

**CONTEMPORARY FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUALITIES FROM
AUTHORITARIAN AFRICAN CONTEXTS**

By

Asante Lucy Mtenje



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Supervisor: Prof. Sally-Ann Murray

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I investigate the contentious subject of sexualities as represented in fiction from selected Anglophone African countries which, even post-independence, have tended to enforce authoritarian, hetero-patriarchal control. The study explores how contemporary African writers, writing in (or in relation to) repressive contexts, represent uneasy intersections between socio-cultural understandings of sexuality, gender, and desire, entailing varieties of relation such as control, reciprocity, negotiation and resistance. Allowing for some flexibility in categories, the dissertation analyses the treatment of male sexualities in novels by Helon Habila, Moses Isegawa, and Tendai Huchu; female sexualities in novels by Sefi Atta, Doreen Baingana, and Lola Shoneyin, and depictions of queer sexualities in short fiction by Monica Arac de Nyeko, Chinelo Okparanta, Stanley Onjezani Kenani, and Beatrice Lamwaka. All of these writers, in their respective contexts, offer fictional representations that unevenly subvert hegemonic sexual norms and discourses, even while they also draw on received ways of making sense of gendered and sexual identities. The thesis argues that such ambiguities attest to the complexity of understanding and representing sexualities in Africa, and that fiction, precisely because of its capacity to engage uncertainty, comprises an important mode of mediating repressive socio-political and cultural norms, showing the potential for fiction as a space which engages risky, even taboo, topics. The fictional texts studied make a varied case against the common assumption of a restrictive, monolithic, supposedly proper “African sexuality” that authoritarian governments attempt to reinforce. I argue that through the narrative spaces of fiction, contemporary African authors highlight the tensions and contradictions which shape sexualities, with regimes of sexual knowledge being always in a process of relational negotiation, even in coercive socio-political contexts.

OPSOMMING

In hierdie verhandeling ondersoek ek die omstrede onderwerp van seksualiteite soos uitgebeeld in die fiksie van geselekteerde Engelssprekende Afrika-lande, lande wat, selfs na onafhanklikwording, geneig is tot outoritêre, hetero-patriargale beheer. Die ondersoek bekyk die mate waartoe eietydse Afrika-skrywers, wat inskryf teen (of in verhouding tot) onderdrukkende kontekste, 'n ongemaklike wisselwerking daarstel tussen maatskaplik-kulturele opvattinge van seksualiteit, geslagtelikheid en begeerte, wat 'n verskeidenheid van verhoudings omvat, soos byvoorbeeld beheer, wederkerigheid, onderhandeling en weerstand. Met voorsiening vir 'n mate van buigsaamheid van kategorieë, analiseer die verhandeling die uitbeelding van manlike seksualiteite in romans deur Helon Habila, Moses Isegawa en Tendai Huchu; vroulike seksualiteite in romans deur Sefi Atta, Doreen Baingana en Lola Sheneyin; en uitbeeldings van aweregse ('queer') seksualiteite in kort fiksie deur Monica Arac de Nyeko, Chinelo Okparanta, Stanley Onjezani Kenani en Beatrice Lamwaka. Al hierdie skrywers, in hulle onderskeie kontekste, bied fiktiewe uitbeeldings wat op oneweredige wyse hegemoniese seksuele norms en gespreksvorme ondergrawe, selfs terwyl hulle put uit gevestigde wyses van omgaan met geslagtelik-bepaalde en seksuele identiteite. Die tesis argumenteer dat sulke ambivalensies dui op die komplekse taak om seksualiteite in Afrika te verstaan en uit te beeld, en dat fiksie, juis as gevolg van sy vermoë om met onsekerheid om te gaan, 'n belangrike modus verteenwoordig van die bemiddeling van onderdrukkende maatskaplik-politiese en kulturele norme: hierdeur word dit duidelik hoe fiksie 'n ruimte kan bied waarbinne riskante, selfs taboe-onderwerpe aangespreek kan word. Die fiktiewe tekste wat bespreek word, maak 'n genuanseerde saak uit teen die algemene veronderstelling van 'n beperkende, monolitiese, kwansuis aangewese 'Afrika-seksualiteit' wat outoritêre regerings sou poog om af te dwing. Ek argumenteer dat eietydse Afrika-skrywers deur middel van die narratiewe ruimtes van fiksie die spannings en teenstrydighede onderliggend aan seksualiteit belig, met die kaders van seksuele kennis voortdurend gewikkel in 'n proses van onderlinge onderhandeling, selfs in onverdraagsame maatskaplik-politiese omgewings.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Al and Alice Mtenje for all your hard work and sacrifice.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sexing the Subject¹

[Literature] gives the opportunity of encountering other possibilities and people in the mind, in the heart, first. ... For true literature tears up the script of what we think humanity to be. It tears up our agendas and the limitations we impose on the possibilities of being human. It destroys preconceptions. And makes us deal with something partly new and partly known. (Ben Okri, speaking at the first Caine Prize of African Writing ceremony)

Until 1994 when I was eight years old, in Malawi the act of wearing a pair of trousers outside our house was always accompanied by the process of folding them at the ankles up to the calves and then wearing something on top lest my parents get arrested for encouraging (and by proxy engaging in) subversive acts against the person of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the life president of Malawi. The law was the law. We had to obey it. Often, my sister and I would just abandon the whole tedious process that came with wearing trousers. We'd wear dresses instead, even though that was not what our hearts desired. As a little girl growing up in Banda's Malawi of the early 1990s, I was always intrigued by the stories my parents told my siblings and I of the 'liberal' days soon after independence in 1964, and up to the early 1970s. My mother's fond memories were sparkling. The heydays of freedom included stories of her older sister who, as a young college student, loved wearing miniskirts and high-heeled shoes and was a source of fashion inspiration to my then pre-teen mum. My father would reminisce over the times when he and his friends, priding themselves as the second generation of Malawians to attain university education, would roam around campus in their trendy 'bell-bottom' pants. They were young and they had been freed from colonial 'chains'. They were even free to adopt hip, western-oriented fashion trends. They felt unstoppable. They were unbeatable.

Then came 1973, and the decree. The Decency in Dress Act made it illegal for women to wear trousers, miniskirts and see-through clothing. To show cleavage was a criminal offence because it was supposedly inimical to Malawian cultural values. Banda's regime claimed that these clothing items salaciously drew attention to a woman's thighs and buttocks, two areas considered particularly erogenous in Malawi, as in many other parts of

¹ I borrow this phrase from p.180 of Alison Donnell's 2007 volume *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*. London: Routledge.

the continent.² Nor did male clothing escape the prohibitions. Men were banned from wearing flared trousers and from growing long shaggy hair and beards. Even foreigners visiting the country were not exempt. In keeping with the laws of the land they were subjected to a thorough dress code scrutiny at the arrival borders and at international airports. Those who were found to be non-compliant were instantly disciplined: subjected to humiliating public rebukes such as impromptu haircuts and ad hoc trouser or skirt tailoring, right at their point of entry to Malawi and when Malawians travelled abroad: Banda made known that it was their national duty to show the world how exemplarily Malawian citizens dressed, and behaved.

One of my own earliest memories is of my mother, clad in a special red long *chitenje*³ and matching blouse (printed with the portrait of Banda), her forehead and nose sun burnt from the scorching heat after a whole day of dancing for Banda during one of the independence celebrations which were held in the town where we lived. It was a requirement that every woman, regardless of social status, should wear the special uniform and perform traditional dances for Banda whenever he visited their area. The dancing women were fondly referred to by Banda as *Mbumba za Kamuzu*, meaning ‘women who were under the protection and moral care of Kamuzu’. The care seemed more like enforcement. Prior to the life president’s visit, women had to undergo intensive two day rehearsals under the coordination of the over-enthusiastic local women’s league chairperson. Sometimes, dances for Banda did not consider weather conditions, but fiercely hot or not, or raining cats and dogs, *Mbumba za Kamuzu* did their duty, dancing and dancing in the public open spaces as required, while the *Ngwazi* (Kamuzu’s official title, meaning the ‘All wise one’) watched in admiration. It didn’t matter that my mother never liked the dancing or that she was a working woman with three young children to take care of, or that her husband, my father, did not like the idea that she was leaving the home to dance for The President. They both had no choice in the matter. Ironically, although Banda insisted on decorous clothing and behaviour for his dancing women, the sexualised hip and thigh motions they had to direct at male politicians, notably Banda himself, presented a paradoxical message: modesty, combined with explicit sensuality, even sexuality. All was under Banda’s control, and he always made sure to secure the optimum view of the dancing women’s bodies. The decree that *Mbumba za Kamuzu* dance for Banda also exposed Malawian women to varied forms of sexual exploitation by

² For more see Mazikenge Chirwa 2011, Gilman 2009

³ Chitenje is the name of a local cloth which women wrap around their waists. The plural is zitenje.

influential politicians and political party agents who took advantage of the women's subordinate social positions. For the duration of the dancing practices and performances, the women were made to sleep in places far away from their families – in school blocks, for example. At times they were deliberately plied with alcohol, which made them easy targets for domineering male political zealots. My mother told of women who even went through divorces because of their husbands' suspicions of their extramarital affairs. Some of the suspicions were well-founded; politicians were able to exert great power over ordinary women, whether with threats, or promises.

I had grown up listening to narratives of oppression in Banda's regime, and people's inventive scattered tactics to survive. My mother's stories have stayed with me. But it was only as an undergraduate when I read fiction such as Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt*, novels set in Banda's autocratic Malawi, that my interest in representations of gender and sexualities was really piqued. As I grew as a literary scholar and read more fiction from other authoritarian regimes, I became intrigued. Was there a pattern emerging? Or patterns? Were these patterns of control, coercion, complicity and resistance, which illustrated the intersections between political power and gender? Could I take this even further, extending 'gender' to questions of sexuality? It began to seem, over time, that a number of my interests as a young, female African scholar coalesced around the shaping of African sexualities in and by forms of authoritarian African regimes. And so began this doctoral project.

African Sexualities: Key Concepts, Definitions, Ironies and Paradoxes

This study explores representations of sexuality in contemporary fictional texts from selected Anglophone countries in East, West and Southern Africa which have been subject to forms of authoritarian rule. I consider the authors' treatments of links between heteropatriarchal dictatorships, changing socio-cultural understandings of sexuality, and sexual behaviours as paradoxical assimilation and resistance. The study examines six novels and four short stories set either within a dictatorial regime, or in the volatile national contexts which follow such tyranny. All the narratives represent the complexities of sexuality and sexual agency, contributing to our understanding of sexual imaginaries as shaped by political and wider cultures of authoritarian political rule. The novels are Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (Nigeria), Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (Uganda), Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* (Zimbabwe), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (Nigeria),

Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe* (Uganda) and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (Nigeria). The short stories are "Jambula Tree" by Monica Arac de Nyeko (Uganda), "America" by Chinelo Okparanta (Nigeria), "Love on Trial" by Stanley Onjezani Kenani (Malawi) and "Chief of the Home" by Beatrice Lamwaka (Uganda). The majority of these texts have not yet received extended scholarly attention, which enables my own study to offer an original contribution to the field. All of these fictions fit the 'thematic' brief of my purpose: they arise from and/or speak to dictatorial African contexts, addressing sexuality as a socially constructed space and identity that is also constantly (re)negotiated in relation to normative assumptions about human sexual behaviour. Additionally, these texts will enable me to offer a wide-ranging engagement with forms of extended prose narrative style, characterisation and point of view, rather than focussing only on a content-oriented account. An interesting comparison, here, is with Alison Donnell's research on sexuality and Caribbean literature. She points out, for example, that "the focus on childhood and the perspective of the child narrator" (182) in much of Caribbean literature, while it has usefully enabled writers to mirror the growth of the nation in the figure of the child, has unfortunately "arrested the discussion of sexuality"; indeed, "sexual identities remained unspoken for almost twenty years" (182). Her research focuses "on texts that have spoken into this silence, and opened up discussions and representations of sexuality" (182). In doing so, she aims "to bring sexuality to the fore, alongside race, gender and class, in order to argue that these identificatory categories are mutually affective" (182-3). Donnell suggests that fictional writing "on sexuality can be seen to have called into question the dominant matrix of race, ethnicity, gender, class and nation" (181).

Although the parameters for establishing critical boundaries among generations of African writers is quite problematic and overlapping, I nevertheless place the writers under focus in this thesis within the third generation of African writers as their thematic concerns and stylistic impulses are significantly different from their predecessors. As Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton note in their argument about third generation Nigerian writers which, I argue, can be extrapolated to the Ugandan, Zimbabwean and Malawian writers, these are "texts born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern, an order of knowledge in which questions of subjecthood and agency are not only massively overdetermined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame but in which the tropes of Otherness and subalternity are being remapped by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies" (15). Overall, the texts selected for my study are pertinent because they address the plural articulations of

sexualities which characterise a range of African contexts, and enable me to speculate about male and female writers' responses to the shaping of normative sexualities. Also relevant, in some instances, will be the author's writing from within, or from beyond, the repressive national context in question. The African writer "in the diaspora occupies a liminal space", uneasily negotiating "the melancholia" and the variously unhomely and liberating norms of the foreign locale. In conjunction, too, is the need to acknowledge "the anomie of those left at home, who experience many types of deprivation" (Muchemwa 135), which for the writer may include literary censorship, and limits on distribution and audience.

I focus on a range of fictional texts from Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Malawi, nation states which find self-definition not only through continued inflections of colonial rule but, even in terms of the post-colony and independence, have tended to enforce authoritarian, heteropatriarchal control over belief and behaviour. Borrowing from Juan Litz's definition, in this study I define authoritarian regimes as "political systems with limited, not responsible political pluralism, without intensive nor extensive political mobilisation, and in which a leader or a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones" (255). With some acknowledgement of limitation – as Natasha Ezrow and Erica Frantz remark, "dictatorships are not one and the same" (xv) – for the purposes of my own study, with its origins in literary-critical readings rather than political analysis, I use the terms authoritarian regimes, autocratic rule and dictatorial regimes interchangeably in this study.

This seems permissible, given that political scientists and sociologists continue to disagree over the exactly precise nomenclature open to debate: some refer to "grey-zone regimes" (Thomas Carothers) or "semi-authoritarian regimes" or "hybrid regimes" (Tripp 1). In her recent study of emergent women's writing in Africa, Lynda Gichanda Spencer, for example, designates contemporary Uganda a post-repressive regime (18), referring to the years after Idi Amin's and Milton Obote II's aggressive, tumultuous rules, when Museveni's disciplined army and initial 'no-party' cabinet restored peace, stability, civic order and improved human rights after decades of chaos and abuse, overcoming dangerous factionalism.⁴ However, Spencer goes on to concede that even post-independence Uganda in the later years of Museveni has had a violent, tyrannical history (19). Evan Mwangi, too, refers to "dictatorial regimes in Africa" (41), Zimbabwe prominent among them, although he also cites Marina Ottaway's description of such governments as "semi-authoritarian" (42),

⁴ Also see Tripp 2010.

saying “despite their embrace of the rhetoric of liberal democracy, they remained authoritarian while claiming to allow competition in order to reduce accountability”.

Overall, then, while leaders of post-independent African countries have made marginal concessions to democracy over the years (in response to internal and donor pressure), they have also found pretexts for repressive control of both civil and political society, remaining “basically authoritarian” (Tripp 6). In this context of unpredictable civil rights, the “undemocratic core of the regime” relies on the paradox of “dual realities” – “partial democracy and partial authoritarianism” – which “exist in constant tension” in varieties of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts”, creating a paradoxical regime which is “neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian”(Tripp 6). Such national authority, while vested in a despotic or similarly autocratic leader, also becomes systemic, moving beyond individual figures in (and of) power. (In addition to the high number of expressly despotic African regimes which are scarcely troubled with the pretence of democracy, Tripp notes that more than half of contemporary African states are characterised by “semi-authoritarian regime types” [8].) Elly Rijnierse, too, notes that many African countries, at independence, “adopted a multiparty system fashioned after the French or British model. These... models soon failed and most sub-Saharan countries have since had more or less repressive authoritarian regimes, with hardly any changes of government except through military coups” (647). The historical effect is of unpredictable, inconsistent, and vulnerable political landscapes, in which power may be exerted at whim.

From the late 1970s, Ogaga Okuyade observes, the majority of African countries began to experience dramatic transformations in political rule (1). Most African citizens by this time were already disillusioned with nationalism and its proponents, with most leaders portraying authoritarian and nepotistic tendencies, and betraying their promises to the constituencies that had put them in power. On the rise of dictatorship rule in Africa, Michael Walonen posits that the postcolonial African dictator was “invariably a product of the Cold War and the relative social instability and state of economic underdevelopment that reigned in the wake of the vast colonial pullout – grudging or well intentioned as it may have been in individual cases – of the nineteen fifties and sixties” (104). Most of these figures rose to power either via coup d’état or what Okuyade describes as “coup by ballot”, overthrowing the fragile democracies and monarchies that had succeeded colonial rule (Walonen 104). The list includes Mobutu Sese Seko (D.R Congo formerly Zaire) in 1965, Muammar al-Gaddafi in 1969 (Libya), Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1974 (Ethiopia), Sani Abacha in 1993 (Nigeria) to Siad Barre in 1969 (Somalia), Paul Biya in 1982 (Cameroon), Kamuzu Banda in 1964

(Malawi), Idi Amin in 1971 (Uganda), Robert Mugabe in 1980 (Zimbabwe), Yoweri Museveni 1986 (Uganda). Their machinations of oppression, the cult of grandiose personality, an atrocious record of human rights violations, maladministration and corruption “defined an era in African history, one lasting roughly from the late sixties until the end of the Cold War”, though in some cases these dictators are still in power up through the present day, and in “almost every case their legacies of poverty and brutality endure within the countries they governed with iron fists” (Walonen 105). Transformations from the late 80s, as observed by Okuyade, were particularly visible at the level of the system of government employed by most tyrannical rulers. He notes that military dictators for example in Nigeria began launching endless transition programmes that brought most of them back to power. Others became autocratic in their bid to ensure their political metamorphoses from military dictators to democratic autocrats would not be contested (Okuyade 2). These regimes reinforced the ideology of militarism which Jacklyn Cock has defined as an ideology that sanctions “organised state violence as a legitimate solution to conflict” (2) and with it a hyper-militarised military masculinity which oppresses women and other “lesser” men.

Without negating the heterogeneity of experiences in and among repressive African nation-states, this study is interested in considering the broad, dispersed effects of autocratic forms of African government upon the experiences and expressions of sexuality, as depicted in fiction by selected African authors. Despite varieties of national difference, the countries show several similarities in autocratic rule that serve as a prompt for my having selected these particular countries over other English speaking African nation-states that have, at one point in time or another, experienced dictatorship. Firstly, Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria and Zimbabwe continue to impose forms of socio-legal governance over women’s dress and behaviour, even where the government takes a supposedly democratic dispensation⁵. Post-independence, this “new script, steeped in the moralistic, anti-sexual and body shame acts, was inscribed on the bodies of African women and with it an elaborate system of control” (Tamale, “Introduction”16).⁶ Furthermore, these countries are noted as being among those in

⁵ As in Malawi, in Uganda under Idi Amin, Uganda’s decree of 1972 imposed strict dress codes for women. In both cases women were prohibited from wearing garments such as shorts, mini-skirts and hot-pants. This has also been an issue in most post-colonial nations including Zimbabwe and Nigeria. See Bibi Bakare-Yusuf’s “Of Mini-skirts and Morals: Social Control in Nigeria”, (2009); “Nudity and Morality: Legislating Women’s Bodies and Dress in Nigeria” in Tamale, S. (ed) *African Sexualities*, and also Rudo Gaidzanwa’s “African Feminism” at http://www.osisa.org/sites/default/files/sup_files/Africa%20Feminism%20-%20Rudo%20Gaidzanwa.pdf

⁶Tamale’s introduction to *African Sexualities: A Reader* was first published with the title “If Sexuality were a Human Being” at <http://www.pambazuka.org/governance/if-sexuality-were-human-being> on 11th May, 2011.

Africa which criminalise alternative forms of sexualities and whose nationalist leaders have repeatedly vilified, in public contexts such as the media, and government gatherings, expressions of alternative sexual orientations and practices as “un-African”.

The countries from which my selected fictional texts originate are among the most notorious for exerting repressive control over definitions and practices of African sexualities. They criminalise homosexuality via homophobic laws, mark as deviant even those suspected of being homosexual and, in some instances, censor and (threaten to) imprison writers who tackle subject matters that are considered transgressive. As Jean Comaroff points out, “Across Africa ... discourses of perversion and shame have been common” in relation to sexuality. In particular, the “spread of AIDS has spurred the vilification of homosexuality”, and “also licensed the policing of other forms of sexuality not securely under the control of normative authority, hence the demonisation of independent women, immigrants, and youth” (202). Aspects of such demonising will inform the chapters of my dissertation.

Sexuality, as the key node of this study, needs clarifying comment. Popular understanding of the term ‘sexuality’ is oftentimes limited and linked to the physical act of sex. Oliver Phillips rather prosaically explains that sexuality “can be defined by referring to a wide range of anatomical acts and physical behaviour[s]”, though he proceeds to grant that sexuality also bears upon unpredictable, opaque “emotional expressions of love, intimacy and desire” (285). Clearly sexuality is not limited to erotic physicality and sexualised feelings. It also entails the evocation of emotional feelings in inter/intra-personal connections. Even though it is a complex term with multifaceted meanings, a nexus of individuated embodiment and affect, it is nevertheless shaped and constrained by systemic issues of power and vulnerability (Machera 157). At the same time, while sexuality entails individualised expressions of self, individual sexuality is always “implicated in the reproduction of social structures and markers through rules and regulations that permit or prohibit specific relations and/or acts” (Phillips 285). Scholars recognise, for example, that while the feelings and power dynamics of sexuality seem to be linked to the biological existence of an individual as either female or male (Machera 157), nonetheless, the broader discursive scope of sex and sexuality is not merely idiosyncratic. Human beings “express sexualities through a diverse range of subjective experiences, filtered through social frameworks of ideologies, theories, politics and ethics” (Van Zyl and Steyn 4). In the same vein, Sylvia Tamale posits that “the historical, social, cultural, political and legal meanings and interpretations attached to the human body largely translate into sexuality and systematically infuse our relationship to desire, politics, religion, identity, dress, movement, kinship structures, disease, social roles

and language” (“Interrogating the link” 608). Thus sexuality permeates almost every aspect of human life and it is difficult to regulate, despite edicts and regulations. Against a homogeneous and centrifugal definition of “African sexuality” my study focuses on the *fictional* representations of sexualities, not on sexuality as a social science. Thus, while I address the different state politics of the particular African countries from which I draw my examples, I am primarily interested in using literary narratives to explore the ways in which authors respond to state (and state-inflected) attempts to control African bodies and the various ways in which these attempts are resisted, negotiated and conformed to. My analysis also points to how institutions such as religion, culture, family and school at various points in time converge in collaboration with state power in the instrumentalisation, control and regulation of African sexualities. (The implication, here, is that even under governments which are *not* repressive, sexuality and its expression are influenced by a variety of social forces.)

Sexuality in relation to embodiment is important to this study for, as Ezekiel Kaigai argues, “embodiment offers a nuanced optic through which to capture the way power hierarchies...are exercised” (13). It “is through bodies,” for example, “that...narratives invite the reader to reflect on how certain forms of power and domination are gendered in particular ways and how stories present the gendered body as an unstable field of power contestation” (Kaigai 12). I investigate how fiction writers explore the congruencies and disjunctures amongst outright political dictatorship and the impact on bodies and behaviours of state-influenced institutions such as ‘the family’, along with discourses such as gender, culture and religion which are commonly mobilised in the service of national identity. As Mikki Van Zyl and Melissa Steyn posit “our sexuality is shaped within our social understanding of selfhood, how we make sense of our relations to others and how we fit into our cultural institutions- the laws, religious institutions, schools, social venues and above all, families” (4). These are “sites of energetic social pressures, evoking equally energetic agencies on the part of individuals to conform, perform, enact, resist, undermine, revise or transform the constraining and enabling influences” (Van Zyl and Steyn 4). The study therefore considers literature’s representations of the relationships amongst socially normative, even hegemonic definitions of sexuality and wider understandings of ‘sexuality’ as moral-cultural attitude, sexual and reproductive health, pleasure and desire, and female/male sexual rights.

