

THE PARADOX OF SAME-SEX REPRESENTATIONS: THE PRESENCE/ ABSENCE OF GAYS IN UGANDAN SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The fact that same-sex sexuality is a topically combusive issue in Ugandan public discourse is reflected in debates it inspires. The debates that rage in Uganda regarding this topic are ferociously polarised around one camp that evokes the protection of minors from exploitation by “foreign” gays and upholding Ugandan culture to support the criminalisation of a sexual orientation, and another that cites modernity and Universalist’s human rights discourse to advocate for the fundamental human rights of individuals who choose to engage in same-sex relationships. The intense national anxiety around this topic is perhaps best illustrated by the controversial 2009 Anti-homosexuality Bill and the debates it produced. Granted, many Ugandan commentators, like politicians, journalists, religious leaders, traditional leaders and medical practitioners have joined in this debate to advance particular standpoints regarding this topic. However, one group of public intellectuals whose critique of this debate has attracted little scholarly attention, comprises Ugandan writers. In this article, I investigate how Ugandan short story writers have utilised fiction to map out the essence of queerness in Uganda. I argue that Lamwaka’s ‘Pillar of Love,’ (2012) Arac’s ‘Jambula Tree’ (2007) and Paelo’s ‘Picture Frame’ (2013) deploy subtle and nuanced discursive strategies to foreground the presence/absence paradox that is inherent in Ugandan discourse of same-sex sexuality.

Keywords: fiction; homosexuality; stigmatisation; same-sex sexuality; Uganda; Ugandan short story

INTRODUCTION

The term homosexuality as a descriptor of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women became popular in Ugandan discourse after 2005. As an adjective for sexual practice in contemporary Ugandan sexuality discourse, homosexuality is often conflated with anal sex by many commentators to foreground its “queerness” as a sexual practice often practised in Ugandan prisons or some single-sex secondary schools. Many conservative commentators on this topic frame it as a “shameful sexual” act that many are “forced” into because of unavoidable circumstances, namely prison or school. This framing disavows the agency of men and women who practise same-sex sexuality wilfully. It also advances a rhetoric that argues that it is inconceivable for a man to choose to be in a relationship with another man or a woman with another woman. This perhaps explains the insertion of a clause criminalising same-sex marriages in the amended 1995 Ugandan constitution in 2005 (Government of Uganda 2005) and the expunging of sexuality as a claim to minority status from the 2007 Equal Opportunities Commission Act (Government of Uganda 2007a). The tightening of “loopholes” in the laws that could be appropriated by this minority constituency to claim equality reflects societal attempts to erase their existence.

The presence/absence paradox inherent in Ugandan public discourse of same-sex sexuality has polarised sexuality debates in the country. The competing framing of this sexual practice that simultaneously acknowledges and denies its existence has attracted various public intellectuals and opinion leaders to postulate it. While scholars such as Ward (2002), Strand (2012), Sadgrove (2012), Semugona, Bayrer and Baral (2012), and Nyanzi (2014) have problematized this issue from human rights, legal, political, medical and religious viewpoints, it is in the work of Tamale that profoundly Ugandan insights about this sexual practice have been distilled. In her various intellectual engagements with this topic, Tamale has argued that sexuality should be treated as a justice/equality/human rights issue and not a religious-moral or cultural subject as it is often framed in Ugandan public discourse. In “Out of the closet: Unveiling sexuality discourses in Uganda” (2003), *Homosexuality: Perspectives from Uganda* (2007), “A human rights impact assessment of Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009” (2009), and *African sexualities: A reader* (2011), Tamale interrogates the homophobic inflection of this topic in Ugandan debates. Tamale debates the 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill and its intention to strengthen the nation’s ability to deal with the emerging “threat” of homosexuality to the heterosexual family and traditional Ugandan culture as a quintessential Ugandan argument that justifies the oppression and segregation of gay Ugandans. She debunks the premise on which such a homophobic point of view is anchored to argue for the protection of the rights of queer subjects.

