LITERATURE

A Psychoanalytic Study of Peer Pressure and Sexual Identity Formation in Selected African Novels

Benjamin Ruth Ababo Otaria

Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Published November 2026

Abstract

This study investigates the formative role of peer relationships in the development of sexual consciousness in Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda* (2018), Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023), and Chukwuebuka Ibeh's *Blessings* (2024). The novels portray peer encounters as experiences through which characters interpret desire, imagine intimacy, and develop their understanding of sexuality, rather than merely providing opportunities to express desires they already understand. Employing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory as its theoretical frameworks, the study examines how unconscious desire, repression, inner conflict, observational learning, and social influence contribute to sexual consciousness. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyses the selected novels through close reading and textual analysis, with reference to relevant secondary sources. The analysis demonstrates that peer relationships influence sexual consciousness through observation, invitation, experimentation, emotional identification, and unequal power dynamics. It further reveals that peer encounters may involve curiosity, pressure, coercion, pleasure, and acceptance within the same encounter. The findings indicate that sexual identity formation in the selected novels is a process in which private feeling and social experience meet. The study concludes that interpersonal encounters play a formative role in how characters understand desire, experience intimacy, and develop sexual consciousness, without reducing desire to imitation or treating every intimate encounter as freely chosen.

Keywords: Sexual identity formation; peer influence; psychoanalysis; sexual consciousness; Social Learning Theory

1 Introduction

The development of sexual identity has become an important subject in literary studies, particularly in works that examine the relationship between human desire, social experience, and personal identity. Literary representations of sexuality reveal how individuals recognise attraction, understand intimate relationships, and respond to the expectations of their societies. Sexual consciousness may develop through personal feelings, but interpersonal relationships also provide experiences through which individuals interpret and express those feelings. Friends, schoolmates, and other peers can introduce unfamiliar forms of intimacy, encourage experimentation, offer emotional acceptance, or exert pressure. These interactions raise important questions about the role of peer influence in the development of sexual self-understanding.

Psychoanalysis provides a theoretical approach to examining desire and the psychological processes associated with sexual development. Sigmund Freud, a major proponent of psychoanalysis, developed concepts such as the unconscious, libido, repression, and psychological conflict to explain human behaviour and motivation. His account of unconscious desire suggests that individuals may experi-

ence feelings and impulses that are not immediately understood or that conflict with accepted social expectations. Repression concerns the exclusion of unacceptable wishes from conscious awareness, while psychological conflict may arise when personal desires contradict internalised moral and social values. In literary studies, these concepts provide a means of examining how characters experience attraction, shame, guilt, and uncertainty in their relationships. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory offers another perspective on the influence of interpersonal relationships. Bandura (1977) argues that human behaviour develops partly through observation, modelling, social interaction, and the consequences associated with particular actions. Individuals may acquire knowledge of unfamiliar behaviour by observing others, while approval, rejection, reward, and punishment can influence whether they act on what they have observed. The theory also recognises that observing behaviour does not necessarily lead to its performance. In the study of sexual consciousness, Bandura's approach provides a means of examining how peer encounters introduce possibilities for intimacy and influence the interpretation and expression of desire. Combined with Freud's psychoanalysis, the theory makes it possible to investigate both the psychological experiences of characters and the social relationships that contribute to their developing understanding of sexuality.

The representation of same-sex desire in African literature has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Earlier literary portrayals frequently associated homosexuality with moral disorder, foreign influence, or socially unacceptable conduct, as discussed by Dunton (1989). Contemporary African writers have increasingly represented queer characters through experiences of affection, family relationships, personal conflict, social exclusion, and the search for belonging. Writers such as Jude Dibia, Chinelo Okparanta, Trifonia Melibea Obono, and Chukwuebuka Ibeh portray characters whose sexual experiences challenge accepted expectations of heterosexual relationships and marriage. These works provide opportunities to examine sexuality not only through social opposition but also through the interpersonal experiences that contribute to the characters' understanding of themselves. Existing scholarship on queer African fiction has examined the historical representation of same-sex desire, heteronormativity, gender performance, social exclusion, and the regulation of sexuality. Otaria and Ohia's comparative study of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, *Blessings*, and *Walking with Shadows* investigates gender performance, institutional violence, bodily memory, and the relationship between social punishment and queer self-recognition. These studies establish the importance of cultural expectations and social authority in shaping queer experiences. Nevertheless, the formative role of peer encounters in the development of sexual consciousness requires further comparative examination. Beyond the restrictions imposed by families and communities, questions remain about how observing peers, receiving affection, participating in intimate encounters, and experiencing interpersonal pressure contribute to the characters' understanding of desire.

This concern is particularly significant in Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda* (2018), Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* (2023), and Chukwuebuka Ibeh's *Blessings* (2024). In *La Bastarda*, Okomo's encounter with Dina, Linda, and Pilar introduces experiences of same-sex intimacy that contribute to her developing sexual awareness. In *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, Segun's relationships with Tanko and August reveal the influence of emotional attachment, unequal power, and social expectations on his understanding of intimacy. Similarly, *Blessings* presents Obiefuna's relationships with Aboy, Senior Papilo, and other peers as experiences through which affection, attraction, fear, and pressure become significant to his sexual self-understanding. Although these characters encounter different forms of influence, their experiences demonstrate the importance of examining how personal desire develops in relation to interpersonal encounters.

This study therefore examines the formative role of peer relationships in sexual identity formation in the three selected novels. Employing Freud's psychoanalysis and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study examines how observation, invitation, experimentation, emotional identification, approval, and unequal power influence the characters' understanding of sexual desire and intimacy. Through qualitative close reading and textual analysis, it explores the relationship between psychological experience and peer interaction. The study argues that peer encounters do not merely provide opportunities for characters to express desires they already understand. Rather, these relationships contribute to how characters interpret desire, imagine intimacy, and develop sexual consciousness, while recognising that peer influence may involve both acceptance and coercion.

