the various pressures he feels from not quite fitting in, but largely this work presents a morose tale of one unable to achieve acceptance.

When Niru's father discovers dating apps on his son's phone, reading romantic exchanges Niru has had with other men, he erupts with anger insisting Niru returns to Nigeria in an effort to rid him of his homosexuality through religious intervention. The trauma of this trip cements in Niru a further fragmentation of his sense of self, as he works harder to conform to the often competing norms of behaviour both at school and at home. Imprisoned within the expectations placed upon him by his family, his community and his social circle, Niru enters into a downward spiral. His brief relationship with Damien, a young student at Howard University and his friendship with Meredith, Niru's closest friend whom is in love with him, both crumble leaving Niru feeling increasingly alone.

With echoes of the Black Lives Matter movement reverberating in the text, *Speak No Evil* engages with the social construction of black masculinity as inherently dangerous in the American context, highlighting the tensions between the police and the black community. Iweala repeatedly references the racial dynamics which shape Niru's life, commenting on the ways in which his blackness sets him apart from his contemporaries. This novel, whilst speaking to very current African-American concerns, also locates itself within the Nigerian literary tradition through its homage to Chinua Achebe. Like Achebe's celebrated novel *Things Fall Apart* published in the 1950s, Iweala constructs three generations of men in which father-son relationships are marked by tensions. Iweala's representation of the Ikemadu family presents Obi, a father with a fiery temper whose accomplishments are born out of his sheer hard work. Obi views his father who turned to alcohol as a failure, and views his son Niru as a disappointment, mapping onto Achebe's familial model presented through the protagonist Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

Speak No Evil is a slow paced novel with few moments of dramatic tension, occurring largely in scenes which depict the father-son interactions. The novel lacks an urgency in its telling, with the narrative unfolding gradually. *Speak No Evil* offers a glimpse into the issues it puts forward, bookmarking central concerns around race, sexuality and religion for the reader but not managing to fully tease out their complexities. Offering an example of middle class life for a Nigerian family in the diaspora, its narrative is reminiscent of many other novels depicting the experiences of African diasporas. That said, Iweala's centring the experience of a gay second-generation Nigerian in

America contributes to the telling of more diverse narratives of Nigerians, and in doing so sheds light on experiences which /assists in presenting a more varied image of...

helps to complicate provides another interjection into the conversation around....

Contributes in providing a glimpse into the varied lives of....