In *African sexualities: A Reader*, Tamale (2011, 2) notes the current configuration of debates about queer sexuality when she argues that ‘the continent is currently replete with vibrant movements, some seeking to reinforce sexual hegemonic powers and others challenging, subverting, resisting imposed modes of identity, morality and behavioural

patterns.” This statement captures perfectly the tenor and character of queer debates in Uganda. While one group upholds the conservatively patriarchal and religious notion of criminalising and silencing unconventional sexual practices, another advocates for the agency of the people engaged in same-sex sexuality. The latter group — composed mainly of activists — seeks to challenge, subvert and resist the stereotypical and homogenising discourse regarding homosexuals. It the need “to deconstruct, debunk, expose, contextualise and problematize concepts associated with African sexualities in order to avoid essentialism, stereotyping and othering” (Tamale 2011, 1). This group’s aim is to reclaim the humanity of sexual minorities that are often erased in mainstream discourse, by underscoring the diversity and complexities that sexuality engenders. This is possible, Tamale (2011, 5) argues, when people begin to unclothe, quiz and give voice to this which “society has clothed in taboos, inhibition and silences.”

I apply Tamale’s central thesis that activist public intellectuals use their work to challenge and interrogate societal taboos, inhibitions and silences to my reading of three short stories: “Jambula Tree” by Monica Arac de Nyeko, “Pillars of Love” by Beatrice Lamwaka, and “Picture Frames” by Anthea Paelo. I argue that Arac de Nyeko, Lamwaka, and Paelo are comparable to Tamale’s activist public intellectuals because they use their writing to intervene in this national debate. The three writers deploy a subtly affective and nuanced register to construct and circulate a recurrent trope of representation of same-sex reality in Uganda. For example, the plot and subject matter of their texts not only affirm the existence of this sexuality in Ugandan society, but it also underlines societal practices and technologies that erase or camouflage queerness. These writers’ authentic representation of same-sex sexuality reminds us of Adebani and Carolin’s argument that African writers are social thinkers distilling significant insights into homosexuality as a topical issue (Adebani 2014; Carolin 2015). Adebani (2014) and Carolin (2015) both underline the important role of the writer as an intellectual who theorises subjects deemed unfit for official history and archives. My hypothesis is anchored particularly on Carolin’s postulation of the “epistemological status of fiction as an alternative archive of marginalised voices and experiences” (Carolin 2015, 49). The writing of Arac de Nyeko, Lamwaka and Paelo are faithful chronicles of a subject that society actively erases or silences.

These writers’ activist writing recalls arguments by Nussbaum (1995) and Kruger (2011) about the role of literature in creating awareness about a peripheral subjectivity. Following Nussbaum’s assertion that “the central role of the arts in human self-understanding [is to] give us information about those emotion-histories that we could not easily get otherwise” (1995, 236) and Kruger’s claim that fiction functions as “a medium of social change” (2011, 2), I argue that the three selected short stories distil important insights into same-sex sexuality. I draw on Nussbaum’s (1995) argument that the role of fiction in public judgement involves helping the public to imagine “the situation of someone different from [themselves]” (1995, xiv). The core point in Nussbaum’s argument is that for the public to know what it means, for example, to be

gay in Uganda, it needs to take a glimpse at an apt snapshot of this subjectivity that can be provided by fictional representation. I argue that Arac de Nyeko, Lamwaka and Paelo use their texts to unveil the presence/absence reality of women who have sex with women and men who have sex with men in the Ugandan society.

Tamale's thesis that activist intellectual work can subvert and disrupt hegemonic and patriarchal oppression of minority sexual practices by "raising awareness through formal and informal education on sexualities" (2011, 4) is applicable to the intervention of the three short stories in the sexuality debates in the country. The three short stories use plotting, characterisation, setting and language to offer readers lessons on what it means to be gay in Uganda. This is because their texts spotlight the presence/absence paradox that is inherent in Ugandan debates of this sexuality. We are reminded of Foucault's argument that at one point in Western episteme "homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or naturality be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (1976, 101). Foucault argues that categorised sexual science, which emerged in the late 19th century, was appropriated within discourse of resistance and rights claims to bolster debates about homosexuality. Foucault's argument explains European and American advocacy and legislation around homosexuality reflected in gay pride and feminist marches/protests in the 20th century. Although Foucault's argument is specific to activism in support of homosexuality in the late 19th and 20th century America and Europe, his argument can be applied to the selected writers' use of fiction to advocate for the agency of queer subjectivity.

