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DEPARTMENT OF WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

Mini-thesis in partial completion of MA course requirements

An exploratory study of the representation of lesbian subjectivities in the contemporary Kenyan film *Rafiki*.

Written and submitted by

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PLAGIARISM & DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own original work. Each significant contribution from anyone or from articles has been cited and referenced as per the rules of academic writing. This mini thesis is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts, Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Western Cape, South Africa.

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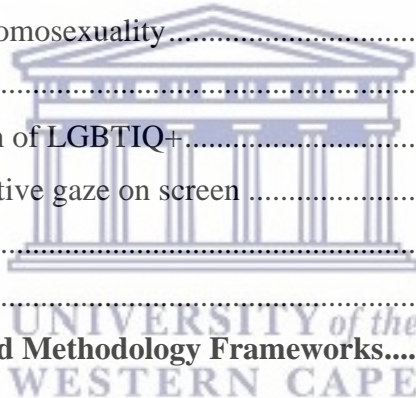
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Abstract

This research analyzes the depiction of black Kenyan lesbians in contemporary Kenyan films. In order to do so, I focus on the film *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu, a 2018 Kenyan drama film that documents the story of romance that grows between two young women amidst family and political pressure around lesbian gay bisexual trans intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) rights in Kenya. The film speaks to issues of intersectional subjectivity and diverse ways of what it is to identify across different social categories, a woman, a lesbian, a Kenyan and specifically black Kenyan.

This study adopts a feminist qualitative interpretive approach to explore the ways in which lesbian characters in contemporary Kenyan films negotiate, resist or redeploy heteronormative discourses in their performance of gender and sexuality. In particular, I interrogate whether the film is viewed as successful for the goal of LGBTIQ+ freedom and whether it reportedly represents a shift from heterosexist and heteronormative mainstream film. Further the extent to which the film is viewed as speaking to the needs and desires of the lesbian community is explored. Underlying the study is the assumption that visibility does and can disrupt heteronormative hegemony and provide support and solidarity for marginalized people.

The question this research attempts to address is the extent to which the film has deconstructed dominant cultural representations of lesbian identity. Additionally, the study seeks to explore whether the characters consciously offer a counternarrative representation to what is being represented and portrayed in the mass media. The questions are related to various themes that revolve around queer identities, gender, sexuality and filmic representation in contemporary Kenyan context.

At its starting point, the study is located within a feminist social construction, gender performativity and intersectionality. The film is analyzed within the context of the socio-political environment in which it was created. Resources include online interviews with the director Wanuri Kahiu. Located within a feminist qualitative interpretive framework, qualitative thematic analysis is conducted on the textual data collected in the process.

Findings indicate that the representation of black Kenyan lesbians has grown in recent Kenyan films. A significant portion of these films utilize drama narrative approach of filmmaking. *Rafiki* challenges prevailing beliefs about homosexuality within the African context, more so in Kenya, where homosexuality is still illegal. The film defies notions of essentialism in favor of highlighting diversity.

The literature discussed draws from scholars like Judith Butler whose work on criticizing exclusionary gender norms within feminism and underscoring delegitimizing of minority gendered and sexual practices played a bigger role. Other scholars include Sylvia Tamale and her work on challenging homosexuality as un-African and Gregory M. Herek's work on homophobic violence, among others.

The primary problem encountered in researching this topic is the inadequate academic studies focusing on filmic depictions of lesbians in Kenyan context. This may be due to the fact that

there are not yet many local films depicting such identities. There appears a need for further analysis and academic consideration of the repression of lesbian identities in Kenyan films. This research aims to contribute to this field.

KEYWORDS; Lesbian, black, gender, heteronormative, LGBTIQ+, Representation, Kenya, Film, Rafiki, Thematic analysis



GLOSSARY

Black: This research suggests and works from the principle that “black” is a word that refers to people who are of colour based in Kenya. The term is used for people who self-identify themselves as black and it is used in a broader and more inclusive sense.

Heteronormativity: This term denotes that heterosexuality is the only “expected” sexual orientation (sexual relations between women and men) and each of the sexes has a specific natural role in life called gender roles. This ideology assigns lesser value to other sexualities and gender identities.

Homophobia: It refers to a set of beliefs that consists of irrational fear and hatred towards homosexuality and those who self-identify as homosexuals, informing prejudiced behavior. Most people who hold homophobic beliefs rationalize their views based on their religious and cultural beliefs.

LGBTQIA+: An acronym used to refer to people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersexed, asexual, or other (as indicated by the plus sign). It integrates a set of gender and sexual non-conforming identities. The term is usually problematic when used to signify homogeneity for a group that is diverse and different. In this research, it refers to the notion of collective constituted by various non-heterosexual identity groups and I by no means intend to downplay the multiplicity of individual identities and experiences. (Explain function of the plus sign.)

Lesbian: This is a term used to refer to women in same sexual or intimate relationships. Although some hold essentialist views, this research aims to utilize this concept with sensitivity as a concept with which some people chose to identify with as a sexual orientation or identity or community.

Queer: In this research, queer is presumed to be a space within which diverse notions of gender, sexuality and identity are questioned. Queer entails a variety of non-conforming identities and practices that oppose normative hegemonic notions of gender and sexual orientation. Generally, queer is a word that refers to “not normal” or more specifically, “not heterosexual”, a term that by its very use, questions conventional understandings of sexual understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them. There is need for one to differentiate between queer theory as a quality (essentialism) and queer as an attribute (constructionism).

Queer as a quality defines sexual orientation as unchanged across culture and time while queer as an attribute posits sexuality as product of sexual relations thus suggesting the history of the subject (sexuality) whose meaning and content are in continual process of change. One of the major strains of queer theory is the fact that it draws heavily on French post-structural theory and the critical method of deconstruction, deconstruction in this case to mean, a social analysis of who, why and what produced a text, a critical analysis of what is said and unsaid through language, structure, form and style.

In queer, the definition of text encompasses any form of communication used to convey an understanding of one's world, it can either be in form of a book, film, life story among other forms. Queer aspect assumes a position if not within the marginalized, then at least outside of the margins of normality, which creates new positions and paradigms of analyzing methods of data representation. This position not only captures the partiality of exclusionary heterosexual assertions but also the partial yet productive differences of queered presence thus representing a change from how and why the experiences of non-heterosexual people are studied, a change from current grounding in identity concept to epistemological centering. Furthermore, the language used to conceptualize and relay queer thoughts and inquiries is also questioned.

Queer theory is more of an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power and knowledge arena that frame the ordering of desires, behaviors and both social institutions and relations. Queer theory is against the societal power of binary distinctions, it streams from queered perspectives of the researcher and the researched.

Visibility: In the context of queer film theory, this refers to the presence or absence of sexual minority groups of people within films and television. The presence is argued to be of importance especially for them to be able to either recognize themselves in filmic representations or relate with them. On the contrary, the absence is perceived as an erasure of sexual minorities from the public hence denying their existence. Kenyan films have been characterized by under-representation of sexual minorities reflecting negotiations and power struggles situated within lived social experience. Black lesbian women face discrimination on the basis of their identity (being black, female, homosexual). The Kenyan constitution has made it worse for their existence since their rights are not enshrined in the Kenyan constitution. Some Kenyan films made about sexual minority groups of people is changing the narrative and this research is focusing on one of those films, *Rafiki*. *Rafiki* is remarkable not only because it documents the under-represented identity groups but also how it displays the diversity within these groups.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This study focuses on the continued heteronormativity and homophobia in society, particularly Kenyan society and seeks to explore the role that film may play to make a difference. On the basis of the case study of a local Kenyan film *Rafiki*, I explore the way in which such a public intervention may disrupt silences, erasures and misrepresentation of queer people, with a particular focus on lesbian subjectivities and relationships. In this beginning chapter I elaborate the background to the study, contextualizing it in the challenges of heteronormative cultures and cinema globally and locally, towards motivating for the study and elaborating the main problem and research questions that it sought to address. The chapter further details how the research report is structured.

1.1 Background

Heteronormative culture is evident across the globe and sexual minority groups suffer injustices, oppression, discrimination and marginalization perpetrated by both state and non-state organs leading to deprivation of social, economic, cultural and political rights (Amory, 1997). This study is located within the framework of social construction and situated knowledge, positioning discourses within their historical and political contexts of production. Epprecht (2010) argues that the ongoing historical processes of colonization and missionization has continually changed dominant beliefs and social responses to sexual practices posing a threat especially to the sexual and gender minority within the global context. The challenges of LGBTIQ+ community have been and continue to be swept under the rug, with the majority of people choosing to deny their existence.

While their stories are rarely told, the few representations that make it on screen are frequently unidimensional and often pathologize such identities, practices and relations. Among the many topics of concern for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans (LGBTIQ+) rights advocates has been the mainstream Hollywood portrayal of homosexuals which is continuously being problematized and questioned (Eaklor, 1994).

Outlining the history of global, African and Kenyan cinema and how sexual and gender minorities have been portrayed will give the study a rich background.

1.1.1 Global Cinema

Strengthening of the production code, a regulatory measure for films in the early 20th century and introduction of Catholic based morality in Hollywood film content saw censoring and erasure of homosexual and homoerotic portrayal on screen (Eaklor, 1994). The 1960's saw the decrease of the power of the production code which meant more introduction of homosexual content onscreen though they were rarely presented in a positive way (Malin, 2005). The 1970's saw a group of LGBTIQ+ political activists step forward and demand that Hollywood end its consistent negative and discriminatory portrayal which was a success and issues around LGBTIQ+ culture, identity history, discrimination and oppression were minimized (Rudy, 2016).

Lesbian and gay sexuality has gained greater visibility over the last few decades, especially in literary works such as novels, films, and short stories, yet in American context which has dominated film globally, heteronormativity remains dominant in the mainstream media and film. Currently, there has been a proliferation of Hollywood films that have explored the lived experiences of gay and lesbians, the complexities and richness including diverse forms of relationship and how sexuality and gender intersect with race, politics, class, culture, with many of such films being showcased in LGBTIQ+ film festivals (Eaklor, 1994).

Debates on filmic representation of sexual minorities have been mostly located in the global North and there has not been much research of such films from the global southern context with much of this focus appearing in the 2000's particularly in the USA (Stein, 2012). Some of the genres of the films were comedy, horror, romance and drama with most of them portraying such characters as violent.

1.1.2 African Cinema

Uncertainty, silence and repression has greatly affected lesbians in the African context as it has with respect to other non-normative sexualities and genders, while on the other hand, LGBTIQ+ experiences are currently an emerging focus for African feminist scholars, film makers and critics (Rowe and Tuck, 2017). In this respect scholars have also addressed transnational politics of knowledge production with regards to their experiences including activism and art in the African context and in relation to other parts of the world (Currier & Migraine-George, 2017).

Notwithstanding gender justice efforts in post-apartheid South Africa, for example, marginalized groups of people including sexual and gender non-conforming people are still underrepresented in local South Africa films (Pieterse, 2019). While there is a growing number of films that disrupt this such as *Beauty* directed by Oliver Hermanus, *The World Unseen* directed by Shamim Sarif, *Inxeba (The Wound)* directed by John Trengove among others, these constitute a relatively small group of such work in relation to the larger film industry (Botha, 2008).

The complex relationship between queer films and other cinematic productions has been brought about by the social justice issues that queer films address including realities of marginalization, racial segregation and politics around gender and sexuality (Rudy, 2016). Thus, while in current context there are a wealth of films that represent queer experiences and lesbian sexualities globally, in Africa there remains a dominance of mainstream North American images on our screens (Botha, 2008).

