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Sex Outlaws: Challenges to Homophobia in Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ and Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’

Abstract This paper examines Malawian writer Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ and Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’ as entries in a growing field of literature that attempts to define a restorative queer aesthetic. Employing Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, the examination aims at unravelling multiple narrative voices regarding homosexuality within the narratives. The discussion illustrates how the authors simultaneously highlight the instability of homophobia in the contexts of the stories, as well as the existence of multiple perspectives challenging the dominant homophobic rhetoric.

Keywords: Bakhtin, heteroglossia, homosexuality, Caine Prize, African short story

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Sex Outlaws: Challenges to Homophobia in Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ and Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’

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Introduction: Politics of the Caine Prize

Using Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ (2012)¹ and Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’ (2009),² this paper examines the manner in which both authors handle the contentious issue of homoerotic desire in their stories. The paper argues that the two authors’ treatment of alternative sexualities in their stories is evidence of commendable efforts at challenging negative attitudes towards homosexuality on the continent. Further, through their handling of multiple narrative voices, the authors illustrate how the dissemination of stories based on insufficient knowledge can have detrimental effects on human life.

In one of the earliest analyses of homosexuality in African novels, Chris Dunton observes that in most of these texts, ‘homosexual practice is almost invariably attributed to the detrimental impact made on Africa by the West’.³ In many parts of the continent, homosexuality is assumed to be a Western import, highly unusual and undesirable by the black people. It is deemed one of the legacies of colonialism. Few ever pause to consider other daily behavioural practices that could

equally be placed under the same class. A potential complication arises when we consider, as Desiree Lewis does, that ‘colonialists believed that Africans were less than human or uncivilised, and so could not possibly be anything but heterosexual’.\(^4\) The logical interpretation of this statement is that, to the colonialist mind, homosexuality was considered a sign of advanced humanity, a display of ‘sophisticated desires’.\(^5\) African writers have provided a mirror of their societies, highlighting the prevalent attitudes existing therein. However, in contemporary Africa the terrain is not as monochromatic as some would believe. That is why, in some recent texts, ‘homosexual subject matter is utilized in a more complex, though not necessarily more sympathetic manner’.\(^6\) Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ and Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’ are attempts to challenge the observation that African writers have greeted the practice of homosexuality ‘with a sustained outburst of silence’\(^7\). With their focus on sexuality, these writers fall within a contemporary cadre of artists on the continent who address the subject of homoerotic desire in their work, including Calixthe Beyala, Rebecca Njau and Mark Behr, K. Sello Duiker and Jude Dibia to mention a few. In these stories, homoerotic desire is a central theme, not just a peripherally addressed subject. Both of these stories are therefore acts of defiance, as examples of the literary subtleties that ‘believe the stereotype of a timelessly heterosexual and homophobic Africa’.\(^8\) Particularly interesting is the way in which the writers challenge the assertion of homosexuality as un-African, through


\(^{5}\) Lewis, ‘Representing African Sexualities’, p. 207.

\(^{6}\) Dunton, ‘Wheyting be Dat?’, p. 422.

\(^{7}\) Dunton, ‘Wheyting be Dat?’, p. 445.

their sentimental rendering of the characters, who have been deemed ‘sex outlaws’ in most African societies. Contrary to expectation, issues of neo-colonialism are accorded secondary priority in these narratives. This makes the writers’ endeavour a rather unique risk in a growing field.

Part of the reason these stories were selected for the present discussion is the fact that they have both been involved in the Caine Prize literary award, established in 1999. The award is ‘open to all African writers from whatever part of the continent’. Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’ is the 2007 Caine Prize winner, whereas Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ was nominated for the 2012 Caine Prize (won by Rotimi Babatunde). Given that these stories were selected out of hundreds of other published stories as representing African writing, their literary merit should be set in stone. The question inevitably arises however: were these stories nominated because they treat a topic that is contentious on the African continent? The online reaction to Kenani’s story appears to uphold that assumption. Most reviewers are in agreement that the story has very little literary merit, being a narrative which hardly deserves the tag ‘short story,’ and should instead be read as ‘a morality fable aimed at winning votes’, a ‘cringe-worthy tale; preachy social

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commentary roaring into town wearing the unctuous toga of a short story\textsuperscript{12} as well as a ‘blatantly issue-led’ narrative that was most likely selected because it tackles ‘the darling issue of the Western middle class’.\textsuperscript{13} The reception to ‘Jambula Tree’ is not as acidic. It is generally held as a piece of admirable writing. Particularly interesting is the subtlety with which the issue of lesbian desire is handled in the story, since the writing style has priority over any political message that the author puts across.