Ifenyiwa Okolo’s approach, for instance, in her analysis of Ojaide’s *The Activist*, encourages me as a scholar to address the “networking of sexuality” in a novel, “in an attempt to show the role of sexuality and sexual nuances” in the plot development and

characterisation of fiction. To this end, she not only engages with explicit and obvious depictions of ‘sexuality’, but draws on deconstruction to locate those moments of unwitting textual avoidance or suppression, where an author imagines him or herself to be writing about one subject matter, but in so doing simultaneously implies a masked, or repressed interest in questions of sexuality. As Okolo notes, it is much mistaken to imagine that an author’s interest in questions of ‘sexuality’ means a focus directly on ‘sex’ as physical act. Rather, there

is hardly any discussion that does not have implications for sexuality studies, especially in literature. Sexuality refers to feelings, behaviours, experiences and expressions of humans as sexual beings. It covers various sexually-related aspects of human life, including physical and psychological development, attitudes, thoughts and customs associated with the individual’s sense of gender, relationships, sexual activities, mate selection, reproduction, and so on. In every sphere of human existence, the issue of sexuality comes up. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is viewed with much contradiction and confusion. (Okolo 108)

Clearly, then, the study’s focus on sexuality necessarily also encompasses gender, which is itself a complex issue, relationally defined. “The notion of gender *as* sexual difference” (de Lauretis 1) underpinned much original feminist thinking and activism, but has become a limit demanding reconceptualising. It has become important to understand that “a subject [is] constituted in gender, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual, relations; a subject, therefore, not unified, but rather multiple, and not divided but contradicted”, entailing a social performative (de Lauretis 1). The difficult relationship of gender and sexuality is described by Teresa de Lauretis as a “bind, a mutual containment” (1) which requires that the scholar acknowledge their imbrications, but also allow that they are not automatically coterminous.

A place to begin, Teresa de Lauretis suggests, is to think of gender, too, as being fashioned by a ‘technology’ analogous to Michel Foucault’s ‘technology of sex’, “and to propose that gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies” – among them cinema, literature, consumer culture – “and of institutionalised discourses, epistemologies and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (2). De Lauretis envisages that this understanding enables us not only to work with Foucault, but to go beyond his ideas, giving more credence to “the differential solicitation of male and female subjects, and...the conflicting investments of men and women in the discourses and practices of sexuality” (3).

My study also, in peripheral respects, touches on some of the complications associated with the diasporic, transnational vectors that cut across African sexualities: the globalised visual repertoires of film and television, for instance, as well as the culturally and geographically displaced, even cosmopolitan gendered Africanities of authors who write back to Africa, on African issues, from western metropolises. How do these bear upon Sylvia Tamale's discussion of the "diverse forces" which "interrupted the shape of sexualities on the continent – redefining notions of morality, for example, and 'freezing' them into social and political spaces through both penal codification and complex alliances with political and religious authority"? (2). Even while such forces were not homogeneously effected, meaning that the continent "is not a hostage of its late colonial history" (Tamale "Introduction" 2), it remains true that "colonial methods of researching, theorising and engaging in sexualities in Africa left indelible and significant imprints on people's lives" (Tamale "Introduction" 2), and that these continue to entangle with contemporary pressures and possibilities upon gender and sexuality.

Tamale further points to the ironies (and poignancies) of the term 'sexuality' in the context of African experiences, for although it "might represent notions of pleasure and the continuity of humanity itself, the term [also] conjures up discussions about sources of oppression and violence ("Introduction" 1). The selected literary texts therefore provide an illustrative space to explore the performative mediation of sexualities in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Malawi. As in the Tamale volume, the "idea is to deconstruct, debunk, expose, contextualise and problematise concepts associated with African sexualities in order to avoid essentialism, stereotyping and othering" (Tamale "Introduction" 1). By overtly depicting "marginal" or "different" sexualities, for example, the fictional texts which I focus on possess what Maria Pia Lara calls an "illocutionary force" which exerts pressure on "monolithic conceptions of sexual identity and potentially incites readers to perceive differently a subject that has hitherto remained taboo in many parts of Africa" (Ncube 1).

On this note, in order to provide informing historical context, I move to an extended discussion of the relationships between colonialism and sexuality. These have been examined by several scholars who have been able to demonstrate the centrality of sexuality not only to the imperial mission but also to the formation of colonial sexualities and identities which were perpetuated through various socialisation methods including education. This centrality of sexuality as an especially acute locus where state desire for the disciplined, governable subject meets a proliferation of individual desires and subjectivities, continues to reverberate even with the post-colonial moment (Osha 64). Texts from 19th century reports authored by

white explorers and missionaries reveal a clear pattern of ethnocentric and racist construction of African sexualities. Western imperialist stereotypes and caricatures of African sexualities were part of a wider design to colonise and exploit the black race. These narratives equated African sexualities with primitivism. African sexualities were depicted as primitive, exotic, rapacious, savage, bestial, lascivious.... African people's sexualities being "read directly into (and from) their physical attributes" (Tamale "Researching and Theorising" 15).⁷ Colonial constructs of African masculinities, for example, set out to portray African men as infantile and in thrall to rampant sexual appetites. Aided by racist 'scientific' research that proved that black men were closer to the lower animals in intellect and physicality than to human beings, colonial scientific discourse also 'confirmed' that black men were closer to animals when it came to sexual appetite, (lack of) morality and, to a certain degree, sexual anatomy (Saint-Aubin 33). The dominant view at that time stipulated that there existed an opposition between the head and the loins, with the brain existing as the marker of superiority. The former was obviously lacking in the anatomy of the black man, since "the greater abdominal and genital development merely corroborated the inferiority of his other anatomical peculiarities - his black skin, flat nose, lesser cranial and thoracic development" (Haller 51). Numerous physicians corroborated these so-called findings, and also devised labyrinthine explanations to justify instances where black people's sexuality contradicted the scientific evidence.

The bodies of African women, especially, were freighted with ideological import in consolidating the imperialist project. The physical differences between the bodies of black and white women were invested with numerous social meanings which included the black female body as biologically deviant. Consider the notorious objectification of 'Saartjie'/Sarah Baartman's body even after her death. Baartman, a young Khoikhoi woman was "taken from the Cape Colony in South Africa and exhibited at the Piccadilly Circus in London because of her purported abnormality of her sexual organs. She was said to suffer from steatopygia (an enlargement of the buttocks) and an elongation of the labia (thus named the Hottentot apron) (Magubane 817). As Sander Gilman sums it up "[t]he antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the Black, and the essential Black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being is the Hottentot. The physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the Black" (231). Juxtaposed with the "imported and highly conservative sexual norms of Europe, the sexualities of Africans, which were relatively unrestrained, posed huge challenges to the

⁷ Also see Gilman 1985 and Commons 1993.

Victorian minds of the early explorers” (Tamale “Researching and Theorising” 15) as the dress, behaviour and mores of women in Victorian England were geared towards erasing any hint of sexuality. Women who did not conform to such performance of femininity were denigrated as prostitutes or courtesans.⁸ Black female sexuality was therefore inscribed as physically and morally aberrant – grotesque and licentious - but this did not prevent white colonial agents from claiming the right to sexual liberties with these very ‘deviants’. Furthermore, preferred sexual behaviours and bodily decorums based on European Victorian values were inculcated into black colonial subjects. As Sylvia Tamale explains, “through religion and its proselytising activities”, including schooling, “African were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the ‘civilised ways’ of the whites” (“Researching and Theorising”16). This reformatory project promoted heterosexuality, monogamous marriage, conjugal virtue, child-rearing and family life as values essential to social order and cultural progress, and to this end colonial administrators enacted a series of laws and regulations which—with the aid of missionaries—taught Africans to discipline and channel their sexual desire exclusively towards the preservation of life and the increase of the population (White 17). Tamale concurs with White, adding that this element of the imperial mission was executed through a panoply of “force, brutality, paternalism, arrogance, insensitivity and humiliation” (“Researching and Theorising” 15).

As a result, socialisation in colonial schools aimed at denying young people’s questioning not only about sex, but about sexual identity. Sexuality was taken as a “given which could not be negotiated”, and thus “the (false) binary of male and female was taken as a natural order and ‘proper’ sexual behaviour and identity was taught in gendered terms” (Desai 18). As Nkiru Nzegwu suggests, this unsettled traditional practices in many African societies, which had encouraged versions of eroticism that involved both men and women, often avoiding “the domination/subjugation complex of patriarchal ideology” (255). The current notion of eroticism that pervades African societies has assumed the “sexualised gender hierarchy of the West”, which “eroticises male dominance and female subjugation” (Nzegwu 255). This “is steeped in an ideology of gender inequality” that derives from the divisive power legacies of colonial laws and religions, and is vastly expanded in capitalism, which is premised on the commodification of gender divisions (Nzegwu 257).

Gender, Sexuality, Nationalism and Phallographic Authoritarian States

⁸ See Rees 1997.

In his seminal *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George Mosse shows the crucial role of nationalism and moral respectability in the construction of sexuality in modern Europe. Mosse argues that the value that western nationalist thought of the 19th and 20th centuries placed on regulating sexual desire as a condition of the progress of modern capitalist societies was seen as one of the devices most easily and uncritically transferred to a variety of other national political contexts, regardless of their affinity with the source of this modern western invention (75). Likewise, the value attributed to “respectability by the emerging capitalist bourgeoisie, who regarded control over sexuality as vital to the stability of modern society and the maintenance of its dominance, would later be assimilated even by regimes that abolished class stratification” (Mosse 75).

We may extrapolate from Mosse’s argument to a discussion of the link between the shaping of African sexualities and the rise of African national movements in counter to colonialism. The state, though appearing asexual, has always had embedded sexual preferences and categorical definitions. Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson argue that the state both has sexual foundations and regulates other sexual sites and practices, and these are completely entwined with questions of gender (5). As they explain, “it is hard to conceive of a version of a nation that does not address its citizens more or less explicitly, in sexualised or gendered terms” (Epstein and Johnson 5). Anne McClintock concurs, arguing that all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender:

[d]espite many nationalists’ ideological investment in the idea of popular unity, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalisation of gender difference. No nation in the world gives men and women the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state. Rather than expressing the flowering into time of the organic essence of a timeless people, nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimise people’s access to the resources of the nation-state (McClintock 353).

At the onset of self-governance, independent African states clearly learnt from European colonialism and assertively promoted (and, arguably, continue to privilege) “an ethos of restorative masculinity” (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 4). The political culture of the new African nations expressed “authoritarian and militarist legacies, ritualised in the national parades of the Head of State and ‘his’ armed forces, echoed in the national symbols - flags and anthems that invariably have military origins” (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 4). As Cynthia Enloe notes in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope” (43), with women

often depicted in idealised symbolic roles “as icons of nationhood, to be elevated and defended, or as the booty or spoils of war, to be denigrated and disgraced” (Nagel 245).⁹ Patricia McFadden also argues, in the same vein, that there is a need to acknowledge that the African postcolonial state is a militarised construction that excludes women and limits their citizenship potential. Furthermore, those who control the state are often instrumental in the violation of women’s bodily and sexual integrity in the service of reclaiming and reasserting the African masculinity that colonial rule undermined; here, rape and other forms of gender violence are used to suborn and humiliate women, as well as the men who are unable to protect them (McFadden “Plunder as Statecraft” 152).

The centralisation of postcolonial hyper-masculinity also entails the aggressive valorisation of heterosexuality. In most post-colonial African societies, sexuality continues to exist as a site for marking belonging and citizenship, reminding us of Foucault’s argument that sexuality is a charged point of transfer for power. One can only observe how the deployment of sex intersects with projects of control which regulate or govern, denigrate or even pathologise certain forms of sexualities, homosexualities prominent among them. In effect, the delimiting of sexuality is a form of power-wielding for African politicians; it allows them to gain political mileage by seeming to ‘protect’ the ‘integrity’ and sovereignty of the nation-state while disguising their own mis-governance of national resources and their abuse of human rights. For example, by framing his homophobic sentiments within a postcolonial narrative that aims to ‘reconfigure’ proper African values that were ostensibly ‘destabilised’ by Western imperialism and colonialism, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe (who famously labelled homosexuals worse than pigs and dogs) uses “homophobia to deflect attention from his increasingly autocratic rule and Zimbabwe’s social and economic problems” (Hoad 68). In his evaluation of this political homophobia (which also characterises the views of other nationalist leaders such as Namibia’s Sam Nujoma, and Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni) Neville Hoad further observes that “it may be possible to read homophobic strands in African nationalisms as displaced resistance to perceived and real encroachments on neocolonial national sovereignty by economic and cultural globalisation” (xii). In other words, the rhetoric of homosexuality as being un-African is misguided but the fear of economic and cultural neocolonisation could be well-founded. In the instance of Zimbabwe, Mugabe imagines the nation-state as a homogeneous entity whose very existence is

⁹ Interestingly this hyper-sexualised masculinity presented a paradox, in seeming to reinforce the colonial perceptions of African men as inherently lascivious and lecherous, which the political project of independent African nationalisms might reasonably be expected to counter.

threatened by diversity. By implication, supposedly non-normative sexualities become a stigma (see Oliver 1997), and the homosexual body is framed via images of filth, disease and dirt, contaminating elements which need to be cleaned up, controlled, and eliminated.

These exclusionary image repertoires which configure non-normative sexualities and their supposed threat to the unity of the nation-state are clearly exemplified in the excerpt of a parliamentary speech by Aeneas Chigwedere, a cabinet minister in Mugabe's repressive government. He asserts: "What is at issue in cultural terms is a conflict of interest between the whole body, which is the Zimbabwean community and part of that body represented by individuals or groups of individuals ...The whole body is more important than any single dispensable part. When your finger starts festering and becomes a danger to the body you cut it off. The homosexuals are the festering finger" (Franke 14).

This speech could reasonably be said to represent the state dominant, as it is delivered in an autocratic 'parliament', by a preferentially-appointed cabinet minister who ventriloquises the opinion of the state. The view foregrounds the nation-state as embodying the collective, which in turn is depicted as an ostensibly whole, salutary body, all elements contributing to the good functioning, the life-sustaining good, of the heterosexuality that, according to norms, best accords with the robustly healthy state. There is the normal, indispensable collective, and then there is the morally sick, dispensable individual. In Chigwedere's terms, which channel those of the regime, the robust, flourishing nation of Zimbabwe cannot but be associated with proper sexuality, defined as the heterosexual. Any evidence of the improper, the homosexual, is naturally a gangrenous extremity which poses a danger to the wellbeing and welfare of the assumed healthiness to which the national collective ascribes. The vital standard of heterosexuality, of course ('vital', here, meaning both crucial and life-sustaining), is also associated with the reproduction of the normal nation state.

If all of this sounds confusing, it is, Chigwedere's argument verging on the tautological. The sexual normativity for which he advocates can only in fact be presented as a construct, a constructedness which is present in the tensions between the minister's confident announcement, with the purpose of naturalisation, and his simultaneous, necessary acknowledgement of 'other', conflicting interests. The tension is also implied in the elaborate, even clichéd metaphor of the 'collective' body that figures the Zimbabwean state, depicted through polarisations of norm and deviance. The metaphor as it were holds these two 'states' of sexuality together in the same space, forming a discomforting reminder of the

very artificiality of the supposed norms for which the speaker claims naturalised status. The state declares its support for the one, (read ‘normal’) sexual state, but the othered state is paradoxically made present even in the process of its being reviled. This *creates* a productive counter space *within* the dominant state discourse, one in which different, more amenable recuperations of homosexuality could well be made. The constructedness, then, cannot be effaced in the minister’s claims; rather it paradoxically *presents* that which the minister wishes to render absent, this presence then demanding its right to be faced, and not *effaced*. In regulating sexual difference, the minister’s claims attempt to represent sexuality within Manichean and binaristic confines of good and evil, normal and abnormal, western and nativist, denying the possibility of relative positions and ideologies. Portraying homosexuality as a cultural “conflict of interest”, the quotation aims to depict culture as static, ignoring the diverse factors that inflect African subjectivities and, in turn, require us to understand sexuality as multiple and mobile. It also serves to advance the line of thought that homosexuality is a western import, foreign and destructive to African indigenous cultural values, a practice which threatens to infect the ‘whole’ national body. Within this line of thought, the threat to the unified body ought to be eliminated. As I have already highlighted, the comments connote homosexuality as a disease, abnormality and degeneracy. The pathologised homosexual body presents a harmful threat or an infection to the attempts to reclaim a supposedly pure, dignified, African past.

What is most significant, here, is the implication that attacks upon the “diseased” body parts are not homophobic and unjust, but are justified in order to “cut them off” to prevent them from further desecrating the nation-state. The quotation therefore highlights my earlier argument in which sexuality becomes a marker of belonging and unbelonging. Mugabe’s statements that homosexuality is a “white problem” (Franke 7) and “Let them be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere...They shall be sad people here” (Dunton and Palmberg 13) further illustrate the nationalist construction of homosexuality as “un-African” and the deployment of normative sexuality as a marker of proper citizenship, the politics of self here experiencing powerful shaping under the attempted enforcement and discursive *re-*enforcement of state apparatuses of control. This homophobic rhetoric of same-sex relations as being “un-African” (in spite of empirical evidence of its existence in pre-colonial times) emphasises Homi Bhabha’s argument that the nation-state’s invention of a social and national cohesion requires highly discriminate and repetitive cultural shreds and patches to conjure up and maintain the signs of a cohesive national culture (212). To sustain this imagined unified culture, evidence pointing to the contrary is silenced or obliterated with impunity – and yet,

as I have been suggesting, is paradoxically at the same time *revealed* in glimpses, and at odd angles. In other words, the putative unity, premised on selected, preferred modes of being human, is even, in its vigorous articulation, revealed to be false and narrow, by virtue of the penumbral lacunae whose traces cannot be eliminated by the affirmation. Indeed, these traces are actually brought into being by the very process of affirming a ‘unity’ which is premised on selection rather than inclusivity.

Albeit referencing a different historical-geographical context, I draw parallels between the postcolonial management of sex and sexuality in African states (with the associated assertion of patriarchal nationalism and the management of sexualities towards respectability and propriety) and Ann Laura Stoler’s study of colonial sexuality. Stoler notes that “the distinction between normality and abnormality, between bourgeois respectability and sexual deviance, and between moral degeneracy and eugenic cleansing were the elements of a discourse that made unconventional sex a national threat and thus put a premium on managed sexuality for the health of the state” (34). It is therefore paradoxical that African national discourses on sexuality continue to mirror the social values embedded in the colonial management of African sexuality which they claim to reconfigure or contest. Even within nations like South Africa where the Constitution protects same-sex sexualities, William Spurlin notes that African cultural nationalism in the region continues “to read homosexuality as an infection to be contained and as a remnant of empire, failing to acknowledge the difference(s) of African identities and cultures or account for hybridity and the ways in which African identities and cultures are shaped by transnational and global influences, thereby maintaining a problematic self/other split between Africa and the West which re-inscribes and repeats the imperialist gesture” (70).

Since the early 1960s, many post-independence African leaders have taken up the duty of reconstructing the supposedly authentic African selfhood that had been perverted by colonialism (Ndjio 9). Basile Ndjio (while examining postcolonial sexualities in Cameroon), argues that in this intervention an African “‘imagined community’ was forged: firstly, by the political annihilation of any kind of (sexual) difference that could constitute an obstacle to the achievement of nation-building”, and “secondly, by the means of violent exclusion from the postcolonial public sphere of the embarrassing presence of those sexual ‘aliens’ whose unconventional sexual desires and practices problematise the very ontology of the African subject” (9). In this process, Ndjio argues, “African history and culture are...selectively reshaped, revised and even re-invented by nativist discourses through a deliberate amnesia regarding earlier forms of African sexualities, including male and female same-sex relations”

(10). For all its national liberationist achievements, Pan-Africanist thought played a significant role in shaping “the contours of the modern African sexual regime, construct[ing] the sexuality of African men and women on the basis of dominant sexual codes establishing heterosexual relationships as the sexual norm” (Ndjio 3). In the heyday of African nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s, “heterosexual acts were idealised—often fetishised—as an efficient means of achieving the nationalist project of increasing the size of African populations” (Ndjio 3). This is even evident in the literature constituting the Heinemann African Writers’ Series launched in 1962, where numerous novels (through to the 1980s) articulated pent-up rage at the colonial experience by depicting the African continent being raped or dominated by masculine outsiders, and African men being reduced to metaphorical boyhood and impotence at the hands of racist whites (Epprecht “The Making of an African Sexuality” 775). According to Epprecht, the “‘remasculinisation’ of African men in this body of literature is often attempted through heavy-handed portrayals of African men’s heterosexual virility and polygyny” (“The Making of an African sexuality” 775), a ‘normalisation’ of heterosexuality” which was accompanied “by the suppression of other sexualities, construed as contrary to the proper formation of the African nation, premised on natural increase, sexual order and morality.

Employing culture, religion and the law, autocratic African regimes have tended to enforce heteropatriarchal control over individual and collective subjectivity, most notably women’s subjectivities. The deeply personalised authoritarian governance of bodies which can be traced within the nation and state-inflected institutions such as the family echoes Michel Foucault’s notion of sexuality as a technology of power (Lewis 105). Especially relevant to the present study, given my interest in sexualities and authoritarian nationalisms, is Rudo Gaidzanwa’s argument which problematises the familiar attempt to control women’s sexualities in Africa through the notion of women as the embodiment of idealised nationhood. She unsettles the claim that women are what is “best about the ‘nations’ that were being built after colonialism had been overthrown” (9). She notes that “women’s dress, their social and physical mobility, education and health are critical areas of concern because they are more strictly policed than those of men” (Gaidzanwa 9). She further notes that with regard to women’s sexualities, challenges have tended to be framed in terms of “women’s health and reproductive rights, rather than the right of women to express, shape and explore desire and sexuality on the same terms as men” (Gaidzanwa 9). As some of my previous comments suggest, these double standards are enabled by nationalisms’ tendencies to liken the nation to the traditional male-headed family, and where men are perceived as “defenders

of the family and the nation” and women are thought to “embody family and national honour” (Nagel 254). The naturalised corollary is that women’s sexuality and sexual behaviour ought to be governed to ensure their purity is impeccable, since a “woman’s shame is the family shame, the nation’s shame, the man’s shame” (Nagel 254). From this, one observes that “issues of sexualities and desire, which are conventionally (and perhaps *conveniently*) viewed as apolitical and private, are in fact steeped in politics and power relations” (Tamale “Introduction” 6).

In his examination of the “insidious” and subtle ways in which political power and its accompanying discourses become so banal as to be assimilated by a wide segment of the population of African states, Achille Mbembe argues that power in postcolonial Africa is so pervasive and ubiquitous that it invades even the most sacred domains of life, resulting in what he calls “the intimacy of power” (“Banalities of power” 4). Even indisputably private and innocuous decisions such as who to have intimate relations with, “the desire to wear a beard or bear the nickname ‘president’ could bring one into confrontation with the state” (Ochono 1). Several major African writers (eg. Wole Soyinka, Nuruddin Farah, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, Mariama Bâ and Ama Ata Aidoo) have fictionalised such complex interplays of patriarchy, tribalism, nationalism, colonial power structures and African dictatorships (Walonen 105). Dubravka Juraga points out that literary texts may offer an incisive perspective on the social and psychological dynamics of authoritarianism, addressing not only how dictators maintain power through outright surveillance mechanisms, but what living conditions are like for ordinary individuals under modern despotic regimes.

However, despite such research, there is a paucity of studies that have focused on the representation, in fiction, of the ways in which ‘sexuality’ has been configured under African dictatorships. This is intriguing considering that it is under these dictatorships that some of the most notorious heteronormative and heteropatriarchal¹⁰ laws controlling sexualities were legislated and, conversely, that even with systematic attempts to control African desires, non-normative sexualities eluded control, refusing to conform to the hegemonic social script.¹¹ At the same time, it is also interesting to note that some of the repressive laws regarding sexualities were passed under supposed democracies, for example the Anti-homosexuality bill in Nigeria that was passed under President Goodluck Jonathan. This illustrates how regimes of sexual knowledge and power function not only under extremely coercive

¹⁰ Heteropatriarchy can be defined as the combination of male hegemony and heterosexual dominance essentially describing the sex and gender bias prevalent among the elite ruling classes of nation-states.

¹¹ Also see Mwakasungula 2010.

circumstances but also under supposed liberal democracies as they intersect with other regimes of knowledge such as religion and culture. This dissertation advances the argument that sexuality offers a space in which people mediate and even subvert behaviours made illegal by the state and/or preferred as licit by heteronormative cultural contexts.