1.1.3 Kenyan Cinema

By the time Kenya attained its independence in 1963, there were few films produced and no expertise because of lack of technical empowerment which was being offered by the British through British Educational Cinema Experiment (Diang'a, 2017). The colonial masters made it hard for the indigenous population and the few who had access, learnt through observation thus making them novices. One would expect that with independence, things like cinema would be independent as well but to the contrary, it remained a foreign product.

The cinemas were dominated by western productions that were characterized by ogling, propaganda and instructional content, which proliferated among indigenous population through

the introduction of television (Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers, 2019). The establishment of the Kenya Film Corporation in 1967 had a major impact in establishing the foundation for indigenous filmmaking though its role was mainly distribution of foreign films and less of production of local films (Diawara, 1992). Films gained a rising trajectory from the 1980's especially because filmmakers from the West realized that Kenya had among other African countries, best locations for their productions (Moggi and Tessier, 2001). Among the early films by a Kenyan filmmaker was *Kolormask* by Sao Gamba that was successful at deconstructing colonial impositions and successful at portraying post-independence cultural freedom such as burial rites, marriage rites among others.

The government failed in terms of offering support leading to closure of Kenya Film Corporation that slowed down local film production through to the 1990's that opened a new film era in Kenya (Okioma and Mugubi, 2015). It was during this era that the very first film directed by a woman, was produced. The film *Saikati* was directed by Ann Mungai, produced in 1992 with an aim of telling African women's stories, Kenyan women to be specific. This saw a rise in feminist language in the films and most of the films captured the plight of women in a typical Kenyan society. Repetition of themes especially the one's portraying women as desperate people lead to erasure of other social, cultural, political and historical realities that were of equal importance (Murphy, 2000).

There was the rise of Riverwood (a Kenyan version of Hollywood with limited resources) in the 2000's that mainly comprised independent filmmakers who addressed diverse thematic areas including day to day realities (Ndaka, 2022). Despite the rise of positive female representation on cinema, sexual minority subjects and themes continued to be an alien thing. Most filmmakers never explored these subjects which was attributed to the rule of law that criminalized homosexuality. A few filmmakers like Wanuri Kahiu among others were able to explore these subjects in films although they were banned from being screened. This then justifies little literature work that has addressed sexual minorities in films in Kenya.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The adoption of the new national 2010 constitution, one that guarantees good governance and respect for human rights by the Kenyan government brought a relief to its citizens that had been oppressed through human rights violation, marginalization and discrimination against many minority groups amongst other inequalities and abuses. Despite its transformative and free nature, the 2010 Kenyan constitution has failed to legalize laws that protect sexual minorities and to revoke colonial laws that criminalize same sex relations (Johnstone, 2021). Although the legislature and the judiciary are known for critical decision making in provision of services to the people of Kenya, they face the risk of duality in jurisprudence especially with respect of sexual and gender minorities.

The ongoing national discourse on gender identity by the Kenyan government has led to the ban of both local and international films with LGBTQ+ themes such as *Rafiki* and *I Am Samuel*. Scholarly literature has explored and analyzed various Kenyan films that cover a wider range of day-to-day realities in the Kenyan society. Okioma and Mugubi (2015) explore various themes in Kenyan films such as domestic violence, corruption, politics among others. The few available

literature on sexual minorities, has tried to deconstruct the various beliefs around LGBTQ+ and little has explored such representations in films creating a gap which I aim to explore in this research.

This research hopes to address this gap through representation of black Kenyan lesbians in contemporary Kenyan film *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu, a 2018 Kenyan drama film that documents the story of romance that grows between two young women amidst family and political pressure around lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) rights in Kenya. The film speaks to issues of intersectional subjectivity and diverse ways of what it is to be named across different social categories.

1.3 Aim and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to undertake a critical feminist analysis of the film *Rafiki* in order to identify the possible role that film plays as a counter narrative in promoting lesbian visibility in Kenyan context.

The study will address the following questions;

- 1) How are lesbian characters depicted in the film *Rafiki* and to what extent does their depiction reproduce or challenge dominant representations of lesbian women in the context of Kenyan society?
- 2) To what extent is the use of film as a counternarrative perceived as challenging the non-visibility and or negative representation of lesbian sexual practices and identities including their inclusion in mainstream heteronormative Kenyan society and films?

1.4 Significance of the Study

As an African woman who is aware of the cultural, political and social notions surrounding homosexuality in Africa and particularly within the history and current context of the dominance of heteronormativity and ongoing homophobia in Kenya, I wish to contribute to the social justice goals of a free and safe space for black lesbian characters to tell their stories through films. This subjective experience forms the basis of the study and is further bolstered by my awareness of the limited literature on contemporary representation of LGBTIQ+ identities and practices in films in Africa and more specifically in Kenya.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

Chapter Two provides a detailed and critical review of diverse relevant literature in the field of gender studies, sexuality and films with particular emphasis on the depiction of lesbian and other non-conforming sexualities and identities. The chapter explores various general themes that LGBTQ+ films tend to address which are also depicted in the film *Rafiki*.

Chapter Three explores the various theoretical framework which informed my study. The chapter elaborates on Judith Butler's gender performativity concept, social construction as well as Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory and their relevance. I conclude the chapter with

methodological framework of the study as well as reflecting on my positionality with regards to the study.

Chapter Four provides the findings of my study. It captures a detailed analysis discussion of the film *Rafiki* in response to the research questions, literature review and theoretical analysis.

Chapter Five concludes the discussion of the previous chapter to demonstrate that the research has addressed the research questions of the study. The chapter also captures reflections and recommendations on areas that need further attention in future research.



Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A key component of this literature review is an overview of the relevant literature in the field of gender studies with particular emphasis on the depiction of lesbian and other non-conforming sexualities and identities. My aim is to appreciate the relevance of existing literature and build on them within the larger project of the use of films for advocacy purposes and towards disrupting normative narratives that continue to exclude other marginalized identities.

Cinema may be a tool used for understanding social dynamics towards social change such as increasing visibility, challenging discrimination of the marginalized, disrupting stereotypes among others, amongst other contributions (Eves, 2004). LGBTQ+ individuals in film play an important role in documenting and reshaping the historical context of queer exclusion and current location in a social-political space in which they continue to face repression and marginalization (Pieterse, 2019). In this chapter I begin by reviewing some of the key contexts of LGBTIQ+ rights and continued marginalization that are of relevance to the study, before going on to unpack the literature of film and its possibilities for LGBTIQ+ visibility and for challenging continued inequalities, othering and abuses.

2.2. Social and political contexts

A number of key contexts related to LGBTIQ+ people in Kenya and regional and global contexts are outlined here including: religion and homosexuality, African culture and homosexuality, and homophobic violence. These provide an important backdrop in understanding the research and the film that is the case study here.

2.2.1 Religion and Homosexuality

Religion through Christian missionaries has played a fundamental role in the establishment of major developments both pre- and post-independence in different sectors such as in education, health care systems, infrastructural developments among others in Africa. Coyle (2015) argues that despite its positive impact, religion has greatly contributed to the increase of homophobia by mainstreaming western Christian moralities especially from Britain and its colonies infiltrating law-making. In 1957, religious laws provided room for homosexuality on the basis of offering pastoral solution to sexual deviance but with the onset of HIV/AIDs, homosexuality among children, among other factors, religious leaders thought differently about the law (Paglia, 2011). The 21st century saw eruption of yet another major discourse on equality that led to total decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain and its colonies, a step backwards.

The recent politicization of homosexuality in Africa has greatly been perpetuated by the fundamentalist nature of religion, posing a question of, what then, does “fundamentalist” term mean? A monolithic approach of both Christianity and Muslim faith in Africa poses a threat to other beliefs, since there is a tendency to overlook the diversity in beliefs, practices, among other. One good example is the way Christians often associate the politics of homosexuality with the increase of the Pentecostal style of Christianity often emulated from the West (Awondo, Geschiere and Reid, 2012).

2.2.2 African Culture and Homosexuality

Colonialism is an important factor when it comes to analyzing power relations that shape sexualities and gender, and has potentially been the most important social-structural feature in the regulation of same sex sexualities and gender outside binaries across the globe. Phillips (2000) argues that the framework for regulation of sexuality in colonial Africa was based on the Victorian social values of morality and civilization. The effects of imperialism and colonialism has been severe especially to legacies of European empires, for instance, criminalized laws of same sex relations worldwide by the British is still in place in countries like Kenya. Among other factors, the belief that homosexuality is un-African is one of the main factors that has greatly contributed to homophobic violence towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Why then is it termed as un-African? Roscoe and Murray (1997) established in their study that same sex relations are considered an insult to African culture, anti-religion (Muslim and Christianity), immoral and a western import making it un-African. Their study also ascertains that homosexuality existed during the pre-colonial era and the subjugation of it, is a result of colonialists who are deliberately misrepresenting homosexuality in discourses and for social political reasons.

Tamale and Murillo (2007) reiterate that colonial influence has eroded truth in Africa by imposing western norms, an example being religion, which is frequently used to condemn homosexuality, God for Christians and Allah for Muslims becomes the perfect tool to silence same sex relations. They further talk about the understanding of same sex desire in Africa, stating that, issues of same sex desire in Africa are complex and have not been personified historically as it is in Western countries. They argue that same sex relations existed in the pre-colonial Africa era in folklores, folk art, body markings, clothing and naming systems, and while colonialists shifted to culture transformation of African societies in order for their agenda to succeed, they both consciously and un-consciously implanted heterosexism culture.

One of the major reasons as to why the existence of homosexuality has been contested is because of lack of documented records about the cultural and social lives of Africans in the pre-colonial era. Falola and Flemming (2009) note that because of lack of records, there is limited legible histories of sexuality that connects the pre-colonial concept to the contemporary Africa based concept. They further explain that, despite the limited available data, certain forms of art and the writings of colonial anthropologists' hint at the possibility of sexualities. Murray and Roscoe (1997) further explain that the presence of limited literature work prior to colonialism proves that colonial anthropologists wrote a bigger percentage of scholarship literature since they were part of the colonial system and their aim was to distort African sexual history. There are numerous instances of homosexuality in the pre-colonial Africa era citing that sexuality emerged from old texts that is different from the modern idea of equality and sexual relations.

In addition to being a problematic and false statement, numerous research scholars have published examples of specific same sex practices among various African cultures such as *Defiant Desires*, an influential piece that documents the history of queer identities that flourished in South Africa pre-independence. Tamale and Boniface (2007) argue that colonial anthropologists who wrote about early sexuality in Africa research are to be blamed for the

current myth of homosexuality non-existence in pre-colonial Africa, claiming that they have continued the misrepresentation discourse. They further states that there were traditional hierarchies involved when conducting research in the colonial context, hierarchies that gave power to the researcher, ones that only believed a researcher could produce legitimate scholarly knowledge and assumed that the researched subject or individual was naïve.

Maguire (2004) opines that post independent African leaders still impose foreign conceptions of sexuality in their societies, failing to acknowledge existence of same sex relations in the history of African communities.

2.2.3 Homophobic Violence

This thesis subscribes to the view that discrimination on the account of people's sexual orientation and gender identity is unacceptable. I argue that sexual minorities just like any other sexual identities are entitled to enjoy equal human rights. Heteronormativity remains one of the major causes of abuse towards the sexual minority in Kenya and it permeates through most social institutions in the country.