As some of the comments above should indicate, the Caine Prize is not without its critics. One of the most scathing pieces of criticism levelled against it is Dobrota Pucherová’s “A Continent Learns to Tell its Story at Last”: Notes on the Caine Prize’ (2012), where she levels interesting critiques against the awarding of the prize, and the way in which it is hardly representative of African writing. For instance, the critic takes issue with the fact that the criteria for judging the stories are not made public.\textsuperscript{14} She further notes that ‘many Caine finalists seem to reproduce’ stereotypical depictions of Africa probably as a way of targeting the literary tastes of the Western-educated judges of the prize.\textsuperscript{15}\textsuperscript{16} Do Kenani and Arac de Nyeko pander to this tradition? Although both authors deny writing their stories with the Caine Prize

\textsuperscript{15} Pucherová, ‘A Continent learns to Tell its Story at Last’, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{16} Lizzy Attree, the current administrator of the Caine Prize, has responded to these allegations through an article: ‘The Caine Prize and Contemporary African Writing’ Research in African Literatures, 44. 2 (2013), 35-47.
in mind,\(^\text{17}\) the content of the stories themselves may provide more insight regarding the matter, since the West is evoked within them. One is tempted, however, to consider the possibility that the authors realise the potentially explosive nature of their topic, and thus use it in full knowledge that their risqué subject may garner them applause from the West.

**A ‘homophobia of poverty’: Love on Trial**

Kenani's ‘Love on Trial’ is written in a humourist mode that pokes fun at unquestioning Christian faith and also criticises the West for attempting to regulate the fates of developing nations through the withholding of donor aid. Although the story is perfectly enjoyable on its own, one's appreciation of the narrative is heightened by familiarity with the Malawian context which clearly informs the author's plot. The story taps on events that occurred in Malawi towards the end of 2009. The small African country was put on the international map due to the imprisoning of two young men who had defied both national law and common religious practice by publicly declaring their homosexual relationship through the holding of a colourful engagement ceremony.\(^\text{18}\) The publicly displayed relationship attracted a lot of condemnation from religious and political quarters in the country, who agreed in describing homosexuality as abhorrent. Given a fourteen year sentence, the two were kept behind bars for a short while, a period during which then President Bingu wa Mutharika also declared his position in opposition to homosexual practice, in the


face of condemnation from the West for failure to respect basic human rights. It took
the intervention of the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, for the president to
finally pardon the two individuals, albeit with a warning not to repeat their ‘mistake’.

‘Love on Trial’ draws from this slice of history, but modifies various aspects of
the story in order to create a narrative that is memorable both for its characters as
well as for the satirical handling of an issue that remains sensitive in most parts of
the continent. Indeed the representation of homosexuality remains a tricky exercise
in Africa, ‘especially with how non-Western and precolonial subjectivities and
practices can be understood within the framework of concepts, languages and
conventions that assume or prioritise modernity and Western-centric assumptions’.

Stanley Kenani does not paint a black and white picture of pro or anti-homosexual
opinion. Instead, his style in crafting the story is a subtle and teasing method of using
multiple narrative voices to create a single story, a strategy which does not always
work, as the story comes across to some as a ‘morality fable’. The news of
homosexuality in the small village of Chipiri is revealed through the character of
Kachingwe, a local drunk who is nevertheless clever enough to use his
loquaciousness to his advantage, luring people who want to hear of his encounter
with a homosexual couple in the midst of coitus. This is where the main story
emerges, told from the perspective of this not-so-reliable narrator. Kachingwe only
serves to start the story, however. The rest of the narrative is elicited from various
media outlets as the story of the homosexual couple gains national, and eventually,
international interest.

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20 Partington, ‘A Quick Response to “Love on Trial” by Stanley Kenani - the third of the shortlisted
Caine Prize Stories’.
The author’s handling of multiple narratives is a move that permits the recognition of multiple perspectives regarding homosexual desire in a land that claims to be against it. Although the loudest rhetoric in Malawi is against homosexuality, the author highlights the fact that the homophobic stance is not as unanimous as some would claim. Furthermore, the story highlights the fragile bases on which this homophobia is constructed. A helpful way to understand the weaving of multiple perspectives into the story is to employ Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia.

In his highly influential essay, ‘Discourse in the Novel,’ Bakhtin highlights the dialogical interplay of multiple voices in the text:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the side-lines.21 Bakhtin argues that in the multiple utterances directed towards an object, some can indeed be contradictory opinions, and these can all be captured in the author’s final utterance. Much of the narrative regarding homosexuality in the story is teased out through the attention accorded to Charles by various media. In the story, one can identify up to seven narrative sources, all of them important in either upholding popular sentiment against homosexuality, or serving as voices that destabilise such prejudiced opinion. As Bakhtin argues, ‘the intentions of the prose writer are refracted, and refracted at different angles,’ depending on the degree to which the

refracted, heteroglot languages he deals with are socio-ideologically alien, already embodied and already objectified'. These narrative voices include the narrator, who appears to be from the same village as the central characters; Mr Lapani Kachingwe, the village drunk; Charles Chikwanje, the victim and self-identified homosexual person in the narrative; the local news media (including local newspapers, radio stations, and television station); the international community and the news houses that represent them; the religious fraternity; and the crowds, who mostly ride on waves of popular opinion. This paper, however, focuses mainly on some of these narrative voices, highlighting how they overlap, interact, contradict, and challenge each other in the course of the story.