2 Literature review

Studies of queer African fiction have given sustained attention to family opposition, social exclusion, religious authority, political repression, and the search for belonging. These concerns help explain the pressures that surround queer characters. Yet attention to prohibition alone can leave another question unanswered: what happens when a young character encounters intimacy through a friend or group of peers and begins to understand a feeling that was previously uncertain or unnamed? The present study treats those encounters as part of the literary representation of sexual development, rather than as minor episodes preceding an already settled identity.

In early psychoanalysis, scholars such as Irving Bieber et al. (1962) framed male homosexuality through a pathological lens, viewing same-sex attraction as an unresolved developmental fixation or an inhibition of standard heterosexual growth caused by distorted family dynamics (45). Scholarship on same-sex desire in African literature has moved from questions of visibility and social prohibition towards closer consideration of queer lives and relationships. Chris Dunton's study of homosexuality in African writing examines how earlier literary texts often associated same-sex desire with foreign influence, moral disorder, or unequal relationships. His survey also recognises works that treat homosexual relations less negatively. The problem he identifies is not simply the absence of homosexual characters but the limited development of relationships between African characters as ordinary, complex human experiences (426). This distinction is useful to this article. A character may appear in a narrative as evidence of social prejudice without the narrative exploring how that character becomes conscious of affection, desire, or intimate possibility.

Later scholarship helps explain why the treatment of same-sex desire cannot be separated from the history of African societies. Epprecht's account of same-sex sexualities in Africa challenges the idea that such experiences are solely imported from Europe. Chantal Zabus likewise examines representations of same-sex desire across African literatures and cultures. These studies question accounts that place heterosexuality outside history while treating queer desire as an alien disruption. Their contribution is essential for reading the selected novels within African settings rather than measuring their characters against assumptions about what is supposedly African. Yet historical recovery cannot, by itself, explain how an individual fictional character comes to understand an attraction or responds to an intimate encounter. The question of personal development requires attention to relationships within the narratives.

Lindsey Green-Simms's discussion of the emergent queer in twenty-first-century Nigerian fiction develops the literary side of this shift. Her work shows the importance of newer narratives in making queer experience visible within Nigerian social life (139). The movement from schematic representation to complex characters also changes the questions literary criticism can ask. Instead of

establishing only whether a text condemns or affirms same-sex desire, criticism can examine how desire becomes understandable to the person experiencing it. Such a question is especially relevant to the young characters in *Blessings* and *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, whose experiences unfold through friendship, education, family expectations, and encounters with other young people. Their identities are not presented independently of those relationships. Studies of sexuality and social control offer another necessary part of this discussion. Sylvia Tamale's work on African sexualities draws attention to the ways legal, religious, and cultural authority regulate what people may do and openly acknowledge. Such regulation matters in fiction because it shapes what young people can know. When family and community recognise heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate form of intimacy, a young person may experience same-sex attraction without having acceptable language for it. The rules that constrain sexual conduct may therefore also influence how characters interpret their feelings. Nevertheless, identifying the source of prohibition is only one stage of analysis. We must also consider the relationships that bring alternative practices and meanings into a character's experience.

Otaria and Ohia (2026), in their study of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, *Blessings*, and *Walking with Shadows*, examine how gender performance, institutional violence, and bodily memory shape queer characters' experiences. Their analysis demonstrates that punishment extends beyond immediate physical suffering to influence how characters remember violence and respond to social authority. Discussing Obiefuna's experience in *Blessings*, they argue that "the physical violence in the novel remains active through memory" (145). Their interpretation draws attention to Obiefuna's recollection of being beaten, particularly how the memory of blood returns through bodily sensation. They explain that the past remains available through sensation. This establishes that violence does not end when the physical punishment stops. Its effects continue to influence the character's relationship with his body and past experiences. Their paper examines Obiefuna's developing attraction to Aboy in *Blessings*. Their analysis contrasts the judgement imposed by Anozie with the emotional recognition Obiefuna experiences through Aboy's attention. They observe that Obiefuna's encounter with Aboy gives his body a different meaning, since it becomes a means of recognising pleasure rather than evidence of failed masculinity (147). This reading is significant because it acknowledges that Obiefuna's experience involves more than persecution. His relationship with Aboy also introduces affection, pleasure, and recognition within a family environment that condemns same-sex intimacy. Although their paper establishes the relationship between social punishment, bodily experience, and queer self-recognition, their primary concern remains the body as a record of violence and resistance. The present study extends their discussion by examining how peer encounters contribute to the development of sexual consciousness. Rather than concentrating mainly on the lasting effects of punishment, it investigates how peer relationships influence the characters' understanding of attraction, intimacy, emotional attachment, and sexual behaviour.

Recent criticism devoted specifically to *Blessings* reinforces the need to examine these overlapping forces. Ezeani and Paschal-Mbakwe read the novel through identity conflict and social rejection, emphasising discrimination, concealment, and the struggle for self-acceptance. Their use of minority stress theory places Obiefuna's experience within a pattern of hostility that produces psychological pressure. Anakoro, Unoroh, and Idowu, in a separate study, concentrate on family and religious authority and the regulation of personhood. Together these studies make a strong case for examining the systems that police Obiefuna's life. Their emphases are not identical, but both direct attention to what happens when identity encounters social punishment. A further question concerns the earlier and continuing interpersonal experiences through which Obiefuna learns to recognise desire,

receives attention, and interprets closeness. *Blessings* does not represent Obiefuna's relationships as interchangeable. His growing closeness to Aboy takes shape through shared household routines, bodily attention, and the possibility of mutual affection. The later relationship with Senior Papilo unfolds within the hierarchy of boarding school, where an older student can offer attention while also exercising control. These relationships provide different conditions for sexual and emotional development. A critical account of violence explains why Obiefuna fears punishment, but it must be joined to an account of how affection, approval, dependency, and unequal status influence his choices. The present study therefore reads peer influence not as one consistent force but as a range of encounters that can offer recognition or expose the younger character to coercion (25).