Clearly, I will need to address intersections between nation, the literary, and sexuality, considering how particular states might see literature as paradoxically a marginal space *and* a challenging space of discursive threat, which might also be harnessed for ideological control. In the same vein that James Graham's 2009 study addresses the interlayered questions of land and nationalism in Zimbabwean fiction, my dissertation will consider (a) how intersecting 'regimes' of political and social authoritarianism and/or received authority influence literary representation and (b) how the form and content of a literary text is elusive and difficult to control, since literature as a category creates relatively independent spaces of critical, affective and imaginative truth, rather than corresponding directly with sociological data. Extrapolating from Sylvia Tamale, I maintain that the "study of sexualities" in literature, as evidenced in the novels and short stories selected for analysis provides excellent critical opportunity to learn "about pleasure, creativity, subversion, violence, oppression, living" ("Introduction" 2). Like Tamale, I am interested in how such discourses both shape lives, and also, in turn, are inflected in reciprocal ways by people's re-working of norms. To this end, my dissertation offers an instance of the "critical process of transformative learning" and "challenges us to confront issues that society has clothed in taboos, inhibitions, and silences" (Tamale "Introduction" 5). As Joel Gwynne and Angela Poon observe, "sexuality is often perceived as shameful, for the dangers it potentially precipitates—rape, incest, exploitation, cruelty, and humiliation—often outweigh its pleasures. Essentialist arguments surrounding sexuality have historically cast the subject as taboo, and even within relationships where sex is sanctioned—namely heterosexual marital relationships—it is often a difficult subject to navigate and negotiate"(xi). However, over the last three decades multiple, intersectional critical theories including feminist, queer and postcolonial theories "have interrogated the ways in which sexuality is conceptualised and constructed, specifically with the intention of deconstructing essentialist notions of sexuality and identity formation" (Gwynne and Poon xii). This has helped to "re-situate sexuality as a historical and social category", enabling the understanding that "ideas about sexuality are linked to forms of power and other hegemonic categories of identity and subjectivity like class, race, gender and nationality" (Gwynne and Poon xii).

Indeed, this critical observation proves to be pertinent especially when interrogating how sexualities, emerging from contraptions of totalitarian rule, have been interpreted and subsequently represented in works of literature. As Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski indicate, “[l]iterary representations of the body from Africa as well as narrative strategies of writing the body have lately begun to receive wider critical attention”, along with “the themes of body, sexuality, and gender” understood as “inter-referential” and mutually “questioning” terms (ix). While my own methodological approach is literary, I also recognise the pertinence of social science scholarship on sexuality by scholars who have been engaged in empirical research premised on fieldwork investigations, notable among them Signe Arnfred’s edited collection *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* which sets out to “critically investigate existing lines of thought about sexuality in Africa, while also creating space for alternative approaches” (Arnfred ix). Especially appealing is research by historian Nancy Hunt, whose publications on embodiment, ‘nervous states’, ‘colonial lexicons’ and the Congo are models of sophisticated interpretative reading practice which avoid simplistic assumptions about ‘colonial encounter’ and instrumental despotism in favour of unsettled reciprocities amongst cultural norms, state power and individual agency. Some studies offer a more literary-cultural emphasis. Among them is Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi’s *Gender and African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, with commentary on texts by Anglophone and Francophone female writers. The volume critiques western feminist and post-colonial theories while applying gender as a frame of literary analysis to the works of nine sub-Saharan women writers. In addition, Evan Mwangi’s *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* primarily argues that African novelists exploit “self-reflective techniques to signal changing circumstances in the society, discuss traditionally taboo issues such as homosexuality, and preserve themselves in the face of censorship” (iii). Ada Azoda and Maureen Eke’s edited volume *Gender and Sexuality in African Literature and Film* “urges the reader to explore how literature and film interact with political, economic, and social life in Africa, and to challenge cultural biases that predominate about Africa and its diaspora” (3). Thus working from the premise that African bodies are at once restricted by *and* resistant to uneasy combinations of authoritarian political rule and socio-cultural traditions, my own study hopes to expand the scope of a literary-cultural research engagement with the vast body of fictional writing by Africans, on the multiple forms of individual and social embodiment which constitute African sexuality. Epprecht remarks, for instance, that African societies [have] traditionally placed an extremely high and prodigiously over-determined value on heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Individual sexual desire was largely subsumed to the

broad interests of the extended family or lineage or enabled in ways that did not endanger those interests (Epprecht “Bisexuality” 188). He finds that this “invisibilisation of homosexuality” is also influenced by a broader silence around sexuality and issues of modesty in African societies. The implication is that “it is only recently that Africans have had the opportunity to reflect and discuss their own sexualities in public” (Fortuin 44).

Sexual Textualities

As the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter observes, literature is an appropriate medium for such enquiry. For example, as a creative activity, “fiction projects the diverse yet enduring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour of the society from which it is drawn” (Kehinde and Mbipom 62). Yet, at the same time fiction, as a form of literature, may “‘trouble[]’ and transform[] our thinking about sexuality”, rather than merely reflecting the status quo (Watkins n.p). Reading the literary texts against the grain, acknowledging contradictions, I consider the extent to which the fictional texts selected for my study constitute an ambiguous space, one in which “to expose and challenge the realm of dominant identifications and fantasies” (Rose 15), even while there remain awkward moments in which the writers continue to be interpolated by normative, even hegemonic discourses around sexualities. In effect, my engagement with the selected works of African fiction attempts to emphasise a plural and elusive conception of African sexualities, a project well-suited to the potential of the literary, since literature is always characterised by a surplus of meaning, intentionality and cultural reference, rather than being merely descriptive or reflective of reality.

Broadly, this study aims to tussle with question such as the following: What is the interplay between hegemonic sexual norms (re)created within and after autocratic rule, and the mediated representations of sexualities as portrayed in contemporary fiction from (post) dictatorial African regimes? How may received norms about sexuality be imagined to intersect with governing political ideologies? How are such norms reproduced and/or contested in the selected fiction? What are some of the limits, possibilities and paradoxes of the representation of sexualities in the selected texts? How do language and form enable an author to mediate meaning? To what extent may the aesthetically-inventive representational spaces of fiction both draw on and yet also reconfigure documented observations of empirical-sociological sexual experience? My goal is not to answer such questions but rather to be guided by the spirit of Namwali Serpell’s *7 Modes of Uncertainty*, in which she explores the relationship between potentially paradoxical claims for the ethical capacity of

literature and literature's power to unsettle and trouble received ideas, to perplex and bewilder readers. Her argument is made in relation to experimental novels, where difficult style and lines of conflicting information and view preclude easy assimilation into coherence, for a reader. But her idea that textual structures generate productive uncertainty is a useful one for my own study of sexualities in fiction from repressive African regimes. The implication is that despite politically repressive power over sexuality, despite culturally pervasive patriarchy, the writers on whom I focus find space to question various received sexual repressions and mores via character development or plot, *and* that such treatments ought not to be assumed to *resolve* difficult issues or comprehensively to *settle* challenging questions. Rather, the text's willingness even to countenance contradictory positions is the point, opening up potential responses which are sometimes contradictory, and induce perplexity, or further query. Serpell suggests that texts work through un-foreclosed modes of 'affordance', both guiding and frustrating, so that a reader encounters an encouragement, if not an obligation, to experience ongoing ethical quandary.

Some Theoretical Concepts and Frameworks

In terms of theoretical framework, my approach owes intellectual debts to overlapping domains of critical scholarship and practice, prominent among them Foucauldian analysis, as influenced by contemporary gender studies and African feminisms. The study will make questioning use of Foucauldian theory on sexualities, giving necessary attention to issues of gender differentials that Foucault's work tends to ignore. As discussed earlier, sexual behaviour and sexuality exceed the locations of individual self, being discursively and systemically constructed. Michel Foucault maintains that sexuality has "been taken charge of, tracked down, as it were, by a discourse that aims to allow...no obscurity, no respite" (20). Often concealed in discourses are layers of signification that inform what is said, why and how it is said, what is not said and why (Izugbara 3). Foucault argues that discourse involves power because it is about knowledge and language and narratives are key vehicles for producing knowledge. Power is thus a multiplicity of force relations of which discourse and knowledge are key elements. As such, language is not merely an explicitly directed, repressive power, but productive of knowledge in more dispersed forms – in the case of the present study, of the nature of sexuality and 'proper' sexual conduct. It is through institutional practices that sexuality is reified or given meaning by those who at a particular historical point in time exercise power and control discourse. This element gives greater credence to ways in which gender influences decisions about and actions of sexuality, more

so than Foucault conceded. Law, culture, religion as institutions constitute part of the truth-generating apparatuses and structures that uphold what Foucault conceptualises as ‘regimes of truth’, but categories of gender also need to be factored in. As I have already indicated in referring to de Lauretis, for example, while my approach owes much to Foucault’s I also aim to bring his useful ideas of the technology of sex into nuanced critical relation with more gender-oriented discourses of sexuality.

In the contexts under study, state power exceeds its normal limits; the state is able to exert influence, direct and indirect, on both mundane and politically consequential matters. In such semi-permanent states of political ‘excess’, the postcolonial commandment (as Mbembe calls it), routinises itself through “daily rituals that ratify it” (Mbembe “Provisional Notes” 10). Power, in these cases, is viewed not simply as a coercive tool of control, superimposed from outside but a pervasive, diffuse and complexly embodied series of relationships which come into play via the production and circulation of discourse, knowledge and regimes of truth which are differentially internalised. Power is thus a multiplicity of force relations of which discourse and knowledge are key elements, and systems of sexuality are linked in relation to questions of gender, race, class and the like. In my analysis, I adapt Foucault’s concept of governmentality- understood as “the broad sense of technologies and procedures for directing human behaviour” (Rose et al 1) – in order to examine the formations, contestations and iterative performances of African sexualities.

The meaning of governmentality is “three pronged” (Nyanzi 481): (a) The processes through which governments produce governable citizens, who respond accordingly to policies to create a happy society; (b) How citizens think about and respond through organised practices- for example, mentalities, rationalities and techniques – to the modes through which their conduct is governed and (c) the inter-relationship between these two levels of meaning. Stella Nyanzi adds that beyond hierarchical state politics of government control, “governmentality also considers how conduct is governed through, for example, individual self-control, parental and family guidance for children, management of the household, the bio-political control of populations and the relationship between knowledge, power and self-governance- and social control in disciplinary institutions such as the school, the hospital or the psychiatric institution” (481). Thus in my study I examine the multiple ways in which governmentality is exercised in the selected fiction.

I have also found conceptual inspiration in Ann Laura Stoler’s study of the “education of desire” (6) and “the alienations of affections” (12) under the authority of colonialism in the context of Dutch colonial Indonesia of the 19th and early 20th century. In research which she

positions as “anticipat[ing] comparative concerns” (11) from further scholars – an invitation, as it were, for my own work – she examines “the colonial state’s investment in knowledge of the carnal,” showing how “domains of the intimate figured...prominently in the perceptions and policies of those who ruled” (7). As she argues, sexuality and embodiment are locations which allow us to identify what Michel Foucault might have called the microphysics of colonial rule. Such work offers me the opportunity to extrapolate to investigating fictional representations of African sexualities in repressive postcolonial regimes. Stoler, while a historian, makes specific claims for fiction as “portray[ing] sensibilities, sentiments, and states of distress” that “haunt and hover on the fringes” of socio-political and historical discourses. She implies that literary texts, in “evading our hermeneutic finesse”, are documents which might valuably lead a scholar towards nuanced understandings of “how power shape[s] the production of sentiments and vice versa” (7). She implies that literature is an important discourse in enabling scholars engaged in exploring sexuality and political power “to dwell in the disquiets, in the antipathies, estrangements, yearnings and resentments that constrained ...policies and people’s actions, compelled their fears and shaped what they imagined” (12). Overall, she gives greater depth to Foucault’s notion that sexuality is a “charged transfer point of power” (Stoler 16), and this influences my own research in placing “questions of homo- and heterosexual arrangements and identities” (10) at the core of governmentality, colonial or postcolonial, investigating definitions of sex and affect “as charged sites of its tensions” (10).

The study also deliberately re-contextualises Foucault’s ideas within the context of Africa and African scholarship, using the framework of African Feminisms. In examining African sexualities, Tamale draws on Foucault’s understanding that power is not simply a coercive tool of control, superimposed from outside but unevenly diffused through the production and circulation of different discourses and regimes of truths, race, culture and gender among them. In the African nation states which form the focus of my study, how people experience sexuality is heavily influenced by social and cultural norms. As Tamale notes, “How and with whom we have sex; what we desire; what we take pleasure in; how we express that pleasure; why and under what circumstances and with what outcomes sexuality is experienced...all are forms of learned behaviour communicated *inter alia* through the institutions of culture, religion and law (“Exploring Contours” 8). Tamale’s use of Foucault within African scholarship develops a contextualised framework of response which accommodates the myriad factors which inflect African sexualities, among them totalitarianism, religion, imperialism, ethnicity, culture and (neo)colonialism, all considered

as contributing factors not only to the outright oppression of African subjects, but also to the ways in which they constantly mediate identity, rephrasing and reconfiguring received norms. I examine some of the ways in which these considerations intersect to construct, reproduce and reconceptualise gender and sexualities in the texts I have selected.

I also use works by African feminist scholars such as Patricia McFadden and Charmaine Pereira whose research specifically addresses the intersections of the erotic and power. McFadden argues that the systematic suppression of “women’s sexual and erotic inclinations”, has resulted in the “conflation of sexuality and reproduction within a heteronormative cultural and social matrix”, a situation maintained through “vigilant cultural surveillance” and reinforced through various agents (50). Among other aspects of sexuality, the notions of pleasure and choice are “rarely discussed or acknowledged as being...contentious aspects of human sexuality and for many African women and men” even the slightest proposition that “sexual pleasure and eroticism have political implications elicits alarm, and it is seldom recognised that sexual pleasure is fundamental to one’s right to a safe and wholesome lifestyle” (McFadden 50). While one of my interests in this dissertation is desire and the individual, a relation I might prefer to imagine as idiosyncratic, McFadden’s provocative arguments draw my attention to even sexual desire as in some measure a social construction that is articulated in and through power, entailing processes of subjugation and ordination which may be externalised in practice, but are also internalised as psychological patterning.

Mumbi Machera, too, indicates that “sexual feelings and behaviour are influenced and constrained by cultural definitions and prohibitions”, rather than merely “by physical possibilities for sexual indulgence” (157). On this note, Signe Arnfred reminds us of the assumptions regarding female sexuality and fertility which coalesced into a persuasive moral code under the combined forces of Victorian colonialism and Christianity (17). She argues that norms for male and female sexual behaviour developed along different lines within this “moral regime”; men were given more room to express their manhood and masculinity and female sexual pleasure was “defined out of existence”, “female chastity and passionlessness becoming the model and norm” (Arnfred 17). Contrary to the indigenous practices of some traditional African societies, sex as reinforced by church and familial institutions began to be “legitimised for women only as a means of procreation for pleasure was seen as proximate to “primordial sin” (17). However, Charmaine Pereira in a response to McFadden’s standpoint, is quick to caution scholars of African sexualities against making universalist claims about the repression of female sexuality. She invites scholars to conduct more research into those

various traditional African contexts which make allowances for the sexual fulfilment of women by extensively “engaging in the production and distribution of erotic articles and in teaching about sexuality and traditional erotic culture”, practices aimed at enhancing both female and male sexual pleasure (Pereira 63). I bear such cautions in mind in my study, even while I remind the reader again that the study is literary-critical and thus emphasises interpretation, rather than depending on the empirical angle more characteristic of scholarship whose disciplinary ambit is historical or anthropological. I also draw inspiration and selected ideas from the research of African feminist scholars such as Obioma Nnameka, whose concept of nego-feminism enables me to think through how African women negotiate their sexualities in circumstances which tend to entail restrictions. This context-specific line of thought, which also focuses on how strategic resistance against power can also manifest itself in subtle ways, counters western feminist hegemonic perceptions which have often framed African women as lacking agency of any kind.

More broadly, Judith Butler is also useful in problematising Foucault’s “gender blind” historical analysis of power and sexuality in his assumptions that “models of masculine behaviour were transferrable to feminine behaviour” (Greene 37). Butler unsettles the deeply-rooted, ‘common sense’ assumptions that ‘natural’ biological sex describes a person’s gender, which then determines sexuality. In illustrating how social reality is not a given but a construct which nevertheless has tangible social effects, Butler speaks of the power of “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign,” arguing that through the act of performance, society positions people so as continuously to enact sexual conventions making them appear natural and necessary (270). Hence, gender is an act “which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again” (Butler 272). In effect, for Butler, gender and sexuality is not what we are but what we do through performativity, by following the rules that govern a heteronormative discourse. As Tamale shows, Butler’s subversive theory of gender/sexuality-as-performance exposes the fictitious character of the hegemonic conceptions of sexuality that law, culture and religion (as examples of ‘truth’ reinforcing institutions) help to construct. Butler, in conjunction with Tamale, is useful to my research since this scholarship emphasises that gender and patriarchy are not transcultural notions; instead, they are contextually configured.

Methodology and Chapter Breakdown

As Catherine Cole *et al* note in their introduction to *Africa After Gender*, literary methods offer useful advantages to researchers investigating gender and sexuality. The literary critic “is trained to read against the grain of texts, deciphering layers of significance in narrative technique, tone, style, and genre. This appreciation for the paradoxical expressive capacity and opacity of language is an important corrective to historical and social science scholarship, which often assumes a direct and transparent connection between word and meaning, between signifier and signified” (Cole et al 4). Simultaneously, I also grant Cole *et al*’s reminder that literary scholars “are often less sensitive to the specificities of different cultural and historical contexts as well as the larger issues of continuities and change within historical transformations” which tend to mark historical and anthropological research (4). Thus, while my study emphasises literary-critical discursive engagement, at the same time, by being open to the ideas and methods of other disciplines, I hope to set up checks and balances, “to overcome [the] biases and omissions inherent within [literary studies’] disciplinary perspectives” (Cole et al 4).

This dissertation has three core chapters – but five including the Introduction and the Conclusion. Chapter One, the present Introduction, outlines a survey of the existing literature and presents a rationale or validation of the scope of my own study. It also offers critical definitions of concepts, theoretical underpinnings and methodology. In Chapter Two, the novels under study are Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, Moses Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles* and Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*. I analyse these three fictional texts by male authors using the lens of ‘sexualities’, and I speculate about forms of hegemonic and more heterogeneous masculinities in the authors’ narrative representations. Chapter Three focuses on the way in which selected female writers represent girls’ and women’s sexualities in relation to proprieties of respectability, erotic desire and the possibilities and limits of sexual agency, among other issues. Here, the fictional texts in question are *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta, *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe* by Doreen Baingana and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* by Lola Shoneyin. In Chapter Four, paying particular attention to *form*, I turn my attention to short stories and the representation of so-called non-normative or queer sexualities. I analyse the following short stories: “Jambula Tree” by Monica Arac de Nyeko, “America” by Chinelo Okparanta, “Love on Trial” by Stanley Onjezani Kenani and “Chief of the Home” by Beatrice Lamwaka. Finally, in Chapter Five the representation of African sexualities as discussed, explored and

investigated in the dissertation overall is revisited, and open-ended conclusions are drawn with regard to the issues of transgressive sexualities, marginalised identities, contested gender constructions, sexual agency and desire in fiction from (post)dictatorships. The concluding section will also provide a commentary on the effectiveness of literary representations in enlarging and problematising the discourse of African sexualities.

CHAPTER TWO

MAKING MEN: FORMING AND PERFORMING MALE SEXUALITIES IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 364–65)

Preamble

This chapter examines representations of male sexualities in Helon Habila's *Waiting for An Angel* (2002), Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2001) and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010). It particularly explores the congruencies and disjunctures of authoritarian constructions of sexualities and the impacts on, and implications for, male bodies and masculinities in the selected fiction. Borrowing from Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher's definition, masculinities can be considered as "a cluster of norms, values, behavioural patterns expressing explicitly and implicitly expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others" (3). Here, I aim to understand "the masculine" within "postcolonial" African contexts, following Stephanie Newell's reminder that it is necessary to "read masculinities through local embodiments" (247). Approaching African masculinities as a concept problematised through the notion of Africa as a historical and geopolitical space (Ouzgane and Morrell 2), the chapter positions its analysis within an intersectional framework. Intersectionality¹², a term coined by Kimberly Crenshaw as a "way of capturing the complexity of social identities", can be defined as a "discourse about identity that acknowledges how identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions" (Crenshaw 1299). While my study is concerned with the fictional representation of sexualities, it nevertheless recognises that "there exists an array of vectors of relationality" (Hopkins and Noble 815) that produces different forms and functions of power; hence, intersectionality is useful for understanding the "myriad and multiple articulations of social power" as they relate to the social reproduction of masculinities and male sexualities

¹² Intersectionality has a strong link with Black Feminism and as a result has prompted scholars of masculinities for example McGinley and Cooper (2012) to lean towards the concept of "multidimensionality". I however use intersectionality in my study because although I am mindful of the partial privileges that men might have over women, their experiences are also inflected by an intersection of issues of class, gender, religion, culture, totalitarianism, globalization etc.

(Moolman 93). The chapter will address a number of interrelated questions: how do these authors' representations address challenging new forms of masculinities, and in what ways do these representations also unevenly endorse or reinforce patriarchal hegemonic constructions of sexualities? Overall, I am interested in exploring the intersections, continuities and discontinuities which obtain in the constructions of masculinities and male sexualities within forms of authoritarian contexts. I suggest in this chapter that the three writers on whom I focus represent heterosexual masculinity, with all its associated ideals and limitations, as the assumed, naturalised form of the hegemonic masculinity that is preferred by the state, and sanctioned in dominant culture. At the same time, though, I seek to consider how the fiction enables hegemonic versions of masculinity to be imaginatively contested and reconstructed to place in cultural circulation versions of masculine identities which destabilise the norms.

Hegemonic Masculinity?

Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee in their 1985 article "Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity" defined the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" as a version of masculinity that is dominant in society, a form that acts as a yardstick for measuring other masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity "establish(es) the cultural ideal" for what it means to be a man, "silence(s) other masculinities, and combat(s) alternative visions of masculinity" (Ouzgane and Morrell 4). In other words, hegemonic masculinity is the idealised form of masculinity in a given historical-cultural setting (Messerschmidt 82). Although there is no single definition of manhood across different cultures, David Gilmore makes cogent points:

[A]lthough there may be no "Universal Male", we may perhaps speak of a "Ubiquitous Male" based on these criteria of performance: . . . to be a man . . . one must impregnate women, protect dependents [*sic*] from danger, and provision kith and kin . . . We might call this quasi-global personage something like "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider (223).

Such catalogues of masculine ideals as the historical and cross-cultural undertakings listed above are examples of what Connell calls "essentialist" definitions of masculinity, "definitions [that] pick a feature that defines the core of the masculine" (68). As Connell further posits, hegemonic masculinities tend to assume heterosexuality as the legitimate form of sexual desire and expression, clustering into a dominant concept of masculinity that is culturally upheld by many societies, both Western and African.

Hegemonic masculinity as the practice of a dominant form of masculinity is central to understanding the mobilisation of power and the reproduction/production of sexual violence. Moolman argues that the state as the “embodiment of social and political power is important for the constitution and representation of hegemonic masculinities” (96). Furthermore, “power, privilege, and protection as constitutive of hegemonic masculinity are achieved through different vehicles and mechanisms, depending on race, class, age, geography, and context” (Moolman 96). In Africa, the power and privilege of hegemonic masculinity are legitimised through the simultaneous existence of a dual, binarised ideological space, modernity and tradition. Extrapolating from Desiree Lewis who argues, for example, that South Africa exemplifies the dynamics of many neo-colonial contexts, “where nation-building is firmly yoked to heterosexist relations and discourses” (104), I highlight this centrality of heterosexuality in relation to the nation-state in my discussion of the novels.

Under heterosexual masculinity, male-female sex constitutes manhood as it is closely linked with several thematic factors that resource the dominant masculinity narrative (Ratele “Male Sexualities” 414). “The significance of the penis in any man’s life,” Ratele argues, “is never just with the organ as a physical object. Rather, the consequence of a penis is more about the powerful meanings that the organ accretes in different cultures” (“Male Sexualities” 414). The physiological biology has attributed to it a potent panoply of maleness, per se, which in tautological turn is taken to imply the naturalised rights and rightness of physical maleness and male heterosexuality. This sexuality, in all its manifestations, is a hegemonic form of masculinity, and tends to occupy a ruling and privileged position in a society or group, while ‘other’ masculinities are relegated to subordinate positions (Connell 125). Robert Morrell further adds that these other forms of “less powerful masculinities develop outside the corridors of power” (7). This dominant masculine discourse has been instrumental in attempts to control and dominate female sexuality, as well as to penalise male citizens whose behaviours and orientations do not conform to the preferred hyper-masculine codes. As Ratele further explains, hegemonic masculinity is “a mesh of social practices productive of gender-based hierarchies, including violence that supports these hierarchies; that is, the unequal relations between female and male groups” (“Male Sexualities” 416). For example, we witness this in the way sexual violence can become both a weapon of war and a potent symbolic act in patriarchal ethnic cleansing and the gendered creation of nations or national pride, through the raping and sexual brutalising of women and gender non-conforming sexualities (Lewis 105).