The unidentified narrator of the story is a mere observer, and does not get directly involved in the events. However, this narrator nevertheless gives the sense of being very familiar with the everyday occurrences of Chipiri village. His descriptions of Mr Kachingwe’s antics, for instance, have a tone that reveals familiarity with the man. The use of the present tense in some passages gives the illusion of the narrator’s presence and proximity to the characters and events. Nevertheless, he remains uninvolved.

Mr Kachingwe’s voice, on the other hand, is the first explicit narrative voice that the reader encounters. His is a metadiegetic narrative, detailing a second story within the one that the nameless narrator is telling. This second-order narrative is incidentally the one that the whole story is about. Kachingwe is a crafty character, for whom the narrative is simply a means to an end. To him, this narrative is a way of getting free alcohol. He simply baits his listeners with the promise of an exciting narrative about ‘the time he stumbled upon two young men… in flagrante’ (Kenani, p.

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49). Although he fancies himself an excellent narrator, who ‘prefers to begin from the beginning,’ (Kenani, p. 50) in the end, ‘nobody ever finds out what the …details are in Mr Kachingwe’s story’ (Kenani, p. 49). The specifics of this intimate scene, which the listeners are interested in, in a curious voyeuristic desire, thankfully never emerge. Kachingwe always becomes too inebriated to coherently narrate his tale. He essentially uses the story to move himself from the periphery to the centre of the story. The subject of homosexual desire is not of much interest to him, as he simply enjoys the attention he gets as the source of the story, and the money that he charges to grant interviews to reporters. The pinnacle of his newfound fame is no doubt his image ‘on the centre spread of both leading newspapers, tot in hand, with the tiny grass-thatched huts of Chipiri in the background’ (Kenani, p. 52). As a character, at least in the earlier part of the story, Kachingwe cuts a rather colourful figure, bringing some humour through his crafty ways of siphoning money for alcohol out of unsuspecting listeners, as well as his quipping of elementary Civics as defence for spreading the story. It is no surprise therefore that he claims the spotlight when his story gains a wider audience. However, without any alcohol to fuel his narrative skills, ‘Mr Kachingwe is a shy man, so he fails to explain more, repeats himself over and over, and trembles intensely due to delirium tremens, the DTs’ (Kenani, p. 55). In the end, he is a rather tragic figure, as the story suggests he is heading towards his death, having contracted HIV, a potentially problematic twist, as I illustrate presently.

One of the reasons why ‘Love on Trial’ could be described as being a disservice to the representation of same-sex love is through the way Kenani handles the source of the story – Kachingwe. The author’s handling of this narrator is interesting in the sense that Kachingwe has authority only when he is taken as the
sole source for the story of sexual deviance, in the eyes of the majority of the people. At the start of the story, he is the only character with narrative agency, which is translated into material benefits in the form of money for alcohol and food. However, once he loses credibility, his fortunes simultaneously change for the worse. Through this source, a well-known drunk whose breath reeks of a ‘strong odour of alcohol’ (Kenani, p. 50), Kenani unwittingly appears to endorse homosexual desire as something that originates in filth. This is entrenched by the fact that the lovers are discovered in a position of intimacy in a latrine, leading blogger Ikhide R. Ikheloa to quip, ‘In the West gays come out of the closet, in Africa, they are outed screaming and kicking from stinking latrines’. There is no trace of decency attached to homosexuality. It is discovered in a latrine, by an inebriated buffoon, and the story gains currency in a beer hall, through rumour. Kachingwe’s contracting of HIV may be intended as a form of punishment for his reckless dissemination of the rumour, but it also comes across as a way of further tainting the source of the story. Through these associations, the author (unwittingly) invites moral judgement on his subject, presenting it as ‘deviant’ sexuality.

The other narrative voice that we encounter in ‘Love on Trial’ is the voice of the media. This can be divided into two: the local news media and the international news. The similarity in both of these groups is that they appear to feed on rumour and opinions of people they regard as authorities on sexuality. However, there are some interesting differences as well. The portrayal of the local media houses is, for the greater part, unflattering. Through these reporters, the mere ramblings of a village drunk become newsworthy material, giving to Kachingwe’s narrative an authenticity that it previously did not have. It is these media houses that wrest

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23 Ikheloa, ‘Caineprize - The Thirteenth Caine Prize Shortlist: Love on Trial’. 
narrative agency from Kachingwe, through their transforming of the narrative from beer-drinking oral form of entertainment to national broadcast news. They hound Charles and his family, asking ‘probing’ and ‘inconvenient questions’ (Kenani, p. 52).

