

## QUEER AFRICA: NEW AND COLLECTED FICTION

Karin Martin and Makhosazana Xaba, eds.  
Braamfontein, Johannesburg: MaThoko's Books, 2013  
ix + 214 pp. Hardback, ISBN 978-1-920590-33-8

Reviewed by **Oluwafemi Atanda Adeagbo**  
Institute for Gender Studies  
University of South Africa  
femiadex@yahoo.com

*Queer Africa* is a collection of 'unapologetic' stories that present the challenges people face in expressing their sexualities in patriarchal African societies. Today, the majority of African countries criminalise same-sex intimacy, and still subject women to oppression by men. These well-written stories show the extent to which people go to express their sexual desires, even in the context of strict discrimination and condemnation. It is noteworthy that the dominant discourses in Africa suggest that same-sex intimacy is un-African, and that sexuality in Africa is largely a heterosexual phenomenon. The following analysis of stories from different African countries not only shows that same-sex intimacy is *African*, but also that sexual desires (whether same-sex or heterosexual) are innate, and people can only express them when their socio-political context allows such relationships.

'Pelican driver', by Davina Owombre, is a short story about same-sex identity and desire in a homophobic environment (Abuja, Nigeria). It is a story of hope and risk in a society where same-sex relationships are illegal, with a 14-year jail term for any identified homosexual at the federal level, while some states, which follow Sharia Law, have instituted the death penalty. Anthony is a young man who engaged in gay sex with

his boss and one of his clients, Pelican, a musician. Ironically, Pelican composes songs about his same-sex sexual escapades within their homophobic society. The short story shows what people are driven to do, in order to express their sexual desires amidst stiff repression and societal hesitancy, due to the notion that same-sex attraction is un-African. On the other hand, 'Poisoned grief' by Emil Rorke is a story about two families who experience grief and shame because of their son's sexual orientation and death. Fear of societal and family responses leads to the death of two young men who are in love, because they are afraid to express their same-sex desires openly. Hence they decide to go into a barn on a farm, it catches fire and kills them. The shocking discovery of the young lads' sexual orientation and death leaves both families grieving.

Wamuwi Mbao's story, 'The bath', is an ode to a lesbian partner who lost her life. The most interesting aspect of the story, which deals with the experiences of African lesbians, is the part where the dead woman worries about her father's salt consumption, while her father worries about her desire for girls. The narrator quotes her dead partner talking about her father, 'He needs to eat less salt', while her father believes 'She needs to like boys' (37). The story is about the uncertainty of life between two lesbian lovers and the memories they share before one of them passes away. 'Chapter thirteen', by acclaimed South African writer K. Sello Duiker, is another interesting story featuring the sexual escapades of a black man who meets a white man at Sea Point in Cape Town. The story's reversal occurs when the white man arrives home and turns his family photographs (of his wife and children) face down. He does not allow the narrator to ask him any questions about his family, which may mean that he was trying to satisfy society by showing that he is a real man, in a heterosexual relationship, while his sexual desire is for other men. Put differently, it could also mean that the man is bisexual but cannot admit it to anyone, because of what his society sees as 'normal' or 'abnormal'.

Dolar Vasini's 'All covered up' explores same-sex affections in a country where homosexuality is criminalised. This is the story of Carmen, a woman who works for the United Nations and has lived outside Tanzania for 30 years. She returns for a short period to complete a project. Her supposed female escort in the country later becomes her sexual partner. She develops feelings for Fatma (her escort), who waits for the right time to express her own feelings. No one would have thought that Fatma, who always covers her head and body with a *hijab*, is a lesbian. Carmen's fantasies about Fatma end when they have a wonderful time together, ironically on Carmen's last day in the country. The story deals with risk, secret and same-sex affection in a homophobic environment. Similarly, Monica's 'Jambula tree' is a fascinating story about two young girls who developed same-sex desire for each other. They live in a small community where gossip is the order of the day, yet they have each other's back, and attended the same primary school. Their affection for each another leads to the one of the girls being sent to London by her father, because Ugandan society does not allow same-sex romance. The two girls are discovered by a woman (Mama Atim) caressing each other's breasts under a Jambula tree. Although time passes following the incident, both families

continue feeling shame. Natasha Distiller's 'Asking for it' is a story about two ladies in a same-sex relationship and their addiction to tattoos. The story shows how one partner can go the extra mile to satisfy her partner in a same-sex relationship, as would be the case in heterosexual relationships. One of the ladies discovers that her partner likes her tattoo and she keeps getting new tattoos until her partner tires of her last tattoo. By contrast, 'The big stick' by Richard De Nooy centres on a gay guy (Princess), whose family members try to 'turn' heterosexual, before eventually accepting his sexuality. Another interesting aspect of the story is when Princess looks at someone's cock (the eponymous 'big stick') and the guy says it belongs to his partner, Barry. This section of the story is beautifully written, as the writer created an imaginative Princess thinking about the different things he would like to do with the other man's cock. This story is centred on aesthetics and the body.

'Sethunya likes girls better', by Wame Molefhe, is a story about a woman in a heterosexual marriage who likes girls better. This story details how one's true sexual feelings can be subjugated by family pressure and societal norms. On the other hand, 'A boy is a boy is a ...' by Barbara Adair, is about gay sex in a train travelling to Johannesburg. It is centred on a young boy who is coerced into having fun with heterosexual soldiers in the train – initially under duress, but he later enjoys it. In the story, the soldiers disrespect the boy by calling him a 'fucking queer boy', yet they later enjoy having sex with him. This depicts the typical behaviour of men who do not view their involvement in same-sex sexual intercourse as outside of their heteronormative world.

'In the way she glides', by Mercy Minah, is a story about how Ms J, who is in a same-sex married relationship, with three daughters, loses her marriage and family due to her alcoholism. She is rehabilitated and finds a job as a school swimming coach. She marvels the first time she sees Pipp Jacobs, one of her students, and invites her to join the school swimming team. Ms J has a special interest in the girl because of her body shape and eye colour. She is surprised when the girl wins the swimming races during training, and realises that the girl was born to swim. The story revolves around passion and same-sex affection. On the other hand, Lindiwe Nkutha's 'Rock' is about loneliness, love and family rejection. Ncedi keeps her guitar in memory of a loved one whom she believes to be dead. One can deduce from the story that Ncedi and Dan were lovers before they separated because society disapproved of their relationship. Ncedi's daughter (the narrator) confirms this when she says that her mother is full of joy, but that it has been a long time since her mother felt that way. The writer's dream of becoming a rock star is boosted with the arrival of Danisile, who teaches her how to play the guitar and read music.

It is evident from the stories in the anthology that society still denigrates any behaviour that falls outside of socially accepted constructs. This is because most (if not all) African countries are patriarchal in nature, and any social processes outside of heterosexuality are seen as deviant. This applies to same-sex attraction, which

is believed to be a psychological or spiritual problem in most African countries. Homosexual or lesbian relations are seen as shameful acts, and society vilifies both groups and their families. At the heart of it, this is because same-sex relationships challenge the dominant patriarchal system. Therefore, the experiences narrated above lead me to conclude that *Queer Africa* is indeed a collection of impenitent fictions that present real-life stories which reflect that same-sex attraction is *African*, and that what is un-African is *homophobia*.