Due to this dominant culture, LGBTQ+ people in Kenya continue to suffer severe social injustice, perpetrated by both state and non-state organs that is characterized by deprivation of their social, economic, cultural and political rights. Herek (1990) posits that homosexuals just like heterosexuals are present in every facet of the society and as such, they vary in socio-economic status, employment, race, age, ethnicity among others. He furthers that, the main distinguishing factor is the fact that they are victims of heterosexism that breeds stigma and discrimination against them. The widespread human rights violations towards the LGBTQ+ community is perpetrated by political and religious leaders with the justification that it is an important cornerstone of safeguarding morality and social order. Puar (2007) argues that the discourse around African homophobia has greatly promoted racism and colonialism portraying Africa as hostile towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Homophobic violence occurs worldwide with many countries having discriminatory national legislation and practices that criminalize sexual orientation expressions and gender identity. Fraser (2020) notes that LGBTQ+ people are victims of a system of differentiation whose approach of collectively is one that despises sexuality, is deeply rooted in the cultural-evaluation structure of society, which hence makes them suffer injustice in form of denial and deprivation of human rights, among other rights. Mkhize et al. (2010) reiterate how patriarchal and heteronormative ideology has fueled homophobic violent crimes against lesbian women as well as cultural and religious beliefs in South Africa. They further that obtaining statistics on homophobic violence has been hard since survivors are afraid of reporting instances of homophobic violence due to the risk of further victimization by both state and non-state organs.

Kenyan culture is structured along binary opposites of male and female, a system that is basic to society and present in everyday life of citizens rendering those who don't abide by it as "deviants". They are therefore subjected to verbal and physical injury, social marginalization and homophobic violence on the basis of their sexual orientation. The Kenyan penal code states that engaging in same sex sexual activity is characterized as an unnatural offense and punishable

felony of up to fourteen years in prison. Finerty (2013) argues that the laws structures and legitimize general freedom of homophobia that exists within the country leading to human rights violations that LGBTQ+ people face in Kenya. She furthers that, the same laws instill fear, promote abuse and prevent the LGBTQ+ community from accessing equal rights to which they are entitled.

2.3 Film and the representation of LGBTIQ+

Film needs to be seen as a significant modality for the reproduction of normative and binary views of gender and sexuality. Yet film is also an important space for challenging and disrupting hegemonic positions. Given the focus of the study on the representation of lesbian identities and practices, this section reviews key global and local literature on cinema which are relevant to this study including, the male and heteronormative gaze on screen; African studies of the representation of lesbians in film; and the strategic emphasis on visibility through film in disrupting heteronormativity and misrepresentation of lesbians and lesbian desire and sexualities.

2.3.1 Male and heteronormative gaze on screen

Historically, critical film makers have called attention to the “male gaze”, the over-dominance of the male gender and heteronormative perspective from which characters are presented and stories told (Oliver, 2017). Feminist critics have argued that film’s depiction of stereotypic masculinity which also center men and marginalize women remains a challenge (Cooper, 2016). Greater representation of women and non-binary identities and sexualities can be used as a resistance strategy however the patriarchal hegemony dominating Hollywood is argued to make it virtually impossible to represent women and others outside of the dominant male gaze (Chirrey, 2003). Double standards also appear to characterize the art industry in this respect; lesbian and minority group films tend to be represented as “dangerous” characters which Luttig (2014) warns are hugely problematic and will lead to “creative death”.

2.3.2 Visibility and challenging homophobia and heteronormativity through film

Visibility is a strategy that was used from the 20th century by the LGBTIQ+ liberation movement to challenge the invisibility of non-normative sexualities particularly employed in film and broadcast media. Queer politics argued of the importance of “coming out” which refers to positive representation and refusal of negative evaluation of non-conforming gender and sexual identities and lifestyles (Chirrey, 2003). In cultural presentations and spaces that have naturalized heterosexuality, lesbian visibility is often portrayed as destabilizing through transformative actions and gender performances (Sedgwick, 1999). Only recently have lesbians and other sexual minorities gained attention in media from academia to the mainstream media (Currier & Migraine-George, 2017).

Eaklor (1994) draws on two mainstream films from the industry in North America of the 1990’s to illustrate the challenges of representation and the problematic visibility of lesbian identity and relationships. The film *Basic Instinct* is one example since it raised a lot of controversies with respect to the representation of a lesbian as its protagonist who was also depicted as dangerous and

a murderer. This is a clear example of how when visibility is achieved, it may reproduce homophobic stereotypes and do more damage than good.

Another film which gained popularity at the same time was *Fried Green Tomatoes*, an adaptation from a novel. In the novel, the two main female characters, Ruth Jamison and Iddie Threadgoodie are lovers unlike in the film where they are portrayed as friends. This stimulated a debate around the nature of their relationship on screen and attention to a clear indication of the erasure of their relationship on mainstream media (Eaklor, 1994).

These two films gesture to the contemporary challenges and contestations in North America film representation of lesbian subjectivities and relationships.

Eaklor (1994) states that of importance in both films was the language used, public perceptions and expectations and the way they are shaped by politics of gender, sexuality and stereotypes despite both films portraying lesbians in problematic ways thus serving as projects of delesbianization. Apart from the elimination of the lesbian love story from the film, some reviewers of these films further used language that served to erase the lesbian identity of the characters (Eves, 2004). While lesbians in the public often encounter discrimination and violence related to homophobia, a positive representation of lesbian identity and relationships also forms a fertile ground for establishing recognition and claim to rights.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a selected background of some of the key literatures that speak to lesbian representation in films. Issues around religion and homosexuality, homosexuality being un-African, the lack of visibility, problematic representations of lesbians, and homophobic violence remain a challenge in society and are often popularized and disrupted in LGBTQ+ films. Yet, as illustrated, some films may reproduce problematic social discourse. I have reviewed the literature here that illustrate how religion and notions of tradition have played a great role in perpetrating homophobia and homophobic violence. While many scholars like Tamale (2011), have challenged the notion that homosexuality is un-African, such myths live on and are reproduced in popular culture. I have also discussed how LGBTQ+ individuals and in this case, lesbians have been largely absent from film historically and have struggled to be visible through films or have frequently been negatively or problematically portrayed. This then leads to my next chapters which will explore how the film *Rafiki* and its key characters Kena and Ziki are set up to illustrate the possibilities of both positive visibility as well as challenging problematic stereotypes. We will see through the film how these characters overcome some of these challenges while navigating the different and difficult spaces that have been elaborated here.

Chapter Three: Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

3.1 Introduction

This study will explore how different characters perform gender and sexuality through drawing primarily on Judith Butler's gender performativity and social construction theory lens together with Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory. Key to my study is an understanding of the politics of gender, sex and sexuality as socially constructed and interrelated. In this chapter I overview the key theoretical bodies of work that inform the work and my analysis of the film. I also elaborate on the research study, its methodological framework and methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I reflect on the ethics of my research including my own positionality and investments in the research.

3.2 Theoretical frameworks

This study will be located within the intersecting theoretical frameworks of feminist social constructionism, gender performativity concept by Judith Butler as well as Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory that is widely recognized.

3.2.1 Gender performativity and Social Construction

Heteropatriarchy has become the accepted day to day way of living, one that suppresses women and sexual minorities through unswerving beliefs, use of language, social practices, understanding among others (Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

I will adopt Judith Butler's gender performativity and feminist social constructionism, a combination of feminist thought and the social constructionist school of thought. Butler (1999) posits that gender is a recurrent deed often within a fixed regulatory system that solidifies with time reproducing a natural sort of a being. She argues that from the inception of a being's social existence, all bodies are gendered, that is to mean, gender is expressed, a sequence of acts rather than a thing. Butler furthers the idea of gender performativity by arguing that the subject does not have to exist for the performance of gender rather the subject or the doer in this case is a fiction character usually imposed on the action hence emphasis is on the action. This then, creates a dilemma of how possible it is for there to be a performance without a performer. Butler clarifies that while a performance entails a prior subject, in the contrary, performativity does not. Gender brings to life the actions it performs such as masculinity and femininity. In this particular research, I looked at how gender is represented through the different ways in which the lesbian subjects in the film *Rafiki* performed their gender and sexuality and to what extent these repeated dominant perspectives on lesbians.

Sexual minority groups of people have had to wage ongoing battles against homophobic acts of marginalization and bias as have women against sexism and gender inequalities. Queer struggles represent a resistance movement that is aimed at transforming the oppressive nature directed especially towards sexual and gender subjugation and marginalizing of minority groups of people (Pindi, 2020). Judith Butler's concept on queer representation problematizes dominant identity categories and rethinks the concept of plurality, fluidity and intersectionality in knowledge production (Matebeni, 2009). The idea helps in breaking down the use of labels and

categories that stereotype and marginalize identity groups such as lesbians by opening up a more fluid notion of gender and sexuality thus enhancing understanding of human diversity.

Social constructionists argue that the social positioning of both men and women, and gender itself as a key divide between people shapes the production of meaning through social interaction (Mumby, 1998). Feminist social construction presents an organizing framework for this study because it seeks to understand and then respond to the way systems, processes, policies, structures and cultures operate to privilege some and oppress others (Condit, Flores and McPhail, 1997). This research hopes to reveal the social positioning of black lesbian women cast in the film *Rafiki* and how their positioning in the society affects their representation on screen. It also hopes to explore the way in which this representation of black lesbian women may challenge normative constructions of sexuality, gender and stereotypic representation of lesbians in Kenyan context.

A social constructionist framework provides an understanding of sexuality and gender as socially constructed identities and practices which take on meaning within a particular set of material and discursive relations in which some identities are considered normative while others pathologized (Kaufman-Osborn, 2005). Heteronormative discourses embedded in the production of films makes one believe that ideas, relationships and identities are exclusively heterosexual thus silencing sexual and gender difference and diversity (Eves, 2004). Approaching this study from a social constructionist lens helps with identifying underlying norms within the film industry that reproduce gendered divisions that privilege men and heterosexual identities and practices and to interrogate the extent to which films may shift, disrupt or reinforce particular social beliefs and meanings.

3.2.2 Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is one of the tools used to analyze sexual identity discourses. Crenshaw (2017) argues that one cannot talk about black women's marginalization without referring to anti-discrimination laws and politics around feminism that revolve around race, gender and sexuality. She suggests a "demarginalization" and "mapping" strategy that allows for identification of the various identities and how marginalization is reproduced thereof. By doing this, Crenshaw's objective was to deconstruct institutionalized marginalization that in most cases legalized existing power relations. The law has both consciously and unconsciously set boundaries to sexual and racial discrimination through existing institutional systems restricting institutional transformation. The film *Rafiki* captures a range of issues from gender and social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, among others.

Sexuality plays a crucial role in most societies in establishing differences and inequalities in lived experiences thus the centering and normativity of heterosexuality creates discrimination and stigma towards sexual minority groups (McQueeney, 2009). Feminist research at least during second wave feminism, tended to focus on white middle class women not considering that gender intersects with other multiple forms of identity and location which shape gendered experiences such as sexuality, race, ethnicity and many others (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Any

epistemology that addresses inequality, oppression and dominance must pay attention to the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and race (Biana, 2020).

An intersectional feminist approach cautions against homogenizing different group identities and the ways in which certain aspects of the society affect particular groups. Rather, attention is on analyzing the social location, people's affective identification and attachment to various groupings, ethical and political value system that others use to judge them (Yuval-Davis, 2016). Black lesbians are located at the intersection of the marginalized identities of gender, sexuality, race and class that threatens their peaceful coexistence, well-being and causes discrimination, stigma and violence towards them (Manion & Morgan, 2006).

As a researcher, intersectional feminist theory informs my understanding and cautions me against assumptions that all black lesbians in films are represented equally just because they belong to the same gender, race and sexual identity groups. People affiliated with more than one category of social group experience different advantages and disadvantages related to their social group thus an intersectional lens will allow me to acknowledge the multiplicities and nuances of being a black Kenyan lesbian in film.

3.3 Research Design

In this section I outline the feminist qualitative methodology of the research and provide an overview of how the research was conducted including how the methodology was used for both data collection and analysis.