Kenani’s most scathing attack is reserved for the national television station, MBC. The presenter of the television station, a Khama Mitengo, is presented as homophobe. His probing method betrays a self-fulfilling prophecy at the heart of his agenda, as his questions are backed by the statement ‘Malawi is a God-fearing nation,’ a truism that Charles reveals for its emptiness by cross-examining the reporter and illustrating that this often repeated statement is empty of practicality in a nation that has its share of sinful acts. As Charles asks,

> How much evil takes place at night? What happens behind closed doors of offices? What about in churches? Don’t we hear of sexual affairs between priests and their flock?’…

> …the collection of fourteen million individuals that make up Malawi cannot be termed God-fearing. Among the fourteen million there are rapists and murderers, corrupt government officials, thieves and those who sleep with goats. (Kenani, p. 59)

The mirror effect of the narrative emerges in the news personality’s character. Mitengo’s character is used by the author to illustrate homophobia as a trait displayed not only by the poor and uneducated in the country, whose opinions can be attributed to ignorance, but also by what may be termed the middle class. Indeed, it is possible for well-educated and well-informed people such as the television reporter to display such homophobic bias in their writing and speaking. This is seen from his utterances, through which he attempts to blame ‘Western ideologies’ and ‘tourists’ for homosexuality. Kenani also uses the reporter’s perspective to critique
attacks on homosexuality that refer to the Holy Bible as providing evidence against the practice.

Charles could perhaps be taken as Kenani’s attempt to give the marginalised a voice in the narrative. It is through such a character that Kenani joins a wave of writers for whom ‘diverse homosexual or bisexual characters facilitate a powerful critique both of contemporary African society and Western prescriptions about Africa’. As the homosexual subject, Charles faces a lot of hostility from his immediate community as well as other figures of authority in the country. Although the reader instinctively sympathises with Charles, he comes across as a smug know-it-all who has the entire world against him. As one reviewer points out, the character is ‘so dull and pretentious in his stilted legalese’. This character is used to counter several other voices in the text, including the country’s legal system and religious authorities. For example, when asked if he is not afraid of breaking the law, he responds, ‘If a law is designed to suppress freedom, then it is a stupid law and must be scrapped’ (Kenani, p. 53). The law in question, drawn from the country’s penal code, designates homosexuality as being ‘against the order of nature’.

As the interview with the television presenter illustrates, Charles’s reactions to religious attacks are equally astute, if not glib. Through his utterances, Kenani exposes the religious fraternity – ‘reverends, pastors, prophets and apostles, even bishops’ (Kenani, p. 53) – for their [limited] conceptualization of homosexuality as an affliction that requires prayer. The representative of this group, an Apostle Dr Njole Kaluzi, is

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26 ‘Penal Code, Ch. 7:01’ (Laws of Malawi, 1973a).
the first to utter the ‘Malawi is a God-fearing nation’ line (Kenani, p. 53), which eventually becomes a refrain and in the process loses any potency it may have initially had. The statements of the clergy in the story lack the persuasive force that colours Charles’s arguments. This is emphasised by Charles’s above-average grasp of the Holy Bible. However, the very qualities that add to Charles’s merit are the ones for which Kenani is criticised. One reviewer asks a pertinent question: ‘what happens if the main character isn’t a Law student and therefore capable of quoting and refuting?’ Kenani’s decision to make the homosexual character an intelligent Law student draws on a particular trope in African literature (the educated student from the village) but his decision to invest all these qualities in the character makes him an exception to the rule, not only of homosexual characters, but also of heterosexual ones. In other words, he is not exactly a representative character.

In the masses of the story, the villagers of Chipiri and the people who watch Charles’s television interview on Reach Out and Touch, Kenani articulates the voice of the Malawian masses. In their jeering, heckling and ululating of Charles’s presence on the television, Kenani captures not only the homophobic sentiments of most of the country’s citizens, but also highlights the limited information bases on which their opinions are formed. The fortunate point about such poorly formed opinions is that they are open to questioning with an increased access to information. Charles provides exactly that in the interview. His defence against the presenter’s attacks serves to shed light on the profound ignorance of the masses, who also employ religion as the basis for their anti-homosexuality stance. Their initial stance is one of condemnation of homosexuality, tossing slurs such as ‘Wamathanyula’

(Kenani, p. 55) at Charles and declaring him a ‘madman’ and an ‘evil man’ (Kenani, p. 55). What is evidenced by the masses here is what several Malawian scholars describe as ‘a homophobia of poverty’, an apt description for the ‘culture of religious fundamentalism and homophobia merged with traditional culture’. However, after hearing Charles’s responses, their ‘handclapping and cheering and whispering …seems to be more in favour of Charles’ (Kenani, p. 60). The fickle nature of these citizens is a space of hope for tolerance and accommodation of a minority that is reviled simply because it is not understood. The demonization of the homosexual individual here illustrates a knee-jerk response to the unfamiliar. Short stories like the present one have the potential to reflect that sad truth in the eyes of the masses.

