

The significance of gender and sexuality in Coming of Age experiences in Okechukwu
Nzelu's *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* and A.S Byatt's *Still Life*

Elizabeth Pye
lizzie.pye2017@my.ntu.ac.uk

Word Count: 1557

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Similarity, Difference

Abstract:

As the female protagonists of *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* by Okechukwu Nzelu and *Still Life* by A.S Byatt have many differences, such as race, family dynamic, and the contexts of their contemporary societies, this article, which is mainly focused on gender and sexuality, examines the extent to which there is a difference between their 'coming-of-age' processes. Nnenna Maloney is a 17-year-old attempting to figure out a multitude of things about herself, whereas Frederica Potter is trying to navigate the world of Cambridge University. This article is an exploration of the two characters' coming of age experiences as women and in terms of exploring their sexuality, in order to determine if there are constants in those experiences, which are not affected by growing up in particular circumstances.

The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney by Okechukwu Nzelu is set in present-day Britain and follows seventeen-year-old Nnenna who starts questioning her identity, particularly her half-Nigerian heritage, as she begins to wonder about her father whom she has never met. *Still Life* by A.S Byatt is set in 1950s Britain and follows Frederica Potter who has just started at Cambridge University. Both novels follow young women on the brink of adulthood; this article will explore whether they have a similar or different coming of age experiences in two ways. The first as women, for example, they are growing up in different time periods, different families, are different races, Frederica Potter is at Cambridge University, Nnenna Maloney is at home in Manchester, but the two may still share similar feelings or experiences due to the fact they are both women. The second in terms of sexuality; they may also share similar experiences exploring their sexuality despite their differences.

When considering the two characters' coming of age experiences as women, Nnenna's is undoubtedly affected by her race. It causes her to feel pressure to live up to British societies' female beauty standards. Carrie O'Grady explains Nnenna is left feeling 'confused and isolated as she grapples with ingrained racist attitudes. Nzelu has a sharp touch for these subtle, stinging barbs.'¹ There are two primary examples we see of this, the first in chapter one when a boy says to her "Nina, you shouldn't be attractive. But you *are*," he confirmed, reassuringly. It's so weird."² Another time is while Nnenna is at school and the narrator reveals "Nnenna, partly by virtue of not being white, knew better: perhaps more than most people, she was sometimes beautiful, and sometimes less so, depending on who was observing her at the time."³ Having to deal with these kinds of comments and thought processes leave Nnenna confused and unsure of herself, making growing up as a woman all the more difficult. This is also an example of a difference between Nnenna's and Frederica's coming of age experiences; Frederica, as a white woman, does not share the same worries as Nnenna in terms of living up to societies beauty standards.

Frederica's coming of age experience in relation to being a woman is mainly affected by some attitudes that women are somewhat inferior to men. For example, Frederica meets a medical student at Newnham College, and she explains to us "He had a habit of uttering sentences beginning with "Girls..." as though all girls were the same, and different from him."⁴ She elaborates, and informs us about another student she meets called Freddie "He truly thought women were good and bad and that good women were somehow dirtied by being touched and would resent it."⁵ These quotes highlight some of the ingrained sexist attitudes of the 1950s about women and their place in society compared to men's. It makes Frederica wonder "Surely, it was possible, she said to herself in a kind of panic, to make something of one's life *and* be a woman, surely."⁶ This is also another example of a difference between their coming of age experiences; Nnenna does not experience some of these sexist attitudes Frederica had to deal with in the 1950s.

¹ Carrie O'Grady, "The Private Joys Of Nnenna Maloney By Okechukwu Nzelu Review – Coming Of Age In Modern Britain", The Guardian, 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/18/private-joys-nnenna-maloney-okechukwu-nzelu-review>> [Accessed 8 January 2020].

² Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (Dialogue Books, 2019), p. 51.

³ Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (Dialogue Books, 2019), p. 153

⁴ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life*, (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 127

⁵ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life*, (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 128

⁶ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life* (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 198

Although we can see the differences between Nnenna's and Frederica's coming of age experiences as women, it is still evident there are some constants within them. One is they both have to deal with societies ingrained attitudes; about beauty in Nnenna's case, and about gender roles in Frederica's, shown through the negative comments they receive. Another is that Nnenna and Frederica both feel under pressure; Nnenna to live up to beauty standards that are not always inclusive of mixed-race women, Frederica to prove women are equal to men and have similar wants and needs.