Insofar as “heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals”, heterosexuality can be understood “to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Butler “Bodies That Matter” 237). These, Judith Butler argues, are for the most part “compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate” (“Bodies That Matter” 237). At the same time, though, such “norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction” (Butler “Bodies That Matter” 237). Accordingly, as my discussion in this chapter will attest, even sedimented and naturalised versions of masculine sexualities are subject to reconfiguration. Moolman, for example, has defined masculinities as signifying the “multiple, shifting, fluid practices, and performances of gendered bodies and identities” (95). She further brings our attention to postmodern and postcolonial theorists who identify a “space of in-between” as a contemporary place for the “construction of identities and subjectivities as multiple, continuously shifting and in-process of contestation and negotiation” (Moolman 95). Andrea Cornwall, and Nancy Lindisfarne, in their introduction to *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, make a similar point: “once comparative studies expose a diversity of meanings, the idea of ‘being a man’ can no longer be treated as fixed or universal”(3). Masculinity as a relation to femininities - beyond binary definitions of gender to include transgendered and transsexual identities - is constituted through larger ideological discourses such as imperialism, race, sexuality, and age (Moolman 95), thus even so-called hegemonic modes of masculinity and the norm of heterosexual maleness which they tend to uphold, may be considered to *shift* according to various exigencies and pressures

Sexuality Under “Men in Khaki”: Performing masculinities in Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*

During the decades when the country was ruled through military dictatorship, the phrase ‘men in khaki’ was widely used by Nigerians to refer to the soldiers who enforced the state’s military rule. Habila observes that it “was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious-and patriotic... most intellectuals had only three options: exile, complicity, or dissent. Needless to say, there was more of the first two than the last (Habila 223-228).¹³ In an interview, he explains further:

I wrote [*Waiting for an Angel*]...for people like me, young, frustrated, patriotic and desirous of change. All of us were victims in those years. I wanted to point out especially the mental agony, the psychological flagellation all of us experienced under the military. As a character in the book says, “we were all impotent because we had no guns”. (Helon Habila interview 2002, 26)

Here, through a layered voicing - in the voice he has created for one of his own characters - Habila (perhaps inadvertently) configures the lack of political power by inverting the biological metaphor of commanding male sexual capacity, which in turn is associated with violent weaponry and war. Impotency becomes a metaphor for the powerless (rather as the etymologically male word ‘patriotism’ is the ‘correct’ term for love of one’s country), and if Habila intends his remarks as a critique of military rule, they also, through the voice of the character, in a deflected move propose that the ‘we’ of the author’s disenfranchised peer group is quite naturally to be rendered (if not explicitly *gendered*) through the ‘universalising’ linguistic-imaginative authority of the male norm. This convoluted statement attempts to locate the writer, possessed of a critical intelligence and potential, as an adversary of the phallocratic and masculinist inclinations of the postcolonial African nation state, an entity which privileges male ideals, ambitions and visions. And yet this is paradoxically achieved via the taken-for-granted assumption that language does not itself preferentially – with no need of disguise, the norm being so un-contentious – figure experience and thought through patterns of hegemonic masculinity. These are among the issues I will tackle in this section. I will argue that Habila largely conforms to this established tradition in his representations of gender norms even as he attempts to critique and problematise normative, homogeneous depictions of masculine identity and sexuality.

¹³ Helon Habila, *Waiting For an Angel*, London: Penguin Books, 2002. All subsequent page references are from this edition.

My focus falls on the novel *Waiting for An Angel*¹⁴ (now translated into French, Dutch and Swedish, among other languages), which chronicles the despair, despondency, deprivation and often-times terror that pervaded Nigeria in the years of corrupt military rule and pervasive human rights' abuse which occurred from 1993 to 1998 under General Sani Abacha, military head of state and de facto President. Habila's story centers on Lomba, a young writer-cum-journalist who is navigating an extremely oppressive socio-political and economic climate. In particular, after necessarily addressing questions of socio-historical context as they bear upon my analysis of Habila's first novel, I will explore what it means to be a man in the context of the Nigerian national politics within which Habila was writing. I speculate about both civilian and military forms of masculinity, considering how, within a military dictatorship, norms of male behaviour and imaginary are inflected. At the same time, I suggest some of the ways in which constructions of heterosexual masculinity intersect with multiple related factors, among them ethnicity, age, and class.

Habila is on record as being open-minded when it comes to sexuality as the subject of fiction by African authors, implying that he is not attached to essentialisms or prejudices, and that he is chary of long-standing taboos. Consider for instance his comments as one of the judges of the 2014 Caine Prize for African Writing. He remarks on the outstanding diversity of subject matter addressed by the applicants, from pieces "written in the folklore tradition", to "a detective story", to "fantasy stories about people disappearing into their computer screens, [and] about strange visitations by even stranger beings". There was also "a lot of sex, gay and straight, and yes, this is all African fiction" (Habila 2014). From this, we may infer that he does not consider homosexuality a taboo topic for the African writer, nor even an 'un-African' practice.

Yet for all this open-mindedness towards content, orientation, and representational mode, there remain complex nodes of entanglement in Habila's representation of heterosexual masculinity in *Waiting for an Angel*. In one sense, Habila "can undermine the psychological oppression of the military state through the defiant use of the imagination", even "rejecting the illusion of monolithic power that the state projects...by connecting with and listening to the stories of a larger community" (McCain 2). Simultaneously, though, it strikes me that Habila's shaping of "a social imagination" in the hope of "eventually lead[ing] to physical change" (McCain 2) is complicated by questions of the representation of gendered

¹⁴ The opening section of the novel *Waiting for An Angel* was first published as a short story titled "Love Poems" and it went on to win the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001. The novel also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the African Region in 2003.

and sexed subjectivities. In his fictionalised challenge to militarised masculinity, there also exist assumptions and characterisations which continue to invoke, and to place in repeated re-circulation in the world of the text and the wider world of ideas, some rather normative assumptions about African male sexuality and gender roles. This tension intrigues me. Most scholarship has focused on the ways in which Habila's first novel makes the specific link "between the poverty of the masses and the corruption of the military" (McCain 18), but I believe that this focus, however worthwhile, has detracted attention from the need to engage with the text's often more contradictory elements of the representation of sexuality and its intersections with poverty and militarised misconduct. For the moment, a brief account of *Waiting for an Angel* is needed. An excellent synopsis of the book (which also hints at its narrative-stylistic flair) is conveyed in the following 2002 editorial review from *Publishers' Weekly*:

Habila's first novel captures the chaos and brutality of Nigeria in the 1990s under the rule of despotic military dictator Gen. Sani Abacha. The story follows Lomba, a quixotic, apolitical student in the capital city of Lagos, who is trying to write a novel in his shabby tenement on Morgan Street (better known as Poverty Street) and covering arts for a city newspaper, the Dial...Lomba decides to take part in a prodemocracy demonstration. There, he is arrested and imprisoned for three years. The novel's narrative moves back and forth in time, beginning with Lomba's life in prison and ending with the climactic events leading up to the arrest. Some chapters are written in the third person, others narrated by Lomba himself and still others by a high school student named Kela, who lives near Lomba...and crosses paths with him just before the fateful demonstration. Through their eyes, Habila paints an extraordinary tableau...bringing...sounds, sights and smells to life with his spare prose and flair for metaphor.

There are analogies here with Habila's personal experience, as he struggled to write the novel under a repressive military dictatorship and, like Lomba, he has referred to enduring the "anguish of survival, seeking tactics to surpass the social matrices that threaten their very lives" (Egya 111). However, the character Lomba, unlike the author, is unable to realise his creative "intellectual endowments" (Egya 111). He is arrested without trial while covering a demonstration organised by residents of Morgan Street (later renamed "Poverty Street" by the inhabitants) against the extreme deprivation to which tyrannical army rule has subjected them. Moving between the multiple voices associated with the different characters in the novel, the narrative depicts how young, promising lives are thwarted, crushed by the inhumane strategies of the regime and its supporters. As Habila explains, "It is a novel about a distinct period in our history: the 1990s, or as some people term it, the military years. It is a story about the lives and dreams and hopes that were wasted by those draconian days – but it

is also about some people's determination to survive despite all that darkness...I lived through those days and I wanted to write about it, to keep it as a record of that moment in our history" (Habla interview 2002). In this chapter, while my interest is primarily in gendered sexualities, I will also address Habla's making of this supposed historical-documentary 'record' using imaginative means. My point will be to make a case (although brief) for the author's interest in formal boundary breaking at the same time as he attempts to write characters who break free from authoritarian rule; the related issue, here, is the extent to which he can create a narrative in which characters are able to challenge the powerful practices of hegemonic masculinities.

Experimentalism as Boundary Breaking

Within the broader frame of postcolonialism in which African writers strive to write through the vestiges of colonial authority into reconfiguring forms of African agency and self-assertion, I read Habla's novel as one that adopts postmodern elements which challenge the conventional narrative strategies of "impersonality, indirection and suggestiveness which are the props of the fabulist or/and parabolic modes" (Anyokwu 5) of traditional, older generation African writers. (For the purposes of my own focus in this chapter, I run the risk of seeming perfunctory on what is in fact a complex, extensive topic.) As a reader I notice his turn to various postmodern principles, among them stylistic transgression, flux, fluidity, indeterminacy, instability, linguistic and stylistic play, fantasy and decentered consciousness. Habla's use of postmodern elements demonstrates how postmodernism, though seeming 'decadent' and 'merely' experimental with its inclination towards avant-garde linguistic-stylistic play – techniques sometimes dismissed as 'inappropriately' Western in an African context - can also function as a form of postcolonial critique. This is important to my investigation of Habla's representation of masculinities. It is his sometimes unusual style which enables his critique of social repression and authoritarian repression. For example: he uses a-chronological plot breaks, fractured narrative and mobile, disaggregated points of view. In addition, he favours a collation of stories rather than a narrative premised on teleological coherence and progression, and his fiction is marked by disjunctures, multiple voices, and interrupted identities. Such techniques deliberately render norms unstable, whether we mean norms of identity or those of language and genre. The result is a form of fiction which, from multiple points of view, tries to engage with (often to ridicule) the autocratic military regime's suppression of its subjects' basic right to self-expression in

favour of the autocrat's rhetoric of dictatorial monologue and rule by edict, fiat and injunction.

However, Habila's literary inclinations towards a postmodern worldview in his first novel raise an interesting contradiction. While framing itself within the deconstructive and interrogating tendencies of postmodernism in its questioning of notions of history and nation, the novel is simultaneously marked (to some extent) by limitations in its questioning of conventional notions of gender and their representative sexual symbologies. This strikes me as an inconsistency worth pursuing. I find myself wondering, for example, about the extent to which the energies expended on countering the *masculinist* emphases of the nation's authoritarianism might leave a writer with little leeway for exploring forms of female identity. Or perhaps, to put this a little differently: I am interested in considering whether Habila can depict masculine gender and sexuality in heterogeneous ways without still positioning the female correlatives in typically more subordinate relation.

In an online interview with Susan Tranter in *Encompass Culture*, Habila acknowledges the potential of the novel form to accommodate diverse stylistic and theoretical perspectives: "The beauty of the novel is that it can absorb as many styles and philosophies as one cares to throw into it, and it gets the better for it." Like Lomba, the main character in the novel, Habila uses intertextuality to indicate the permeability of texts. His reference to historical events collapses the boundaries of the text and allows further conversations between his fiction and other fiction as well as historical events that lie outside the novel (McCain 48). Acknowledging that the novel form does not allow "monologic impulses to go unchallenged", Habila's inventive and innovative layering of the old stories with the new "places his novel into a much larger web of associations that add further depth to his characters" (McCain 48). Here, again, I am intrigued to consider his treatment of African sexualities in terms of possible challenges to "monologic impulses". What does he manage to render more complex than received norms tend to allow, and where (at whose expense) is he less successful? Lomba's performance of his masculinity takes different trajectories as the novel progresses, shifting according to the different contexts that he finds himself in. In the face of increasing military repression, masculinity for Lomba comes to be seen as the ability to perform sexually as a man and he begins to associate freedom with sexual gratification.

The Militarised Nigerian Context

David I. Kerr invites us very generally to read the “validity of West African novels as social documents, for if literature is relevant at all it is because we can obtain some picture of society and of life from it” (26). However, Ker cautions, in order to determine how “accurately certain social types and their behaviours are reproduced in a work of fiction, we must have knowledge of the structure of the society gleaned from other sources than purely literary ones” (26). Extrapolating from Ker’s assessment, I argue that in examining the representation of heterosexual masculinities in *Waiting for an Angel*, it is necessary to consider how the brutal socio-politics of Nigeria during the thirty years of military rule affected the corporeal realities of men and women who lived under the shadow of the military. My analysis examines the hyper-masculinist ideological narratives reproduced by the military state which pervade state influenced institutions such as family, higher education, and the penal system. Habila’s novel implies that the military state attempts to normalise and legitimise heterosexual, militarised hyper-masculinity as the dominant form of masculinity. Catherine Lutz describes the ways in which militarism becomes embedded and normalised in a society and highlights its broader, socially divisive effects:

Militarisation is... a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organisation of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them. Militarisation is intimately connected to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action. (723)

Under Abacha, militarism in Nigeria was justified and legitimatised as a narrative that persuaded the citizens of the military government’s necessity as a “‘corrective’ form of governance against corruption and indiscipline”; the supposition was that the regime “was in favour of [the] restoration of democracy and justice” (Osuba 26). As it happens, in fact, Nigeria has been governed for a longer period by the armed junta than by civilian rule, with most of the military leaders conceding the illegitimacy of their power only by expediently advancing the idea of a temporary and corrective government. In the process they have effectively “engineer[ed]” a politics of “transition without end” (Mama “Khaki in the Family” 2).

As the Lutz quotation implies, military dictatorship has significant effects upon the imaginative conception and embodied practices associated with human sexuality. Indeed, sexuality in relation to embodiment is especially pertinent to this study as discussed in the

introductory chapter. For as Ann Laura Stoler whom I quoted earlier explains, sexuality and embodiment are “locations which allow us to identify what Foucault might have called the microphysics of colonial rule”, meaning “the affective grid of colonial politics” (7) which plays out at the level of individual lives as possibility and limit. Stoler’s argument allows me to extrapolate to my own study of hegemonic military masculinities and how these modes of gendered being are embodied, related, and contested within a repressive regime. Sandra Jackson *et al*, in their edited collection *Imagining, Writing, (Re) Reading the Black Body*, add that the body “as material with particular bodies as a social construction, in a late capitalist context, is a site of cultural and social power, as well as an embodiment of values, norms” constituting what Donald Lowe describes as “production practices, consumption practices, social reproduction practices, practices of sexuality and gender construction...” (1).

Militarism is often conceptualised as an extreme variant of patriarchy used to dominate and oppress women and other non-dominant men; it is “a gendered regime characterised by discourses and practices that subordinate women and other non-dominant men...reinforcing hierarchies of class, ethnicity, race, and gender”, and in some contexts even violent hierarchies of religion, caste, location (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 99). Aligning myself with this line of thinking, my analysis of *Waiting for an Angel* examines how male-female relationships are constructed within the context of a military regime and how power is negotiated within these relationships. In examining the intersection of power and how sexualities are constructed and negotiated within military dictatorships, I draw from Foucault who argues that power is discursive, diffused, “already always there” and that one can never really be “outside of it”. Interestingly, this means that power cannot simply be equated with blunt, total control, but that it emerges as a curious, mobile totality of relations in which power must constantly work for legitimation, rather than being coercively secure. Foucault further argues that if there “are no margins for those who break with the system to gambol in”, this “does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law. To say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what” (Foucault 89).

Within this theoretical framework, Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* invites a reader to understand the discursive formation of masculinity, how male identification is performed - in language, idea and practice - under repressive circumstances. Indeed, the novel illustrates how ‘masculinity’ is an unstable construct that cannot be neatly configured and enacted in monolithic ways - even under a hegemonic phallocratic and repressive state, in which one might initially be inclined to imagine a hierarchically polarized, binaristic (mis)alignment of

power. As Robert Morrell points out, in any analysis of masculinities it is necessary to consider the “socially constructed nature of masculinity”, indeed, to concede that there exists “a range of masculinities” (605) through which to examine male roles (622).

Under military dictatorship, as Habila shows, the body is also the potential agent of sexuality, which in itself can be used to negotiate the repression, the social-economic despair and desolation created by the regime. The sexual body that is gendered ‘male’ also becomes a hierarchical symbol of power over other sexual subjectivities, but only with such insistence as to imply a fear of uncertainty, an anxiety over the very authority that is being claimed. This implies that male sexuality is a site not only of the normative, but also potentially of sexualities which unsettle the norm. This can be extrapolated from Connell’s remarks regarding masculinities, which can only be understood in relation to other masculinities and also to what is categorized as “feminine”, since these power differentials are what maintain women’s subservience in the gender hierarchy, *and* also unequal relations among men who espouse various forms of masculinity. Amina Mama argues that militarisation mobilises men into aggressive expressions of hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality, which has the effect of rendering women even more vulnerable, and marginal. Additionally, the macho qualities of militarised hyper-masculinities advance a spectacular emphasis on violence, strength, weapon-use and dominance over women and other, non-dominant men (see Adelman, 2003; Cockburn, 2010). Donald Mosher and Mark Sirkin in their seminal essay “Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation” describe hyper-masculinity as having three main characteristics: i) callous sex attitudes towards women ii) violence as manly; and iii) danger as exciting (150).

The military regime uses violence in its attempt to inculcate and legitimise hyper-masculinity as the acceptable and ideal form of masculinity. In the novel, Lomba mocks the belief that this is the solely justifiable embodiment of masculinity (his very mockery hinting that for all its authority and force, the state has *failed* to produce masculinity and male sexuality as coherent and singular). Notably, though, for all his criticism, near the end of the novel Lomba tells a prostitute at a bar, “I like you...but I am impotent...I don’t have a gun” (210). Here, we find another version of Habila’s remark at the beginning of the present chapter. Masculinity is equated with sexual potency and the ability to express male sexual desire towards female bodies; a failure to perform this sexual language stigmatises a man as un-masculine. Also, by associating male impotence – *his* own impotence - with the absence of a gun, Lomba illustrates just how pervasive and intimate is the military regime’s configurations of supposedly ideal, real masculinity. It ought to be imagined via figures of

violence, this figuration working to enable the sexual act, which in language and action becomes, figuratively, the violent penetration of a female body by a dangerous, unfeeling object. Further, if the impotence metaphor alludes to the phallus as a symbol of state power, reminding us that within semiotic definitions of masculinity “the phallus is master signifier” (Connell 70) while in contrast “femininity is symbolically defined by lack” (Connell 70), this symbolising of state power is never simply secure, precisely *because* it situates both the nation and its subjects as by implication feminised and subordinately sexualised sites (Musila “Phallogracies and Gynocratic Transgressions” 41). The ‘phallus’ creates the very lack that enables its power, but the shaky foundational premise of supposed lack in turn exerts its own force, always threatening to undermine phallogratic authority.

It is feasible to suggest that Habila’s treatment of male sexualities in the novel is a reminder that the patriarchal postcolonial state itself needs to be conceptualised as a constant site of “contestation and reinvention” (Mama “Khaki in the Family” 3), rather than coherence. Such instabilities for example characterise the intimacies of writing love poetry that the imprisoned Lomba undertakes for the superintendent. As I discuss later in this section of the chapter, under the heading “Writing Imprisoned Male Sexuality” (see page 51 *et seq*) the poetry writing entails mobile reciprocities and feints. The process shows Lomba and the prison official discovering odd ways of working in-between state authority, literary-cultural authority, and the elusive authority of personal intimacy which tries to live in repressive institutionalised contexts. Their intentions and strategies, too, are never fully explicit, remaining partially concealed, subtle manipulations. While not explicitly a physical *sexual* encounter, this man-to-man interrelation, in the context of (supposedly) subordinated prisoner and (supposedly) masterful figure of officialdom, unsettles the usual vectors of sexualised power relations, highlighting the labyrinthine rather than one-to-one correlations between forms conventionally designated ‘masculine’ and those marked ‘feminine’. The relation between Lomba and the superintendent is a curious form of counter-discursive masculinity combining repressive duress and elected address, in which power is slippery rather than illustrative merely of the super- and the sub-ordinate power relations of prisoner and authority. Here, understood in Foucauldian terms, the state’s governmentality is not that of a sovereign power which gives or takes life, but a far more complex interrelation of multiple agents through which subjectivity is formed and re-formed as political, economic, and sexualised; now emerging clearly, now becoming more obscure.

Such entanglements are even more acute once Lomba meets the woman to whom the poems are addressed. Her alluring female presence holds out to him the promise of the male

sexual freedom that the heteronormative socio-cultural context beyond prison suggests is his male right, but which has been curtailed by his incarceration under the military state, which attempts to subordinate him to the regime's more powerful expression of hegemonic masculinity. But Habila's characters imply that the postcolonial relationship of the subject and the state cannot be simply explained via rigid dichotomies such as "public/private, state/civil society, masculine/feminine, individual/society, ruler/ruled", as doing so would "obscure rather than reveal the functioning of modern sociality, governance, politics and sexuality" (Mama 3)¹⁵. Instead, even under despotic politics in which the diverse functions of the state as site and agent of governmentality have narrowed to expressions of violence and edict, the postcolonial relationship may be characterised as a "dynamic that is based not on the traditional either/or of collaboration or resistance but on an 'illicit cohabitation'" (Mbembe "Notes on the Postcolony"⁴). This is illustrated in the relationship between Lomba and the superintendent. The request that Lomba write the official's love poems for his girlfriend reconfigures the prison space as a social dynamics of unstable authority that speaks to the de-forming of the norms and lexicons associated with militarised hyper-masculinity even as it turns on the female figure and lyrically poetic ('feminised') modes of address in order to set the parameters of this unusual male bond in which power is differentially exchanged. Here, the rulers and the ruled share the same living space, with a sense of familiarity and domesticity pervading their relationship (Mama "Khaki in the Family" 3). Achille Mbembe further elucidates such power relationships within contemporary Africa, explaining that the:

[P]ostcolony is characterised by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation... the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery which, once they are in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence (Mbembe 3).

In one sense, the "excess" of the postcolony gives it the impetus to pervade and control the intimate lives of citizens, erasing boundaries between the public and the private. It is also through this series of institutions that the postcolony moulds the person into the governable citizen on whom violence can be exercised if need be, further extending control and subservience. And yet this desired totality of control is repeatedly elusive, morphing into micro-agencies that escape institutional mastery. This is exemplified in the subversive agency that Lomba's love poems take. In fact, the governance of the failed state is such that

¹⁵ Also see Gordon (ed).1980; Rose 1989, Weedon 1987.

individuals are *not* totally or completely ‘produced’ or perhaps interpellated as *citizens*, precisely because the apparatuses in this service are not civil, and are rendered insecure in the state’s reliance on explicit force, failing to persuade by subtle measures and being over-reliant on measures which tend to alienate, rather than convince.

Instabilities of Politics and Gender

The novel moves discursively across different spatial and temporal dimensions thus representing the political instability characterising the lives of the characters within the novel as well as that of the author himself. The political instability ensures that “everything is politics” (113), and as Bola, Lomba’s roommate, puts it, “The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison” (50). From this quote, we notice the restrictions that have been placed on lives and the prevalence of a militarised masculinity which uses violence as a political tool to retain power. Citizens’ lives are policed, and personal spaces are encroached upon by the soldiers. “[E]very street out there is crawling with them; the people lock their doors, scared to come out” (50). Moolman argues that “social identities are framed through ‘history’ and ‘place’” (94) and the centrality of this notion is indeed clear in the shaping of masculine identities of the young men in the novel as they fight against the poverty created by the military regime. Habila complicates his representation of masculinities in the novel, at times playing into heteronormative masculine codes which denigrate women and at other times critiquing the very same codes of masculine conduct, implying that masculinities are situational.