The selected short stories deploy different textual and narrative techniques to enunciate different pictures of same-sex sexuality. The three short stories use a presence/absence framework to perform queerness that imitates public discourse around this sexuality in Uganda. For example, in "Jambula Tree" (2007), while Arac de Nyeko's protagonists' sexual preference is erased by their censure from Nakawa Estate, the imagery and symbolism of the story affirms their orientation. Arac de Nyeko evokes the Garden of Eden motif to depict the simultaneous purity/abomination and presence/absence frames associated with same-sex sexuality. Similarly, Lamwaka uses characters in a same-sex marriage to offer a vision of queer discourse that affirms queerness through camouflage. Lamwaka deploys the anchor metaphor implicit in the short story's title, "Pillar of Love" (2012), the key word "pillar" being used to depict how the characters deal with their sexual orientation that is actively silenced and erased by society. The third story, Paelo's "Picture Frames" (2013), is similarly anchored in the conflict between two parents who are fighting either to erase or enshrine the queerness of their dead son. The erasure/inscription of homosexuality in the text is beautifully articulated by the imagery of the text. Paelo uses the twin images of photo frame (memory) and sewing machine (creation) to foreground homosexuality that is present, but actively silenced by society.

ARAC DE NYEKO'S INTERVENTION IN "JAMBULA TREE"

Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree" is set in the Ugandan housing estate called Nakawa Housing Estate and it is about the discovery of the lesbian sexual act of two adolescent girls. The discovery that the girls engage in a sexual act that society frowns upon leads to their stigmatisation and expulsion from the estate. Arac de Nyeko deploys the Judaeo-Christian trope of the Garden of Eden to provide a convincing rendering of same-sex sexuality in the depicted society, as shall be illustrated later. The short story is structured as Anyango's letter to Sanyu on the eve of the latter's return years after their lesbian relationship was discovered by Mama Atim and the two adolescent girls were forcibly separated. The letter oscillates between the past and the present to unveil the point that in the Nakawa Housing Estate, sex between women is labelled a "shame" (Arac de Nyeko 2007, 164). In the letter, Anyango reminisces about their intimacy as "forbidden" and/or "shameful" sexuality. Interestingly, while the entire community of Nakawa Housing Estate refuses to accept the girls and their sexual orientation, the text depicts the girls' unacceptable intimacy as natural. The layered edifices of Arac de Nyeko's narrative, the problematic sexual practice is scripted as a pristinely idyllic attraction between the two girls. While society labels Anyango and Sanyu's sexual act as unwanted, for Arac de Nyeko's protagonist it is natural and inevitable.

The text allows the discovery of the protagonists' sexual act to be queered from two perspectives. First, as adolescent girls they are prohibited from knowing, let alone engaging in, any sexual act. This is in spite of the fact that adolescents are inclined to explore their sexuality. The societal view of a girl child as a sexually innocent subject performs an erasure of their sexuality and agency that Arac de Nyeko restores in the text. The second issue is the queerness of the sexual act itself. That the protagonists are labelled deviant is perhaps because they are caught engaging in a same-sex sexual intimacy. The treatment of sex between women as taboo is one of the many techniques employed to erase same-sex intimacy from public consciousness and practices in Uganda. Thus, Arac de Nyeko is using fiction to distil profound insights regarding sexual experiences in the depicted society. The text underlines that while societal homophobia works to eradicate certain sexual practices from public discourse, the sexual acts consigned to erasure subvert the surveillance to proclaim their existence. This reminds us of Carolin's reading of Kraak's *Ice in the Lungs* and specifically his argument that Kraak's texts reveal "the importance of literature in reinscribing a gay cultural history into discourse of the apartheid era" (2015, 49). It is plausible to argue that Carolin is underscoring the role of literature in writing and debating taboo subjects such as queer sexuality. This makes Kraak's *Ice in the Lungs* comparable to "Jambula Tree" in two respects. First, both texts debate the silencing of unwanted sexual practices by ultra-conservative and religious societies, namely, the Ugandan and Afrikaner inherently

homophobic societies. Second, both texts deploy the advocacy model to accentuate the agency and humanity of queer characters.