3.3.1 The choice of the case study: *Rafiki*

This research project addresses the filmic representation of black lesbian identities in contemporary Kenyan films with my focus being on *Rafiki* (2018). The motivation together with the information gathering process was inspired by a particular interest in gender representation in the film *Rafiki*. Wanuri Kahiu's storytelling style stimulated absorbing debates both in academia and in public contexts regarding the depiction of queer identities in Africa. This interest led to the choice of the film *Rafiki* on the basis of its combination of subject matter and form, as well as the reaction it caused. While gathering and studying literature, it became clear that Wanuri Kahiu was one Kenyan film-maker to incorporate such identities as a central theme in her work.

3.3.2 Feminist Qualitative Methodology

One of the key features of feminist methodology is its crucial focus on gender and other issues of power. This methodological framework argues that all human social relations are structured by power and the differential social positions that the society gives both men and women and its argument that gender differences largely affect our personal beliefs and experiences (Westmarland, 2001). I chose to conduct this study through a feminist qualitative lens since women who are self-identified as lesbians are at the center of my research and I am interested in a gendered lens that may contribute to intersectional gender justice in film and in society more broadly. Feminist researchers have questioned quantitative positivistic methods since they tend to exclude women or rather the research for men is frequently generalized to women and what is actually referred to as "universal" knowledge has largely been male knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Further, I am interested in rich qualitative material, in perceptions and narratives

rather than in quantification since this lends itself better to the objectives and research questions of this research.

Feminist qualitative methodology emphasizes the importance of challenging power relations such as reducing the hierarchy between the subject and the researcher as well as shifting the focus from men by locating women at the center of the research with an aim to achieve social change and justice for women and other marginalized groups of people (Clarke and Braun, 2019). Feminist qualitative researchers therefore acknowledge that no research is value-free or unbiased and rather seek to ensure that their research contributes to social and gender justice. Feminist qualitative methodology also emphasizes reflexivity and places a great deal of importance on the researcher and their positioning and situatedness (Landman, 2006). In this respect we are urged to reflect critically on our own ideological positions on the research and our relationship to participants if we are working with human participants. This also means that feminist researchers are deeply interested in challenging power relations that may emerge in the research process or how the research may be taken up politically (Mohajan, 2018).

3.3.3 Data Collection

The film *Rafiki* is the case study to be drawn on and therefore a key component of the data for this research project that is analyzed through a feminist lens. Further reference is made to a few interviews that are available publicly in which the director Wanuri Kahiu is interviewed. Produced in September, 2018, *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu documents a love story between two African women (Kena and Ziki) amidst political, religious, family and society intolerance. This will serve as the primary case for this study. Online data collection methods further allow for critically oriented data, ease of data collection, new grounds for social interaction and understanding the way social realities get both constructed, deconstructed and reproduced (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022).

The two interviews used for the analysis of the film *Rafiki* were selected with regards to the questions around how lesbian subjectivities are represented in the film as well as the time frame between when the film was released and when the interview was done. The 1st interview drawn on (“Wanuri Kahiu Speaks On Her Film, ‘Rafiki’”) was conducted by BUILD Series on April 17, 2019 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cym3q1NCow&ab_channel=BUILDSeries) which was done few months after the release of the film capturing a range of concerns that the film had raised during that particular period of time. The 2nd interview by vpro cinema, “Wanuri Kahiu on *Rafiki*, and why it's banned in Kenya” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDOzqdirFsA&t=1s&ab_channel=vprocinema) was conducted on May 12, 2018 which also answers some of the questions that this research addresses.

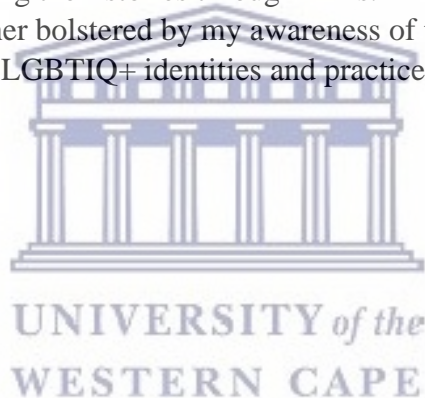
3.4 Ethical Consideration

Since no human participants are involved in the study, but rather the analysis draws from material that is available to the public online, ethical clearance is not required. However, I am aware of the importance of feminist ethics that go beyond standard consideration for research with human participants, and these are embedded in my reflexive engagements as detailed below.

3.5 Self-Reflexivity

In a feminist qualitative research, self-reflexivity is a crucial component since the researcher is an active participant in reproducing knowledge and acknowledges her situatedness in the study and in larger social contexts (Davids, 2014). Being an African woman filmmaker, in a country that doesn't recognize same sex identities and practices, I have constantly seen the discrimination, stigmatization and marginalization that black Kenyan lesbian women face when it comes to being cast in films and how frequently they are cast in problematic ways. I have also seen the invisibility of lesbians and lesbian relationships in mainstream films.

Such experiences have motivated me to research the representation of lesbians in contemporary Kenyan films, focusing on the film *Rafiki* as a case study. I aim to analyze the two main characters in the film, how they and their relationship have been represented and to assess the extent to which the film has challenged or deconstructed stereotyped and negative representation of lesbian identity and whether the film consciously offers a counternarrative and alternative representation to what is being represented and portrayed in mass media. As an African woman who is aware of the cultural, political and social notions surrounding homosexuality in Africa and particularly within the history and current context of heteronormativity and homophobia in Kenya, I wish to contribute to the social justice goals of a free and safe space for black lesbian women coming forward and telling their stories through films. This subjective experience forms the basis of the study and is further bolstered by my awareness of the limited literature on contemporary representations of LGBTIQ+ identities and practices in films in Africa and more specifically in Kenya.



Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by establishing the context of the case study by introducing the filmmaker, the film and the main characters in the film *Rafiki*. It then unpacks the emerging issues and themes through a feminist reading of the film. The themes explored answer research questions on how lesbian subjectivities are represented in films, how their depiction challenge dominant representation as well questions around the role the film played in increasing visibility of lesbian subjectivities.

4.2 Context and Significance of the film

Wanuri Kahiu is a well-known storyteller and filmmaker in Africa who shares stories that are based on destabilization of African patriarchal structures of oppression and on the promotion of art as a complex and fun space (BUILD Series, 2019). Born and raised in Kenya, she describes her storytelling art as part of her tradition, one that not only tells stories but also sees through the future and speaks to and about them (Obenson, 2019). To her, storytelling is not only the ability to communicate an idea that becomes a film but the ability to be herself, link her story to the heritage that she is.

The three notable films among the many that she has directed include *From a Whisper* (2008), *Pumzi* (2009) and *Rafiki* (2018). *From a Whisper* is a multi-award-winning drama feature that explores emotional recovery of an intelligence officer and a rebellious artist who lost family members during the 1998 US embassy bombing in Nairobi, Kenya, that led to the death of more than two hundred people (Lempert, 2014). The plot twist revolves around religion, fanaticism, family dynamics and political violence with the message being that violence is never the way out.

Kahiu's feature film *Pumzi*, an award-winning film at the Cannes Film Festival, speaks to the representation of African realities and future using the art of African futurism. Durkin (2016) states that the film capture the art of eco-feminist positionality where women are the leading changemakers in matters nature. He furthers that, while attending film school at the University of California, Los Angeles, Kahiu encountered a situation where she was tasked to define her identity which she found uncomfortable. It is during this time that she thought of telling more stories especially on identity with an aim of creating a fluid world, a world that allowed people to explore, a utopia, a world that she referred to as "heaven" (TEDx Talks, 2014).

While growing up, she never got the opportunity to see people like her fall in love, all she saw was other people fall in love. It always seemed like love was for others and not for her and so, it was important to tell a love story, add cinema to it, especially to the history of African cinema, just so we have an experience of our own love on screen (TEDx Talks, 2014). She wanted to concentrate on human relationships, which she believed was a beautiful thing and that's how the film *Rafiki* was born through the support of the Netherlands Film Fund and the Big World Cinema production company, an adaptation of Monica Arac de Nyeko's short story *Jambula Tree* (Osinubi, 2019).

There were not enough love stories on screen coming from Africa, and the available ones, were unidimensional thus Kahiu's interest to integrate the art of "Afrobubblegum," one that is fluid and allowed exploration of diverse facets of emotions without being issue driven (Obenson 2019). The Kenya Film Classification Board banned the film before its release on the basis of what they termed as "normalization" of homosexuality which is against the Kenyan culture. Wanuri Kahiu would then submit a petition on the same that led to lifting of the ban for seven days, allowing Kenyans to interact with the film at the theatres in September, 2018 (Vpro Cinema, 2018).

After its release, it provoked a series of emotions and anxieties especially by giving assurance and positionality privilege to the LGBTQI+ community, there was fear of mistranslation among citizens, neocolonial supremacy, cinema supporting a limiting identity politics and leveling of difference in the Kenyan context (Osinubi, 2019).

Schoonover and Galt (2016) argue that despite queer spaces being made possible by cinema, the films created are rarely enforceable since the space of the setting in most cases is usually undecided producing both dominance and resistance effect. They further that new orientations towards cultural beliefs of queer identities have been enabled by queer cinema, shifting and disrupting dominant nuances around queer cinema while also exploring the different intersections.

Exploring Wanuri Kahiu's style on how Kena and Ziki are represented in the film *Rafiki* will give this research a privileged positionality of what it means to identify as a lesbian character in a film in Kenya. Through its dramatization, the film *Rafiki*, has been able to articulate Kenyan cultural politics, the unspoken and spoken desires of lesbian identities and their public and furtive identities simultaneously. The multi-layered approach in various scenes achieved by the use of different cinematic styles and the synchrony of both sound and images created an enabling virtual space for same sex desire to thrive. Despite the film *Rafiki*'s hopeful ending, themes like homophobic violence, role of religion on perpetrating homophobia, homosexuality being un-African among others have been popularized. This research aims to deconstruct some of these nuances which will enable filmmakers explore different strategies on how to increase positive representation of lesbian subjectivities in Kenyan films. This research draws critical attention to the place of lesbian subjectivities in the cinema world and how they construct ways of being in the Kenyan context with the assumption that queer cinema enables different ways of being that creates a different world for them.

4.3 Synopsis

In the film *Rafiki*, Wanuri Kahiu tells a story of sexual awakening between two young women (Kena and Ziki) who fall in love just after finishing high school, in the bustling streets of Nairobi. Kena works in her father's shop as she awaits her results hoping to join a nursing school while Ziki passes the days hanging out with her friends and making up dancing routines. Their paths cross when their fathers run against each other for seats in the County Assembly, and they find themselves drawn towards each other. Despite her academic prowess, Kena comes from a conservative low middle class family setup, with parents who are trying to go through a divorce,

a depressed staunch Christian mother and a struggling business owner, John Mwaura, as a father who tries his luck in politics.

Ziki on the other hand, comes from an upper-middle class family set up. Peter Okemi, her father, is a seasoned, well-known politician and a businessman. When love blossoms between Ziki and Kena, they are forced to choose between happiness and safety. Their love endures the pressure from their different social classes, political rivalry and tension between their fathers, religious beliefs around homosexuality and the country's position on homosexuality. As they navigate the different spaces, they get to encounter different characters like Blaksta, who is a dedicated motorcycle rider and Kena's best friend, Mama Atim, a blabbing and gossipy kiosk vendor, a homophobic priest and Ziki's dancing girl gang, among others. Rich in tension and different textures, the feeling of searching and getting lost in the process, the embodiment of saturated colors in different scenes and characters, the natural intimacy that grows between Kena and Ziki and the construction of their own world thereof makes the film interesting.

