

## Review of *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*

Azeenarh Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan and Rafeeat Aliyu (Eds.) Cassava Republic, 2018.

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When considering the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights it is all too easy to disregard those outside of our line of sight. Marginalised queer voices are often drowned out by the overriding cis-gendered, white, able-bodied queer majorities. It is for this reason that *She Called Me Woman*, a collection of first person narratives by queer Nigerian women, is such a refreshing and humbling read. Azeenarh Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan and Rafeeat Aliyu edited the book, bringing their expertise in writing, the law and human rights activism to this fascinating project.

The collection begins with an Introduction, which sets out the aims for the body of work. Firstly, it hopes to centre queer people in the discussion of their own lives. Secondly, to bring to light the range of cultural histories and traditions in Nigeria with regards to gender norms and sexualities, and thirdly, to counteract the denial of queer experiences that many Nigerians, or people they know, engage in. To meet these objectives the editors consulted their own social networks to find queer women willing to talk about their lives and work with the editors to produce a piece based on their own recorded testimonies. Twenty-five women made it into the final collection, with ages ranging from 20 to 42 years old.



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In some parts of Nigeria being queer is punishable by death, in others the punishment is fourteen years imprisonment. With this in mind, when reading this collection, one cannot help being moved by the bravery and vivacity by which these women live their lives. The book opens with: 'It's un-Nigerian. It's against our culture. It's not allowed by our religion. This thing isn't in us- it comes from over there. I'm an African and there are some things I can never accept' (Mohammed et al 2018, p. 1). An example of opinions often expressed by Nigerians about LGBTQ+ individuals acutely sets the scene and highlights why queer narratives by queer individuals are necessary. The deeply entrenched view that being queer is a Western idea, coupled with the laws and religions that vilify LGBTQ+ existence, is why the editors anonymised all participants by using only initials when publishing their contribution. Surprisingly, this detail takes nothing away from the stories we are told, as it gave respondents the freedom to divulge extremely personal and often painful circumstances from their lives. Highlights include JP, a 33-year-old trans woman who talks of her journey to self-acceptance through depression and beatings from family members, and how her life now is like 'living the dream' (Mohammed et al 2018, p.45). Also, 20 years old UE who eloquently states that '[b]eing queer does not depend on whether I have had sex with a woman or not. I am a constant' (Mohammed et al, p.288).

*She Called Me Woman* also educates the reader about Nigeria. From the different testimonies we learn about the country's religious make up, the north-south divide, different tribes and cultures, and previously unknown language used by queer people to describe different genders and sexualities. The editors were successful in their aim to acquire viewpoints of different groups of queer Nigerian women and the religious diversity of the country is evident in the testimonies of participants, with many speaking of their struggle to manage their belief system alongside being queer. VA in Lagos tells of how she stopped going to church when she

heard a pastor claim that homosexuals do not exist, whilst IX in Kaduna explains how being a queer Muslim in the north of the country means a life full of restrictions and has even been detrimental to her mental health. Another point that is worth contemplating is the number of women in the collection imagining their future with another woman and eventually starting a family. Given the current climate in the country, this leads many to surmise that their future may not lie in their homeland. Despite these very affecting revelations the collection ends on an encouraging note with 30-year-old HA believing that, thanks to the globalized world we now live in, the next generation of Nigerians will have a more optimistic outlook on LGBTQ+ life and that 'our rights are just as important as everyone else's' (Mohammed et al 2018, p.357).

A moment of thanks must be given to everyone who contributed to this extraordinary book. Their enthusiasm to take part in this important conversation and invite us in to their life is commendable. Appreciation must also be given to the editors who persevered in gathering so many voices on such a contentious issue. They succeeded in their aims of putting queer Nigerian women at the centre of their own lives, and the expertise and lived experience of the editors as female and/or queer Nigerians adds an authenticity to the collection that cannot be overlooked. This point is particularly emphasised when reflecting on the lexicogrammatical choices within each account, which, justifiably, have not been modified to accommodate the Western reader. Further to this, the determination of the editors to gain in-sights from such a diverse range of individuals shows the benefits of considering intersections when investigating queer identities. Despite not managing to speak to older women, having the thoughts of trans and cis women, women from different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, gives a fullness to the collection that is incredibly powerful.

In conclusion, *She Called Me Woman* is an essential read for anyone wanting to learn about those on the periphery, those detached from the Western narrative that is more commonly disseminated in LGBT literature. These first-hand accounts cannot be dismissed when researching LGBTQ+ life during the early 21st century and the colourful women in this collection demand your attention from the first page, as they transmit their message loud and clear: we are here, and we, also, are queer.

**To cite this article:**

Buchanan, C. (2019) Review of *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*. Azeenarh Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan and Rafeeat Aliyu (Eds.) Cassava Republic, 2018., *Feminist Dissent*, 4, pp. 296-299. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n4.2019.373>