This latter point is stressed in “Jambula Tree” by the passage: “the feeling that I had, the one that you had, that we had — never said, never spoken — swelled up inside us like fresh mandazies” (Arac de Nyeko 20017, 176). The primal and almost chaste nature of their attraction — scripted in a slow, almost sensual pace — underlines the palpable eroticism that characterises their relationship. The poetic quality of this passage is at odds with societal labelling of the protagonists’ intimacy as an unnatural type of sexuality. The writing prods us to question how something so beautiful and equally beautifully depicted can be condemned in society as arousing shame. While Arac de Nyeko’s description of the love between Anyango and Sanyu evokes a sense of palpable anticipation because of the teasingly playful register of the text, the protagonists’ staging of the “offending” sexual act in front of Mama Atim’s house — aware that she is a huge gossip — can be read as a form of “coming out” or making present that which society dubs absent. While this scene is read as an artistic staged intervention to acknowledge the existence of same-sex eroticism, it can also be interpreted as a carefree light-hearted action by two adolescent girls who are not restricted by societal taboos and censures.

Whatever perspective one takes in reading the passages in which Arac de Nyeko describes queer sex, it is plausible to argue that the scene makes present what is supposed to be expunged from societal discourse. For example, the passage below is significant in explicating the dominant view of same-sex sexuality:

That night would be a night, two holidays later. You were not shocked. Not repelled. It did not occur to either of us, to you or me, that these were boundaries we should not cross or should think of crossing. Your jambulas and mine [...] You pulled me to yourself and we rolled on the brown earth that stuck to our hair in all its redness and dustiness. There in front of Mama Atim’s house. She shone a torch at us. She had been watching, steadily like a dog waiting for a bone it knew it would get; it was just a matter of time. (Arac de Nyeko 2007, 176)

A proper reading of this passage demands the foregrounding of its temporality. While Anyango is recollecting this event on the eve of Sanyu’s expected return from Britain, the action itself took place over a decade in the past. It is argued that the temporal and thematic layering of the passage is significant in unravelling societal failure to suppress and erase queer sexuality. The first layer seems to suggest that the girls are oblivious of the fact that they are engaging in a sexuality deemed unacceptable in their society. This suggests the girls’ rejection of societal hegemonic treatment of same-sex attraction as an unacceptable type of sexuality. It is important to note the verbs “pulled” and “rolled” infuse the passage with a spontaneity that frames the sexual act within playful, child-like activities. This is hardly a description of forbidden sexuality, but rather a signal of innocent and pure love. The naturalness and inevitability of the girls’ love mimic playing children, who are without any care or qualm in the world. It also seems to suggest a form of defiance or subversion of a homophobic ethic that oppresses diversity and sexual complexities in society. It could be argued that the almost spiritual, idyllic,

playful carousing between Anyango and Sanyu as reflected in the passage quoted above gestures to more than forbidden sexuality; it can be read as a representation of a type of feminine spiritual connection that is oblivious to societal taboos.

However, what seems to be a pure, innocent and natural intimacy in the eyes of the naïve girls is considered taboo in the eyes of society — a metaphorical partaking of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This thesis is supported by two symbols that Arac de Nyeko expertly infuses into the passage. While Mama Atim symbolises a bigoted society, her torch is a metaphor of exposition and/or discovery. In the eyes of society, the discovery of the girls' same-sex act perhaps explains the genesis of their stigmatisation. This is because in this society this type of sexual intimacy is associated with sin. The discovery of Anyango and Sanyu's sexuality ensures that they are "forever associated with the forbidden [...] shame" (Arac de Nyeko 20017, 164). For example, Anyango informs us that Mama Atim "talks about me and you, Sanyu, after all these years, you would think her sons are priests. You would think that at least one of them got a diploma" and Sanyu's mother does not talk to her (Anyango) or her mother (Arac de Nyeko 2007, 169). This passage interestingly underlines Arac de Nyeko's centring of the presence/absence image of queer sexuality in the depicted society. It underlines the intensity of societal stigma against Anyango and Sanyu as underlined by the phrase "all these years." This phrase highlights the fact that Anyango and Sanyu have been marked for life. Ironically, their stigmatisation, which aims to obliterate their agency, achieves the opposite outcome. On the one hand, it normalises and foregrounds their subjectivity when one considers the recurrence and topicality of their shocking sexual experimentation. On the other hand, phrases such as "not shocked", "not repelled", "did not occur to either of us [...] that these were boundaries we should not cross" and "should think of crossing" naturalise the queer sexual act of these characters.