Kena is a woman but her gender expression is more masculine. Minute 1;03 shows Kena dressed in a vest, exposing her arms and muscles out. She's worn two different pieces of earrings and has a unique haircut and dreadlocks on the side, which in a traditional African context, is typically associated with the masculine gender. She maintains the same kind of attire and presentation throughout the film. Kena mainly associates with the male gender. Her best friend Blaksta, with whom she spends a lot of time together with, sees her as 'one of them'. They go out drinking together, playing cards, and plays football with the rest of the boys among others. In one instance, after Blaksta refused to give his girlfriend money, Kena offered some to Blaksta, which is a role mainly associated with the masculine gender.



Figure 1: Image of Kena (Samantha Mugatsia) from the film Rafiki

Ziki is also a woman and unlike Kena, her performance of gender is more stereotypically feminine. She mainly spends time with her girlfriends but there is something unique, that differentiates her from the rest of the girls. Ziki adorns colorful outfits that bring out her femininity and that are not normally "proper" for young women in Kenyan culture. She has pink hair, purple lipstick and well-done make-up. She maintains a colorful look in different shades across the film making her stand out from the rest of the girls. Ziki's dressing speaks to how she

is destabilizing the norm of a typical Kenyan girl having to maintain a contained and conservative look.

Despite Ziki having friends that she could spend time with, she finds herself attracted to Kena and ends up spending most of her time with Kena despite the political rivalry between their fathers. The friendship blossoms into a romantic relationship putting them at a cross-road of choosing between happiness and safety.



Figure 2: Image of Ziki (Sheila Munyiva) from the film Rafiki

Blaksta is Kena's best friend and one of the characters that is crucial to the film. Blaksta's mind is binary because of his socialization. His world is a world of men and women, so when he sees a woman, he sees a potential wife with prescribed roles that they must perform, which is why he says to Kena that she will make a good wife. It doesn't occur to him that there are women who do not perform the feminine roles as prescribed by the society. It comes out in a very natural way because of the nature of his socialization.

The character Mama Atim speaks to how the society stigmatizes sexual minorities. She singles Kena and Ziki out for shaming, an experience that affirms their rejection by the society. These are experiences that lesbian people are used to because what they are doing is considered abnormal, shameful by the society. She puts them in the spotlight, making them feel uncomfortable, make them think that whatever they are doing is unacceptable, not the norm.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

The study aims to use thematic analysis method in analyzing its data. Qualitative thematic analysis is a method of analyzing data by identifying themes in qualitative data with an aim of clarification, demystification and contextualization rather than showcasing difference and diversity (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Unlike other methods, thematic analysis through its

theoretical freedom, provides a flexible research tool that gives detailed yet complex account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This report aims to analyze the way in which the film addresses the challenges faced by non-heteronormative genders and sexualities in Kenya and the kinds of homophobia and othering lesbian women may experience in society. The film also seeks to challenge the lack of visibility lesbian identities and relationships in popular culture and film. My analysis therefore focuses on the key themes the film surfaces that speak to gender and sexual justice issues. I also assess the extent to which the film disrupts (or reinforces) negative representations of lesbians. Key themes emerging include: Religious and other double standards, Intersectionalities of power inequalities and privileges, visibility of lesbian subjectivities, sexualities and relations, cultural and social norms as well as politics and transnationalism.

4.4.1 Religious and Other Double Standards

From its introduction, the film portrays a Christian society that is embedded in Christian values, laws, practices and images. The society's deep root in Christian values is evident with Kena's friend who gets angry when he sees a gay man at minute 5:18. He expresses his disappointment and says how God is not happy with such acts. He gets angry, stands up and walks away from his seat with rage, pushing the gay man away. This speaks to the role of religion in perpetrating homophobic violence.

The church espouses greed, which features the way the church has been commodified or commercialized at minute 13:56. The focus is not really on moral uprightness or the word of God, which should be the actual focus of the church. The church overlooks the various deeds of its role models, that is, bribery, immorality, among others which thus addresses the fact that, both the church and the priest have been compromised, the priest can no longer speak the word of God. Seeing that the role models are financiers of the church, the church might lose them, if they are not praised. The church is at the forefront through the priest condemning homosexuality and how the bible terms it as a sin while on the equal side, its role models are at the forefront of committing adultery, bribery, divorce among many other inequities which the bible is against. This clearly shows how the religious law only applies to the few marginalized in the communities while the high and mighty get through the system freely. This also points out to the hypocrisy and double standard nature of the Kenyan society, whereby it sets certain standards specifically for people who are gay or homosexual but no standards for heterosexuals.

Another instance is that of Kena's mother. She seems to be in a state of denial with respect to the divorce she is going through with Kena's father as seen at minute 9:56. Mr. Mwaura, Kena's father is no longer living with her but because of her socialization, she has no other world, her world is in marriage. Being a staunch Christian, divorce is taboo. She keeps on hoping that the husband will return to her. This is the society that confines her, she cannot have a life outside marriage. So, she wants to remain there, she wants to continue believing that the man will come back to her. She perhaps holds on to the marriage because the bible says otherwise when it comes to divorce. Perhaps because Kena is not within the confines of these normative gender constructions of the society, she actually wants her mother to snap out of that bubble. Kena's

mother is a perfect example of hypocritical Christian when it comes to religion. She even criticizes the co-wife's unborn baby at minute 15:00 and walks away angry which does not align with Christian values while on the other hand, Mr. Mwaura is relatively calm in his reaction to his daughter Kena, after realizing that she is in a relationship with Ziki which might have been triggered by the fact that he knew Kena has held secrets for him, he has made mistakes in the past and Kena has held space for him. It comes out more as blackmail. This as well speaks to the aspect of double standards, to say, Mr. Mwaura is not condemned as much as Kena is going to be condemned by the society. He is at liberty to leave his wife, get another woman pregnant, yet does not suffer the same othering as his daughter does for transgressing heteronormativity. They further suffer homophobic violence that is perpetrated towards Ziki and Kena by the society when they realize that they are in a lesbian relationship at minute 58:00.

4.4.2 Intersectionalities of Power Inequalities and Privileges

A further area that the film surfaces is the complex relationships between different forms of power and privilege. The intersectionality of gender and sexuality with other forms of inequality and difference are exposed in the film thus again inviting the viewer to ask questions about continued forms of inequality and othering in Kenyan society. This section contributes to a dimension of knowledge on social arrangements, beliefs and practices that merge in the construction and performance of gender as explored by Butler (1999). I draw from a range of events and actions within the film *Rafiki* that help us understand the interconnections among other forms of oppression against lesbian identities that have become institutionalized in our modern society. We get to learn how patriarchy is a great contributor to legitimization of oppression towards lesbian identities in the film *Rafiki*, whether it is cultural practices, social constructions, among others.

Class played a major role in constructing and performance of Kena and Ziki's gender identities. Kena's unwillingness (or inability) to come out is greatly contributed by her class and social status. The fact that she comes from a poorer and conservative family, it becomes difficult for her to come out unlike Ziki. Kena is overwhelmed, even when she goes out, she has to quickly come back to run errands at home, take care of the mother, wash dishes, among others. This speaks to factors or questions that LGBTQ+ individuals have to think about before they consider coming out, in this case, is, Kena's domestic environment. How does class affect the practices, experiences and capacities of lesbians? Further, personal circumstances exacerbated by class and social position impact on the two women's experiences of their lesbian desire. For example, for Kena, she is dealing with her mother who is going through a divorce, she is supposed to be there for her, emotionally and physically, she holds space for her mother. Ziki on the other hand, in a middle class educated environment, is not expected to center her family but rather is encouraged to generate her own self development, following classed and westernized capitalist individualist expectations. She thus does not have to deal with such a domestic load in the same way as Kena. Further, due to Kena's upbringing and the context of her domestic environmental socialization, she knows exactly what she should say and what she should not say. Despite the fact that Mama Atim had mentioned to her about her father's extra-marital affair and that the woman was expectant, she chooses not to tell her mother, because she knows the psychological torture her

mother will have to go through. Ziki on the other hand is a bit more independent and liberal in terms of expression and movements, because of her social status.

The issue of class is as well evident in the church set up and practices. The moralities and rules that the church preaches only apply to those with no money. So, when someone of high profile in the community, a politician in this case, provides the church with money, then, they can get away with anything, such as immorality, divorce, bribery, among the many practices that the church should actually discourage outwardly, yet they turn a blind eye to when the perpetrator has financial power or other social status. Those with less power, younger, poorer, who practice same sex desire identifies as a homosexual, they are condemned, as the film shows. Further, the priest is heard praising Okemi, Ziki's father, at minute 13:50, a veteran politician and businessman. Ziki snobs at the remarks of the priest looking away from her father. She is likely to know more about her father that probably the society and the church doesn't know which contradicts with what is being said by the priest and Christian values. It is very clear that the priest ends up not preaching the word of God apart from the praises. The film highlights the fact that, the church is controlled by those in power in the Kenyan society.

The political status of both Kena and Ziki's parents play a strong role in how they perform their gender identities. Ideally in this society, Kena and Ziki are already experiencing barriers because their parents are political rivals. The society has created barriers in terms of what one can do, what places they can go, among others. Kena and Ziki however are trying to cross these barriers and break the norms. The film shows how they are punished for breaking norms. This society has got no space for them as powerfully illustrated by the scene when they go to a restaurant at minute 17:50 to have a soda and they end up leaving even before they can take their soda. This highlights the way the society has got no place for lesbian subjectivities to be expressed in the Kenyan society.

Another scene that highlights gender performativity is when Kena tells Ziki, she is not a typical Kenyan girl which gestures to their race at minute 18:00. A typical Kenyan girl is one who is domesticated, one who is going to get married, have children, follow all the cultural norms, values and traditions. But Ziki refuses to do that. Ziki doesn't want to be like them, those who live in the binary world, the typical Kenyan girls, who must stay in the domestic spaces and perform all the norms and practices prescribed to them by the society. She is constructing another world, a different world, defining herself, she doesn't see Kenyan cultural context as enabling, it's a disabling environment that doesn't allow her to dream, to be different, to be something else, which is connected to what we can interpret as her identity as a lesbian. Because if she conforms, then, she cannot realize her identity.

Language is one of the other factors that has created a disabling environment for black Kenyan lesbians to thrive. For instance, the kind of language and words of expression between Blaksta and Kena speaks to their socialization. It comes out naturally on how Blaksta uses masculine expressions and statements when addressing Kena, for instance, when she told her to jump on the motorcycle at minute 12:44.

4.4.3 Visibility of lesbian subjectivities, sexualities and relationships

As in other national contexts, elaborated earlier, cinema has become one of the main channels that the queer community in Kenya is using to generate visibility, one that publicly celebrates them and their identity (Johnstone, 2021). The film both shows up continued othering and marginalizing practices while also making visible a positive representation of queer love and lesbian subjectivities.

In one of the scenes, when Kena's friend bumps into a gay man and pushes him on the side at minute 5:31, its highpoints erasure of the sexual minority, which also addresses the aspect of one's humanity not being recognized. The gay in return, cannot challenge him or do anything, because he knows, once he defends himself, he has no society around him to defend him. So, even if he can fight and win the fight, he is not going to win the social stigma that comes with being gay, that's why he decides to remain quiet. If one speaks out, then they get sanctioned by the society. The film in this way shows up the complexities of the ways they silence the sexual minority. We do not even know the name of the gay man from the film.

Several images in the credits of the film *Rafiki* also address invisibility of lesbian subjects in films. A black woman, which I am of the assumption that she is Ziki at minute 2:26, facing a different direction, with a white dress and holding flowers at the back. From the way the picture is taken, facing a different direction, it distracts the normative ways. It seeks to destabilize the norm because, normally, when one takes a picture, ideally of a woman, one would want people to see their face. But in this case, it is done differently, in a unique way, reversing the norm.