Criticism of Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda* has also examined the relation between queer identity and social authority. Isaac Veysey-White studies the novel through queer performance and the coloniality of gender. He argues that Okomo's refusal of prescribed roles and her search for community challenge restrictions operating within postcolonial Fang society. The value of this reading lies in its treatment of queer conduct as a form of resistance rather than merely a deviation judged by the village. Okomo's relationships become meaningful because the world around her denies women the freedom to choose their sexual and social lives. Even so, resistance describes only part of what occurs when she meets Dina, Linda, and Pilar. Their intimacy also introduces experiences that Okomo has not previously understood or practised. Agbowuro-Aro's Lacanian study, 'Unconscious Desires and the Symbolic Order,' examines metaphors, metonyms, symbols, and the 'big other' in *La Bastarda*. It argues that the Fang social order mediates the characters' same-sex desires and limits their expression (33). The study makes a useful contribution by connecting social restriction to unconscious processes rather than treating sexuality solely as outward conduct. Okomo's shame and uncertainty are shaped by the language of propriety and by the authority of elders. Yet the symbolic order does not explain every aspect of her changing response to other girls. A close reading must also follow what she observes, what she is invited to experience, her hesitation, the pleasure she reports, and her subsequent attachment to Dina. These events are not simply evidence of an identity that has already been fully articulated.

Okomo's earlier attraction to Linda is particularly important for this distinction. The forest encounter is not necessarily the first moment of same-sex attraction. It is, instead, an encounter in which observed conduct and bodily experience make previously troubling feelings more intelligible. The novel presents observation before participation, and participation before Okomo declares a particular love for Dina. It also records reluctance and pressure, so the group's role cannot be described only as generous guidance. Reading these moments together allows the study to examine how peer encounters influence developing sexual consciousness without claiming that attraction has only one origin (29). This inquiry extends rather than dismisses the work of Veysey-White and Agbowuro-Aro: the question changes from how queer subjects resist social authority to how interpersonal experience becomes part of their self-understanding.

Scholarship concerned with *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* offers a further point of comparison. Sopuruchi Blessed Frank's study of contemporary Nigerian fiction includes Somtochukwu's novel among works that challenge normalised heterosexuality. Its wider concern with literary resistance provides a context for reading the novel as more than a private love story. Yet Somtochukwu represents different experiences within one narrative, and these differences deserve sustained attention. Segun's earlier relationship with Tanko begins with valued attention after bullying, but it also involves a serious imbalance of power. August's experiences are marked by the fear of public recognition and the struggle to acknowledge what he wants. Their later relationship cannot be understood without

considering what each has already learned about affection, rejection, and disclosure. The psychological approaches used in this article help to bring these literary problems into the same discussion.

The reviewed studies establish important approaches to the representation of same-sex desire in African fiction. Dunton, Epprecht, and Zabus examine its literary and historical representation, while Green-Simms considers changing portrayals of queer experience in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Veysey-White and Agbowuro-Aro examine queer performance and the symbolic restrictions surrounding desire in *La Bastarda*. Otaria and Ohia investigate gender performance, institutional violence, bodily memory, and self-recognition in *Blessings* and two other Nigerian novels. These studies demonstrate how social expectations shape queer experiences, and some also recognise the importance of intimacy and personal relationships. The present study differs in its primary concern with the formative influence of peer encounters. Through a comparative reading of *La Bastarda*, *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, and *Blessings*, it examines how observation, invitation, experimentation, emotional attachment, approval, and unequal power contribute to sexual self-understanding. Freud's psychoanalysis and Bandura's Social Learning Theory provide a means of examining both the psychological conflicts surrounding desire and the influence of interpersonal experiences on behaviour. The study therefore extends existing criticism by examining peer relationships as experiences through which characters come to interpret desire, negotiate intimacy, and develop sexual consciousness.

3 Theoretical framework

The development of sexual consciousness involves both internal psychological experiences and social relationships. Individuals may experience attraction before they fully understand its meaning, while interactions with others may influence how they recognise, express, or respond to those feelings. In literary narratives, such experiences become important in understanding how characters negotiate desire, social expectations, and their developing sense of identity. This study adopts Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory to examine the influence of peer relationships on sexual identity formation in Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda*, Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, and Chukwuebuka Ibeh's *Blessings*.

The two theories address different but related aspects of the research problem. Freud's psychoanalysis provides a means of examining unconscious desire, repression, shame, and the psychological conflicts that arise when individual feelings contradict accepted social values. Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains how observation, interaction, modelling, reinforcement, and anticipated consequences influence behaviour. Their combination allows the study to consider both the feelings characters bring into peer relationships and the changes in understanding and conduct that emerge through those relationships.

3.1 Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is concerned with the relationship between conscious experience and unconscious mental processes. Freud argues that human behaviour cannot always be explained through thoughts and intentions of which individuals are fully aware. Desires, memories, and impulses may remain outside conscious awareness while continuing to influence emotions and conduct. His discussion of the unconscious therefore provides a basis for examining fictional characters whose feelings become clearer through particular experiences.