The nostalgic tone in the passage seems to suggest that escape into dreamland is a feasible way of evading societal stigma. This is suggested by Anyango's words: "other times, I see it, floating into your dreams across the desert" (Arac de Nyeko 2007, 165). The personification of shame and the protagonists' escape into dreamland underline the presence of queerness, albeit in another state of consciousness. It can be argued that Arac de Nyeko uses the description of the offending lovemaking to destabilise and subvert social silencing of this group. The "offending" lovemaking takes place under the jambula tree and is vividly described in the passage below:

And your breasts, the two things you had watched and persuaded to grow during all your years at Nakawa Katala Primary School, were like two large jambulas on your chest. And that feeling that I had, the one that you had, that we had — never said, never spoken — swelled up inside us like fresh mandazies [...] when I could dare place my itchy hand onto your two jambulas. (Arac de Nyeko 2007, 176)

One way of reading this passage is that it is a depiction of the girls' coming of age and experimentation with their sexuality. It is plausible to argue that the girls are experimenting and trying to come to terms with their sexual urges. Relatedly, by centring

the image of a tree coming into fruition, Arac de Nyeko progressively and teasingly underlines the protagonists' blossoming. The image of a fruiting tree echoes the Judaeo-Christian transgression of eating the Biblical "forbidden fruit." It also coheres with the sense of nostalgic anguish that the direct address "Sanyu" and the measured reflection of the phrases "I still," "I see," "things we should not" and the question phrase "how did she know" to highlight the protagonists' reflections on their intimacy.

Admittedly, as a word of fiction, "Jambula Tree" cannot change societal views about same-sex sexuality. However, the contribution of Arac de Nyeko's text to Ugandan gay debates is that it creates awareness of the conflicted reality of queer sexuality. This is underlined by the parapsychological connection between Anyango's dreams and Sanyu's consciousness as reflected by Sanyu's cryptically emotional three line/word letter "A/I miss you /S" and the circularity of the controlling image of the text. The jambula tree that opens the narrative and the painting of a jambula tree in Anyango's room that closes it not only illustrates the enduring presence of queer love, but also acknowledges its silencing by society. In other words, the picture of a jambula tree that adorns the wall of Anyango's small room suggests an aura of a sexuality that society has failed to extinguish. This is particularly true if one considers how the images of the rising sun coalesce with the recurrent trope of the Judaeo-Christian fruit of knowledge, self-will, choice and discovery to underscore the depth of gay love.

THE LESBIAN COUPLE IN LAMWAKA'S "PILLAR OF LOVE"

Lamwaka's 'Pillar of Love' problematizes the trails of same-sex marriages in the Ugandan society characterised by homophobia. Set in a middle-class Ugandan context and featuring Ugandan corporate artistic characters, the text interrogates what it means to be lesbian in Uganda. The story opens with Lala's dilemma over whether to stay married to Grace or start a new love affair with an attractive man, Kaya. On the surface, it appears as if the conflict of the short story is a simple tale of a love triangle gone wrong because of relational unhappiness. However, when one considers the fact that Lala's marriage to Grace is a secret and that Lala desires to lead a normal life with husband and children, "Pillar of Love" becomes a tour de force in re-orienting perceptions of queer marriages in the Ugandan society. Therefore, it can be argued that the text's contribution to Ugandan sexuality debates is twofold. First, it is a fictional acknowledgment that same-sex marriages exist in the depicted society. Second, it reveals the reality that same-sex couples face the same challenges as their heterosexual counterparts.

The paradoxical challenges of lesbian sexuality in the short story is signposted by Lamwaka's strategic use of romantic poetry as a significant textual marker. In the text, romantic poetry becomes an effective register that unravels the presence of an alternative sexual orientation. Lamwaka subverts quintessential heterosexual romantic texts to claim the agency of lesbians. This is underscored by the intertextual use of

Hudson's song "Feeling Good" (Lamwaka 2011, 183), Walcott's poem "Love After Love" (Lamwaka 2011, 188) and Bukkenya's poem "I Met a Thief" (Lamwaka 2011, 189). Lala might have used these quintessentially heterosexual romantic texts in reference to Kaya, but I argue that they capture the affection she has for Grace. Put differently, Lamwaka imperceptibly and implicitly uses the selected Hudson song and Walcott and Bukkenya poems to underline the idea that true love and commitment (pillars of love) can exist between a woman and woman in the same way it exists between a woman and a man. Indeed, it can be argued that the romantic message of the cited texts captures Lala's reciprocated affection for Grace.