In the novel, Habila portrays a sexualised military masculinity and its exploitation of female sexuality by the regime’s soldiers. Cynthia Enloe argues that “when a nationalist movement becomes militarised” (56) as in the case with Nigeria, “male privilege in the community usually becomes more entrenched” (56). Indeed, we see this power asymmetry with regard to gender in the sexual aggression that soldiers deploy against young women during anti-military demonstration organised by university students who are contemporaries of Lomba. Habila depicts how sex is used as a weapon to discipline women’s bodies. Lomba’s college friend Adegbite reveals how the soldiers take advantage of the chaos during the demonstration to force themselves on some of the female students: “They appeared from nowhere in their trucks, shooting tear gas and rubber bullets at us...They went from room to room, breaking doors and looting. When we heard the girls screaming ‘rape’, our courage was rekindled” (73). The soldiers’ militarised masculinity expresses itself through the threat and action of a violence that the women understand conflates state authority with sexual

violence. At the same time the normative masculinity of the narrator and his male peers is also summoned forcefully into being by the need to react against such sexualised vehemence, their own belief in themselves as courageous men being predicated upon their bold willingness to act against the potential rapists, protecting the women. With regard to militarised masculinities, Yaliwe Clarke posits that being a soldier is purposefully linked to being a ‘real man’ as it is an embodiment of most qualities of ideal masculinity. The military attempts to “mould all men in a uniform guise of masculinity” through an “organisational culture that encourages ideal assets of soldiery such as physical ability, endurance, self-control, professionalism, sociability, heterosexuality” (52). It is through these characteristics that masculine performance is contrasted against images of ‘otherness’ such as femininity, emotionalism, weakness, non-normative genders, and homosexuality (Clarke 52). These constructions of masculinity work to dominate, objectify and vilify what militarised men consider to be weak and other. This incident in the novel is also explicable in terms of Amina Mama’s arguments regarding the militarisation of society. She explains that it is a process which “both draws on and exaggerates the bipolarisation of gender identities *in extreme*” (Mama n.p), a violent binarism which creates a situation in which men are encouraged to subject the nominally ‘weaker’ sex to gender based violence. This masculinising process, as Mama argues, is not marked by a singular quality but is an “intersectional dynamic that also ‘works’ ethnicity, religion and other social distinctions” (Mama n.p) into the construction of masculinities. This can create a circumstance, for example, in which soldiers rape women of a particular ethnic or social identity or class in order to exercise even more extreme forms of male power. In this instance, the female students occupy a social class associated with the privileges, status and relative liberalism of a university education, a social benefit which is not necessarily accessible to the soldiers, nor even congruent with their views of the proper citizen’s obedience to the state. The threat of rape, then, even before any actual physical assault, is a hazardously sexualised horizon of military rule, an implication always waiting to come into force, and hence shaping the embodied imaginaries of both the young women, and the soldiers. Habila’s narrative recognises that under the force of militarised nationalisms, ‘woman’ becomes an abundantly and expediently sexualised figure, “inundated with” a complex of masculinised desires for power, territory and control (Theweleit 294).

What comes to mind, though, is also Foucault’s contention that if sexuality is a technology of power, a site where bodily subjectivities are controlled, it is, too, a place where power is not only exercised but contested. Armed with guns and rubber bullets, rushing room to room, kicking down doors and looting, the soldiers embody an aggressive hyper-

masculinity that regards violence as manly and danger as exciting. As objectors against the state, the students are positioned as enemies whose power has to be diffused. By taking part in the anti-military demonstrations, female students become a particular category of enemy, on a level similar to that of the objects which the soldiers loot in the hostels, “booty or spoils of war” (Enloe 45). In this perverse, violent sexual-political economy, the female students present as ‘available’ “to be denigrated and disgraced” (Enloe 45). They are perceived as legitimate targets of rape. They must be disciplined and corrected in order to recant their transgression of the obedient female’s role in the normative gender hierarchy. Such logic also implies that the women ought to be taught by the militarised male representatives of the masculine state to (re)subject themselves to ‘necessary’ patriarchal authority and rule.

Habila further depicts callously sexualised militarised masculinities in the sexual brutality against women in the post-June 12, 1993 election riots. The riots came as a reaction to General Ibrahim Babangida’s annulment of the first general elections since a 1983 military coup, which saw the triumph of the M.K.O Abiola, a civilian. Through Habila’s depiction we observe an aggressive masculinity which aims not only to dominate women, but also those other masculinities which, disagreeing with the state’s project, are perceived to be subordinate, weak. In the episode of the novel which recounts the 1993 riots, the male characters (as ever) attempt to position themselves as bold heroes against the state’s tyranny of sexual violence upon women. However, a female character demurs, reminding the men of their own subordinate rather than valiant positions: “Oh, don’t start again with your lies!” Nancy cut in. “Who did you fight? All of you! I was there when the soldiers and police came. You all ran and hid inside your wives water pots, blocking your ears to the sounds of the soldiers raping your wives” (134). Nancy’s critique of what she views as cowardly actions of the men exposes power differentials occupied within masculine constructions. Militarised hegemonic masculinities relegate dissenting masculinities into lesser positions, feminising them, using fear and violence to drive such masculinities to hide in spaces traditionally designated feminine, emasculating them by rendering them powerless to protect their wives from sexual assault.

The military state’s invasive restraints on the personal freedoms of university students prompts the twenty-two year old Lomba, whose muddled thoughts, “converged in a confused, convoluted mass, then slowly receded, frittering away to nothingness...flooding and ebbing, chafing at the seams of (his) sanity” (71), to abandon his studies at the university. During the riots Lomba’s room is ransacked and his poems, which were his “secret thoughts and dreams” (72), are destroyed. Following these events, Lomba makes up his mind never to

return to the campus and he heads off down the “deserted road with nowhere to go” (75). It is this decision to abandon his studies at the university that shapes him into the man that we meet at the beginning of the novel. The interference and social upheaval that the military occasion in Lomba’s rather ordinary life not only curtail his relationship with Alice, a girl he meets at university, before it has even properly begun, it also determines the unsettling, even destructive socio-political context which informs the individual’s private life, his personality, his emotion. The violent cathexis of the personal and political that he experiences in his life leaves him disillusioned, and it shapes the kind of relationships that Lomba subsequently forms with women. His life becomes one of uncertainty and impermanence; women are not satisfied with him because he cannot provide for them as a man since he dropped out of college, a resentment which further demonstrates the extent to which the masculine and the feminine have been entrenched as the established bases for the ordinary relations of potential lovers, and potential spouses. Lomba’s girlfriend Sarimam, for example, leaves him for a man with money, a man who embodies socially-influential norms of male authority as an inseparable, paradoxical conjoining of potency and protection.

In the lived chaos created by the dictatorial military regime – evident not only in the overt brutality of rape, but also in the protracted mundanity of the long queues for fuel and kerosene – the intimacies of love and loving are squeezed to nothing, becoming superfluous. Indeed, even the act of *living* is severely compromised, since what matters is survival, the desperate need to find the means to survive economically. As Lomba laments when he sees Alice’s wedding photograph in a newspaper, some years later: “We were not to meet again for over three years - because my friend went mad, because of the riots, because I dropped out of school, because of so many things. What was a mere promise in the face of all these cataclysms, what was love but a luxury?” (92). The anaphoric repetition of ‘because’ is tenderly poignant, implying Lomba’s inability to make logical sense of the violent, disruptive socio-political context which has so shaped his personal life. Here, too, the concluding clause sets ‘love’ and ‘luxury’ in devastating syntactical relation, aptly conveying the damaged, emotionally impoverished effects of militarised masculinity upon the lives of an entire generation of young students.

Ironically, however, in spite of the systemic disruptions in Lomba’s life caused by the government, even the explicit violence of militarisation does not substantially alter his own conceptualisation of heteronormative masculine codes. They retain a hold on him, and he continues to recirculate them as he attempts to make a living as a writer. We may consider this a short-coming in the author’s own conceptual-ideological frame, of perhaps,

more generously, consider that in the young male figure of Lomba, Habila seems to be grappling with a difficult question: ‘What would it take to up-end received codes of masculinity and their associated sexual norms? Habila faces a conundrum: if violent militarisation does not in itself reveal the complicities between normative masculinity and violence – Lomba, despite his critique of the militarised state continuing as well to espouse versions of repressive masculinity - then what, how, where might a solution lie? Ali Erritouni implies something of this difficulty in his claim that:

For Habila, despotism in postcolonial Africa is coextensive with the will to power of the national rulers, and efforts aimed at countering it through radical means cannot but prove futile given the incomparable means of violence available to the state. Despite his pessimism, Habila, however, incorporates in[to] *Waiting* utopian projections, tentative as they are, that anticipate an egalitarian dispensation. (145)

That said, challenges still remain in the representation of egalitarianism between the genders as I will discuss in the sub-section below. Is Lomba’s behaviour, and indeed Habila’s shaping of the narrative in which Lomba acts, just another version of the longstanding tendency to subordinate the need for gender equality to the supposedly more urgent demand of national liberation?

Lomba, Masculinity, and the ‘Girls’

Lomba is a student from the remote northern part of Nigeria: “ain’t nothing happening there but goats and cows and deserts” (58). Because of this relative social isolation we might stereotypically expect Lomba to be associated with extremely hierarchical gender norms. However, contrary to his male college-mates whose expression of masculinity is equated with subjecting female bodies to salacious scrutiny, Habila presents the younger Lomba as being indifferent to performing his masculinity through the conventional subordinating gambits of male sexual desire for women, and the panoply of bodily prowess. He prefers to show his masculinity through demonstrations of intellectual capacity. For example, he doesn’t even notice the female students who are in the office of Dr. Kareem, his favourite lecturer, when he goes to discuss his poetry. As the narrator discloses, at that time Lomba preferred nothing more than “to have his poems discussed and argued; it gave him some kind of vague hope, a sense of place in the larger scheme of things” (80). In this ego-centred space of lyrical self-expression and exploration, he is pleased when he realises that registration was over and “the girls would soon be gone” (80) from Dr. Kareem’s office. While Lomba’s version of masculinity is not overtly sexualised, it is difficult to avoid the imputation that his sense of

maleness is nevertheless a form of egotism which is not as different from the overt sexual chauvinism of his male peers as he might think. For both types of youthful masculinity, ‘the girls’ scarcely feature, barely matter, in and of themselves; they are marginal to the main, *male* terrain of the young men’s agency, whether sexual or cerebral. If it is true that at this point in the narrative Lomba believes in the power of writing and its ability to transform, subvert and destabilise systems that have been put in place by society, at the same time his self-absorbed, perhaps self-regarding, interest in his own poetry also suggests his nascent sense of male importance, his striving for an authoritative frame of male cultural mastery in terms of which ‘the girls’ are merely minor figures, annoying distractions.

In this sense, despite Lomba’s progressive thoughts on national liberation, his views of women (‘girls’) reproduce normative, heteropatriarchal assumptions which subordinate the female to male ordinance. He seems to view women as a surplus or a distraction in relation to the bigger nationalist project; their presence and “uniformity” make him feel “jaded and superannuated” (81). To Lomba, women do not seem to have individualised identities and he therefore divests them of any autonomy and personhood – and yet the odd word ‘superannuated’ implies his unconscious fear of the latent power that the young women have over him. It is strangely as if he ‘intuits’ that his masculinity and the virility of nationhood are intimately connected to an as-yet-unrealised female power which will not necessarily wait its imagined ‘turn’ in the ideal scheme of things, but might erupt and claim agency at any time. However, he does not consciously think this, and hence cannot properly imagine or express the interrelation. More conventionally (a necessary displacement of his subconscious fear?), he holds dominant, complacently negative views about women as insignificant and ‘naturally’ inferior, and objectifies them by reducing them, for example, to the clothes they are wearing. He nonchalantly refers to one of the girls as “jeans”, judging her from her looks to be “fresh and foolish” (81). He thinks about the girl he facetiously labels ‘Jeans’ with contempt: “She had on the same wig all the other girls on campus were wearing, the same tight top, the same faded jeans (81). Here, despite seeming to single her out for remark, he blankets her under the demeaning category of a trite generic femaleness, which in turn is further diminished through an apparently inevitable association with fashion trends, appearance and a concern with ‘mere’ embodiment.

However, when he hears Alice speak for the first time (a friend with whom ‘Jeans’ had been in Dr. Kareem’s office), we notice a subtle shift in Lomba’s views of women. He moves from viewing her as insignificant to being aware of her as a human with individual qualities:

What they did (her words) was to make me look at you for the first time; all this while I had looked at your friend - you had that ability of a cryptic animal to blend into the background, as if you were saving the viewer from the full shocking impact of your beauty. You were the medusa. I turned into stone. (81-2)

Here, an “other’s” words compel him to see her properly for the first time, with a shock of sensory recognition. Yet Habila’s phrasing of this emotional event is very complex. Lomba’s response is marked by the patronising assumption of male power, since it is *he* who deigns to *grant* her notable singularity and the metaphors which ostensibly praise her ability to conceal her attractiveness, at the same time depict her as creaturely rather than human. Even the mysterious quality he attributes to her compounds the normative social convention of womanly mystery by further associating it with an animal’s skills of camouflage. Finally, Lomba invokes a medusan trope. The mythologised reference to the medusa acknowledges the woman’s power to turn the male to stone with her gaze, but the reference also perversely renders the woman monstrous, fixing her to a reviled mythological femaleness which has historically gripped men’s hearts with fear. (While the medusa trope has been reworked by feminist theorists in the liberatory claims of female power, there is none of this disruptive energy in Lomba’s – or Habila’s? – passing reference to the power of the snake-headed figure of ancient myth. Medusa is rather bathetically trundled on as the popular cliché describing women’s ‘apparently’ emasculating power.) Overall, the passage is riven with such contradiction as to imply that the young man’s desired authority and autonomy is in fact severely compromised. Beneath his play of masculine sexuality lies an unsettling intuition that his power is only relational, his capacity for super-ordination entangled with the woman’s powerful capacity to exert not only attraction, but varied female agency.

In some sense, then, Habila’s treatment of Lomba as a character is a device which allows him to explore the compromised relation between masculinities and despotism. Consider, for example, Lomba’s use of sexual metaphors; their highly predictable, rather than imaginatively innovative shapes: “I like you...but I am impotent,” he says to a sex worker at the end of the novel to symbolise how powerless he is as a man under the military regime. Furthermore, he describes his insatiable sexual desire and longing towards Alice within art collector metaphors therefore commodifying her sexuality: “Was that what made him want her in the first place?[...]If you knew Alice for an hour you’d know that beauty wasn’t just it. There was something else. What makes art collectors pine and ache with longing the moment they see a rare work they just have to have? (80). His language is an

expression of a conventionalised male aesthetic of the visual, even the scopic, whose superficial view is further endorsed by the blunting supremacy of political authoritarianism. In his discussion of women in relation to political ideals and the abuse of human rights, his writing hopes to overturn normative social roles: “To conclude, I use the kerosene-starved housewives of Morgan Street. I make them rampage the streets, tearing down wooden signboards and billboards [...]; the sensual face of the man holding a pack of condoms bit the dust” (113-114). On the face of it, in this passage from Lomba’s account, the women are not subservient; they are enraged, provoked to rebellion by economic and political exigencies. They step aggressively beyond domestic space and claim rightful public visibility for their supposedly private, domestic hardships – whether of fuel scarcity, or of sexual servitude. And yet a reader is conscious, throughout, of the male character’s authorial agency in dictating situations and actions: “I use”, “I make”.

Even after the demonstration and the terrible madness which grips his roommate Bola, Lomba frequently fails to respond to women in terms of their individual identities. Indeed, it seems that because the military unrest denies him freedom and by extension the possibility of loving freely with Alice, he begins increasingly to equate the desire for freedom with the desire for sex with a woman, even to subsume his thwarted longing for political change under the more easily, conventionally satiated physiological lust for sex. When he is confined in his small room in the tenement house “trying to write a novel...the words and sentences...looking ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table” (106), he begins to envy the youthful boys and girls who walk past outside his window. He wishes he could break out of the bondage in which the regime has trapped him (part of which entrapment is his having assumed the obligation to write a public record of the regime’s tyranny), wishing for nothing more than to be “out in the sun *with* a girl and so free” (105).

Writing Imprisoned Male Sexuality

In the following section, I move on to discuss how Lomba reconfigures his male sexuality while languishing in a prison where he has been dumped without any prospects of a trial because of reporting on an anti-Abacha demonstration. Lomba’s prison notes, incorporated into Habila’s novel, comprise not only an attempt to restore the humanity and dignity that the jailers deny to a prisoner, but are also “a testimony to the power of narrative in helping the speaker cope with a traumatic past and [to] memorialise his eventual freedom” (Mwangi 54). (The wording, here, hints at the challenges: to ‘memorialise’ is usually to commemorate

something that has *already* occurred, and indeed may well be past in the sense of dead. However, Lomba's freedom is yet to come, an unrealised individual futurity which also represents, more broadly, the utopian political work of the protesters in pushing for the liberty of a post-military state.)

In his second year in prison, Lomba is granted access to pencil and paper, and he starts writing. Writing becomes an activity which enables him to re-shape his identity and dignity. He writes: "Here in prison loss of self is often expressed as anger. Anger is the baffled prisoner's attempt to re-crystallise his slowly dissolving self" (3). For his part, Lomba explains: "I write of my state in words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality" (3-4). Lomba's description of the loss of the self invites me to extrapolate from Mbembe's discussion of the rise of modern terror in his "Necropolitics" and his suggestion of slavery as an instance of biopolitical experimentation.¹⁶ Slavery is as an extreme form of the obliterating of self, and it closely resembles Habila's depiction of the prisoner's condition. Mbembe argues that the structure of the plantation system of slavery and its aftermath "manifests the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception" ("Necropolitics"21). He describes it as paradoxical because, in the first place, in "the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow" ("Necropolitics"21). The slave condition, Mbembe continues, is consequential of a triple loss: loss of a 'home', loss of rights over the body, and loss of political status. This threefold forfeiture constitutes absolute domination, natal alienation and social death ("Necropolitics"21). The analogy with Lomba's "nullified individuality" in *Waiting for an Angel* is trenchant; the prisoner is subjected to the jailer's control, an authority which is a metonym for the authoritative regime of the tyrannical state:

We were lined up in rows in our cell, waiting for hours to be addressed by the prison superintendent. When he came his scowl was hard as rock, his eyes were red and singeing, like fire. He paced up and down before us, systematically flagellating us with his harsh, staccato sentences. We listened, our heads bowed, our hearts quaking. (5)

The superintendent's body is symbolic of the military regime which privileges hyper-masculinity and the use of violence to subordinate supposedly lesser masculinities. Verbal abuse, brutal as any whipping, is a vehicle for the assertion of dominance, fearfully

¹⁶ In "Necropolitics", Mbembe relates and contextualises his project within the framework of Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Foucault's formulation of biopower situates itself within the division of people into those who must live and those who must die. He further states that the sovereign right to kill (*droit de glaive*) and the mechanisms of bio power are inscribed in the way all modern states function (See Foucault *Il faut defendre la societe* pp.227-32).

disciplining any potential irruption of resistance, language being used to ensure that the subjects remain under control of the military state. The jailer's body, while particularised, also stands (in) for, the otherwise remote power of the regime. (In a sense, here, even his own distinction is effaced, and he becomes, for the prisoners, the state: the state of control, the state of imprisonment, the state of self-subsumed by the political...) Further, given the prisoners' maleness, this stripping away of the self, of human dignity, cannot be separated from questions of emasculation; it is through verbal and gestural threat that the jailer, as representative of militarised authority, attempts to strip away the prisoners' belief in themselves as men. Here, we need to appreciate that in a heteropatriarchal society, masculinity is associated with preferred physical behaviours such as strength, bravery and the body's stoic ability to resist pain and withhold the showing of 'soft' emotion. The failure to perform these attributes in social relations is associated with being "feminised". Habila presents the prison context under the military not only as physically degrading, but as an emasculating experience for men. This is clearly articulated by Lomba during his detention:

Now I realised that I really had no "self" to express; that self had flown away from me the day the chains touched my hands. What is left here is nothing but a mass of protruding bones, unkempt hair and tearful eyes; an asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the mornings grows turgid in vain. This leftover self, this sea-bleached wreck panting on the iron-filing sands of the shores of this penal island is nothing but hot air, and hair, and ears cocked, hopeful... (4)

The ebullient lyricism of the language attempts, through rich description, to conjure a powerfully embodied sense of personhood that elicits empathy for Lomba and asserts his presence as a suffering individual. Despite Lomba's careful eliciting, part by bodily part, of the bare destitution of self, the insistent, irrepressible style hints at resilience of self, at unstoppable agency and an enduring belief in the un-abashed power of even the suffering human body to overcome. Lomba's imaginative description relies on vivid conjurings of embodiment, moving from hands, to bones, to hair, to eyes, to anus – and then ending on the poignancy of a de-realised, particularly *male* bodily agency: his erection. Even during Lomba's imprisonment, his penis follows its habitual biological promptings, erect in the mornings when pressured by the full bladder. This erection is rendered sexually useless to Lomba in jail; it is a superfluous bodily power, hence a non-power in the physical sense. And yet in the descriptive language, Habila connotes something of Lomba's continued power with *words*. Indeed, Habila's own authorial skill with language leads him to draw explicit links, at the level of poetic sound, between 'penis' and 'penal island', obliging a reader to appreciate

the abrupt curtailments which occur, in the prison, of accustomed male sexual behaviours. Lomba's maleness is reduced to the most intimate mercy of the state; at the visceral level of bodily urge, his masculine biology and its associated sexual agency are severely constrained. Interestingly, the imprisonment here is unable to police the basic male biological response of the erection, even though it does deny Lomba the power to transform biological impulse into the expression of sexual desire. (Incidentally, if the description of *ears* being 'cocked' points to the prisoner's heightened anxiety about his vulnerable body, it also forms a subtle echoic heightening a reader's sense of the *penis*'s usually casual sexual power, now abrogated in the prison context.)

In the above quotation, Lomba draws an analogy between imprisonment as "an emblem of governmental abuse of civilian rights" (Mwangi 56) and the denial of sexual gratification of the male body. As illustrated by Lomba's diary entry, the penis is an established symbol of masculinity, connoting virility and agency, both of which are impeded by imprisonment. Lomba's thoughts demonstrate how his self-identity *as male* is constructed within a cultural framework that invests male identity in the penis and sexualises male identity by associating it with heterosexual performance. Male identity is habitually premised on extensive sexual experience and on "attitudes towards sex and about women that shape men's conceptions about what it is to be (or not to be) a real man" (Langa 21). Ratele notes the commonplace perceptions of heteropatriarchal society in defining manhood. 'Proper' manhood is closely associated with the number and attractiveness of men's female sexual partners; further, "the size of our penises, the claims that we make about our sexual stamina, whether we can maintain a healthy erection and how virile we are" (Ratele 399), all of these become markers of desirable male sexuality. Such points are relevant to Lomba's situation. Lomba repeatedly equates his sense of self and his goal of political freedom with the ability to have intercourse with a woman. He has internalised the widely-accepted assumptions about male sexuality that, outside the prison, enable him to function as virile male, exercising his gendered freedoms, but which, in prison, subject him to repression by militarised masculinity and disrupt his self-identification as a man. This also implies the limits upon imagined freedom, since even the imaginary of political liberation continues to be premised on women's subordinate role in the entangled sexual-political performances of male desire. In *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila seems to be articulating his pessimism about the possibilities of a nationalist liberation movement which offers equal rhetorical and actual agency to both men and women. For where does hope lie with regard to the equality of the genders if even expressly progressive writers and champions of human rights such as Lomba perpetuate

heteronormative sexual belief systems and practices, simultaneously “expressing the loftiest political ideals about democracy and respect for human rights” (Mwangi 57)?

The absence of women within the prison environment is important to Lomba’s imagining of himself as a man (or as not sufficiently manly), for sex is a constitutive theme of dominant masculinity narratives. The performance of a heteronormative male sexuality is fundamental to Lomba’s sense of self. As a way of reconfiguring his “lost identity” as a healthy, heterosexual male, Lomba resorts to writing love poems in his diary which is later seized:

The poems were mostly love poems; fugitive lines from poets he had read in school: Donne, Shakespeare, Graves, Eliot, etc. Some were his original compositions rewritten from memory; but a lot were fresh creations - tortured sentimental effusions to women he had known and admired, and perhaps even loved. Of course they might have been imaginary beings, fabricated in the smithy of his prison-fevered mind. (6)

Reconstructing through memory his prior connections and affiliations with women, piecing together a sense of affirmative maleness from fragmented and even imagined pieces of his former life as a free man, these are creative strategies which play a significant role in enabling Lomba to reconstitute his erased identity as a normal, heterosexual male. However, Lomba’s reconfiguration of his male identity within the prison context also raises interesting paradoxes in his self-construction as a man and further highlights the falsity of any singular, credible and dominant code of masculinity. This is perhaps implied by Habila’s use of the phrase “fugitive lines”, borrowed from canonised English writers like William Shakespeare, John Donne and possibly pointing to the elusive and flexible nature of masculinity in contrast to essentialist notions of maleness. I notice, for example, that while Lomba relies on popular gender stereotypes regarding male and female sexuality, in his own prison writing he turns to a sub-genre (love poetry) that has historically entailed very complex *explorations* of gendered power in relation to self and identity. In some respects, the love lyric is a literary mode in which the male poet or speaker is able to demonstrate mastery of style, register and voice in expressing heterosexual desire. And yet in other respects, it could be seen as facilitating a male poet’s conscious play with positions of super- and sub-ordinate gender roles, sometimes in thrall to a woman’s powerful femininity. The writing of poetry, one might venture, implies Lomba’s willingness, despite (or even prompted by) the highly regularised military masculinities of his surroundings, to ‘feminise’ his masculine self. In a heteropatriarchal setting, to openly express love as an emotion is perceived as a role for the feminine and by implication configures a form of lesser masculinity. By writing love poems (some of them previously written and then recreated through memory; some of them fresh compositions

composed in jail), Habila shows how a repressive state may paradoxically galvanise a creative ‘counter-space’ of thought and action, where the reimagining of masculinities may occur. The jail cell becomes a surprising site for the renegotiation and unlearning of received, masculine codes, a site in which more evasive codes of masculinity can tentatively be scripted into being.