Freud's concept of libido is relevant to the present study. In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, he describes libido in relation to sexual desire and the pursuit of pleasure. His discussion of

unconscious wishes suggests that desire does not always conform to accepted moral expectations. Freud observes that libido may choose objects of desire without the restraints imposed by conscious moral judgement (127). This understanding provides a means of examining the relationship between sexual attraction and the social restrictions that determine which relationships are considered acceptable. An important aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis is repression. Freud explains that repression occurs when psychological opposition prevents certain wishes or impulses from entering conscious awareness. Although these impulses remain unconscious, they may continue to influence behaviour and emotional experience. In his nineteenth lecture, Freud describes repression as a process associated with resistance and the exclusion of particular thoughts from consciousness (266). Repression therefore differs from deliberate concealment. A person who recognises a desire but chooses not to disclose it is not necessarily repressing that desire in the Freudian sense.

This distinction is relevant to the novels under examination. In *La Bastarda*, Okomo's attraction to Linda precedes her intimate encounter with Dina and the other girls. Her earlier feelings indicate that the forest experience cannot simply be regarded as the creation of desire. Nevertheless, the encounter introduces Okomo to forms of physical intimacy that contribute to her understanding of attraction and pleasure. Freud's psychoanalysis helps the study examine the relationship between earlier feelings, uncertainty, shame, and the subsequent recognition of desire.

Freud also discusses the psychological consequences of conflict between individual wishes and internal restrictions. He argues that external denial may be accompanied by inner self-denial, creating conflict when an individual comes to oppose a form of satisfaction that is personally desired (317). This concept is relevant to characters who have absorbed social teachings that condemn their sexual feelings. Such characters may experience conflict not only because society rejects their desires but also because they have learned to judge themselves through those social expectations. In *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, this approach provides a basis for examining the psychological tensions surrounding Segun's attraction, emotional attachment, and response to social expectations. His relationship with Tanko brings questions of desire, recognition, and self-understanding into focus. The relationship between private feelings and external expectations can therefore be examined through Freud's account of psychological conflict.

Similarly, *Blessings* presents Obiefuna's developing sexuality within an environment where family authority, religious expectations, and masculine ideals influence his understanding of acceptable conduct. His relationships with Aboy and Senior Papilo provide different contexts in which attraction, vulnerability, and emotional response can be examined. Psychoanalysis helps explain how these experiences may contribute to uncertainty, guilt, or conflict without assuming that every expression of sexual feeling is unconscious.

Freud's theory is used in this study as an interpretive approach rather than a clinical explanation of homosexuality. Its purpose is not to diagnose the characters or establish the origin of their sexual orientation. Instead, it provides concepts for examining how the novels represent desire, psychological conflict, and the difficulty of reconciling personal feelings with social expectations.

3.2 Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides the second theoretical foundation for this study. In *Social Learning Theory* (1977), Bandura argues that human behaviour develops through interactions between individuals and their social environments. He challenges explanations that attribute behaviour entirely to internal impulses or direct environmental conditioning. His approach

recognises the importance of observation, cognitive processes, and the consequences associated with particular actions.

A central concept in Bandura's theory is observational learning, also known as modelling. Bandura explains that individuals can acquire knowledge about behaviour by observing others, forming mental representations of what they observe, and using that information to guide subsequent actions. He states that much human behaviour is learned through observation rather than direct experience alone (22). This principle is important because it recognises that individuals may encounter unfamiliar forms of conduct through the actions of others before attempting them personally.

Observational learning provides a basis for examining Okomo's experiences in *La Bastarda*. Her encounter with Dina, Linda, and Pilar exposes her to a form of same-sex intimacy that she has not previously experienced in that manner. The behaviour of the girls creates an opportunity for observation, while their invitation introduces the possibility of participation. Okomo's initial surprise, hesitation, eventual participation, and pleasure make the encounter important to her developing sexual consciousness. Bandura's theory helps explain how exposure to others' actions may influence a character's understanding of what intimacy involves and what forms of pleasure are possible.

Bandura also distinguishes between acquiring knowledge of behaviour and performing that behaviour. Observing an action does not mean that an individual will necessarily reproduce it. Whether a person acts may depend on expected rewards, anticipated punishment, personal judgement, and the social circumstances surrounding the action. Bandura explains that people are more likely to perform observed behaviour when they expect outcomes they consider desirable (28).

This distinction is important to the study because peer relationships may influence behaviour without determining sexual attraction itself. A character may already experience desire but lack the knowledge, opportunity, confidence, or social support necessary to express it. Contact with peers may therefore influence the movement from private attraction to experimentation and a clearer understanding of sexual feelings.

Another relevant concept is vicarious reinforcement. Bandura explains that individuals may be influenced by observing the consequences of other people's actions. When a particular behaviour appears to produce approval, pleasure, or acceptance, an observer may become more willing to attempt it. Conversely, the expectation of punishment or rejection may discourage participation. These processes help explain how peer environments can affect conduct even when individuals have not previously experienced the behaviour themselves.