The international news media, as the voice of the international donor community, complements the local reporting teams. The immediate contrast, however, is that the international media is not hostile to homosexuality. On the contrary, the media is the main force against the abuse of human rights manifested through Charles’s arrest. However, the author’s introduction of the international community also highlights the position of Malawi as a postcolonial nation, and therefore illustrates the nation’s illusion of sovereignty, and the subtle power that the Global North still wrests over developing nations. The international attention further broadens the reach of this narrative. Upon Charles’s arrest, ‘Britain is angry. America is annoyed. Norway is furious. France is outraged. Germany is livid’ (Kenani, p. 63).

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28 This is a particularly vile insult directed at homosexual men. The word is connected to matenyera ‘a chiNyanja word for a painful, smelly diarrhoea caused by worms’ Marc Epprecht, Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), p. 160.

Apart from Norway, all of these countries are former colonial centres, and as the story illustrates, they still hold sway over the former colony. This influence is further entrenched by the fact that the countries comprise Malawi’s main donor community.

From this moment, events in the story escalate in terms of how the crisis develops. Donor aid is halted, which results in scarcity of medicine in hospitals and shortage of fuel in the land. The resulting problems are many: ‘Teachers are protesting because their salaries have been delayed for four months. Inflation is rising…The government says it will not be in a position to distribute the subsidised fertilizer to poor subsistence farmers’ (Kenani, p. 64). At this point, ‘Love on Trial’ takes on a different tone, one which appears highlight the neo-colonialism that is defined by donor dependency. Much as homosexuality may not be a Western import, the donor community’s withholding of aid to the already poor African nation on the grounds of human rights abuses is open to an alternative reading – one which reads such action as a thinly veiled form of blackmail. On the one hand, the donor community appears to take the moral high ground by insisting on the respect of human rights. However, this moral correctness is rendered questionable by the pressure levelled against the African nation’s government.

In this turn, the story hints at what could be called the crisis of some postcolonial nations, the illusion of sovereignty that has infected most African countries. This illusion is carried through several of the narrators in the story, beginning with Kachingwe. His loss of ‘voice’ before the television cameras reveals the empty rhetoric with which he had regaled many a listener in his village. When the story slips beyond the borders of Chipiri village, it also slips from his hands. In the same way, a nation such as Malawi retains an illusion of authority within its borders. However, this control is revealed for the façade that it is once the nation is featured
as a player on the international field. That is why the words of the Minister of Information are eventually revealed as attractive but impractical rhetoric: ‘We will not be held to ransom by aid…Malawi is a sovereign state. Let them keep their aid, and we will keep our religious and cultural values’ (Kenani, p. 63). Kenani’s inclusion of the donor community highlights several factors. In the first place, as already pointed out, it reflects the neo-colonial relationship between the African nation and its former colonial centre. This relationship is characterised by a power dynamic that is not all too different from that of the colonial period. Secondly, the introduction of the donor community in this story drives home the point that no country exists as an independent, solitary nation, independent of other nations. The very form of the narrative reflects this idea: it expands from the limited space of Mr Nashoni’s Village Entertainment Centre, focused on the inebriated orator Kachingwe, and expands until the story belongs to the airwaves of the BBC. This form deliberately indicates porosity of national borders, and also questions the allegation that homosexuality is un-African.

What all these voices illustrate are the varied opinions that exist towards homosexuality, even in a country with a high level of homophobia such as Malawi. It reflects what Bakhtin observes about any subject of literature:

For the writer of artistic prose [...] the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgements. Instead of virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads, and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the
object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it.\textsuperscript{30}

With the object of utterance as the phenomenon of homosexuality, the Bakhtinian perspective permits the identification of alternative narratives beneath the homophobic one that appears to control the plot. Although the story does not have any real closure, it succeeds in destabilizing the certainty that people pretend to have regarding the criticism of homosexuality, but highlighting the instability of some of those allegedly entrenched positions.

