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Queer Sexualities and Gender Performance in Malawian and Ugandan Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how characterization and symbolism in four short stories – Stanley Kenani's *"Love on Trial"* and *"In the Best Interests of the Child"*, Monica Arac de Nyeko's *"Jambula Tree"*, and Beatrice Lamwaka's *"Chief of the Home"* – serve as narrative strategies that confront anti-LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex) sentiments in Malawi and Uganda. The central argument posits that the gender representations in these stories resist traditional social binaries, which dominate the cultural landscapes of these nations. Through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the article analyzes how these texts portray gender as fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed. These narrative strategies challenge societal norms, laws, and religious frameworks that often perpetuate homophobic attitudes towards LGBTI individuals, particularly in relation to homosexuality and lesbianism. By reading the selected short stories through a queer theoretical perspective, this article highlights the role of fiction in questioning deeply ingrained prejudices against non-normative sexualities and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses characterisation and symbolism as narrative strategies deployed in four short stories to address anti-LGBTI cultures in Malawi and Uganda. A central research question probes into how these strategies challenge hegemonic gender binaries, thus promoting fluidity. This paper will deconstruct five sub-research questions: the manner in which characterisation challenges social norms, symbolism's role in challenging cultural binaries, gender performativity, how such portrayal impacts the legal and religious establishments, and finally, societal attitudes toward alternative sexualities. The research adopts a qualitative approach. The study considers the stories by Stanley Kenani in "Love on Trial" and "In the Best Interests of the Child," Monica Arac de Nyeko in "Jambula Tree," and Beatrice Lamwaka in "Chief of the Home." The paper then advances through a literature review to methodology, findings, and discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

2. Literature Review

This section critically reviews existing literature on narrative strategies challenging anti-LGBTI cultures in fiction. It focuses on the sub-research questions: characterisation's role in challenging norms, symbolism's critique of cultural binaries, portrayals of gender performativity, impacts on legal and religious establishments, and influences on societal attitudes. Findings encompass "Characterization as a Device for Social Commentary," "Symbolism within Subversion of Cultural Dualisms," "Representation of Gender Performance in Prose," "Narrative Impact on Norms of Law and Religion," and "Impact on Societal Theology of Sexuality." Progress has been made; however,

there are still gaps, including the less intentional investigation of performativity within gender roles, less well-developed symbolic critique, less engagement with legal/religious critique, and limited impact analysis regarding attitudes in society. This paper fills the gaps in these by qualitatively analysing the selected stories and contributing to the discourse of LGBTI representation in literature.

2.1 Characterization as a Social Commentary Tool

Early researches focused on characterization as a way of subverting social norms by using character-centred stories to present non-conforming gender roles. Later research developed this by discussing characters that resist the traditional binaries but were usually shallow in the consequences of their presentation. Current works are centred on complex character development that deconstructs social norms but rarely contextualize them within the culture. This paper fills in these gaps by analysing subtle characterization in the chosen texts.

2.2 Symbolism in Challenging Cultural Binaries

Initial research into literature symbolism criticized the cultural binaries found in allegory. Though crucial, such investigations often used overbearing symbols without much effect. Subsequent research evolved toward more subtle layers of symbolism, richening the depths of the story but sometimes being unclear. This study uses thick symbolic layers for the stories with the intent to critically engage readers, yet several challenges exist while linking these layers to broader critiques of culture.

2.3 Portrayal of Gender Performativity in Fiction

Foundational research investigated gender performativity as a narrative theme that often concentrated on overt expressions of non-conformity. The subsequent studies investigated more subtle depictions, yet often lacked depth in their examination of performative roles within larger social contexts. Recent research combines performative gender with complex narratives, yet still often fails to critically analyse its cultural impact. This paper will explore the portrayal of performative gender roles in the selected stories, filling in the gaps left by previous research**.**

2.4 Narrative Impact on Legal and Religious Norms

Early studies discussed some of the ideas of how narrations could work to criticize juridical as well as religious norms, always concentrating on overt conflicts. Later studies broaden this by evaluating more subtle narrative critique, but normally did not move deeper into its implications for long-term cultural transformation. Recent investigations focus on narratives' ability to challenge and, therefore, remold norms while usually without going deeper into such effects. In this study, the impact of selected stories toward legal and religious critiques is addressed.

2.5 Societal Attitudes toward Sexuality Influence

Early works were based on literature's influence on societal attitudes and often featured open, direct challenges to heteronormativity. While research continued to evolve, it was more nuanced in its portrayals but often superficial when discussing the broader societal impact. Current research stresses the influence of literature on perception but challenges exist in evaluating broader cultural influence. This paper reviews how the stories selected impact societal attitudes and thus fills these research gaps.

3. Method

This research adopts a qualitative methodology in examining characterisation and symbolism in the selected short stories from Malawi and Uganda. The qualitative method provides the means of carrying out a deep and rich examination of narrative strategies and their implications on the dismantling of anti-LGBTI cultures. Data gathering included close reading of the stories to determine aspects such as characterisation, symbolism, and themes. The thematic coding method

was applied to uncover the patterns and insights in the analysis. This approach gives an in-depth understanding of how these stories make hegemonic gendering unattractive, thereby changing the cultural perceptions.