Although same-sex sexuality is ostracised in the depicted society, the text underlines not only its existence, but also its attractiveness. This point is highlighted in the following quotation: "Grace was her best friend, and a person she felt comfortable with. She could not imagine her life without Grace" (Lamwaka 2011, 184). At another point in the narrative, Lala confesses that she found depth in Grace because "Grace knows what Lala wants to say before she says it. She knows what Lala feels after an incident. Grace's intelligence and her ability to understand her were the things she could never get enough of" (Lamwaka 2011, 188). These quotations underscore Lamwaka's assertion that same-sex intimacy exists among Ugandans and operates on the same levels of commitment and love as heterosexual relationships. There is no doubt that Grace and Lala's love is real as it is brilliantly amplified by the telepathy and synchronicity that mark their affection and relationship. This sense of connectedness articulates the depth of love and commitment they have for each other. Lamwaka's point is not only to acknowledge the strength of the bond between Lala and Grace and their loving commitment, but also to question why there are attempts to expunge such affection from societal discourse.

Notwithstanding the purity and naturalness of their love, Grace and Lala camouflage their affection. Thus, Lamwaka's text seems to ponder why a genuine and reciprocated love is encouraged among heterosexual couples, but silenced and disavowed in same-sex relationships. Here, it could be argued that Lamwaka is implicitly asking why society does not extend the same sense of acceptance to same-sex relationships. This question is eloquently captured in the penultimate passage of the story:

'Come sit with me,' Grace says as she makes space for her on the sofa. Lala flops on the sofa. Grace covers her with the khanga she has been covering herself with. It is not cold but Lala appreciates the closeness to Grace's body. She hasn't been this close in a long time. They remain silent for a while. Lala can hear Grace's heartbeats. (Lamwaka 2011, 191)

The almost banal act of sitting together, of Grace covering Lala "with the [same] khanga she has been covering herself with", the closeness of their bodies and the warmth that this corporeal proximity produces, clearly shows that they are not only each other's pillars of love, but also that their love is normal and not something they should be ashamed of. This is the kind of love that the Hudson song and the Bukkenya and Walcott poems evoke. The sense of intimacy and connection of the Lala-Grace relationship

shows that same-sex intimacy is not just a sexual act; it is also a state of being in sync with someone else. This is brilliantly indexed by her expert depiction of Lala and Grace as archetypal “soul mates”.

The symbol of the “pillar” signals a quest to foreground a sexual orientation whose practitioners are silenced and oppressed. This argument reminds us of the observation made by Currier and Migraine-George (2016, 133) that “African lesbian sexualities have largely been shaped by silence and secrecy, oppression and repression, uncertain definitions and varying situational practices.” This view underlines the lived reality of women in lesbian relationships. Although Lala and Grace do not identify themselves as lesbians, the challenges that Currier and Migraine-George outline above apply to them. Their lives and agency are silenced, which explains why their marriage is a secret from their families. It can also be argued that they have kept their marriage secret because of the fear of oppression and repression to which exposure of their marital status would subject them. Therefore, it can be argued that it is in fiction that their quest for agency and identity commensurate with their sexuality is articulated.

Using Lala and Grace’s tale of a secret marriage between women who recognise that they are each other’s pillars of love, Lamwaka’s story brilliantly provides an effective counter-narrative to Ugandan heterosexual hegemony that denies the existence or normalcy of same-sex sexuality. It does not only underwrite the existence of lesbian marriage, but it also engages with the techniques that erase and silence this type of marriage. Lamwaka’s story perhaps seeks to create awareness of same-sex sexuality in the hope that societal stigmatisation, demonisation and criminalisation of homo-erotic desire might be reversed in a hopeful future.