A story like this one is important not just as entertainment. It illustrates the idea that literature can indeed be a mode of knowing. Where statistics, laws, religion and cold biological fact fail, the sentimental language of literature may just succeed in communicating what it is to be human. A story such as Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ is in effect a mirror that communicates a reflection that we may not like to see, since it graphically displays our failings and our hypocrisies. Anyone who reads this story can identify with at least one character within it, and then realise the complications emerging from such a position. For me, it highlights the myopia that emerges from staunchly sticking to a single ideological position and not making allowances for alternative voices. The story impressively conveys most of these positions, illustrating some of the contradictions inherent in particular stances.

**Sexuality and rebellion: Jambula Tree**

In Monica Arac de Nyeko’s Caine Prize winning story, ‘Jambula Tree,’ the narrative seems to advance the argument that ‘nonheterosexual relationships between women

[are] a means of rebellion that challenges patriarchy. This is due to the way the story strikes amazing binaries between the two lovers in the story on the one hand, and the rest of the women who are portrayed as trapped in a world where patriarchal authority determines their roles in life. This is more complex than it sounds, since the author captures a side-lined sector within an already liminal group in society. In other words, the women in the society portrayed in the story are already a marginalised group. Arac de Nyeko employs the two young women as a way of suggesting the possibility of rebellion within this ‘invisible’ group.

Like Kenani’s narrative, Arac de Nyeko’s story also draws from some aspects of real life. The rebellion staged by the girls in the story, as well as that one by the writer in introducing the taboo subject of homosexuality to the Ugandan literary space, mirrors the problems encountered by the real-life tenants of Nakawa Housing Estate. As Sofia Ahlberg points out,

Since December 2003, the real-life tenants of Nakawa Housing Estate have repeatedly been ordered to vacate as part of a re-development program between the private developer OPEC Prime Properties of the UK and the Ugandan government. The Nakawa Housing Estate residents will not be able to afford the increase in rent that is sure to follow the modernization and will very likely end up living on the streets of Kampala.

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It is thus significant that the writer locates a story of rebellion within this space. As the author admits in an interview: ‘the topic [of homosexuality], right now in Uganda, is still very contentious. It’s something the society is still grappling with’. The situation has not gotten any better. This is also reflected in creative works. As an illustration, in 2013 theatre director David Cecil was ‘deported from Uganda over a play depicting homosexuals’. Towards the end of 2012, the Ugandan parliament notoriously announced that it would pass the anti-homosexuality bill, with one of the proposed punishments for the ‘crime’ of homosexuality being life sentences. These glimpses at the situation on the ground illustrate how dangerous it is not only for homosexual individuals in Uganda, but also for artists who choose to make homoerotic desire the subject of their works.

Given the low tolerance for homosexuality in the country, Arac de Nyeko’s story emerges as an astounding act of rebellion, as ‘her concern with homosexual love […] testifies to her willingness to unveil what is mainly regarded as obscene and is consequently expunged from social discourse and literature’. The story is in a way a celebration of individuality, a way in which the narrator and her friend resist conforming to the expectations of their society, where they are doomed to become one of the ‘noisy, gossiping and frightening housewives’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 170). Against this fate, the story presents the two engaged in various acts of subtle

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rebellion, small gestures that point towards their free spirit and a desire to create a
destiny beyond the bounds of the estate. The narrator’s reminiscing of conversations
with her colleague captures this desire for more than what their environment offers
them: ‘You said it yourself, we could be anything. Anything coming from your mouth
was seasoned and alive’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 170). Such rebellion is also to be seen
in Sanyu’s confronting the school bully, Juma, after he assaults the narrator. It is one
of the moments when Sanyu ‘had broken the rules’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 174),
standing up to a boy.