In terms of the two characters exploring their sexuality, Nnenna does so with her boyfriend Dan which seems to put pressure on her experience perhaps. Nnenna wants this experience to happen in a certain way and subsequently begins to worry when it does not. For example, in chapter nine Nnenna and Dan are having a conversation and we are told the following "This was the first time they had spoken since having sex: as such, thought Nnenna, this was the conversation that would determine the meaning of their first time – which had somehow become so rarefied, so holy in Nnenna's mind that she was beginning to worry about it now. Had sex proven their love for one another? Or would he lose interest now he'd got what he wanted?"⁷ The situation seems to affect her because it makes her question and feels unsure about her decisions. Nnenna's experience exploring her sexuality is also almost an act of rebellion because her mother Joanie does not approve of her boyfriend. In chapter five, we are told, 'She knew her mother did not want her to go, and she also knew that her mother wasn't entirely sold on Danny.'⁸ Again, this shows us a difference between Nnenna's and Frederica's experiences, Nnenna being in a different location to Frederica, at home rather than university, means she has to deal with her mother not approving of her boyfriend, whereas Frederica is freer to do what she wants without considering others' opinions.

Frederica has a more carefree experience, exploring her sexuality in a series of flings and one-night stands with people she meets at university. She informs us after one of these one-night stands 'She had the sense that she was one of a number of girls he was observing and practising on; she didn't mind this, since she was observing and practising on him.'⁹ This shows how laid back Frederica feels about the situation. Frederica's experience is also a way for her to feel validated and as though she fits in somewhere; in chapter eight it's explained to us "She saw Cambridge in that first year as a garden full of young men...she ascribed much of the dullness of her earlier life to the absence of men...at Cambridge, they would be clever and interesting and be able to overpower her in an argument and listen to what she said. They would be her friends. She would belong."¹⁰ Exploring her sexuality makes her feel accepted and a part of something.

Although Nnenna explores her sexuality with her boyfriend and Frederica explores her's through flings, it could still be argued there are some similarities, and therefore constants, in Nnenna's and Frederica's coming of age experiences exploring their sexuality. They both use it as a way to empower themselves. Nnenna wants to cancel out in her mind the fact her mother does not think her boyfriend is a suitable match for her; after it has happened, we are informed "By the time Nnenna emerged from John Asquith's shop, she felt like a new

⁷ Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna* Maloney, (Dialogue Books 2019), p. 160

⁸ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life*, (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 128

⁹ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life*, (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 127

¹⁰ A.S. Byatt, *Still Life* (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996) p. 119

woman. She felt extraordinary. She felt powerful.”¹¹ Frederica wants to finally feel like she belongs somewhere and fits in with a group of people, after feeling out of place in her family and at school before coming to university. On the other hand, though still a similarity in their experiences, it could be argued they are exploring their sexuality because they feel the need to feel validated; it is perhaps more of a necessity to them rather than something they want to do solely because of positive reasons.

It is clear that growing up in particular circumstances effect Nnenna’s and Frederica’s coming of age processes as women and exploring their sexuality, and they do experience things specifically concerning their race, family dynamic and location. However, through all of this, some constants that are felt by both despite their differences can be identified. Some of the main ones picked up on being feeling pressured to live up to societal and institutionalised standards and wanting to be validated by particular people.

Bibliography

Byatt, A.S, *Still Life* (Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996)

Nzulu, Okechukwu, *The Private Joys Of Nnenna Maloney* (Dialogue Books, 2019)

O'Grady, Carrie, "The Private Joys Of Nnenna Maloney By Okechukwu Nzulu Review - Coming Of Age In Modern Britain", *The Guardian*, 2019

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/18/private-joys-nnenna-maloney-okechukwu-nzulu-review>> [Accessed 8 January 2020]

¹¹ Okechukwu Nzulu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (Dialogue Books, 2019) p. 123