DUALITY OF THE PERCEPTION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN PAELO’S “PICTURE FRAME”

Paelo’s “Picture Frame” is structured as an exploration of parental response to the death of a homosexual son. After Okello commits suicide because he is gay, his parents, Rose and Daudi, attempt to deal with this tragedy in different ways. The contrasting forms of bereavement acted out by the respective parents are an effective textual strategy that provides us with profound insight into the perception of same-sex sexuality in the depicted society. It can also be argued that the two opposite responses underline the common reactions to homosexuality in the Uganda, namely, erasing and silencing it on the one hand and acknowledging it on the other. For example, Rose, confessing that her son “had not been perfect and [that] she did not understand this gay business,” vows to uphold his memory in spite of who he was, societal stigmatization and her husband’s attempt to erase the memory of a son he regrettably considers a stain on his and his family’s honour (Paelo 2013, 4). The differing reactions to Okello’s death by his parents are underscored by the image of the photo frame.

While for Rose, the photo frame symbolises the memory of her beloved dead son, for Daudi it is a reminder of the shame and stain on the family name and honour on account of Okello's sexual orientation. It can be argued that the picture frame symbolises simultaneous obliteration and acceptance of Okello's sexuality by his mother and father, respectively. This contrast perhaps explains why Rose resolves to remember her son in spite of the stigma associated with his death, while Daudi desires to demolish the symbol of what he considers a shameful memory. This is significant because by accepting Okello's corporeally "gay life" represented by the photograph, Rose not only interrogates her husband's and society's stigmatising discourse on homosexuality, but she also advocates for an ethic that acknowledges and centres the agency and essence of same-sex sexuality.

The doubly subversive images of a photo frame and a sewing machine coalesce to offer readers a nuanced image of homosexuals, in two interesting ways. First, the sewing machine metaphor (with its foregrounding of "making" and "fashioning") seems to suggest that Ugandans should mend, remake, refashion or recreate their perceptions towards people engaged in same-sex relationships. Second, the photo frame's oxymoronic connotation of presence/absence gestures to the need to reclaim the corporeality of homosexuals that homophobia erases. While Okello's suicide can be read as the erasure of his "undesirable" queer body, his mother's preservation of his clothes and image script the acceptability of queerness. This reminds us of Nyanzi's argument that queer Africa can be understood by focusing on "African modes of blending, bending and breaking gender boundaries" (2014, 66). The essence of Nyanzi's argument is the innovative and creative ways that queer advocacy has mustered to articulate a subject that is silenced and oppressed by hegemonic patriarchy and heterosexuality. It can be argued that Paolo has deployed this lexicon in using the photo frame and the sewing machine to present a taboo subject.

The metaphor of the photo frame is brilliantly knitted into individual parental actions and inactions towards the loss of their son as a way of constructing and circulating a double image of a homosexual. While for his mother the picture frame is a metaphor for the acceptance of her son's sexual orientation, for his father it proves stigmatisation and denunciation of this sexuality. This is because the two metaphors show that one parent seeks to humanise Okello in his death, while the other seeks to erase his memory. This claim is illustrated by the opening passage of the short story: "The picture frame stood empty on the bedside. Rose has been staring at it for the last half hour. Tears running down her face. She held a picture of her husband [...] Rose sat next to him carrying Okello. She was much smaller than the man beside her (Paolo 2013, 1). This passage's significance lies in its privileging of a presence/absence binary to persuasively and affectively construct an indelible image of an ostracised Ugandan homosexual.

By tapping into this simple woman's motherly resolve and unbreakable steadfastness to uphold the memory of her son, and the father's stubborn unwillingness to accept his son's sexuality, the metaphor allows Paolo to make two important comments on the

perception of homosexuality in Uganda. First, the portrait of a husband, wife and child that Rose holds in her hands represents a typical Ugandan heterosexual family. However, what is subversive about this photograph is implicitly suggested by one parent's attempt to disavow the child's agency and the other parent's steadfastness in claiming it. The double image of presence/absence forcefully evoked by the picture frame suggests the paradox and complexity of gay subjectivity in the depicted society. Here, Paelo infuses the picture frame with the Judaeo-Christian motif of resurrection. While Okello might have died as someone whose sexuality others and stigmatises him, his mother's actions affirm his humanity and memory.