It is also the case, however, that Lomba’s “tortured sentimental effusions to women he had known and admired, and perhaps even loved” draws our attention back to how this “tortured” love poetry carries sedimented masculinist views. The psychic escape of the poetic, the meditative mediation offered by his ability to imagine women from his past and to invent some who have never existed, grants him resistance against military power and the freedom to escape the regime’s oppression. But it also sees him drawing on well-worn registers and vocabularies of male behaviour which are premised on milder versions of the power relations which characterise the military regime. At the very least, though, this tension between use and resistance is mobile in the narrative, and it is difficult to know where to settle one’s interpretation.

Worth considering is Lomba’s bowdlerisation of Sappho’s “Ode”. The original poem describes the tensions and frustrations of Sappho who is unable to secure the affections of her female lover, whose attention has been captured by the poet’s rival. The version that Lomba produces, plays fast and free with the original, a parody which turns the lyrical material and mood into mockery of the Abacha military regime and its attempts to control the citizens. When Muftau, the prison superintendent, forcibly obliges Lomba to write love poetry on his behalf for his girlfriend, Muftau fails to realise not only that Lomba has plagiarised parts of the Sappho poem, but also that he has censored the ode, expurgating the lesbian sexualities of the original piece lest they prove potentially offensive in the context of militarised masculinity. Muftau is effectively duped, inspired by the purportive beauty of the poem to propose to his girlfriend, much to the amusement of Lomba. As McCain argues, the beginning of the poem points ironically to the vanity and “self-absorption of the prison superintendent who imagines the tones of his choppy voice ‘sweet,’ and his laughter ‘lovely,’ just as he imagines his own poetry ‘great’, and that he is making Lomba ‘comfortable’ in prison by giving him cigarettes (49). The irony is that the intricately layered emotional, linguistic and cultural capitals of poetry completely escape the superintendent, But it is exactly such layered indirection which, for Lomba, offer a nuanced, metaphorical means through which to resist complete confinement, enabling him to imagine ‘self’ as partially eluding the dominant order of political control and policing. Lomba mocks the oppressive

military system by linguistically and poetically manipulating its supposedly authoritative, hyper-masculinised representative.

The politically subversive potential of Lomba's romantic verse eludes Muftau. Love poems? Mere love poems are of no consequence! (This might be because of their sentimentally plangent appeal, and the supposed femininity of the genre and emotional language.) He tells Lomba: "[T]he letters, illegal. I burned them. Prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But the poems are harmless" (16). Letters, albeit written in the same personal capacity as love poems, can claim a more direct political potential, especially in addressing the press and aiming to publicise the government's ills. The romantic, emotionally confessional poems, however, seem nothing but examples of a minor literary genre in which the writer voices personal feelings and private longings, devoid of any political and especially revolutionary, dimension. In Muftau's view, the socially referential mode of 'the letter' could prove seditious, the writer recounting the facts and empirical materiality of his incarceration, and even communicating political-ideological intent. Love poems, in comparison, by their very virtue of being poems, which conventionally are assumed to couch emotional concerns in high-flown, metaphorically obscure language, are surely nothing more than devices for seduction, or for channeling personal pain. This is what Muftau holds to be true.

Interestingly, it is Muftau, the official who is in charge of the prison, embodying in this capacity the hegemonic, militarised masculinity of the corrupt state, who in turn adopts an emotionalised, even 'feminised' identity in appropriating Lomba's poems as a tool for seducing his girlfriend. Muftau's body, "bigger than life, bigger than the low, narrow cell" (6) and the uniform that he wears daily, are all attached to meanings of a militarised, hyper-masculinist ideology that purports to have access to all forms of power, an ideology that controls, threatens, and suppresses other forms of masculinity. Through brutal torture techniques, Muftau uses his position as an agent of the military government to dominate and maintain the prisoners under control: "Twenty years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you" (9). His presence alone has the ability to induce fear in the prisoners, an emotion that marks the wider Nigerian citizenry under the dictator's regime. Wole Soyinka, in "The Climate of Fear" succinctly describes this (himself using a feminised language to position the nation): "While the regime lasted, however there was no question about it: for the first time in the brief history of her independence, the Nigerian nation near uniformly was inducted into a palpable intimacy with fear" (3). Lomba's love poems, having already in their literary borrowings blurred the

boundaries between learned and popular cultures, prompt a further intersectionality, making the boundaries between jailor and prisoner less distinct, especially once Lomba gains insight into the superintendent's personal life. In the narrative, this allows power sometimes to oscillate between jailor and prison, rather than simply reinforcing the expected hierarchy.

When Muftau asks Lomba to read "My Love For You", a poem Muftau claims to have written, the power relation between jailer and prisoner temporarily shifts, tipping in Lomba's favour: "Like a man in a dream, I ran my eyes over the bold squiggles. After the first stanza I saw that it was a thinly veiled imitation of one of my poems. I sensed his waiting. He was hardly breathing. I let him wait. Lord, I can't remember another time when I had felt so good. So powerful" (16). Temporary though it is, this feeling of power over his jailor becomes for Lomba a larger signal of hope against an oppressive government. In terms of material effects, too, Lomba's adeptness in penning poetry which Muftau uses provides an opportunity to negotiate better living conditions within the prison, and also secures him access to reading materials which stimulate his mind and provide imaginative horizons beyond the cell which restricts his life.

His institutional role as a prison superintendent requires Muftau to exert an aggressive masculinity over incarcerated men. (Even here, it could be argued that too is in a sense subordinate to the militarised dominant.) Outside the prison, Muftau expresses a version of masculinity which seems at odds with the official repressive norms. Contrary to the hyper-masculine identity that he projects to the prisoners, in his relationship with Janice, he is emotionally vulnerable, even fragile. Lomba is unable to reconcile these variant expressions of masculinity contained in one man; he is perplexed by Muftau's shift from the dominant aggressor to the affectionate, insecure man who is so desperate to impress a woman out of his league that he plagiarises a prisoner's poems. These elaborately raveled co-masculinities and their associated expressive sexualities of dominance and subordination are difficult to name, but they do unsettle simple categorisations of masculinity and its relation to sexuality.

Also pertinent are Muftau's limitations compared to Janice's own intellectual achievements. This feature of the relationship inverts normative expectations of the clichéd dynamics which are widely assumed to mark differential male/female 'intelligence' in heterosexual relationships. Muftau says of his girlfriend, "Her name is Janice. She has been to the university. She has class. Not like other girls. She teaches in my son's school. That is how we met." (17). The fact that Muftau expresses feelings of affection, of care, for a woman, surprises Lomba: "even jailers fall in love..." (17). Muftau explains, "At first she didn't take me seriously. She thought I only wanted to use her and dump her. And. Also. We

are of different religion. She is Christian, I am Muslim. But no problem. I love her. But she still doubted. I did not know what to do. Then I saw one of your poems...” (17). While there are significant class and religious differences between Muftau and Janice, he still seeks her love, guided blindly by the popular truism that love conquers all, and clandestinely assisted towards his love goal by the elevated emotions and diction of Lomba’s lyric poetry.

Janice’s doubt about her suitor’s integrity and feelings renders Muftau vulnerable. This vulnerability thus shows him to be sensitive and capable of exhibiting love. This is not the Muftau we know from the prison section of Habila’s narrative. In the hope of winning Janice over, he goes out of his way to reassure her that he does not subscribe to hegemonic masculinity’s expedient use of female sexuality; he doesn’t only “want to suck the juice and throw away the peel” (19). He also does her every bidding, allowing himself to be ordered and instructed, inverting his characteristic role with the prisoners. When Janice discovers that he had been asking Lomba to write the love poems on his behalf, she confronts him and demands to see the prisoner who is the real writer. He obliges. Furthermore, he almost weeps, pleading with her not to leave him when she rebukes him for not listing Lomba as one of the political detainees as requested by Amnesty International on the grounds that he thought Lomba “was comfortable” (31). Overall, Janice is an important figure in allowing Habila to explore the interrelated vectors of power (sex, love, dominance...) which mediate Muftau’s masculinity and complicate the assertive authority of militarised masculinity.

Sexual agency as a significant constituent of dominant masculinity is further evidenced when Lomba meets Janice, at her insistence, once she discovers that he is the author of the poems she has been receiving from her suitor. Her presence immediately triggers his desire, and he thinks of how imprisonment has denied him sexual gratification. Janice takes both his hands into hers, to comfort him, and her perfume, “mixed with her female smell...flowery, musky” rises into his nostrils (29):

I had forgotten the last time a woman had stood so close to me. Sometimes, in our cell, when the wind blows from the female prison, we’ll catch distant sounds of female screams and shouts and even laughter. That is the closest we ever come to women. Only when the wind blows, at the right time, in the right direction. Her hands on mine, her smell, her presence, acted like fire on some huge, prehistoric glacier locked deep in my chest. And when her hand touched my head and the back of my neck, I wept (29).

Evan Mwangi suggests that Janice becomes “an object of Lacanian desire, a condensation of wish and drive for a pleasure-giving phenomenon that the poet longs for but cannot achieve

in incarceration” (57). In jail, in the absence of women, the self-identities of Lomba and the other male prisoners as virile heterosexual men are disrupted since the prisoners cannot ‘be men’ when they cannot express their conventionalised male sexual agency. Women, in the prison, are spatially separate from the men, their femaleness diminished into a discordant, disembodied array of distant sounds which nevertheless, for the male prisoners, hauntingly suggests the presence, somewhere beyond the men’s own prison cells, of the promise of ‘woman’. Lomba’s lyrical language - the metaphors of the glacier and fire, as well as the reference to the wind – points to the naturalising of the intercourse for which he longs. It could be argued that for Lomba it does not matter whether it is this woman or that; in his imprisonment, women do not seem to have important individual identity, and the general idea of the female body functions as a compensation for the dysfunctional masculinity which is his lot as a prisoner. The category of ‘woman’ is objectified into a single function and that is to carry the male prisoner’s unfulfilled sexual desire. And yet in the gentle empathy of Janice, a particular woman, and in Lomba’s detailed, emotionally affective account of the power of her female touch upon parts of his body which are not usually designated sexual, per se, there is also a suggestion of Lomba’s maleness as not one-dimensionally *sexual*. Or, to express this a little differently: if Janice’s compassionate, non-sexual touch *is* experienced by Lomba as sexually-charged, deprived as he is of female companionship, it could be said that the touching does not reduce Janice to sex object but reminds a reader that sexual response and feeling are confounding, difficult to define, and unintentionally elicited by innocent touch. For Lomba, unjustly imprisoned, reduced to the barest of human embodiment on the whim of political pretext, his body has in a sense been stripped from him. As a man, he has, in a metaphoric sense, been socio-politically and physically emasculated, unable to put into action his own desires, whether for the achieving of collective political freedoms against the military regime, or in the hope of personal sexual-romantic satisfaction and companionship in love. It may be that his own male sexuality is so shaped by forms of the hegemonic that he instinctually experiences sexual arousal when touched by Janice. But reflecting on the passage above I believe that Janice’s femaleness prompts in Lomba a sensory-affective response more complex than the simply sexual. It is a mix of excitement and acute consciousness of the loss of full humanity to which imprisonment subjects him; a welter of emotions blurring kindness, desire, melancholy, and frustration. In addition, if these feelings carry a sexual overtone, they are also marked by trace residues of the wide cultural association of women with care and nurturing. If Lomba’s responses *are* ideologically shaped, open to charges of responding to a woman via normative

conventions that are premised on intersections of the biological and the cultural, I think that his responses also escape easy judgments such as ‘sexual objectification’ and ‘male gratification’, and the interpretative frame of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.

In trying to offer a nuanced interpretation of Lomba’s responses to Janice, though, I find myself in a difficult position. The text sometimes lets me down. In the novel Habila’s writerly exploration of sexist and gendered notions through representations of the masculine are on occasions nevertheless characterised by dominant gender stereotypes that position women in a less favourable manner than men. This is despite Habila’s contention in a 2004 interview that he consciously attends to the equitable depiction of gender in his fiction:

I wouldn’t go so far as to call myself a feminist –whatever that means. I don’t see myself crusading for the rights of women, but I am also careful never to objectify them or to idealise them, like some writers do. I grew up surrounded by women, and I learned that they are just as human as any man, so first and foremost I present them as people, not just as women, but as people with their strengths and shortcomings and complexities.

Despite these respectful assertions, Habila’s representations in the novel can lapse into heteronormative perceptions of assumed sexual differentials between males and females, and this goes beyond particular views expressed by individual characters. His female characters, for instance, are generally given less agency and prominence in the text, and are given more shortcomings than strengths. Additionally, most of his male characters, even a sensitive and intelligent writer such as Lomba, lapse into gender stereotypes that underwrite a world view which privileges men.

Even at his most defeated as a human being Lomba reproduces stereotypically heterosexist aesthetics of female bodies and their sexuality. Janice has “soft, pudgy hands” (25); she looks “squeaky clean” and has skin that “glowed like a child’s after a bath” (26). Lomba fixes on Janice’s physical appearance, rendering her not only appropriately feminine in terms of appearance and hygiene, but rather childlike. Despite her obvious intelligence – by profession she is a teacher, and has a passion for poetry - Lomba is inclined to speak to and of Janice using patronising, even infantilising language, a tactic (perhaps unconscious?) that boosts his sense of male authority in a context which represses his agency as a man. In what might be a transference of his own vulnerability in the prison context, he also accords her motherly qualities when he buries his sobbing face in “Janice’s ample bosom” (29) as she pats his head, “consoling, like a mother, all the while cooing softly” (29). Here, power positions are inverted as he, “feminised” by the prison space, is rendered childlike,

circumstances suddenly tossing him into the subordinate space that he has just previously reserved for Janice.

In another moment of contradiction, he proceeds to invoke her maturity to qualify her attractiveness: “She was actually pretty. A little past her prime, past her sell-by date, but still nice, still viable” (27). Such crass comments reflect not only on Janice’s supposed sexual attractiveness, but on Lomba’s internalisation of patriarchal discourses of sexuality and gender. Susan Sontag rightly sums up the social anxieties and stigmas surrounding aging among women: “For most women, ageing means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification. Since women are considered maximally eligible in early youth, their sexual value drops steadily. Even young women feel themselves in a desperate race against the calendar” (Sontag, cited in Phillipson 196). So-called sexual viability accords women in a patriarchal setting a false sense of value in as much as they remain appealing to men, and hence have worth. Lomba’s sexualised perception of Janice betrays his “understanding of womanhood as an essentially visual being” (Musila “Age, Power and Sex” 119) located within a construction that places emphasis on peak physical desirability and women’s sexual appeal (Musila “Age, Power and Sex” 119). The “sell-by” label attached to women’s bodies connotes that there is an optimal time in a woman’s life, when she is young, that she is considered sexually attractive and especially amenable to male sexual access. Female sexuality as constructed by heteropatriarchy attaches a timeline to the performance and embodiment of female sexuality. The more a female body ages, the less attractive it becomes and therefore the less sex appeal ‘it’ – *she* - has. In comparison, I notice that Lomba’s concerns about aging and sexual desirability do not extend to the superintendent, for example. This silence might imply his normative views of male sexuality vis-a-vis supposedly superior masculinity. Even given the clear class and intellectual differences between Muftau and Janice, and given Lomba’s own criticism of the military regime, Lomba’s comments affirm the superintendent as a male authority figure. Lomba’s thoughts of Janice, though, are contrary; they both affirm, *and* demean. To my mind, if Lomba as a heterosexual man cannot easily envisage Janice outside of received ideas regarding the physical-moral attractiveness of female bodies (as sexually desirable - or not; as motherly - or not...), in some sense the very ambiguity of his responses could also be thought to point to the instability of the supposedly categorical associations of male and female sexuality as constructed in discourse. If the discourse is riven with contradictions, this might be interpreted as the discourse then necessarily and foundationally entailing shift and variety,

even the contrary, since this flexibility is necessary in trying to understand the fluidity and change which characterise human sexualities and gender roles.

Despite the dominance of a hegemonic masculinity, then, the dominance is always only provisionally secure, never completely *secured*. At any moment, questions and contradictions irrupt, and in this draw attention to the *necessity* of understanding even apparently normative masculinities and the associated sexualities *as* premised fundamentally on instability, on volatile shift; on co-variance and the paradoxical, rather than the comfortably polarised and fixed oppositions which tend to have sedimented into social circulation. What is predictable, then, is not merely that we will find the norms of male sexuality frequently invoked, whether in lived experience or in the fictional representation of characters, but also that we will find them co-existing with inconsistencies and discrepancies that must surely attest to the very precariousness and inconstancy of the ‘male sexuality’ which appears to be so constant and to assert such naturalised authority.

Overall, this section has examined how gender and sexuality are addressed in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* through representations of heterosexual masculinities as embodied in a repressive regime. In my arguments, I have shown how, in the text, mediation of sexuality is inflected by socio-political factors as well as dominant, received notions of human sexuality and at the same time how the repressive state’s desired totality is repeatedly elusive, since norms buckle, and are made to bend, giving rise to small subversions that escape institutional control. Habila in his representation of masculinities sets out to problematise the construction of masculine codes as a stable construct resistant to spatial and temporal exigencies, but he also continues to play into heteronormative codes which privilege male sexuality and subordinate femaleness. Through language and character portrayal, I have examined how notions of male identity are rendered unstable and yet simultaneously continue to circulate as supposed norms about male sexuality.

“Traversing the Abyss”: Transgressive Sexualities in Male Children in Moses Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles*

Serenity was shocked to discover that character was not a monolithic rock which stopped moving somewhere in one's late twenties, anchored by a wife and children, policed by friends, relatives, colleagues, extended family and strangers. He found himself in flux and he became aware of unreleased sexual energy in his body. (130)

I foreground this quotation to initiate my argument in this section: Moses Isegawa’s representation of young male sexuality in *Abyssinian Chronicles*¹⁷ draws our attention to sexuality as a mobile process of relation, a provisional, contextually-informed construct which challenges more naturalised assumptions of sexuality as a monolithic biological given. The quotation aptly underscores the basis of my larger thesis: that sexualities are subtle and shifting. Even though there may be attempts by various state and ideological apparatuses to police sexualities and bodies, whether via explicit control or the more subtle inculcation of ideas and behaviours, this coercive facet of identity is not easily fixed into conformity. People create spaces – rhetorical, experiential, imaginative...- in which to live difference, in the form of resistance, perhaps, or simply as modes of being and imagining that escape the material and discursive governance of normative categories. Here, I note the importance of Isegawa’s title, *Abyssinian Chronicles*. The very title plays off the word “abyss”, implying the dangerous potential (at once fearful and exhilarating) of gap, lacuna, the powerfully unfamiliar. It also implies that sexualities are not *directly* produced and securely fixed by socio-ideological authorities such as government, tradition, family and religion. These, too, may be sites of contested meanings when it comes to questions of sexuality. I borrow the title of this chapter from Jacqui Jones’ interview with Moses Isegawa in *English in Africa*. Following Jones – and contrary to critics who have read ‘the abyss’ as signifying the bleakness of a future under dictator Idi Amin, I interpret the metaphor as signaling the instability of identity, and in particular of young male sexuality. The latter is open ended and in formation, often exploratory and even transgressive. Nor can it be considered merely a provisional point necessarily en route to normative, hegemonic male sexuality.

While a number of scholars have commented on Isegawa’s novel – variously addressing troubled childhood (Nabutanyi 2013), materialism, language and subjectivity (Cooper 2008), and historical trauma (Armstrong 2009), my own focus gives especial attention to an examination of the intertwining concepts of religion and culture and their role in the production of assumed sexual truths. I consider how these are variously realised

¹⁷ Moses Isegawa, *Abyssinian Chronicles*, London: Picador, 2001. All page references are to this edition.

through institutions such as education, church and family, and yet how male child characters *also* embody and transgress the socio-cultural norms that these institutions espouse. I borrow Nabutanyi's idea that this novel offers a "fictional archive" (1) of insights into troubled childhood (and "the traumatic impact of despotic child-rearing" [45]), extending this to foreground the text also as a narrative repository of experiences of, and views upon, African male sexualities. Although Isegawa is constrained by heteronormative patriarchal representations of male sexualities, he also works through such techniques as character and voice to suggest that even within the socially-sanctioned masculine codes of sexual behaviours there exist *various* expressions of sexuality which influence Mugezi's conceptualising of sexuality, leading him on occasions to encounter *sexualities* that in received terms would be considered to border on the transgressive.

Thus Isegawa's treatment of male characters points to the existence of a multiplicity of sexualities, some of them conventionally considered taboo: incestuous carnal desire, masochism, and sex by children. Here, Isegawa wishes to leave space for readers to find their own judgment, and Mugezi's complex narrative positioning offers an exploratory performative of a number of possible affiliations. Layered over this is a degree of authorial voicing which seems interested in deliberately introducing into the text *debates* about the forms that male sexualities may take, among them self in relation to patriarchal tradition, and self as formed in the domestic scene of siblings and parents. Through the portrayal of Mugezi, Isegawa seems intent on demonstrating how subjectivities are produced in relation to sexuality, "as the culture of everyday life becomes distorted by the entwined dictatorships of civil society, such as church, school and family and the state" (Cooper 88). Notable here is Cooper's metaphor of 'entwined dictatorships', a complex plurality which recognises that oppressive controls over self and identity may be located not only in the relatively abstracted realm of state, nation, and governance, but *also* in the more immediate, even intimate relations of parenting, and schooling. As Nabutanyi remarks, the setting of the novel reaches far beyond the context of an authoritarian political regime; the author uses "his child narrator's experiences of abuse in the home and in a Catholic seminary" to "explore the abuse of children at the hands of uncaring fathers, holier-than-thou mothers and duplicitous priests" (147). Further, Isegawa correlates this abuse of freedom with the boy child's insistent expression of his transgressive youthful sexuality that refuses to be bound by normative controls.

Abyssinian Chronicles invites a postcolonial reading, as it is set in the context of a volatile Uganda, subject to repeated changes of power. The narrative spans various time periods, starting with the colonial era of the 1950s, moving on to independence in 1962, onwards to the coup of 1971 and the start of Idi Amin's despotic rule of arbitrary terror, on to the lurching political instability and factionalism which followed the overthrow of this regime, and the eventual return to autocratic power of Milton Obote, who had been the first African leader after independence. The novel closes, finally, with the guerilla wars and the ousting of Obote by the leader of the National Resistance Army Yoweri Museveni, who remains the president of Uganda to date, enforcing executive rule of law via a one party state in the form of the National Resistance Movement.

The narrative which covers this extensive historical time-span is narrated by Mugezi, the principal and omniscient first person voice. The novel focuses especially on how the personal lives of Mugezi and his family members intersect with the political upheaval fomented by Idi Amin. Yet the ambitious reach of the narrative's historical chronicle, referred to above, also serves to alert a reader to the shifting geo-historical locating of supposedly individual experience. Throughout the narrative, the various entrenchments and then abrupt changes of political power advance and recede. They are played out in relation to family, religion and tradition, currents which sometimes sweep up and over the personal, and which, at times, are also more distant, the author insisting on the validity of smaller, individualised stories finding their own compelling imaginative force in Isegawa's long and complicated chronicles of Ugandan life.

Reflecting and Refracting Masculinities

As Nabutanyi notes, Isegawa's protagonist Mugezi is given an "outrageous and brash persona", one marked by "exaggerated, precocious masculinity and arrogance" (148). Such characteristics enable the author to offer clever, challenging re-workings of the proprieties of supposedly normal, middle class family life in Uganda. Mugezi (which means 'clever') is born in the Ugandan village of Mpanda but grows up in the city of Kampala where his parents move to in the early 1970s. He is the eldest of twelve children. Born and raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, he is later sent off to a seminary but he expels himself and finishes school elsewhere. After the fall of Amin and the violence and lawless tumult of the late 1980s he emigrates to the Netherlands. (Such pervasive movement will influence my discussion of male sexualities.)