In *La Bastarda*, Okomo encounters her peers in a setting that differs from the restrictive environment controlled by her grandmother and the wider Fang community. The girls' intimacy presents an alternative to the sexual expectations Okomo has learned. The encounter allows her to experience forms of closeness that her social upbringing has not openly permitted. Her participation and emotional response suggest that peer interaction contributes to the development of her sexual understanding. Social learning also provides a means of examining peer influence in *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*. The relationships surrounding Segun and August reveal how approval, rejection, affection, and group expectations affect characters differently. Segun's relationship with Tanko can be examined in terms of emotional recognition and the influence of interpersonal experience. August's experiences, by contrast, raise questions about how peer acceptance and social pressure shape the willingness to acknowledge or express desire. These differences demonstrate that peer influence does not operate uniformly across characters. In *Blessings*, Bandura's theory is particularly useful for distinguishing supportive relationships from encounters shaped by unequal power. Obiefuna's

interactions with Aboy and Senior Papilo provide opportunities to examine how affection, influence, social position, and expectations affect sexual experience. The relationship between a younger student and a more powerful peer requires attention to the circumstances under which participation occurs. Social learning theory helps the study examine how observed conduct and expected consequences influence responses, while the textual analysis must establish whether those responses reflect willingness, pressure, or coercion.

Bandura's theory therefore contributes to the study by explaining how peer relationships can provide examples of behaviour, opportunities for experimentation, and expectations concerning acceptance or rejection. Its relevance lies in examining how social experience influences conduct and self-understanding, rather than treating sexual orientation as a behaviour simply acquired through imitation.

The combined approach therefore makes a two-part argument possible. First, desire may be present before a character can openly recognise or act on it, and shame may prevent clear self-understanding. Second, relationships with peers can actively shape how desire is understood, experienced, and developed. These parts do not cancel one another. They explain why Okomo's earlier attraction and her later experience in the forest must be studied together. They also establish a test for the other novels: where there is unequal power or an ignored refusal, the formative effect of an encounter cannot be described as simple acceptance or free experimentation.

4 Peer influence and sexual identity formation in the selected novels

4.1 Sexual consciousness and peer influence in *La Bastarda*

In *La Bastarda*, Trifonia Melibea Obono presents Okomo's encounter with Dina, Linda, and Pilar as a defining moment in her sexual development. Raised in the Fang community, Okomo is surrounded by expectations that present heterosexual marriage and reproduction as the proper roles for women. Her grandmother reinforces these expectations through instructions about acceptable behaviour and relationships. She warns Okomo, "Don't be friends with those girls, they're indecent and mysterious" (26). Before Okomo enters the forest, her grandmother has already taught her to see Dina and the other girls as improper. This warning gives Okomo a negative judgment of the girls before she understands who they are or what they do. Within this environment, Okomo feels attraction to other girls but does not yet have the freedom or language to explore those feelings openly. Her encounter with Dina, Linda, and Pilar therefore becomes an important stage in the development of her sexual consciousness. Her decision to join them is also connected to their defence of her uncle Marcelo, whom her grandfather describes as a "man woman", and who has been punished for refusing the community's expectations of manhood and reproduction, and chastised by the tribe: "you are not a man! A real man sleeps with women and fathers children" (27). The friendship therefore begins as a challenge to what Okomo has been taught about the people she should trust.

Before joining the girls, Okomo is already attracted to Linda. While describing her companions, she notices that Linda has "lovely eyes and an even lovelier bottom" (26). She admits that she notices Linda's physical attractiveness with anxiety because she has been taught that her feelings should be directed towards men. This moment is important because it separates the experience of desire from the conscious understanding of what that desire means. Okomo recognises Linda's attractiveness, but her response is filled with discomfort. Her family has given her rules about heterosexual marriage,

but it has not given her an acceptable way to understand her feelings for another girl. She has also learned that such feelings go against the expectations of her community.

Freud's psychoanalysis helps to explain the conflict in this passage. Okomo's anxiety does not come only from her attraction to Linda. It comes from the opposition between her feelings and the cultural beliefs she has accepted about proper sexual desire. Her attraction exists alongside the expectation that she should eventually desire and marry a man. Her experience shows the psychological tension that can arise when personal desire conflicts with internalised social expectations. This conflict becomes clearer when Okomo recalls her attraction to Linda and admits that she often thought, "I am sick with sin" (28). The phrase shows how social condemnation shapes the way she judges herself. Okomo does not lack desire; rather, she cannot reconcile that desire with what she has been taught about sexuality.

The forest scene makes this uncertainty visible. Okomo watches as Dina, Linda, and Pilar prepare a place on the ground and begin showing affection to one another. Dina kisses Pilar, and Linda then joins them. Okomo remains standing, surprised by behaviour that has not been part of the sexual knowledge available to her. She feels shame and unease, trembles, and considers whether to continue working, return to the village, or wait until the girls finish. She says that she does "not fully understand[] why they were doing what they were doing" (27). This is a moment of observation before participation. The scene introduces a practice Okomo did not expect to witness and forces her to decide how to respond.

Bandura's theory of observational learning helps explain Okomo's response. Dina, Pilar, and Linda provide Okomo with an example of intimacy that differs from the secrecy, guilt, and punishment she expects in the village. By watching them, Okomo becomes aware of a form of relationship that was previously outside her experience. Dina then holds out her hand and says, "Come on, join us" (28). Okomo initially refuses. Dina tells her that the forest is outside her grandmother's authority and presents the encounter as an opportunity to try something unfamiliar. Dina's invitation shows the direct influence of peers on Okomo's decision-making. She does not only demonstrate intimacy; she also presents participation as a chance to experience freedom from the rules that govern Okomo's life.

However, the scene should not be read as a simple act of free choice. Okomo's hesitation matters. Her account explains that she could not refuse again after Dina kissed her and the other girls began undressing her. The scene contains encouragement and pressure at the same time. This complexity does not erase Okomo's later statement that she felt pleasure, but it changes how the encounter should be understood. Peer influence can involve curiosity, encouragement, pressure, and pleasure within the same experience. Okomo's initial refusal therefore remains an important part of the interpretation. After taking part, Okomo says, "for the first time in my life, I felt sexually free" (28). This statement marks a change in her experience of desire. The feelings that once produced shame become connected with pleasure and freedom. Before the encounter, Okomo has a desire without an accepted way to live it. During the encounter, she sees desire expressed between women and joins an intimate experience that she finds pleasurable. After it, she begins to speak and act differently. Bandura's idea of anticipated consequences helps explain this change. In her grandmother's household, same-sex desire is associated with disapproval and punishment. Among the girls, Okomo experiences a different social response to desire. This contrast changes her understanding of what may be possible when she acts on her feelings.