Although one of the main subjects of the story is homoerotic desire, the author
skirts around the subject. She dwells on the reactions of people in the community, as
well as the daily activities of the women, rather than on this ‘shameful’ act. From the
glimpses presented in the story, however, it becomes clear that the ‘scandal’
involves the village gossip’s discovery of the two girls in the act of intimate caressing.
The skirting of the subject extends to the title of the story. There is something about
the desire for fruits that makes them apt symbols of rebellion. The biblical narrative
of creation places the consumption of forbidden fruit as mankind’s first act of
disobedience against their maker. The trope has consequently been adopted by
writers throughout history. Earlier in ‘Jambula Tree’ the narrator recalls a moment
when she and Sanyu discuss their future while in a mango tree, which is in itself a
significant act of rebellion since girls ‘were not allowed to climb trees, but we did, and
there, inside the green branches, you said – we can be anything’ (Arac de Nyeko, p.
170). This is the first instance in which Arac de Nyeko depicts fruit trees as affording
a private space for the two individuals. Particularly interesting is the way the desire
for the forbidden fruit emerges repeatedly in narratives of sexual desire. One classic
use of fruit to symbolize erotic desire is Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My
Name, where the narrator focuses on the avocado and banana fruits to symbolize both her ‘lesbian sexual identity [and] her Caribbean and African ancestry’. Similarly, Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy invests the image of the plum with multiple meanings. In the novel, the fruit ultimately signals lesbian desire. Arac de Nyeko draws on this tradition, equally realizing the richness of signification to be tapped from the jambula tree and its fruit. The tree is a place of discovery in the sense that it is the rendezvous for the two girls, but also the place where they are discovered by Mama Atim. Arac de Nyeko’s description of this tree symbolizes the union of the two girls. The tree is described as having ‘unreachable fruit’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 179). In the event that one does sample the fruit, its taste is ‘both sweet and tang’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 179). This bittersweet experience could describe the ill-fated union of the two lovers. Anyango actually employs the metaphor of the jambula fruit to describe her friend’s breasts (echoing her mother's memory of her own youthful breasts, ‘firm like green mangoes’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 176)): ‘I could not wait for the next holidays when I could see you again. When I could dare place my itchy hand onto your two jambulas’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 179). As Antje Lindenmeyer observes, ‘the suggestive shapes and textures of fruit lend themselves very easily’ to metaphorization of sexuality, something Arac de Nyeko clearly realizes and exploits. It is in this fashion that ‘fruit, both seductive and dangerous, […] become interchangeable with the female body’. But in this case, Arac de Nyeko appears to suggest the futility of ever acquiring the fruit, which remain ‘unreachable’. The only available path of expression therefore becomes the written text, the final and most enduring act of rebellion: ‘[t]he only shelter available to [Sanyu and Anyango] is the

act of writing, as Anyango’s moving letter to Sanyu testifies. Only words escape demolition’. Through both Arac de Nyeko’s and Sanyu’s acts of creativity, therefore, ‘writing [becomes] a site of potentiality for the emergence of sexual expression by women: in particular, of the expression of forms of love between women, for the emergence, that is, of a poetics of queerness’. This point establishes the fact of multiple levels of narrative within the story. There is, first and foremost, the story that Anyango is telling, which appears to be a letter she is writing to her friend. But within this story are contained other narrators, including the loquacious figure of Mama Atim.

In his essay, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, Bakhtin argues that in the prose work, the ‘languages of heteroglossia [can] contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically’. In other words, within a single narrative, there is the possibility of encountering multiple, and indeed opposing, narratives regarding a single subject, or situation. In Arac de Nyeko’s story, this opposition is captured through the opposition between the main narrator and the secondary, unreliable, narrator. Like Kenani’s Kachingwe, Arac de Nyeko’s story finds this unreliable narrator in the person of Mama Atim. Another interesting similarity between the two stories is that both writers choose to depict the ‘discovery’ or ‘outing’ of the lovers in scenes of intimacy. As sources of the stories, therefore, Mama Atim and Kachingwe draw authority from the fact that they witness private moments of intimacy. In this story, the character of Mama Atim is important not only due to the narrative function she serves, disseminating the story of the two lovers, but also because she is one of the many

38 Ahlberg, ‘Women and war in contemporary love stories from Uganda and Nigeria’, p. 412.
representatives of the ‘proper’ role that the female is supposed to play in this community. Ironically, it is Mama Atim, a female character, who draws the reader’s attention to the way ‘patriarchy uses sexuality as a tool to create and sustain gender hierarchy in African societies by enshrouding it in secrecy and taboos’. Like the other women, she is part of a community that polices the role of women in what is essentially an oppressive patriarchal system. In the community of Nakawa Housing Estates, ‘[m]ost of the women don’t work. Like Mama Atim they just sit and talk, talk, talk and wait for their husbands to bring home a kilo of offal’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 169). This is an important indication of the roles of women in this community, a fate that the two girls wish to avoid. In this community, agency (albeit of a limited sort) is accorded only to the men, whereas the women simply engage in gossip and petty arguments and wait to prepare food for their husbands. Arac de Nyeko’s characterisation of the women is made in a mocking fashion, revealing the narrator’s simultaneous contempt and pity for them in their petty bickering. To the narrator, these are ‘noisy, gossipping and frightening housewives,’ a fate that the two girls fear for themselves.