Mugezi's father, ironically named Serenity, and his mother (a former nun nicknamed Padlock because she has firmly locked her heart against love) run their family like a dictatorship which mirrors the autocratic military rule of Idi Amin. As Mugezi explains, "Serenity espoused benevolent dictator tactics to the nth degree" (95), demanding absolute compliance and subservience from his children. Padlock is his "enforcer" (96), physically beating the children into obedience. Serenity "never interfered" (96). Mugezi describes his parents' unspoken complicity in co-ordinating the disciplining of the children as "the dull harmony of the dictators" (103). As Brenda Cooper points out, in this novel "dictatorship operates simultaneously on every level of life and seeps into the psyche of the individual" (87). In the novel, it seems that the family (which Fanon has described as a miniature version of the nation), the church and the state act in concert as multiple parts of a larger, cohesive system (Cooper 87), with the effect that "the public and the private become interchangeable" (Jones 96). The family, as Cooper further remarks, is "the state and the state functions through the family as part of the network of dictatorship itself" (87).

My own sub-section in this chapter will engage with such claims, rendering them a little more nuanced. As Tamale points out in her essay "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Statutory, Customary and Religious Laws" the intersection of these institutions functions as an instrumental power nexus for governing, regulating and moulding sexualities. Isegawa demonstrates this through Mugezi's relationships with his parents and with the priests at the seminary. Isegawa structures his narrative in such a way as to "knit together social and psychological complexity" (Ricoeur 9) through the comparable despotisms of parental and state control, placing his protagonist in the multiple roles of "actor and narrator, chronicler and storyteller" (Armstrong 129). The author thus uses Mugezi as both "represented and representative self - speaking from and for a condition of repression and oppression in a violent postcolonial situation" (Armstrong 129). However, this mobile character function implies that Isegawa is *also* interested in representing a character's sexuality as an *elusive* identity which is not directly reproduced by the authority of family, church or state. Instead, such authorities over sexuality variously advance and recede and differently regroup. At the same time, the individual exploits gaps and inconsistencies among the institutionalised discourses of preferred sexuality which themselves, never originating in a single coherent source and not being completely consistent, fragment and slide, enabling subversions and even simply opportunities for the taking. Thus, for example, Isegawa's narrative "plays with, and at times parodies" and contests "the notion of the family" (Armstrong 129) as "the proper ordering center for civilisation" (Tobin 33). My argument

will explore the claim that sexuality is not in some direct way governed and enforced by the politics and legislation of the nation, but, rather, that it is more subtly and sometimes even erratically encoded into practice by relationships which locate force fields of the national dictatorship within the domestic, household autocracy of Padlock and Serenity. Through the narrative, Andrew Armstrong argues, Mugezi *refracts* “the annals of his society through the stories of his family” (129). Such refraction, I suggest, applies also to the novel’s treatment of Mugezi’s youthful sexuality.

The fantastic tales that Mugezi tells about his family members symbolically give us insight into the historical changes that take place in Uganda, closely tying his family’s story to the national story thus emphasising the intricate link between the filial and the nation-state. For example, he links Independence Day October 9, 1962 to Grandpa’s “[getting] into trouble with some pro-government hooligans and escap[ing] with a shallow stab wound and a broken tooth” (85). Elsewhere, he also links 25th January, 1971, the day Major General Idi Amin overthrew President Milton Obote in a military coup, to the day his beloved grandmother (who had raised him) died in a house fire. Her death precipitated his being thrust into the dictatorial and abusive world of his parents, coinciding with the young country’s passage into one of the most bloody, autocratic regimes the continent has ever seen. The multiple stories bring “a polyvocality into the narrative that not only highlights the tension of plural voices” (Armstrong 129) but also the plural, and even socially contradictory ways in which sexualities are embodied. The novel suggests that sexualities give the slip to coercive controls, whether heteronormative autocratic rule, organs of socio-cultural governmentality such as tradition and religion, and even rhetorical forces of naming and categorization. Further, just as the multiple stories demonstrate “the contingent nature of subjectivities, as these ‘voices’ depend on each other to tell a ‘whole’ or mature story” (Armstrong 129), the sexualities of the novel are contingent and intersectional.

Points of View on Male Sexualities

Mugezi’s life trajectory closely resembles Isegawa’s: the author was also born in the 1960s in a devout Catholic family, went to a seminary, became a teacher and emigrated to the Netherlands in the early 1990s. He has however expressed reservations about categorising the novel as “autobiographical fiction”, preferring to describe it as a synthesis between the biographical or historical subject and the artistic subject, since the book is a compound of imaginary, experiential and historical facts. Of particular relevance in this chapter is that

Isegawa's perception of the unstable, transient nature of the first person narrator "I" emphasises the elusive, heterogeneous enactment of sexuality present in the novel:

...[I]dentity is not static. I remember when I started writing this book, I wanted to write it in the third person because I have always hated this 'I'. I have always felt it's not constant, that this person, even when he says 'I' is borrowing ideas from his friend. He may say, "I said this," but he didn't say it: he is remembering at the back of his mind what they said in the bar, and he is stealing those words and turning them into his own words. (Jones 93)

Isegawa's initial choice of the third person point of view and his subsequent abandonment of the same is also intriguing when considering the representation of sexualities. The third person narrative point of view, as Walter Mosley describes it, is like "a small, emotionless, but intelligent creature sitting on the shoulder of the character who is experiencing the story" (22). It appears fixed, "objective", omniscient and omnipresent, in a way mirroring the invasive surveilling techniques of an autocratic state. The third person point of view also implies attempts to pressurise or firmly to direct the way a reader experiences the story, leaving little space for negotiation. Isegawa's eventual decision to use the first person "I" in portraying the multiple and mobile ways in which sexualities are lived in spite of the various modes of control is cognisant of the limitations offered by the third person point of view. As Isegawa shows in his novel, the enactment of sexuality shifts according to place and time as it is a site where subjects can be seen to conform according to those ideological 'truths' which prevail in a particular historical-geography. At the same time, it offers subjects the intimate, personal space to disrupt socio-cultural conventions and to experience and enact embodiment in an individualised manner.

The Ugandan government enforces a monolithic view of properly 'African' sexuality; the law also censors supposedly subversive, transgressive literary material. Writing about sexual issues in such a repressive country, issues habitually cloaked in taboo, is challenging unless the writer enjoys the liberty to express ideological difference. When asked by Jacqui Jones what implications his emigration had on his novelistic ambitions and if he would have written the same kind of novel in Uganda, Isegawa responds:

I would have written a book in Uganda, but it would not have had that big vision, that big scope, that big way of looking at things, and just the freedom of moving around, just moving from this place to that one and having the confidence to really go for it. I wouldn't have written the same novel because I was seeing certain things a certain way, a limited way, because you can only see so much when you are so close. And most of the information coming in from outside had already been censored, had

already been interpreted, had already been coloured. But when you go out there, when I went to the Netherlands, I was on my own.

Isegawa's response underscores how physical and intellectual distance from an intellectually crippling space, "a state of dull uniformity that criminalise[s] difference, ambiguity, and creativity" (Zezeza 10) and constrains mobility, precipitates and accommodates a wider and more complex way of dealing with a subject, like sexuality, that remains contentious in most parts of Africa. However, as I already stated earlier, Isegawa's "big vision" of presenting the scope of the plurality of sexuality exposes the disjuncture between gendered relationships whereby male sexualities occupy a more privileged space in patriarchal African societies.

The Boy Mugezi and 'Curious' Male Sexuality¹⁸

Isegawa presents Mugezi as a sexually precocious and inquisitive child who is fascinated by bodies and their biological functions. Like many children, he wants to know where babies come from, and to satisfy his curiosity he secretly follows his mother to the latrine. When she catches him spying, she beats him. This punishment by the mother serves as an attempt to discipline the wayward boy, hoping to socialise him into appropriate modes of agency which, even in the exploratory stage of childhood, expect the child to learn to reign in potentially disruptive, socially taboo behaviours. Childhood, as Foucault has theorised, is a state which adults designate through disciplinary power – limits and restrictions, governance and surveillance; 'the child' is not some natural category of age, being 'a child' is also culturally produced in a young person's being refused knowledge of an 'adult' world, and made to know his (or her) place.

Growing up in the village, the young Mugezi takes great pleasure in listening to the stories of his paternal uncle Kawayida. He is meter reader, and he regales listeners with anecdotes about his visits to people's houses. Mugezi is hungry for stories of

women who used sugared promises to try to bribe him into under-reading their meters...of people living in congested urban squalor, ten to a little house, with parents fucking in the vicinity of children, who cleverly feigned sleep...of women who committed garage abortions by slipping stiff leaf stalks or bike spokes up the condemned birth canals of unfaithful wives or sneaky daughters...of men who beat their wives with electric cables, sticks, boots or fists and afterwards ordered them to serve their dinner or to fuck them...of a man who kept three sisters (wives)(8).

Uncle Kawayida's stories reflect the multiple ways in which sexualities in this society are enacted and experienced, highlighting the intersections between poverty, sexuality and the

¹⁸ I am exploiting the two meanings of the word 'curious' here to refer to Mugezi's eagerness to know about sexuality as well as his behaviour which may normally be considered strange and transgressive.

ordinary, as well as exposing the link between sexuality, gender and hierarchies of control and subordination. The stories present sexuality *as* interrupted, episodic ‘story’, with glimpses of force, embodied danger, perverse mixtures of possible pleasure and evident suffering which mingle with the boy child’s sense of anticipation and longing pleasure, as he waits to hear ‘what happens’ and simultaneously wishes to project his own young self into these intriguing, even exciting, adult situations which are the world of men and women, and in which male sexuality is associated with extensive power. There are stories of domestic abuse, marital rape, abortion, and polygyny. There are stories of privacy casually impinged on and childhoods which, by force of crowded family circumstance, are necessarily lived in close relation to adult sexuality. If the stories that Kawayida narrates are entertaining and alluring, exaggerating and condensing to heighten effect, they are also influential in how Mugezi learns to imagine his own masculinity as expressed through sexuality. The storytelling relies on familiar discourses of differential male and female subjectivities and social roles, and we note that Mugezi’s idea of masculinity is produced as an effect of his uncle’s stories, centering especially upon misogynistic demonstrations of male sexual prowess and patriarchal sexual brutality, a commonplace spectacle of male liberties which in turn engenders female compliance, silence and secrecy. The boy child’s avid response to the slew of often provocative stories that goads his imagination, stimulating his inquisitive nature and his growing interest in sexuality, feeds into the culture’s established norms of male authority. His fascination conflates many forms of gender violence, desire and intimacy, fomenting a dangerous seduction.

However, the slew of graphic, sexualised stories which his uncle recounts also prompts Mugezi to *question* the socio-cultural and religious codes which endorse and regulate sexual behaviour. He is not merely enthralled by the stories; he weighs them against his own limited experiential knowledge, a repertoire of conversational anecdotes, overheard snippets, and partial glimpses which collectively raise “raging curiosities and doubts” (9).

Uncle Kawayida pricked my imagination so much that I wanted to verify some of his stories by visiting the places and the characters he talked about. For example, what sort of parents did whatever they did in bed with children snoring, falsely on the floor? Were they Catholics? If not, did Protestantism, Islam or traditional religion allow such behaviour? Were such people educated and well-bred?” (9).

The questions proliferate, the list serving as a metonym of the boy’s desire for sexual knowledge. He is eager to find answers about ‘sex’ among the confusing series of interrelated classes and religions which comprise his immediate social environment. This fairly

abstract/ed knowledge, too, is a body of information that, if it is taboo even to be thought of, by a child, is also a necessary substitute for the physical sexual experience which accepted social mores do not permit to the child. In relation to the above quotation, the deliberate verb ‘pricked’ carries clever associations of the boy child’s sense of male sexual desire not simply as overt sexual-biological practice, but also as a creative impulse which carries imaginative satisfactions, and is capable of generating the pleasure of both vivid, visceral image and socio-ethical query.

Mugezi’s grandparents and his uncle, in their roles as generational and patriarchal authorities with the power to enforce social control, deny him the chance to “verify” the stories he has overheard. Even in simple practical terms (leaving aside either any moral constraints, or the impossibility of proving an anecdotalist’s probably embellished narratives), such proof would mean that Mugezi would need to travel with his uncle to the various houses. However, such a journey cannot be permitted, and not only because the child couldn’t randomly tag along when his uncle went to people’s homes to read their meters. In terms of the narrative, the central logic is that Padlock, Mugezi’s mother (an adherent of an especially pious, bigoted form of Africanised Catholicism), exerts considerable control over her son and the places she would like him to visit. Travelling with Uncle Kawayida would mean that Mugezi would have to put up at Kawayida’s house. Padlock dislikes Kawayida’s wife because she finds her polygamous family background offensive and hence would not want her son to be in such ‘morally corrupt’ company. Therefore to avoid strife between the two women, Mugezi’s grandparents and uncle refuse to send him along with Kawayida.

Throughout this novel, readers are encouraged to notice the roles of Mugezi’s close adult family members as regulators of child sexualities, which in turn prompts difficult questions regarding the sexuality of children. The sexual innocence of children has become almost a universal assumption; “sexuality is constructed as a domain exclusive to adults and with preconditions of physical and social maturity” (Nyanzi 494). Rather than being understood as a socially situated, relational construct, childhood has come to be considered a biologically essential, immature stage of development, one generally lacking in significant agency and rationality. Children are therefore positioned as “asexual, childlike, innocent, and dependent on adults for guidance and protection” (McLaughlin *et al* 45). As Foucault rightly points out, discourses of children’s sexuality and sexual agency are shrouded in taboo, and are perceived as “antithetical non-issues or even cause for moral panic” (4). Adults tend to attempt to inculcate children into a narrow, vigilant sexual subjectivity which prepares them

for responsible adulthood, and which subordinates (even denies) complex psychosocial questions of sexual pleasure and desire (partly because the ‘meanings’ and logics of sexual behaviour escape even adult understanding). In such conditions of uncertainty, it seems ‘better’ to deny or suppress, than to enable, the polymorphous perversity through which Freud understood children’s sexuality and erotic lives.

Within an idealised frame of sexual reference, children are perceived as if by nature to be necessarily innocent and naïve, “neither corrupted nor corruptible by the assumed impurities of sexual stuff” (Tamale “How old is old enough” 82). However, this misrecognition fails to concede that childhood, as much as any other aspect of human life, is brought into being through language and social expectations, subject to preferred cultural codes.¹⁹ (Mis)conceptions of childhood as asexual and always vulnerable avoid difficult questions about childhood sexualities, among them: when is sex engaged in by a child voluntary; when is sexual activity on the part of children consensual; how might gendered power relations influence the expression of childhood sexuality? Because childhood is so preferentially associated with sexual innocence, there is a proliferation of “denials and protectionisms aimed at prohibiting [children’s] sexualisation” (Nyanzi 495). In Isegawa’s novel, this is evident in Padlock’s effort to prevent her son’s sexual “tainting” by the older women whose sociable company he enjoys. In Padlock’s view, these women are sexually permissive, and this disposition will influence her son towards sexual transgression. As it happens, Mugezi is in himself inclined towards sexually rebellious behaviour, and Stella Nyanzi’s article “Unpacking the [govern]mentality of African sexualities” inclines me to consider how Isegawa’s representation of the young Mugezi reflects on children as sexual beings, grappling with considerations of the extent to which children are ‘liable’ for their sexual desires, and the degrees to which children should or could be protected against sexualised behaviours. Isegawa’s text certainly complicates – even rejects? – “the myth of childhood innocence in order to map the power relations between children and adults” (Jenkins 3). Through the young Mugezi, I am able to explore how an African boy child mediates his cultural and social identities in the face of adult and institutional attempts to manage a child’s sexuality.

¹⁹ De Boeck and Honwana, for example, remind us that childhood in many contexts, Africa among them, has not been “a protected period of physical and psycho-social development”, but that global standards of children’s rights and interventionist legal argument have powerfully universalised the protectionist view of childhood.

The parenting of Mugezi's paternal grandfather and paternal grandaunt (called grandma in the novel) is described as one intent on nurturing the child's intellect and desire to discover, in comparison with the authoritarian methods of his parents. As Mugezi himself declares when he is ruthlessly beaten by his parents for defacing a headboard: in the village, in comparison, "Grandma or Grandpa would have told [him] straight away that the glittering thing was just a bloody headboard for a bloody bed, wooden, veneered, period" (137). Nabutanyi explains that "Mugezi's vote of confidence" in his grandparents' subversive disciplinary codes "is based on his recognition that the grandparents' child rearing ethos indulges the child's curiosity and treats him like an equal, thus legitimising the child's curiosity and inquisitiveness" (153). The grandparents' assumption, he projects, would not be that the child's impulse to gouge the headboard is destructive vandalism, but rather a product of his desire to know about the materiality of the headboard in relation to his own impulsive creativity. Grandma, indeed, sees potential in the seven year old Mugezi and begins to use him as a midwife's mascot-cum-assistant, "catapult[ing him] into adult circles" (70) and privileging him with knowledge normally reserved for adults: "[I] felt comfortable high up there with dads and mums, heavily involved in the facilitation of the coming in of their babies, privy to adult secrets, seeing adults in instances of vulnerability my age-mates would never dream of" (70). Unlike most of his peers, Mugezi's knowledge of human sexuality is facilitated and nurtured by his grandma, although she is not *laissez faire*, gently exercising control over how much he can hear or watch. For example, during consultations with pregnant women, she asks Mugezi to leave when the discussion touches on the topic of when to stop engaging in sex. She also sends Mugezi out of the room when she physically examines the pregnant women; nor does Mugezi witness the actual birth. However, Mugezi views such culturally sanctioned, carefully controlled modes of exposure to aspects of human sexuality as a position of power which is both exciting (because of the privileged insights into this "adult" domain which separates him from other children) as "overwhelming as it was unbearable" (70) because of his job's "God like" burden to save a life or to lose a life: "Suddenly it occurred to me that I had powers of life and death, because I could give a pregnant woman herbs which might cause a miscarriage or prevent one or help the fetus to grow" (70). We notice that Grandma's subtle modes of control over Mugezi to limit his access to sexual consciousness are creatively escaped by the boy, who gets wise to her schemes, and devises ways of negotiating them. "In order to deal with the last item (ie. when to have sex), I would be sent off on errands, but anticipating it, I often stood behind the door and listened" (71). Therefore, Grandma's attempts to expose Mugezi to age appropriate

sexual information is rendered useless as Mugezi's curiosity prompts him to transgress the societal boundaries placed on such knowledge attainment. Ultimately, although Grandma allows Mugezi's to attain considerable knowledge about human sexuality according to his age, her efforts to control Mugezi though not coercive are still framed within the same protectionist stance as his parents'. The difference however lies in the non-violent manner in which she exercises control unlike his parents whose methods of control are blunt and leave out any room for sex education.

Spaces, Socio-politics and Young Male Sexuality

Mugezi relocates to the city when he is about eleven years old, when his grandmother dies. In the city, where he now lives in the home of his parents, he is compelled to unlearn the attitudes that life in the village had offered him. The village space has largely been construed as a backward place by city dwellers who imagine themselves as progressive and modern. However, as Isegewa points out, with regard to socialisation, village spaces particularly in "their role as a focal point of reference for individual prestige and identification" (1) are more integrated and more organic spaces which locate the individual's life stages in closer relation to community while at the same time nurturing one's individuality. This is in contrast to the more individualistic aspect of city life. In comparison with his grandmother's nurturing control over his youthful desire to know and to experience, Serenity and Padlock's parenting is premised on the explicit need to control the child via fear and violence, brutal methods which drum into him conventionally expected morals in order to maintain the visible, supposed respectability of their Ugandan middle class home.

In the city, Mugezi experiences his parents as the two "despots" who rule over a middleclass lifestyle "in the red-roofed pretension of a big Indian bungalow" (90). He assesses their familial setup as "a prison of sorts, with too many regulations and too many pretensions exacerbated by a dictatorial administration that believed in incarceration as a superior form of discipline and upbringing" (90-1). This repressive household environment reminds the reader of the Foucauldian notion of the panopticon which is a mechanism that "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately" (Foucault "Discipline and Punish" 200). Serenity, "a man who loved to do things by remote control" (91), relies heavily "on the potentiality of force rather than its actuality" (100), preferring "to delegate power to his enforcer Padlock" (91). Padlock determines to raise Mugezi by aiming to "hammer sense into [his] head" (137) and make him conform to the standards of religious piety and middle class respectability she adamantly maintains. To this

end, she relies on Foucauldian “technicians of discipline”, creating enforced daily routines for the children, among them cowed kneeling, during the morning greeting as well as regulated times when he could talk freely. Such routines exemplify Foucault’s notion of reforming the subject’s soul through the techniques of timetabling, which regulates time into smaller, ordered parts.

Padlock (formerly Sister Peter, an ex-nun who has been defrocked because of viciously beating children at the convent) is a prudish moralist. She regularly uses euphemistic terms in relation to sex and genitalia, referring to semen as “holy snot” and pubic hair as “devil’s hair”. Internalising a form of fundamental Catholicism that sets out to repress and control sexuality, she strictly abides by the rules of the church which forbid any form of contraception (though Serenity is willing) and gives birth to twelve children in quick succession. She is indifferent to sexual intercourse itself, and every time she falls pregnant she refuses to have sex with her husband again until she has been delivered of the baby. Thereafter, *she* decides when to have another child. If this is a form of female agency, it is nevertheless strangely co-implicated, and paradoxical. If she refuses domestic patriarchy by becoming herself the dominant partner in the marriage, calling the shots, she simultaneously submits obediently to religious patriarchy, unable to concede its oppressive power. Religiously, she views sex as being legitimate only in so far as it is meant for procreation, and mothering for her is a divine duty in the spirit of the Holy Mother. Emphasising the significance of her convent name (Sr. Peter), wifehood and motherhood for her symbolise that “she was the rock on which a new family, a new church, was going to be founded” (67).

Through Padlock, we see the role that religion plays in its effort to regulate and produce ‘proper’, acceptable sexualities for women, and also for children. Both are especially governable categories of person; indeed, they can present as sexually rebellious and hence threatening identities, difficult to control and therefore *needing* to be controlled lest they undermine patriarchal norms. Closely coupled with Padlock’s obsession with respectability is her piety. Padlock uses her religious duty as a mother to closely monitor and reform her wayward son whom she believes has been corrupted by the lawless, morally degenerate life in the village. (The irony, here, lies in Isegawa’s cleverly reconfiguring more usual assumptions of ‘the city’ as Sodom and Gomorrah, and ‘the village’ as backward and un-modern.) In Mugezi’s childhood, it is the regulated ‘parental city’ which represses, shaped as it is by the neo-colonial instrumentality of institutions such as Christianity and disciplinary governmentality. The village of his grandparents, on the other hand, provides him with a

more uninhibited, demonstrative guidance, one in which sexuality, as embodiment, materialises in a complicated *mélange* of violence, seduction, pain and desire, a difficult, explicit facet of everyday social life and power relations. To Padlock, a “well-mannered” boy is supposed to kneel when greeting his parents, obey instructions and not question authority. But Mugezi is full of questions which displace compliance and propriety. In her eyes, he needs to be brought to his senses, and she often uses a guava switch to beat Mugezi into submission. She demands that he express the right tone of voice, one which embodies “total acknowledgement of her power, servile gratitude for every little thing she had ever done for you, and unequivocal submission to her will” (92). Mistaking Mugezi’s inquisitive mind for insolence, Padlock attempts to reduce Mugezi’s “stature, to prune my idea of myself and to crush my personality in the mortar of conventionality” (114). This control extends to regulating and “protecting” Mugezi’s developing sexuality by policing his movements, monitoring his interactions with the opposite sex and getting rid of anybody who presents a threat to the son she presumes pure and sexually innocent. For example, she fires the ‘house girl’ Nantongo because “she could never trust her around Mugezi” (113). Indeed, the (house) girl’s closeness to Mugezi presents not only a sexual threat, but a possibly united power bloc against the totality of Padlock’s oppressive domestic regime.

There are obviously unequal power relations here riven by class and generational differentials which lead to Padlock’s insecurity as the woman in the house. Mostly, she is threatened by Nantongo’s youth and her evident sexual appeal to the men in the house, claiming Nantongo’s “staring” at Serenity (113) as further justification for dismissing her. The fact of Nantongo’s youthful femaleness is regarded as if by definition to be sexual; in terms of hegemonic assumptions, her youth and her femaleness are necessarily (mis)construed as seductive and morally corrupting, especially in relation to a married man and a young boy. (The implication of ‘temptation’, here, is attributed to *her* supposed salaciousness, albeit latent and un-actioned, rather than to the response and responsibility of the male.)