By making the mother to treasure the picture of her gay son, Paelo succeeds in deconstructing the prevalent image of homosexual as unacceptable sexuality. This image that debunks stigmatisation and upholds Okello's humanity is poignantly made by Rose's rejection of her husband's homophobic ethic, as eloquently outlined in the passage below:

Rose slid back onto her chair, deflating like a punctured tire. For the first time, she realised and accepted that Daudi would always be Daudi. She could not even grieve for her son ... Rose would remove all his things, but she would go with them ... Rose walked towards the sewing machine; she picked up the half-made shirt and held it to her chest for a moment, then slowly folded it. She put it in the crib and wiped the dust from the machine. She was going to begin anew, first by making herself a dress ... Maybe she could make dresses for other people ... Maybe somehow, she would find herself again. (Paelo 2013, 4)

The epiphany of this moment lies in its suggestion of an alternative image of gays. The metaphor sewing coheres with the rehabilitation of the image of homosexuals. Rose's action in the passage is an important commentary on gay agency and subjectivity for two reasons. First, her folding and putting away Okello's incomplete shirt can be interpreted to suggest a rejection of a previously negative attitude to homosexuals. Perhaps, it is also important to note that the unfinished shirt suggests mutated growth and social relationships that must be jettisoned if an alternative sexuality discourse is to be crafted. Second, Rose's calm actions suggested by the verbs "walked," "picked," "held" and "folded" explicitly indicate her confidence and resolve in her twin task of probably memorising her dead son and changing societal attitudes to gays. These verbs conjure an image of a determined and focused Rose who intends to start a new life. This new life — a life without Daudi and rid of the stigmatisation of same-sex sexuality — is signposted by the new dress she plans to make for herself.

The new dress reminds us of the arguments of Homer (2012), Graham (2003), Samuelson (2007) and Nabutanyi (2013) about weaving and sewing as forms of "writing" that allow women muted by patriarchy to ingeniously subvert their oppression. For example, Graham (2003) reads Philomela's tapestry in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as a device that Philomela uses to reveal the identity of her rapist to her sisters. Similarly, Homer's Penelope escapes the pressure of her suitors by ingeniously weaving a shawl during the day and undoing the weaving at night as she waits for Odysseus (Homer 2012).

Given that writing is infused with agency, it can be argued that Rose's dressmaking is a language that she deploys to not only underline her agency, but also humanise gay sexuality. The dress she makes for herself and those she proposes to make for others metonymically spotlight the need to legitimatise same-sex sexuality relationships. The dresses become the register and symbol of a rehabilitation that implores us to recognise the humanity and agency of Ugandan homosexuals.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that Arac de Nyako's "Jambula Tree", Lamwaka's "Pillar of Love" and Paelo's "Picture Frames" successfully map dominant tropes in same-sex sexuality discourse in the Ugandan public sphere. Although my reading has focused on only three short stories, the paradox inherent in discourse on queer sexuality that these texts produce and circulate in the Ugandan public sphere uncannily echo common opinions towards this sexuality. The idea that homosexuality is a form of sexuality that exists, but which society actively disavows, is a thread that weaves through the three short stories. I argue that the affectively nuanced and subtle language of fiction unequivocally articulates the existence of and the attempts to erase gay and lesbian agency in the country. I argue that the dual acknowledgement of the existence of gays and the labels attached to this sexuality subvert Ugandan sexuality debates in two important ways. First, the short stories underscore the fact that gays might be a closeted minority, but they are Ugandans who might be our children, parents, friends or relatives. Second, societal stigmatisation and erasure of this group's agency and subjectivity in the text can arouse empathy for this group rather than derision. This is suggested in the project of the short story writers to raise consciousness about this group.

If this depiction can enact a platform and convince the public to engage with this subjectivity, probably the success of fictional intervention in this debate would have been to transform homosexuals from statistical footnotes to Ugandans who matter. Thus, I suggest that fiction allows us to (re)imagine the recurrent images of Ugandan gays and lesbians as important members of society. Granted, the power of fiction to change public opinion towards same-sex sexuality is limited and unquantifiable. Nevertheless, it can be plausibly argued that these texts' exposure of how fiction can map and make visible an often muted, ostracised and stigmatised subject brings to public attention a viewpoint that is rarely heard. Fiction recovers the lives, agency, and subjectivity of Ugandan homosexuals often rendered invisible in Ugandan public debates that exclude them as non-human. The three writers achieve this by underlining the affective energy that the lives of the depicted characters evoke, encouraging readers to reconsider the received notions about queerness. I argue that fictional representations offer an important arena to debate same-sex sexuality in Uganda.

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