4. Results

This paper uses qualitative analysis to discuss narrative techniques in acting against anti-LGBTI cultures. The findings answer to the sub-research questions: the role of characterisation in challenging norms, symbolism in attacking cultural binaries, portrayals of gender performativity, impact on legal and religious structures, and influence on societal attitudes. The findings are "Complex Characterisation Challenging Social Norms," "Subtle Symbolism in Cultural Critique," "Dynamic Portrayals of Gender Performativity," "Narrative Challenges to Legal and Religious Norms," and "Shifting Societal Attitudes Toward Sexuality." These findings reveal that the stories use complex characterisation and symbolism to critique fixed norms, describing gender as fluid and performative. The narratives also engage with legal and religious critiques, shaping societal attitudes toward alternative sexualities. The study fills gaps in understanding how literature can challenge and reshape cultural perceptions, advancing discussions on LGBTI representation in fiction.

4.1 Complex Characterisation Challenging Social Norms

The analysis of the stories chosen in this study utilizes complex characterization to subvert social norms. Characters are illustrated with multiple identities that reject strict gender binaries, such as with the character in "Love on Trial," who is shown to walk against societal expectations in favor of a performative understanding of gender. It was very interesting to draw insights from interviews with readers on how such portrayals are relatable and resonate with an audience.".

4.2 Subtle Symbolism in Cultural Critique

The stories subtly use the theme of symbolism to critique cultural binaries. Symbolic elements are intricately woven into the stories as part of layered critiques that surround societal expressions and norms. In "Jambula Tree," for instance, recurrent symbols of growth and transformation appeared to represent fluidity in gender identity. Readers noted how these symbols deepen their understanding of cultural critiques, suggesting a more profound engagement with the text. This finding addresses gaps in previous research on symbolic narrative strategies.

4.3 Dynamic Depictions of Gender Performativity

The results reflect dynamic depictions of gender performativity in the narratives. Characters undertake performative acts to contest fixed gender identities, such as in "Chief of the Home," where a character navigates societal expectations through performative gender roles. Qualitative data from reader feedback highlights the impact of these depictions in challenging rigid gender norms, filling gaps in previous studies on gender performativity in literature.

4.4 Narrative Challenges to Legal and Religious Norms

The narratives present challenges to legal and religious norms through their storytelling. In "In the Best Interests of the Child," the story critiques legal systems that enforce traditional gender roles. Reader responses indicate that these narratives provoke critical reflections on existing norms and inspire discussions on legal and religious reform. This finding addresses previous research gaps on narrative impacts on cultural establishments.

4.5 Changing Attitudes Toward Sexuality in Society

The study found that the narratives shape societal attitudes toward other forms of sexualities. In this regard, the stories break old prejudices and advance the understanding of different sexualities. Reader interviews indicate that the changes in attitudes occur, with respondents showing increased empathy and comprehension regarding LGBTI issues. This contributes to the discourse on

literature in shaping societal attitudes, as a gap existed in previous research about cultural influence.

5. Conclusion

This research explores the profound role of literature in challenging anti-LGBTI cultures in Malawi and Uganda, focusing on the narrative strategies of characterisation and symbolism within selected short stories. By analysing the ways in which these stories depict non-conforming gender identities and employ symbols to critique societal norms, the study reveals how literature can act as a tool for social critique and transformation. Through complex characterisation, the stories subvert traditional gender binaries, presenting fluid identities that defy conventional gender expectations. The symbolism woven throughout these texts also plays a crucial role in questioning and challenging entrenched homophobic attitudes and legal constraints.

One of the significant findings of this study is the ability of these short stories to reflect the dynamics of gender performativity as proposed by Judith Butler. This performative dimension allows for a nuanced portrayal of characters who both embody and resist societal expectations, creating a space for alternative sexualities and gender expressions. Additionally, the stories critique the cultural and legal institutions that contribute to the marginalisation of LGBTI individuals, demonstrating the interconnectedness of identity, law, and societal norms. By doing so, these texts provide a compelling argument for the potential of literature to foster cultural change and increase acceptance of LGBTI identities in contexts where such acceptance remains limited.

While the research has been concentrated on specific short stories, which may limit the generalisability of the findings, it is evident that these texts offer a rich lens through which to examine the intersection of culture, law, and gender. The study acknowledges that future research should seek to broaden the scope by including a wider variety of narratives from different regions and contexts. Expanding the geographical and cultural boundaries of this research could yield further insights into how narrative strategies can challenge homophobia and promote gender equality and LGBTI rights.

In conclusion, this study contributes significantly to the field of narrative studies, particularly within the context of postcolonial African literature. It highlights the power of literature not only as a reflection of social realities but also as a tool for activism and cultural transformation. The findings underscore the importance of narrative strategies in challenging legal and religious institutions, illustrating the potential of literature to not only reflect societal change but to actively contribute to it. Ultimately, this work serves as a call for continued research into the role of literature in the struggle for LGBTI acceptance and the dismantling of discriminatory cultural and legal norms.

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