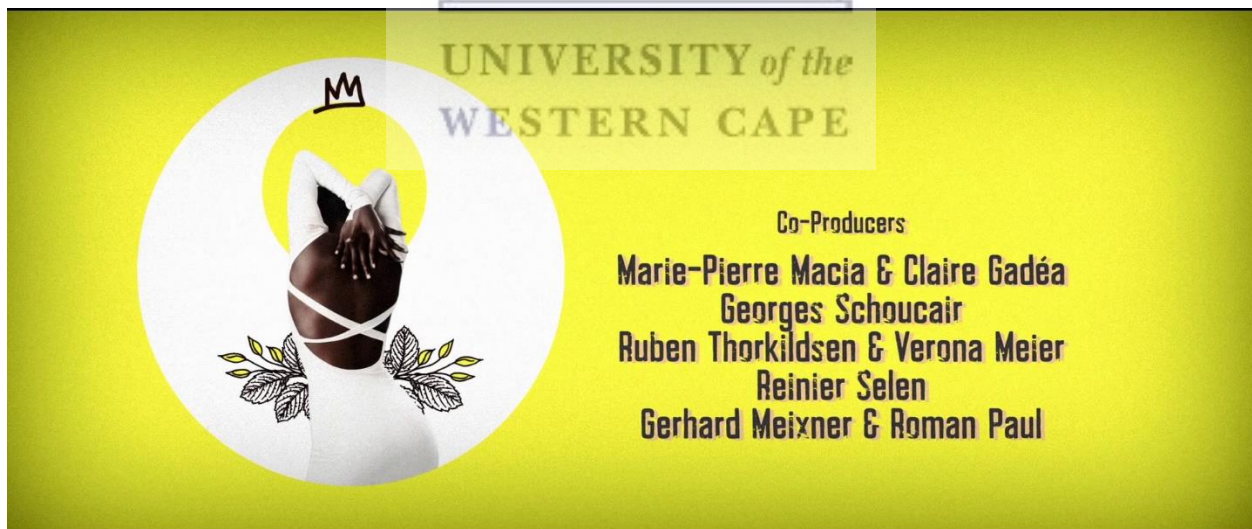


Figure 3: Image of a woman from the film *Rafiki*

Kena's image portrays her with one of her hands in her pocket and the other on her head in rapid succession at minute 1:03. This speaks of a girl in search of love, a distressed young girl,

isolated, standing alone, in a society that doesn't accept her, one that doesn't understand her identity and who she is. She is seeking for love in a society that has rejected her. Her dressing is more masculine, her haircut is also masculine. This speaks to the construction of identity of gender to say, gender is not only accrued through our biological composition but also through the way we dress, the way we cut our hair, which is more masculine which speaks to how gender is performed. The physical construction of Kena, she seems to have small breasts. This speaks to construction of gender, through the way we appear, we make ourselves look, to the society. Kena has small breast, but it appears that she is trying to make them invisible from the way she is dressed. This makes her appear like a man, she constructs herself in a masculine way.

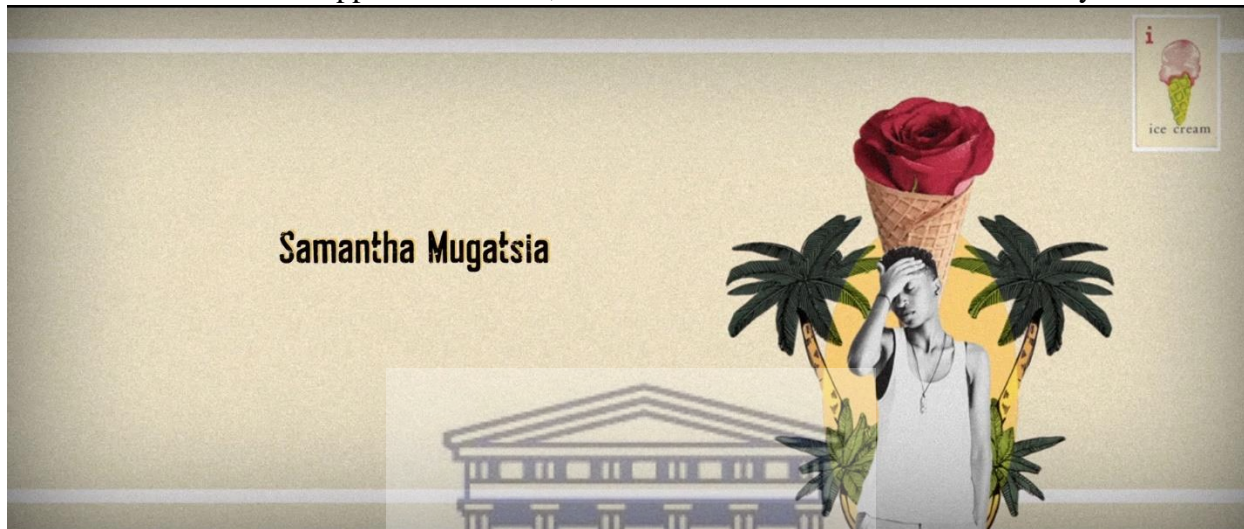


Figure 4: Image of Kena from the film Rafiki.

The second image of Kena is that of her head facing against the audience with a muted speaker at the back of her head and flowers at minute 1:31. This is an image that also speaks to her search for love, search for happiness, search for fulfillment. The fact that she is facing away, talks about her identity, she is hidden, closeted, she doesn't want people to know who she is which highlights a society that makes it difficult for black Kenyan lesbians to come out.

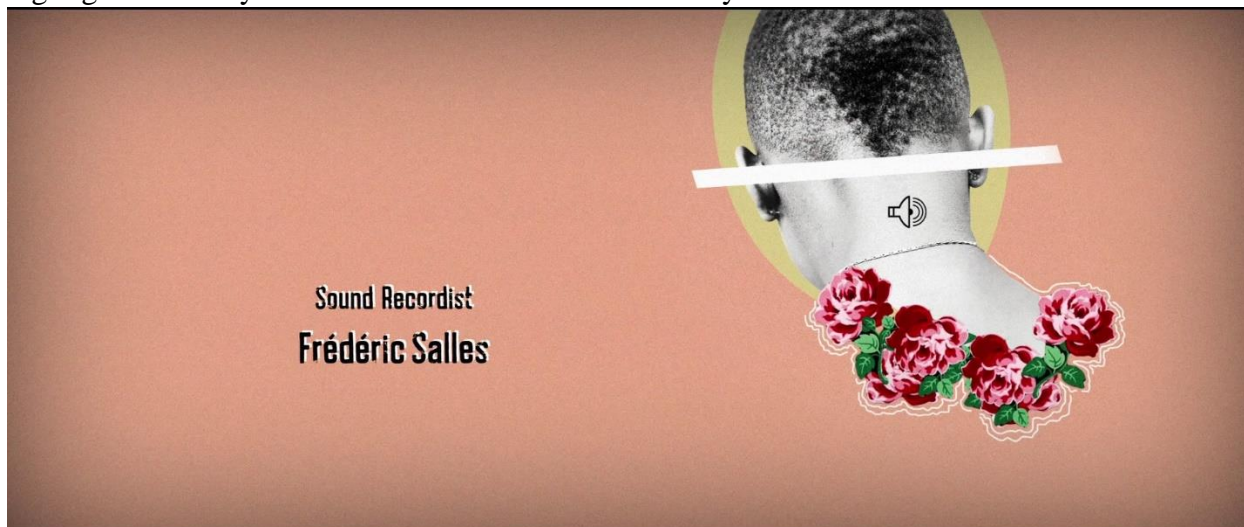


Figure 5: Image of Kena from the film *Rafiki*.

The image of Kena and Ziki at the very last section of the introduction which is also used as the cover of the film *Rafiki* at minute 2:33 highlights a few concerns. They seem to be suspended in the clouds. This highlights the fact that they are in their own world. They wish to be in that world, more like a bubble, where they are just the two of them and free from societal norms and traditions. Kena and Ziki are seen to be in absolute happiness, people who are completely satisfied with themselves, content with who they are. One cannot think that there is something wrong with them if they look at the image. This picture naturalizes and normalizes what it is to be a lesbian, because people normally think that sexual minorities are distressed people, sad, have a spiritual problem, are demon possessed or have a medical problem that requires treatment in a typical Kenyan society. But when one looks at this picture, these are people who are perfectly normal, there is nothing wrong with them, they are enjoying themselves, they are satisfied. It's a picture that is locating black Kenyan lesbian identities in to the social context in which they live in. In the picture, Ziki is in pink, her dressing and hair, colors that are mostly associated with the feminine gender while Kena on the contrary has fits that are aligned to the masculine gender. This clearly shows that there is a gender identity that one can easily pick from the way they are dressed. The film uses the symbol of eagles on the sky and the flight, to highlight freedom and limitless life that they desire. That's what Kena and Ziki aspire to be, to live a free life, and go anywhere they want to go and do anything they wish to do without restrictions. Ziki mentions at minute 20:20, that she wants to fly, go out there, explore the world, away from Kenya which speaks to her seeking for freedom which the Kenyan society does not provide.



Figure 6: Cover Image of the film *Rafiki*

Another powerful image that flags lesbian love and sexuality in positive terms is that of Ziki at the introductory segment at minute 1:11. She is holding a flower and she is hiding behind the flower. The flowers speak of love. The image speaks about her identity in this society, she seems closeted, she doesn't want people to see who she is and what kind of people she falls in love with. This is portrayed in the film when Ziki hides her identity from her father, mother and the general society before she finally decides to come out. The different rainbow colors throughout the film *Rafiki* highlight the idea of queering, the notion of queering is that of destabilizing heteronormative discourses and established norms. Remember according to this society, the world should be black and white, should be man and woman, should be framed through binaries, but when other colors are introduced, it highlights the multiplicities of identities. The colors represent different genders that are possible, therefore making an appreciation of the heterogeneity of identities.

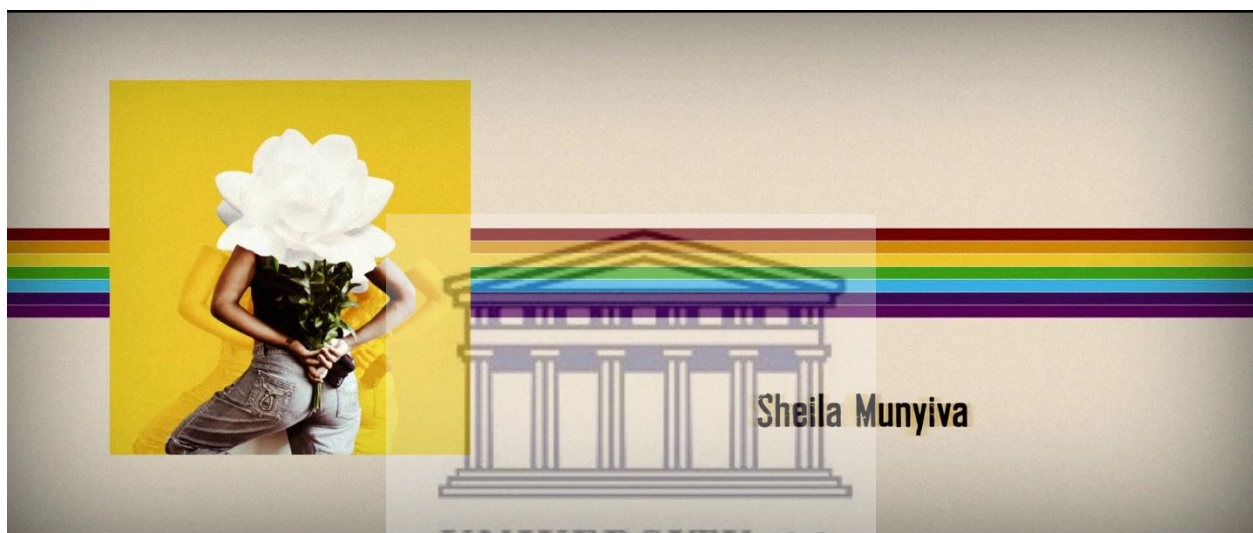


Figure 7: Image of Ziki from the film *Rafiki*.