The girls also give Okomo a sense of belonging. Linda identifies her as the fourth member of the "Indecency Club" (28). Although the name reflects the community's condemnation of their relationships, the girls adopt it as a shared identity. Their acceptance creates a social space in which Okomo's feelings no longer separate her from everyone around her. The group offers companionship and recognition that she cannot easily find in the wider community. The order of events is important: the peer encounter does not simply reveal an identity Okomo already fully understands. Instead, it contributes to the process through which she comes to understand herself.

Okomo's attachment to Dina shows that her sexual consciousness develops further after the group encounter. Although the four girls have agreed to relate as a group, Okomo now wants an individual relationship with Dina. She tells her, "I only love you. I don't like the others" (33). Dina replies, "I didn't know until today. I love you" (33). This exchange is more than a description of an earlier bodily response. Okomo separates sexual participation in the group from a particular emotional attachment, while Dina responds in the language of mutual love. The movement from curiosity and participation to preference and commitment marks another stage in Okomo's sexual consciousness. It also suggests that sexual identity formation cannot be reduced to imitation or participation alone. Okomo moves from observing her peers to experiencing intimacy and then to expressing a specific emotional preference. The social setting remains important. Okomo hides the forest encounter from her grandmother, who continues to ask whether she has found a man. In one exchange, Okomo's use of the word for a girlfriend causes immediate alarm before she corrects herself (29). This slip of language shows that her developing understanding now exists beside the speech expected at home. Okomo must move between two kinds of instruction: her grandmother's teaching about marriage to men and the girls' demonstration that women can desire and love one another. The conflict is not settled by one encounter. It continues as Okomo negotiates secrecy, attachment, and the need for a place where she can live differently.

Obono makes the forest central to this development. It is a physical space beyond close family control, but it is also where Okomo observes new behaviour, experiences intimacy, and finds a group that gives her feelings meaning. Her first-person narration brings readers close to the changing nature of her response. She begins by wondering what the girls are doing, moves through shock and participation, and later speaks of love and belonging. Towards the end of the novel, Okomo identifies herself as a lesbian and describes the forest as a refuge for people excluded from Fang tradition (60). This declaration connects her earlier experiences to her eventual understanding of herself. The forest becomes more than a place where forbidden intimacy occurs. It becomes a setting in which Okomo finds companionship, explores desire, and develops the confidence to acknowledge her sexual identity.

Obono therefore presents peer interaction as an experience that contributes to sexual consciousness rather than simply reflecting an identity that already exists. Okomo's attraction to Linda comes before the forest encounter, but the encounter gives her new experiences, recognition, and emotional attachment. Through Freud's account of psychological conflict and Bandura's explanation of observational learning, the novel shows how private attraction and interpersonal experience work together in the development of sexual self-understanding.

4.2 Peer relationships and sexual development in *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*

Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby* presents peer relationships as important experiences through which Segun develops his understanding of sexuality and emotional intimacy. Through Segun's relationship with Tanko, Somtochukwu examines how companionship, protection,

attraction, and unequal power can shape sexual experience. Their relationship shows that peer influence does not occur only through direct persuasion. It may also develop gradually through affection, emotional dependence, and the desire for acceptance.

Segun's relationship with Tanko begins at St. Emmanuel's Boys' College, where Tanko, an older student, provides protection and companionship. Somtochukwu describes the beginning of their relationship as an "innocent friendship" (25) and explains that Tanko makes it his responsibility to protect Segun when possible. Their friendship develops within the school's senior-junior hierarchy, where older students hold great authority over younger ones. Tanko's attention becomes important because Segun has previously struggled with bullying and rejection. Yet the friendship develops within a school hierarchy that gives Tanko authority over him. Segun obeys Tanko's requests, sometimes at the expense of his own needs, before their relationship becomes intimate. This suggests that emotional attachment grows alongside an established pattern of obedience. Through Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Tanko's protection can be understood as a form of social reward that encourages Segun to maintain the relationship, while the unequal positions of the boys shape his responses. The relationship gradually moves beyond ordinary friendship. Segun begins to recognise changes in Tanko's behaviour, especially the compliments and attention he receives. Somtochukwu writes that "Segun suspected that what they had was no longer just a friendship" (31). This moment is important because it marks the beginning of Segun's sexual consciousness. He recognises that the relationship is changing, but he does not yet fully understand what that change means. His feelings develop through repeated interaction with Tanko rather than through one sudden moment of recognition.

Segun also becomes increasingly "comfortable and at home with Tanko" (5). This feeling of comfort connects intimacy with emotional security. Tanko becomes someone with whom Segun feels accepted and valued. From Bandura's perspective, these positive experiences shape Segun's expectations of intimacy. The friendship creates a social environment in which affection between boys becomes personally meaningful. However, this emotional security also makes Segun more vulnerable to Tanko's influence because he begins to associate Tanko with safety, acceptance, and belonging. The sexual encounter between the two characters introduces a more troubling dimension of peer influence. Somtochukwu describes their first sexual experience by stating that "the sex was not a pleasurable experience" (32). Segun repeatedly asks Tanko to stop, but Tanko disregards his requests (33). These details show that Segun's affection for Tanko does not mean that he willingly accepts everything that happens between them. The encounter demonstrates how sexual experience may occur within an unequal relationship in which one person exercises greater control than the other.