Arac de Nyeko deliberately deploys this storyteller as a contrasting voice to the main narrator, Anyango. It is the writer’s way of negotiating ‘a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object [homosexuality] by social consciousness’. The reader is presented with these to individuals, telling stories that cross paths. Mama Atim’s storytelling mode is a public one, whereas the Anyango’s mode is the private epistolary mode. The latter’s only intended audience is her past lover, whereas Mama Atim has the whole estate as her audience. Acknowledging her storytelling prowess, the narrator displays the way Mama Atim’s

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skill is known to everyone in the community: ‘Ai! Everyone knows her quack-quack-quack-mouth. But people are still left wordless by just how much she can shoot at and wreck things with her machine gun-mouth’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 169). Both Arac de Nyeko and Kenani therefore stories feature storytellers whose skill lies not in the accuracy of the narratives they tell, but rather in the way such stories carry destructive potential. The writers thus draw attention to the power of narrative in such communal spaces, where the oral form has potency and can shape the attitudes of the inhabitants of this space. The stories show how this is the case but also indicate how these narrators remain unaware of the destructive force of their narrative power. In the story, Mama Atim is nicknamed ‘Lecturer’ because she ‘speaks with the certainty of a lecturer at her podium claiming an uncontested mastery of her subject’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 169). At the close of the both narratives, these unreliable narrators are portrayed with bleak futures. Kachingwe has contracted AIDS and ‘Mama Atim’s sons eat her food and bring girls to sleep in her bed’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 180). It is as though the destructive power of such irresponsible narrativising does not spare the narrators themselves.

One subject that emerges through the depiction of life at Nakawa Housing Estate is the strict patriarchal setup that characterises the place. As long as they remain in this space, women are destined to become talkative housewives who depend on their husbands for economic sustenance. Unfortunately, those husbands are not even faithful. The worst part of this picture is the description of two versions of Sanyu’s father. The version that the public knows of is of the man who provides for his family, the man who is admired by everyone, the man who wishes for his child to become an engineer like him. However, the darker side of his narrative displays a man who sexually abuses his daughter. But Sanyu never tells her mother of her
father's actions because she knows she would not be believed. This narrative of incest is not developed in the story, although it reveals an additional layer of complexity in the unbalanced relationship between men and women in the Nakawa Housing Estate society.

Although both of these stories are set within specific African settings, they also evoke worlds beyond these local spaces. Both Arac de Nyeko’s and Kenani’s stories paint an interesting, somewhat idealistic, picture of the former colonial metropole. They offer a novel perspective on the relationship between former colonies and the former colonial power. In the postcolonial moment, the Global North is evoked in a manner that highlights lingering effects on the former colonies. In a way, both writers highlight the way that the Global North still holds influence on sovereign nations of the postcolony, if not through economic dependence, then through a vision of the North as a utopian region where human rights are guaranteed. In Arac de Nyeko’s story, the Global North is evoked through the narrator’s mother’s nostalgic obsession with London: ‘When Mummy talked of London, we listened with our mouths open. She had travelled there not once, not twice, but three times to visit her sister. Each time she came back with her suitcase filled up with stories’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 172). However, the London that is presented in these stories turns out to be an illusion, since the woman never even travelled there. Instead, the true London that emerges in the story is one which does not hold its hands open to the formerly colonised: ‘London is cold. London is a monster which gives no jobs. London is no cosy exile for the banished. London is no refuge for the immoral’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 173). In this sense, Arac de Nyeko’s presentation of the Global North differs from that found in Kenani’s story. Whereas in Kenani’s story, the Global North appears to speak on the behalf of the marginalised, in Arac de Nyeko’s story it offers no such
welcome. That is why the story appears to emphasise rootedness. Despite the stigmatization that she is bound to face, despite the fact that ‘[n]othing has changed’ (Arac de Nyeko, p. 180) at the Housing estates, Sanyu is returning home, an event which ‘signals […] pride in her cultural and national origins and a refusal to surrender to dire living circumstances abroad’.43 This emphasis on homecoming is an important suggestion of the possibility of African agency in being able to confront and resolve the problems that Africa is facing. Sanyu’s return to a home where nothing has changed mirrors the move my writers towards addressing a subject otherwise regarded as taboo in their societies.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have done a close analysis of two stories – Stanley Kenani’s ‘Love on Trial’ and Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’, with the aim of illustrating instability of the proposition that homosexuality is un-African. My approach towards this objective has been to unearth the voices in the narratives that articulate a message that is not as hostile towards homosexuality. This has the merit of indicating the fact that the represented contexts are not characterised by outright antagonism against homosexuality, as some political figures would want the world to believe. More importantly, the narratives also problematize the relationship between Africa and the West. Whereas the writers do not demonize the Global North, they do not paint it as a paradise either. The stories begin and end within their local settings, with focus on the lives of the characters within these settings. For me, the most impressive point about these narratives is that they serve the dual function of providing a mirror to readers within their contexts, as well as acting as a window into this world for those who do not inhabit it. This factor alone explains their nomination

43 Ahlberg, ‘Women and war in contemporary love stories from Uganda and Nigeria’, p. 412.
for the Caine Prize, not necessarily the topic of homosexuality. For us living on the continent, such stories reveal our hypocrisies and our complicity in the marginalisation of others based on differences that we may not even fully understand. To spaces outside the continent, stories like these reveal the complexity of spaces on the continent, as well as the people that inhabit it.
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