4.4.4 Cultural and social norms

The film exposes the power of cultural prescriptions in Kenyan society, not only through exposing homophobia and heteronormativity but also through the pressure to conform to social expectations around family and relationship. This emerges as particularly so for women.

Kena's mother feels 'stuck' through her context of poverty and the imminent divorce that has disrupted her sense of self and in their home set-up. It is one of the things that Kena wants to run from. She doesn't want to be stuck on her life, which is probably the reason she is working very hard at school. The mother thinks that, the only way for Kena not to be stuck in that environment is by getting married to a man, from a richer background, referring to the Okemis at minute 22:28. Relationships become commercialized when it becomes your only exit from social constrains such as poverty in this case. That makes it difficult for any young girl in a typical Kenyan set up to become anything else apart from a heterosexual young girl who is going to get married to a rich man and get kids. So, if you are going to say that you identify as a lesbian, then, how are you going to come out of these social constrains like poverty? This makes it difficult for

young girls who would like to explore other identities to do so. Kena thinks about it, it is one of the things that bothers her, this is what her mother expects her to do, get married properly, get married to a rich man and stand a chance of getting out of poverty that they are experiencing.

When Mama Atim breaks the news to Kena that her father is expecting a baby boy finally, she re-emphasizes about it and even makes celebratory ululations claiming that finally, Mr. Mwaura can be referred to as a man at minute 7:40. This speaks to how women have been socialized into these patriarchal systems. It clearly shows that, it doesn't need men to actually maintain a patriarchal society, even women participate in promoting this notion which then speaks to how the society has been constructed.

The football scene at minute 22:54 describes a heterosexual society, one that has elevated the masculine gender, a space for men, a boy's world. Kena easily identifies with this space; she is masculine in her performance of gender while Ziki is very experimental. Ziki wants to explore other ways of being, she wants to play football, she wants to taste the waters, get out there and feel it which resonates with her character. Ziki's friends are the typical Kenyan girls, they don't want to get sweaty, they must smell nice, being sweaty is a boy's thing. Ziki is in between, experimenting, negotiating new ways of being. All these gender roles have been internalized, for instance, the men playing in the field have been socialized to know that the women cannot play, it's a boy's thing, people of a particular gender have to perform these roles. It's a world that is binary, with specific roles for each. There is no in between which is a space that Ziki is exploring. Kena for some reason, has already broken the barriers and has been accepted, she has passed whichever test she had to pass by the way she walks, dresses, speaks, among others. This is also furthered when it starts to rain and Kena runs leaving Ziki who ends up following her as well. The running is an instinctive reaction, instinctively, everyone runs. This speaks to the elements of masculinity in Kena's character, her running, not caring, not showing sympathy, is more masculine than feminine unlike Ziki who shows care and compassion and runs towards her.

Kena seems to be carrying a lot of burden in her heart, which has a lot to do with the broader society, family, what people will say, the things that she imagines. This is because, when she lets her identity known to the society, it will become problematic especially for her. To the society, she is one of them, as long as she is Kena who is a woman, the moment the society knows about Kena's lesbian identity, then it becomes problematic to Kena, she will face all manner of rejection. If she gets in to a relationship with Ziki, what will the repercussions be? She always has moments when she is lost in thoughts, in those moments, she is contemplating whether she should come out, is it worth it? She knows what she feels is genuine, she loves Ziki, at the same time, she considers what the consequences will be especially from her family and the society at large. In a moment where she should be enjoying herself, where Ziki should be her world, she cannot forget the outside world. It always finds its way in her mind. This speaks to the fact that systems of oppression especially to the marginalized are intersectional, that, one cannot be in his or her own universe, and forget the outside world. After one has explored their universe of say, lovemaking, one gets out there and goes back to the society and meet the same constraints. Another instance is when Ziki wants to kiss Kena, she is overwhelmed with love, she is admiring

Kena. One can easily see the love in Ziki's eyes. Kena on the other hand is lost in thoughts, and she eventually tell Ziki, she has to go at minute 25:17. There are things calling her, responsibilities. There are two worlds where Kena lives in, the world of love between her and Ziki and the other world where she is facing all the societal constrains.

In this society, nursing is regarded as a profession of lower-class people, people who think they cannot achieve much, which is who Kena is. There is no model in her family that makes her want to dream. Ziki doesn't think being a nurse is profession that somebody like Kena can pursue at minute 19:48. Kena is limited by her home set up.

Another scene that portrays effects of social norms is where Kena is thinking while Ziki is busy preparing a place for them to sit at minute 18:53. This speaks to how Kena's social environment has affected her, the domestic environment crips in to the relationship. She is not even quite sure what she is going to do unlike Ziki who is a bit more assertive. Kena on the other hand, is still lost in thought, she is probably thinking about her mother, how the society might perceive what they are doing with Ziki, Mama Atim's sentiments, among others. Her expression of gender/sexuality is limited by her social status.

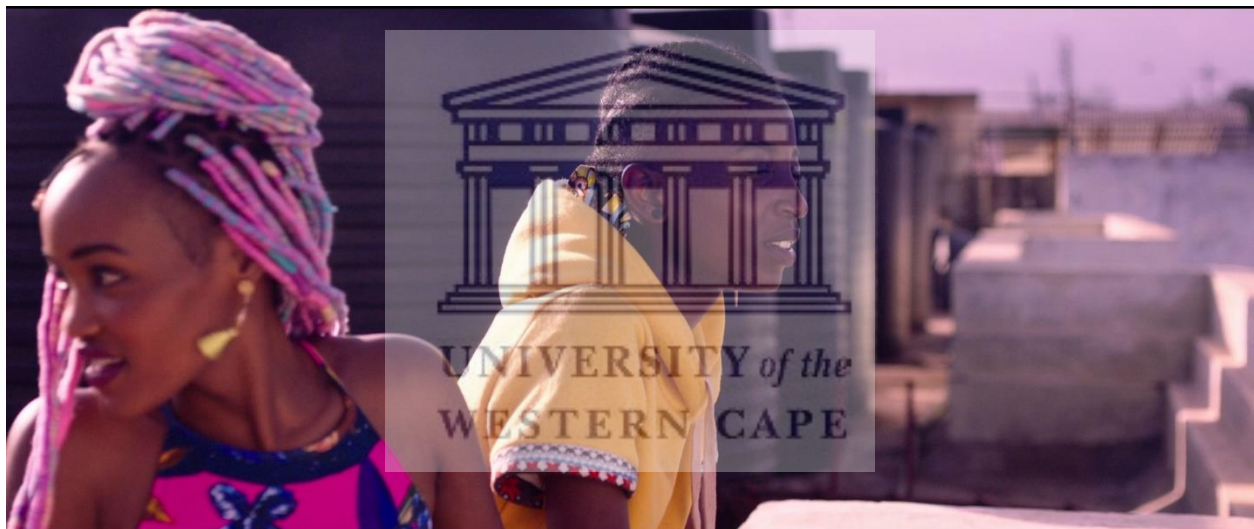


Figure8: Kena is deeply engrossed in thoughts while Ziki goes to prepare their siting space as seen in the film Rafiki

Blaksta's psyche is structured in a typical patriarchal manner from the way he behaves as a man, the way he handles himself, the way he treats women, seeing them as sexual objects, for instance when he was done making love to his girlfriend, he is disrespectful, he even denies her transport to go back home and asks her to go away until Kena, whom the society considers, inhuman, gets the sense to recognize the humanity of Blaksta's girlfriend and offer him some money to give his girlfriend. This thus speaks to the mental schema that Blaksta has, that comes from his culture and ways of socialization. He has slept with his girlfriend, satisfied himself, and lets her go at minute 3:50. The girlfriend complains and tells Blaksta, they are not finished. Blaksta is only worried about his personal satisfaction, doesn't care about the feelings of his girlfriend, sends her away as an object whose satisfaction does not matter. His character of admiring Kena, Ziki, her girlfriend also speaks to a society that normalizes certain toxic ways of being masculine. Its

normalizing toxic masculinity, whereby, men get away with anything, and women are supposed to put up with it. Just like Kena's mother, whose husband has left her for another woman, she stays there expecting him to come back.

The title of the film is undoubtedly of significance to its focus and goals. Kena and Ziki start off as friends. One would then argue that, it was after Ziki and her friends tried to pluck off Mr. Mwaura's posters at minute 13:15, that's how it started. Remember, the enmity was between their father, being political rivalry thus the confrontation but one would notice that, when Kena got to where Ziki was, everything changed, the rage disappeared, they were all staring at each other with hidden admiration. In many cultures, translation of words usually distorts the meaning as stated by de Groot (1992). In the Kenyan context, the word *rafiki* loosely translates to friend, but, the Swahili version in the Kenyan context, refers to more than friendship. In Kenyan context, the word *rafiki* loosely translates to people who are in love rather than just friends. For example, in the Kenyan culture, when a woman finds their partner and they wish to introduce them to their parents, they would call them, a *rafiki*. Then the parent will know what they are referring to.

The art of bilingualism whereby there is frequent use of both Swahili and English language. This enables the film to be located in the Kenyan context, to make it natural. Swahili is the national language of Kenya and it's spoken by everybody.

4.4.5 Fluidity of Identities: Departures and Journeys

Another key theme emerging is the proposition of multiple, shifting and resistant identities and practices. This theme is elaborated visually in the film through scenes of mobility and journeying. We see Ziki and Kena escaping to a new environment through a motorized rickshaw 28:26. This image speaks to a motif of journeying which is something that this society does not allow people to do. The society wants people to be stuck, and this is both materially and symbolically as the film has illustrated the 'stuckness' around particular notions of gender and sexuality as well as family and other ways of living. Kena and Ziki are represented in the film as trying to escape this immobility. The film highlights how they want to explore places, they want to move, a gesture to their desire to get out of this conservative society. This motif of moving or journeying is strongly associated with the negotiation of new identities, because when you move, when you embark on a journey, you discover new things, you discover your other self. The idea of getting out of a particular space to another, it's the journey that allows them to discover themselves, the journey takes them out of this restrictive environment, it gets them to a space where they are free, they connect and they actually have an opportunity to construct their own world on their own terms. Going away is also metaphorical in the sense that, it's not only a literal journey, it's an escape, because they have to get away from the things that limit them, for them to realize who they are. It's so ironical that the driver of the rickshaw is a woman, something that such a society does not celebrate. This highlights the filmmaker's idea of destabilizing societal norms and empowering the marginalized in the Kenyan society.



Figure 8: Image of Kena, Ziki and the Rickshaw driver from the film Rafiki.

It is notable that Ziki’s blouse in this scene is emblazoned with the words “bad news”, suggesting a destabilization of norm that she announces through her clothing. Queer identities and performance in general, are associated with radicalization of existing norms, a radical departure, a questioning, a queering of what is known and a celebration of what is considered other and “abnormal”. Ziki and Kena embody such features with pride. No one would want such inscriptions on their t-shirts especially in the conservative Kenyan society where they live, but Ziki adorns this t-shirt unapologetically. In this way the t-shirt and other forms of queering are celebrating that which the society considers non-normative. The R ’n’ B and hip hop kind of music that plays in the scene and elsewhere? It also speaks to the affection that they have towards each other. It enhances the normalization, naturalness and joy of lesbian and other non-binary relationships and identities in this particular society.