The contrast between Segun's physical experience and his emotional attachment becomes clearer immediately afterwards. When Tanko asks whether he enjoyed the encounter, Segun answers positively despite his discomfort. Somtochukwu explains that Segun responds this way because he is "so enamoured" with Tanko and grateful that someone desires him (8). His response reveals the influence of emotional dependence on his behaviour. Segun's desire to preserve Tanko's affection becomes more important than openly expressing his dissatisfaction.

Freud's psychoanalysis helps explain this conflict between Segun's feelings and his outward response. His emotional attachment creates competing pressures: he wants affection and recognition, but he also experiences distress during the sexual encounter. Bandura's theory further explains how anticipated consequences may influence his conduct. Segun values Tanko's attention and may fear losing the relationship if he openly rejects the encounter. His response therefore shows how

emotional dependence can shape sexual behaviour without establishing genuine consent. The unequal power between them continues after their first sexual encounter. Somtochukwu observes that "sometimes Tanko spoke to Segun as though he were still a mere junior student" (39). This shows that their developing intimacy does not remove the school hierarchy from their relationship. Tanko continues to exercise the authority attached to his senior status. Their relationship therefore combines affection with an unequal distribution of power. This makes it difficult to interpret Segun's participation only as an expression of personal desire.

Segun's later relationship with August reveals another stage in his sexual self-understanding. Unlike his earlier uncertainty with Tanko, Segun becomes more aware of how social expectations shape intimate relationships. When August hesitates to express affection, Segun recognises the effect of learned social condemnation. He reminds himself, "We are socialized to despise ourselves" (143). This statement presents shame as a response shaped by social experience rather than simply an individual feeling. Freud's account of internal conflict helps explain how hostile social values can become part of a person's judgement of their own desire. Bandura's theory also explains how repeated exposure to rejection and punishment affects expectations of intimacy.

Segun's growing self-awareness becomes clearer when he confronts August about the emotional difficulties surrounding their relationship. He declares, "I've waged my own war with myself and my shame" (168). This statement suggests that Segun now understands the effects of internalised shame and is unwilling to continue carrying the burden of another person's uncertainty. Compared with his earlier willingness to hide discomfort to preserve Tanko's affection, Segun now expresses his emotional boundaries more clearly. Somtochukwu therefore presents sexual consciousness as a developing process shaped by different peer relationships. Tanko's influence introduces Segun to intimacy under conditions of protection, affection, and unequal power. His later relationship with August requires him to confront shame, emotional vulnerability, and the need for mutual recognition. Through these experiences, Segun moves towards a clearer understanding of what he desires and what he expects from intimate relationships. The novel shows that peer relationships can influence sexual self-understanding through both harmful and emotionally meaningful experiences. It also shows that sexual participation, emotional attachment, and consent must be examined separately.

4.3 Peer influence and sexual identity formation in *Blessings*

In *Blessings*, Chukwuebuka Ibeh examines the development of Obiefuna's sexual consciousness through relationships shaped by affection, social expectations and unequal power. His encounters with Aboy and Senior Papilo reveal how peer relationships can influence the recognition of desire, emotional attachment and sexual behaviour. Although both relationships contribute to Obiefuna's understanding of intimacy, they develop under different circumstances and produce different experiences. Obiefuna's attraction to Aboy develops through everyday companionship in the family home. As they spend time together, Obiefuna becomes increasingly attentive to Aboy's appearance, movements and responses. Ibeh describes Aboy's arrival as the moment when "Obiefuna's life had finally begun" (21). This description suggests that Aboy introduces a new emotional experience into Obiefuna's life. Their relationship provides an opportunity for him to recognise feelings that gradually develop through companionship and physical closeness.

The possibility of mutual affection becomes clearer when Obiefuna asks whether Aboy has a girl-friend. Aboy responds, "Are you jealous?" (24). He subsequently moves closer and places a finger against Obiefuna's lips, prompting Obiefuna to imagine a world in which only the two of them exist. The exchange suggests that Obiefuna's feelings are beginning to find recognition through Aboy's

response. Bandura's Social Learning Theory helps explain how interpersonal experiences contribute to the understanding and expression of affection. Aboy's response allows Obiefuna to interpret his attraction within the possibility of mutual intimacy rather than as an isolated feeling. Their encounter is interrupted by Obiefuna's father, Anozie, whose presence introduces fear into an otherwise affectionate moment. Obiefuna's subsequent anxiety reveals the conflict between his feelings and the expectations governing sexuality within his family. Freud's psychoanalysis helps explain this tension between desire and internalised social prohibition. Although Aboy's attention creates an opportunity for emotional recognition, paternal authority associates the expression of that attraction with the possibility of punishment.

Obiefuna's separation from Aboy and subsequent enrolment in boarding school expose him to another form of peer relationship. Unlike Aboy, whose companionship develops through mutual attention, Senior Papilo exercises authority over Obiefuna through the school's senior-junior hierarchy. This imbalance becomes apparent when Obiefuna approaches him and "found himself descending to his knees" (54). The response reveals his awareness of the obedience expected of younger students. Bandura's theory of anticipated consequences helps explain how the school environment teaches junior students to adjust their behaviour in response to senior authority.

Papilo reinforces this authority through physical punishment. Ibeh writes, "The first swing landed on Obiefuna's bare shoulders, tingling pain burning up his skin" (56). Yet Papilo subsequently presents himself as a friend and protector, claiming that he "was just trying to be your friend" (58). The relationship develops into the school father–son arrangement, which Ibeh describes as one in which "the son was essentially the provider and the father the protector" (59). Protection and obedience therefore become linked within an unequal relationship. Despite the violence he experiences, Obiefuna develops an attachment to Papilo. Jekwu recognises the arrangement as a means through which senior students manipulate their juniors, but Obiefuna remains drawn to the senior student. The narrator describes the "mesmerizing effect Senior Papilo had on him" (58). This contrast between Jekwu's warning and Obiefuna's attraction reveals the complexity of his emotional experience. Freud's account of psychological conflict helps explain how attraction and fear may coexist, while Bandura's theory shows how approval, punishment and anticipated rewards can influence behaviour. Obiefuna's feelings do not remove the unequal power within the relationship.

Papilo's influence extends into Obiefuna's sexual experiences when he arranges for him to visit a brothel. Despite the woman's initial refusal, Papilo offers, "I go pay double" (75). His insistence shows how he directs Obiefuna towards an encounter associated with accepted masculine sexual behaviour. The episode is significant because peer influence operates here through pressure towards heterosexual activity rather than same-sex experimentation. Obiefuna's participation occurs within a relationship where Papilo's approval carries considerable emotional weight. Obiefuna's reaction afterwards further distinguishes physical experience from personal desire. Ibeh describes him as "panting, loathing his release" (77). Although he experiences physical release, the narrator emphasises his distress and dissatisfaction. The passage demonstrates that sexual behaviour cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of attraction or enjoyment. Freud's account of inner conflict helps explain the difference between physical response and emotional experience, while Bandura's theory identifies the influence of peer authority on the circumstances surrounding the encounter.

The contrast between Aboy and Papilo demonstrates the different ways peer relationships contribute to Obiefuna's developing sexual consciousness. Aboy offers companionship and the possibility of mutual intimacy, although family opposition interrupts their relationship. Papilo introduces a

relationship in which attraction becomes entangled with authority, punishment and emotional dependence. Through these experiences, Ibeh shows that peer influence may encourage recognition and experimentation while also restricting personal choice. Obiefuna's sexual consciousness develops through these encounters, but his participation in particular sexual experiences cannot be taken as proof that peers determine his sexual orientation.

5 Comparative findings

The analysis of *La Bastarda*, *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, and *Blessings* reveals that peer relationships play a formative role in the development of sexual consciousness, although their influence differs according to the circumstances surrounding each character. Across the three novels, encounters with peers introduce opportunities for observation, experimentation, emotional attachment, and the recognition of desire. These experiences also expose characters to pressure, unequal power, and the consequences of expressing intimacy outside accepted social expectations. The novels therefore present sexual identity formation as a process in which personal feelings develop in relation to social experiences.

In *La Bastarda*, Okomo's encounter with Dina, Linda, and Pilar demonstrates how observation and participation contribute to sexual self-understanding. Although Okomo experiences attraction to Linda before meeting the girls in the forest, their intimacy introduces her to forms of sexual expression she has not previously experienced. Her participation, subsequent pleasure, and attachment to Dina mark a development in her understanding of desire. A related process emerges in *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, where Segun's relationship with Tanko introduces experiences of affection, sexual intimacy, and emotional dependence. His later relationship with August reveals how these experiences contribute to his understanding of shame, acceptance, and the expectations of intimate relationships. In *Blessings*, Obiefuna's attraction to Aboy develops through companionship and mutual attention, while his relationship with Senior Papilo demonstrates how peer influence can operate through authority, punishment, and the desire for approval.

An important finding is that peer influence does not produce the same outcome in every relationship. Okomo's encounter with the girls contributes to pleasure and sexual recognition, although the experience also involves hesitation and pressure. Segun's relationship with Tanko demonstrates how emotional attachment can coexist with coercion, while Obiefuna's experience with Senior Papilo reveals how unequal power may influence sexual behaviour that does not reflect personal desire. These differences establish that peer encounters may encourage exploration and self-understanding while also restricting individual choice. Sexual participation, emotional attachment, and identity recognition must therefore be examined as related but distinct experiences.

The application of Freud's psychoanalysis and Bandura's Social Learning Theory helps explain these findings. Freud's concepts of desire, repression, and psychological conflict illuminate the characters' struggles with shame and internalised social expectations. Bandura's concepts of observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and anticipated consequences explain how interpersonal experiences influence their responses to intimacy. Together, the theories demonstrate that sexual consciousness develops through the relationship between internal psychological processes and external social encounters. The three novels consequently establish peer relationships as significant experiences through which characters interpret desire, negotiate intimacy, and develop their understanding of themselves.

6 Conclusion

This study has examined the formative role of peer relationships in sexual identity formation in Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda*, Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*, and Chukwuebuka Ibeh's *Blessings*. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study establishes that peer encounters contribute to the ways characters recognise desire, experience intimacy, negotiate social expectations, and develop sexual consciousness. The findings indicate that sexual identity formation in the selected novels is a process in which private feeling and social experience meet. Peer relationships introduce experiences of observation, experimentation, emotional attachment, acceptance, pressure, and coercion that influence how characters interpret their feelings and understand intimate relationships. These experiences are not uniform. Some provide recognition and belonging, while others involve unequal power and restrictions on personal choice. The study contributes to existing scholarship by examining peer influence as a formative element in the literary representation of sexual consciousness. Its comparative reading demonstrates that peer encounters do not merely provide settings for the expression of already understood desires. They participate in the development of sexual self-understanding by shaping how characters experience, interpret, and respond to intimacy. The study concludes that contemporary African fiction represents sexual consciousness as developing through the interaction of psychological experience and interpersonal relationships, without reducing desire to imitation or treating every sexual encounter as freely chosen.

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