Figure 9: Image of Kena and Ziki from the film Rafiki.

4.4.6 Lesbian Desire

In a heteronormative society, there is a rigid deterministic set of relationships between sex, gender and sexuality as so well argued by Judith Butler (1999). Thus, people tend to assume that sexual desire is a binary following from binary gender, so that a man's sexual desire will be assumed as 'naturally' directed at women and vice versa. Feminist and queer scholars have foregrounded the fluidity of desire, gender and sexuality. The representation of lesbian desire in the film is therefore really important for disrupting heteronormativity. The emotional and sexual connection is portrayed as very strong and positive between Kena and Ziki. The film therefore disrupts the pathologizing of non-heteronormative desire and intimacy.

Kena's mother notices that her daughter is 'different'. She notices the glow on her face and quickly associates it with Kena having finally found someone, a boy or a man at minute 22:20. This speaks to the society's patriarchal construction that associate's happiness with finding a partner of a different gender. Kena is visibly excited and looks like someone who has found fulfilment. The happiness, glow and sense of fulfillment on Kena's face speaks to the fact that she is in love and that is a 'natural' and 'normal' response. In this way the film succeeds in normalizing and naturalizing lesbian identities, desire and intimacies.

The pillow that Kena holds is used to symbolize Ziki and one can see Kena embracing the pillow with a wide smile on her face at minute 27:22. The sense of wholesome, healthy and vibrant love between two women therefore disrupts the negative, pathologizing narratives on lesbians that continue to hold fast in Kenyan and many other societies.

The film's style of deliberately not wanting to name things, to emphasize on fluidity of identity, is reflected in Kena and Ziki not stating their identity using a term such as "lesbian". "People need many things". These things have no names. In the scene, where Ziki says, do you want to do something? At minute 21:20, it speaks to constructionism and performativity of gender. By something, it means, it's not yet known what it is, they want to do. This suggest that identity is not given, that is to mean, we get it from the actual things that we do. So, when Kena and Ziki meet, they have no idea what they want to do with each other. They have to start figuring it out between themselves and in the process, they are constructing themselves, even if they do not have a language to express this desire. That is to mean, these identities are not given but rather, they are constructed through experiences which is what is suggested by Butler (1999). That's why they call it, something. Then Kena says, a soda. They in short, were exploring new ways of being. The soda is symbolic. It's an object around which they construct their gender identities. While they try to figure out or construct their identity, the soda idea (sharing a soda) is what allows the conversation to take place. That is to mean, the identities are formed over the idea of soda and of drinking or spending time together. It as well acts as a medium for these identities to be constructed or performed. They both desire something real, which then suggests, that whatever exists is not real. So, they want to create another world, a real world, for themselves. It also points out to the fact that reality is not given, they had to create their own reality in this society. Many times, we think, when something is real, it's given but, in this particular context, it

speaks to contesting reality and creating their own. The film thus highlights the need to appreciate and recognize other identities.

4.4.7 Politics and Transnationalism

A further theme emerging, or perhaps a political strategy deployed in and through the film, is its identity as a multinational production which has the possibilities of drawing international attention to the politics of LGBTIQ+ in Kenyan contexts at minute 00:43. The multinational production companies address the internationalization of the Kenya lesbian story, making them visible despite the rule of law. Ideally, this story was made for the Kenyan audience but the presence of these particular characters who identify as sexual minorities made it fit for global consumption. This then means, that, a Kenyan story is no longer just a Kenyan story, but a global story. The outside world can live the story, from the lens of Kena and Ziki.

The other aspect of multinationalism in the film *Rafiki* would be to help in both production and distribution while also importantly bringing an international lens to Kenya and its particular legal situation, since homosexuality is considered a crime in Kenya. The presence of the multinational team helps Kahiu and the crew navigate different spaces and power dynamics together with the characters in pre-production, production, post-production, distribution and marketing which also points out the expertise and financial input that the different companies bring on board as stated in the interview by Wanuri Kahiu (BUILD Series, 2019). This outcome however also clearly shows that the Kenya film industry has no support when it comes to the production of LGBTQ+. Multinational production is also a feature of modern-day commercial enterprises that for purposes of globalization, international companies play a big role in marketing and enabling the film to be ranked on global standards. Lastly, this aspect also highlighted domestic challenges as it soon became evident that the film could not be screened locally. It there raised awareness of the legal restrictions in Kenya including the ban on LGBTQ+ films from being screened in Kenya, so, and how the makers had to screen the film via an international agency for it to have any public life at all.



Figure 11: Image showing production companies involved in the film *Rafiki*

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed how lesbian subjectivities in the film *Rafiki* reproduced and challenged dominant representations and has also answered the question of how lesbian subjectivities are represented in the film *Rafiki* as well as the role the film plays in their representation. In particular the chapter has illustrated how the film surfaces a range of problematic practices in Kenyan society that intersect with the othering of lesbian and other non-normative sexualities and gender. The film not only surfaces problematic aspects of the society such as class hierarchies, dogmatic cultural and religious traditions, and double standards, but it also disrupts erasure and silencing of lesbian sexual desire, identity and relationship. The film further represents lesbian identities and relationships as positive, healthy and joyful which disrupts the dominant negative and stigmatizing portrayals of such identities and practices.

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Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

Sandwiched between the 2010 Kenyan constitution that protects human rights and structural social norms that go against it, I argue that existence of black Kenyan lesbians in films foresees a continued potential for rebellion and change. Focusing on the narratives of difference that position sexual minorities, in this case, black Kenyan lesbians as Other, this study interrogated how they are depicted in the film *Rafiki* and the role it played in their visibility and re-representation. The film *Rafiki* examines women's erotic and affective relationships by documenting Ziki's relationship with Kena, and more broadly explores and challenges societal and cultural norms around homosexuality. The film *Rafiki* has addressed various concepts and themes within the broader field of gender and sexuality and in terms of gender and sexual justice goals in Kenya and globally. Among the key themes that I summarize in this section include: religious and double standards, intersectionalities of power inequalities and privileges, visibility of lesbian subjectivities, sexualities and relationships, cultural and social norms, fluidity of identities as well as politics and transnationalism.

5.2 Summary of key emerging themes

A key theme emerging in the film is the role of religion in perpetrating homophobia and homophobic violence towards sexual minorities in the Kenyan society. This is supported by evidence from the various scenes in the film *Rafiki* such as the church scene where the priest is condemning homosexuality, homophobic attack towards Kena and Ziki by the "Christian" society as well violence towards the gay man in the film. The film also surfaces as I have highlighted in the analysis, the double standards among religious leaders and religious practices. Religious leaders and role models are at the forefront of practicing impunity and compromising on religious values while at the same time condemning homosexuality. The study also draws on literature that argues such religious laws and practices against homosexuality are a colonial imposition thus flagging the need for decolonization (Tamale 2011).

The study also highlights the importance of intersectionalities of power and privilege as a key emerging theme in the film and of relevance in thinking about the representation of non-heteronormative identities. To address how lesbian subjects are represented on screen, the study applied an intersectional approach that draws on the theoretical work of feminist scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) and Yuval-Davis (2016). This approach enabled the study to illuminate the diverse angles of marginalization that lesbian women may face navigating the space and think through how to respond to their needs. An intersectional approach in this context has not only helped the study to figure out how lesbian subjectivities are represented in the film *Rafiki*, but also, how they are shown to be a (un)privileged differently as result of other forms of inequality, and how privileges can be used to their advantage. The film does very well in highlighting these multiple intersectionalities. In the film *Rafiki*, both Kena and Ziki articulate a range of different identities being women, black, classed, aged, lesbians. This means that they

might/will face oppression differently on the basis of the nuanced intersections of different aspects of their identity.

I have also illustrated in the study how cultural and social norms and narratives are deployed to bolster heteronormativity and the double standards that persist in society in respect of transgressing social norms has also been exposed in the film. The film surfaces how the society is constructed within a binary spectrum making it difficult for sexual and gender minorities to thrive. This is evidenced in the way they socialize, in their language, their dressing, among others although lesbian subjectivities in the film *Rafiki* disrupt these normative ways.

The analysis of the film has explored the representation of gender and sexual identities as fluid and shifting. This is achieved through a metaphor of departures and journeys. It is further enabled through the language used by both Kena and Ziki in describing their feelings towards each other as well as their sense of dress. This image of fluidity is arguably especially important for challenging homophobia and rigid gender binaries that underpin homophobia. The film is further successful in portraying lesbian desire as 'natural' and positive, which disrupts the pathologizing of non-heteronormative intimacy. Transnationalism as strategy used in the film *Rafiki* also plays a role in increasing the positive visibility of lesbian subjectivities especially to the global spectrum.

The study has argued the importance of the visibility of lesbian subjectivities, sexualities and relationships to challenge social erasure which emerges as a key theme in the analysis of the film. In this respect, cinema emerges as a medium through which the lesbian community in Kenya are using to gain greater visibility and challenge negative stereotyping and othering. It is however important to note that the film *Rafiki* captures both the continued othering and marginalizing practices against lesbians while also making visible a positive representation.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

The key limitation of this study is that only one film was analyzed which means the generalizability of findings is limited. Further case studies would have allowed the study to compare and contrast and to see what other sorts of themes emerge to answer the research questions.

The report also draws from online materials which is also a potential limitation. It would be helpful to interview the cast, the crew and the citizens of the country in context. That will have given the research more in-depth data to answer the research questions on how lesbian subjectivities are represented in contemporary Kenyan films and how their representation disrupts normative ways through films.

5.4 Strengths of the Study

This study contributes to a dimension of knowledge on social arrangements, beliefs and practices that merge in the construction and performance of gender as explored by Butler (1999). This

study as well furthers literature on how lesbian subjectivities are othered in films drawing from a range of events and actions within the film *Rafiki* that help the study understand the interconnections among other forms of oppression against lesbian identities that have become institutionalized in our modern society.

5.5 Recommendations for further Study

I recommend further research on films in the global southern context that foreground marginalized identities..

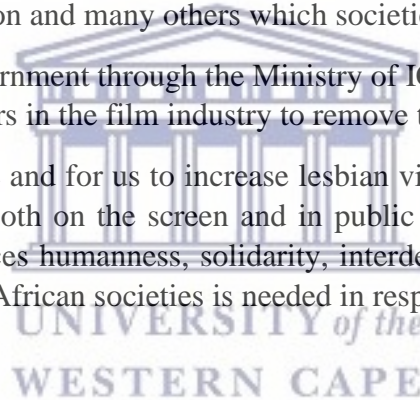
I also recommend further studies on different film genres that can best tell sexual minorities stories. I also welcome filmmakers to explore genres like documentary in which power lies almost exclusively with the characters as opposed to the filmmaker.

And just like Wanuri Kahiú did with the film *Rafiki*, there is need for more collaborations with international organizations especially in countries where homosexuality is illegal and LGBTQ+ content in films is banned. International organizations do come in hand to assist with production, funding and marketing of the film to the global market.

The other aspect is the need for filmmakers and the society at large to be educated on some of these problematic and incorrect notions such as homosexuality being ‘un-African’. This research has tried to deconstruct this notion and many others which societies still subscribe to.

I also call forth the Kenyan government through the Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs as well as the stakeholders in the film industry to remove the ban on LGBTQ+ films.

In order for there to be a change and for us to increase lesbian visibility on screen, there is need for a more radical movement, both on the screen and in public terrains. More inclusion of the guidance of Ubuntu that embraces humanness, solidarity, interdependence, compassion, respect and dignity that is promoted by African societies is needed in response to non-binary genders and sexualities as well.



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