Against Padlock’s supposition of her son’s sexual innocence, Mugezi’s formative masculinity and sexuality elude his mother’s control to form an individualised identity which resists being secured under normative codes of young masculinities. Padlock believes that it is the village that is responsible for Mugezi’s lack of morals but ironically, it is in the city and not the village that Mugezi’s nascent aggressive sexuality which is characterised by misogynistic views about women very forcefully emerges, and his formative masculinity becomes more realised.

He is intrigued by the tensions associated with masculinity as performed in a troubled society where a militarised masculinity is enforced, and which in turn “produced new understandings of gender in a hyper-militarised social world” (Decker 6). For example, on his way home from school, he

would go to the taxi park and watch the vans, the travelers and the rootless spirits adrift. I was jostled by youths of my age peddling radio batteries, underwear, exercise books, toothbrushes – anything they could lay their hands on.[...] I saw provocatively dressed women milling around, jiggling their buttocks, twitching their cheeks and doing all they could to catch men’s eyes. (115)

If school is intended as a highly-controlled moral environment, the taxi rank and associated market form a more porous zone, in which boundaries and expectations blur. Here, young boys hustle their economic independence, with no ‘Padlock’ mothers in sight. Here, too, Mugezi’s freed desires wander, making mobile, rootless leaps among the melee of transport, people and a proliferation of small commodities associated with civilising human imperatives that might also give pleasure and satisfaction. Mugezi is transported, and yet also finds his longing settling in some quite predictable ways on assumptions about female attractiveness and sexually alluring power. He witnesses the playful spectacle of male-female heterosexual ploy, a power paradoxically vested in women’s bodies, and serving to position women’s bodies as powerful virtue of sexuality. The boy has to make sense of all of this.

Elsewhere in the novel, he is impressed by Idi Amin’s hyper-male aura, the “epitome of masculinity, defined both in terms of violence (the warrior ethos) and a charismatic heterosexuality” (Leopold 325). The power of Amin over Mugezi’s youthful male imagination is so great that the boy decides to adopt the ruthless dictator as his imaginary godfather, a counteractive measure against the despotism of his parents. He says: “The safest thing to do was to choose Amin as my bodyguard. He was a realist. He never turned the other cheek. He answered love with love, hate with hate, war with war. He was proud to the point of arrogance” (117). Mugezi’s subsequent self-belief that he is invincible is a result of his imaginary adoption of Amin as his protector and godfather. Amin claimed he “feared no one but God” and he “fashioned himself as the ‘father of the nation’ who would provide guidance, protection and discipline” (Decker 7). By adopting codes of hyper-masculine performance that closely resemble those of Amin at the level of ideology, Mugezi hopes to challenge his parents’ despotism and control his sexuality by creating his own forms of retaliation and means of embodying an individualised sexuality. He responds to the dictator’s

authority as an attractive counter-force to the almost colonial moral-religious restrictions imposed on him by his parents. In effect, their normalised domestic repressions evoke an even more forceful counter-authority, which sees the child imagining his maleness through an amalgamation of sensational powers associated with the allure of the big man, dictatorial terror and military violence, all of which in fact proved extremely destructive to Uganda.

Padlock's controlling behaviours are rooted in the assumption that children are sexually pure and it is adults who corrupt them with their own sexual will. Children should be protected from this adult tainting. However, Isegawa shows us a far more complex understanding of desire than either naïve idealism or narrow religious morality, one shaped by the polymorphous perversity that Freud attributes to all human sexuality, and especially to that of children. The eleven year old Mugezi possesses powerful sexual feelings, and fantasises about women. He particularly desires Lusanani, the young wife of Hajji Gimbi, their polygamous neighbour in Kampala. His sexual imagination is already shaped by the physically-focused, objectifying gender impulses which often mark male voyeurism and projections of heterosexual desire:

If a well-shaped girl like Lusanani was pumping, and you stood 2 feet behind her, you could see her arms rise, her body bend into curves...you wanted her to pump on for ages because her openmouthed, dilated-eyed expression and her laboring body lighted up your mind with lewd fantasies. Her slender waist; the lines of her underwear peeping through her dress; her thighs, her calves and her legs...fueled diverse imagery in my lively mind. As I watched her buttocks opening and closing, and how her panties curved around them each time she bent over the handle, I knew that some adult part of me desired her, and would get her (102).

Mugezi acknowledges his desire, but by calling these fantasies lewd and by attributing them to "the adult part" of him, Mugezi seems to want to exempt his young self from the responsibility of harboring inappropriate thoughts, since not doing so would, in terms of social norms, render him a perverted child. Mugezi transgresses societal constructions around children (especially before puberty) as asexual by not only harboring these feelings but also by desiring a married, Muslim woman who is in a polygamous marriage. He imagines ways of "stealing" her away from the elderly Hajji Gimbi. In a virtual punishment, his conscience troubled, he even visualises his demise by falling "preferably in front of an oncoming truck" (97). If he hates himself, he is also disgusted by visions of Hajji Gimbi "on top of her, wheezing, squealing, sweating (97), and he hates the man and the woman at the same time as he desires her: "I would look at her, imagining how she had gone through her first pregnancy...I would get sudden urges to jump up, slip my hand up her dress and explore. Then I would be seized by the feeling that I was too young for that, and that even if I asked

her to reveal herself to me, she would refuse.” (97). The boy is tormented, guilt-ridden, on account of his moralising upbringing. He is “seized” by the feeling that he is too young for such sexual exploration, clearly having internalised a Foucauldian governmentality in respect of sexual conduct: control is not only externally asserted through parental-family prohibition and guidance (itself a persuasive expression of wider social norms), it is also paradoxically exercised through an individual’s having *internalised* these norms. Thus Mugezi demonstrates incongruous impulses: a counter-intuitive desire to self-control sexual desire even as he sexually desires. Mugezi, as a product of his society, is conflicted by his lust for Lusanani and his own internalisation of cultural norms that work both to produce and to prohibit sexual desires in children. The word that comes to mind is ‘sanction’. He sanctions his desire, firing it, encouraging it, giving it the go-ahead. And yet he also *sanctions* this desire in the other sense of the word: censoring his impulse, and constraining the taboo idea. Mugezi’s ambivalent positioning can be located within the workings of the Foucauldian concept of panoptical institutions as “mechanisms of power reduced to its ideal forms” (Foucault “Discipline and Punish” 205). This power aims to inculcate modes of self-representation that intersect homogeneously with those of external power. This result is a constant inner surveillance that brings about a state of self-policing and self-regulating that assures the automatic functioning of power (Billman 3). Within this context, societal constructions of children’s sexuality are framed as a prison cell, surveillance techniques restricting the potential to articulate and act upon sexuality, even as the wider culture hyper-visibility sexualsity as a mode of being. In the process this creates subjects who self-regulate in as much as they resist these forms of control and are educated to need them, as we observe in Mugezi’s later actions.

Padlock also reiterates society’s assumption that sexuality is exclusively a domain for adults and that “inappropriate” interaction with certain adults corrupts. She constantly warns Mugezi “to stay away from that woman” (175). The assumption is that Lusanani, a married woman “who played with young boys” must surely “have perversity carved all over her psyche, especially if she was married to a man old enough to be her father or even her grandfather...those were indicators big enough to pinpoint a criminally unstable mind to which transgression was second nature. She was obviously a callous thief who had coldly befriended Padlock’s son in order to gain access to her bobbin, her son’s virginity...” (174). Through Padlock’s perception of Lusanani as a canny predator with an intrinsically transgressive nature coupled with inherently alluring skills, she exempts her son from sexual

impulse, denying the agency of his own young male sexuality. Padlock's views verify socio-cultural expectations that children have always to be protected from the adult domain of sexuality. She further endorses this view by invoking the Biblical scripture that threatens potential transgressors into submission and sanctions (in this case *endorses*) the disciplining of children should they show signs of unacceptable, socially transgressive behaviour. For example she paraphrases Luke 12 vs 3 to emphasise the inevitable discovery of "acts done in the dark" and the subsequent divine retribution, "God will shame him one of these days. Whatever one does in the deepest darkness will be proclaimed from the housetops" (144). Angered by Mugezi's resistance, his refusal to submit to her power, she asks for her husband's help in "breaking" Mugezi: "Children have to be obedient; he is not. He thinks he is the man in the house. You let him get away with anything. Don't you worry, I am going to break him myself" (113).

There are interesting, complex familial tensions here regarding ideas of masculinities, femininities, power and their intersections with religion as a version of heteronormative patriarchy and the idealised version of a family that Padlock seems to be wishing for. By implicitly reminding Serenity that by virtue of being male and her husband, he was the God sanctioned head of the household and not Mugezi, Padlock attempts to conform the timid Serenity into the preferred forms of heteropatriarchal masculinity, one of which is a form that uses violence to discipline weaker subjects and secure control and power over them. At the same time, however, she herself transgresses notions of the 'properly' female by usurping the male role in her insistence that she will "break" him on her own, in the process emasculating him. This instance not only exposes the fragility of gender identities but also how identities are produced by power institutions. On the other hand, Mugezi, who has now learned to endure the beatings inflicted on his body, over time understands that whenever "Padlock had recourse to Divine Intervention and Holy Scripture (to threaten her children into submission), it was not out of piety but out of a sense of looming defeat" (143). Padlock's desperate appeal to the abstract notion of a divine, supernatural, all-powerful entity points to Isegawa's argument that children cannot simply be disciplined into obedience and conformity by adults as they too possess the agency to construct their own identities. We see this through Mugezi. He devises witty plans of revenge against his parents' dictatorial tendencies, planning to sabotage their perverse sense of justice and expose their obsession with material objects as well as the façade of respectability that they present to the world. For example, he steals and later sells *Treasure Island*, one of his father's favourite books; he hides the bobbin of his

mother's sewing machine, and writes a fake 'love' letter addressed to his mother from her young customer, an action which leads Serenity to start an affair with Padlock's aunt. These may seem small, mischievous rebellions, yet within the ambit of a child's agency they attest to an inventive series of tactical rebuttals to authority, challenges which have consequences for the authoritarian domain of the dictatorial parents.

Transgressing Moral Codes of Sexuality

Mugezi also disobeys his mother's strict instructions not touch the new headboard of the parental bed, "two-legged like a billboard [which] had a rectangular shining face and was so burnished and smooth that one could see one's face in it" (135). This is a piece of furniture that Serenity brings home from the stock of expelled possessions formerly owned by Asians who were given seventy-two hours by Amin to leave Uganda. Cooper suggests that the object, "mingled with Idi Amin's despotic decree of expulsion and the exoticism of Asian cultural aesthetics" (91) represents the combined power of two despots. This object, which Mugezi is forbidden to touch, is a fetish. As Mbembe informs us, a fetish is "among other things an object that aspires to be made sacred; it demands power" (111). The shiny veneer of the object and its mysterious half-shape render it even more attractive to the inquisitive young Mugezi, and indeed the 'two-legged' headboard, attached to the parental bed (itself an emblem of the secret world of adult sexuality for which he longs), physically arouses him. The excitement occurs at a site of newness and yet familiarity; the emotions are at once a rich sensorium and a banal mundanity. Mugezi must labour the imagination, bringing himself to a form of transposed climax:

I brought my nose close to the glittering object at the head of the new bed. I was disappointed because it smelled like shoe polish, its oily tang lingering on my palate [...] I stretched out my hand and touched the gleaming surface, its dry smoothness, the imagined smoothness of Lusanani's backside [...] my fingers going deeper and deeper into imaginary orifices, [...] The sensation of swimming in a dark pool, warm and slick with swine sperm was intoxicating. I got the feeling that the Lamp lady, Nantongo and Lusani were sitting on my stomach, squeezing a thick liquid out of my loins [...] beneath the veneer was mere wood! Dull brown, long-grained wood! (135-6)

This is an incredible passage in engaging with a boy child's sexual feelings. To start with, the bed is itself a rich, imaginatively seductive object, loaded with contradictory associations. It has been removed from the home of its previous Asian owners by the terrifying edict of ethnic cleansing issued by a political despot. The headboard's previous owners are themselves forcibly-removed, reduced to objects. The headboard is acquired by Padlock and, to a reader, the lives and loves of people who were so-called undesirables are hauntingly

evoked by the displaced part of desire represented by the bed in relation to the headboard. The headboard stands (in) for their expulsion by tyranny. In Mugezi's family home, the headboard brings the violence of politics into the most intimate of spaces. Now, in the time of the narrative recounting, the headboard has become a figurative elaboration of the 'seat' of the domestic despots, Padlock and her less forceful side-kick, Serenity.

Mugezi's response to the headboard is complex. He is enthralled by the smooth, scrolled designs in the wood; the detailed curves, both raised and nooked, lead him to the analogy of touch and orifices. And yet as intriguing as the bed is, it also disappoints. The smell is redolent of ordinary shoe polish; the 'wood' turns out to be fake. The headboard, then, and the way in which Mugezi uses it, is only a pale substitute for actual sex. In showing Mugezi's ambivalent response to the headboard, Isegawa deliberately emphasises the mixed sensations of the olfactory, the visual and the tactile, an almost overwhelming assemblage of sensory embodiment that is not obedient to the niceties of bourgeois domestic constraint and sexual propriety which so strongly shape notions of family respectability. Using the headboard for his own purposes, Mugezi mocks parental proscriptions, and also his parents' middle-class vanity about having 'things'. He 'has' their headboard (which the text implies is anyway only theirs by default of terror). He desecrates their authority and their class respectability by masturbating with (or on) the gleaming headboard. If this is in some way an endorsement of the bed's intended purpose in adult sexual relations, on the other hand his actions very obviously serve to subvert parental authority, challenging their efforts to control his youthful sexuality. Isegawa seems to suggest that underneath the "glitter", "the smoothness" of the polite façade through which Mugezi's African middle class families position themselves (Nabutanyi 151), there exist other, less obedient expressions of sexuality, covert and marginalised, but with power to unsettle. This holds true for the sexuality of the child Mugezi, troubling any assumptions of a monolithic, adults-only African sexuality.

The penetrative and sexualised imagery ("beneath", "my fingers going deeper and deeper", "swimming in a dark pool", "warm and slick") elucidate Mugezi's quest for sexual knowledge which is hidden from children and shrouded in so many taboos, myths and restrictions. Evoking the "forbidden fruit trope" (Nabutanyi 152) in relation to transgression, Isegawa subtly brings to mind Padlock's piety, and underscores the fact that in forbidding not only sexual exploration, but the touching of certain prized objects in the house, a parent can only *heighten* a child's fascination of the forbidden, increasing the likelihood that he will venture into an exploration of exactly that which has been prohibited. This reinforces the

point that sexualities cannot be directly coerced into preferred modes of expression by the powers that be; sexuality is an elusive space that often quite willfully claims the right to unruly embodiments and expressions.

Mugezi's negotiation of sexual subjectivity exemplifies Foucault's thesis that power is diffuse rather than an all-encompassing, polarised force. Power is never with complete success directly imposed in a repressive manner from a "visibly demarcated social hierarchy through the state, religious authorities, family or other institutions (Crowley 5). For Foucault, "[P]ower is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away, power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault "History of Sexuality" 94). Jacqui Jones, too, asserts that *Abyssinian Chronicles* "repeatedly iterates the importance of renegotiating existing power relations in order to evade a representation of the unilateral relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, in which the authorial figure has absolute power over his/her victim" (96). Through Mugezi's mediation of his own sexuality in relation to the dominant expectations of his religious mother, society and the seminary which I will discuss later on, Isegawa demythologises "this over-simplified, myopic view which prevents any modification or exchange of mastery between these two oppositional forces" thereby demonstrating that sexualities are not directly produced by power. There are spaces which allow resistance. Despite parental regulation coupled with socio-religious control, Mugezi resists any efforts to manipulate him into a singular, 'proper', conventional identity. His "subjectivity is forged in violence, rebellion and deceit" (Cooper 93).

Another intriguing sexual exemplar of male sexuality in Isegawa's novel is the character of Cane, Mugezi's older classmate in primary school. Cane is probably in his mid teens, "big, tall, dark, with a conspiratorial charm that left you convinced" (189). His fellow students may fear him because of his ethnicity – "he was a northerner", like Amin (see Leopold 2009) and therefore associated with aggression and political power – and yet they admire him because he is their "sex educator" (189). In the normative sexual ideology of the day, Cane is considered a sexually precocious boy who lost his 'innocence' early in the difficulties that he and his mother suffered after his father, a soldier, abandoned them. He is a bitter young man, bearing an angry confidence "born of hatred and too much familiarity with society's underbelly" (189). He holds misogynistic views of women, introducing the younger boys to pornographic magazines, which leads Mugezi to compare the bodies of the naked white women to those of the white nuns in the seminary: "For the first time in my life I knew

what those white nuns looked like without their habits” (190). So much for Padlock’s insistence that her son be pure and innocent; the children are themselves trading in a sexual economy of images and knowledge, largely because adults attempt to prohibit such knowledge as inappropriate. Cane’s language when educating the younger boys into the mysteries of sex is very crude: “All your mothers get fucked every night, except when they are bleeding. Your fathers pour their...in your mothers’...’ He made us fill in the missing words” (190). One might blanch at such a bold display of deeply ingrained chauvinism, but Isegawa figures the character very well as both a hyperbolic youthful arrogance, and as a product of the dominant, militarised masculinities which esteem such crudity and bombastic paternalism as central to proper maleness. Cane’s pedagogical techniques – in keeping with his brusquely authoritarian name, appropriate in the disciplinary context of the school - demand memorisation from the students and he refuses to indulge them when they seek explanations about “the difference between a vulva and a vagina, sperm and semen” (190). (There’s more than a suggestion that this is less an assertion of domineering control, than a hint at his own youthful *half* knowledge of sex, gleaned piecemeal from biology textbooks, and porn.) Since the younger boys are from families which restrict access to sexually taboo information, they are gullibly fascinated, and susceptible to the power which Cane’s privileged knowledge accords him. One day, Cane even happens to find two dead bodies on the school grounds, those of a man and a woman, and he shows them to Mugezi and another friend. He lifts her skirt - “with his foot” – suggesting arrogant indifference. She is merely an object, a specimen, a morbid aid which enables him to gain power by frightening the young boys, in the guise of ‘sex education’. He is not only a misogynist, but something of a sadomasochist.

Isegawa’s treatment of Cane exemplifies Foucault’s thesis of power as strangely mobile across locations, rather than fixed. Cane’s sexuality is also explored beyond his apparent demonstration of a commandeering vocabulary to describe sexual actions and sexualised biologies. Even in terms of the way he derives sexual pleasure, he eludes the sexual-institutional control of the school, turning its own preferred methods of discipline to his own satisfactions. Isegawa portrays Cane as a masochist who derives sexual pleasure from pain. Most students are afraid of the teacher’s ‘strokes’, but Cane:

was not afraid of teachers, and he took special pleasure in teasing female teachers who acted tough with pupils. In fact that was how he got the name Cane, because he used to tell them, “Cane me bitch.” The first woman to fall for it caned him till she started sweating and wet patches appeared in her armpits and between her breasts.

She finally gave up. Cane liked lying on the floor for the strokes, and when he got up, he usually had a big erection. He would stand there with arms akimbo, his penis pushing against his fly like a big impatient rat. Female teachers soon learnt their lesson. Nowadays they referred him to the head teacher or to their male colleagues. (190-1)

Cane collusively twists intended punishment by the female teachers into pleasurable domination by revealing to them their own suppressed desires, and exhibiting his own visible eagerness to submit, and thereby acquire male potency. In his mind, he inverts the teacher's power, subordinating her authority to his own will (his *willingness*) to have his male desires gratified by transgressive means. The admiration he garners from his fellow students, who view his "full blooded erection" as "our erection, our riposte" to authority, also feeds his ego and consolidates his desire for additional power. Here, we see the nexus of power and sex and how it can be mobilised in unsettling ways to negotiate gendered relations. Cane uses the "threat" of the engorged penis (itself symbolic of the phallus of male socio-political dominance) to challenge female teachers' authority. They eventually stop indulging his pleasure in punishment because his erection is a blatant sign of his male sex drive, and its potential to turn violent. They are women. He, for all his youth, is a man. The classroom allows women to assert forms of authority not permitted them beyond the school, and Cane's behaviour is a cautionary reminder to the women of their 'real' place in the gender hierarchy, especially under a violent military regime. Isegawa's novel insistently focuses on making spectacularly visible, in image and language, transgressive male sexualities which, however, are founded on the continued framing of women as subordinate and dispensable. This is a representational tactic which cleverly parallels Amin's aggressively "charismatic hyper-heterosexuality" (Leopold 322) which toyed with taboo and the transgressive in his deeply gendered efforts "to seize and reinforce power through military means" (Decker 3).

If we return, now to Mugezi, and his parents, it is this exaggerated male sexuality that they wish to protect him from. (If they know of his reputation for being friendly with older women in the neighbourhood, they hope to limit the potential damage, as it were, not knowing either how his sexual education has also progressed via age mates and older boys in school.) Padlock and Serenity agree that the best idea is to send their son to a seminary; "it would straighten him out", thus emphasising his supposed deviance and implying that their own authority has been unsuccessful in achieving the goal of a regulated, normative self. But also, Padlock's Catholic parents "would love to have a grandson who is priest" (182). This latter wish is a residual mark of their ongoing desire to shape his sexuality, this time into the extreme forms of celibacy demanded by Catholicism. Against this attempt to control his

sexuality, Mugezi thinks to himself: “What use was a priest? [...] Celibacy was definitely not for me. I had already decided to marry three wives in the future” (183). And indeed, celibacy is not for him, for at thirteen years old Lusanani “gobbled [his] virginity within the walls of the derelict house where [they] had made [their] bobbin transaction. We explored our eager bodies and squeezed whatever delight we could get out of them. I was finally clearing the last hurdle to adulthood. In the process, I was touched by twinges of regret; I should have asked her earlier, I kept thinking. In an attempt to make up for lost time, I tried to enjoy as much of her as I could” (193). By juxtaposing the sexual act with the subversive act of stealing Padlock’s bobbin and by locating the occurrence of these events at the same “derelict” venue, the author highlights the subversive as well as transgressive nature of the whole sexual act by both parties.

In the novel, the bobbin, which is a tiny but crucial, indispensable part of a sewing machine, functions as “part of the whole of the mother, a metonymy acting as a metaphor of transgressive power” (Cooper 93). The sewing machine is crucial to Padlock’s identity, as it is a source of income and hence a marker of her indomitable power in the house. The sewing machine is vested with “unnatural power as embodying the military might of the Mother” (Cooper 93) and it is located in what Mugezi’s describes as her “Command Post” (92) drawing on military language to symbolise the despotic power invested in this room. The stealing of the bobbin by Mugezi (when he knows full well how precious this object is in Amin’s country of scarce resources) is symbolic of the usurpation of the despot’s power, “a ritual slaying of the power of the mother” (Cooper 93). To highlight the act of transgressive power attached to the stealing of the bobbin as well as the expression of his own sexuality, Mugezi, as in the instance of the headboard, inscribes the theft scene with erotic, sexualised imagery: “I stuck my finger in a small cavern, slippery with lubricant. Polished steel felt perversely smooth in the darkness. I extracted the bobbin” (164). Lusanani rebels against socio-cultural norms that restrain female sexuality by having an extra-marital affair not with an older member of society but with a child who is not even of the same religious background as hers. Mugezi defies cultural expectations by having sex with an older, married woman. Mugezi imagines sexual performance as a rite of passage into manhood, reinforcing the notion that sexuality is a domain exclusive to adults. He imagines the sexual act as according him a new status as a man, and so he walks around “with a swollen chest” (194), proud and fearless of Hajji Gimbi: for “what he could do, I could do too” (194). As material evidence of resistance to Padlock’s power, a provocative goad to her insistent motherly power, Mugezi

“smears” himself with Lusanani’s sexual fluid, arriving “home smelling like an overripe jackfruit” (193). However, his plans to mock Padlock’s failure to produce her son as a respectably governable subject and an acceptable, well behaved child, fail as Padlock ignores (or fails to detect) Mugezi’s “new perfume” (193). In Mugezi’s mind, the shame prompted in his mother when she recognises his active sexuality would prompt her to “cancel her seminary plans for” him. He has sex not only out of long desire, but also to make it self-evident that “I was no longer fit for celibate priesthood” (193). When his mother fails to notice, never mind concede, his “new status”, Mugezi coerces Lusanani into having pretend sex in front of the house, where Padlock could easily walk in on them. Isegawa here seems to delineate the volatile mixture of childish and adult impulses which comprise Mugezi’s masculinity in relation to the female power of his mother, and his own insecure sense of maleness. Mugezi must constantly engage in “collusion with power” alongside the performing of its resistance. This mirrors Mugezi’s own craving for visible power as a male. However, this time around, his open challenge to Padlock’s power leaves him defeated and worn out, “brittle and cracked like an old boot” (195). When she discovers him with Lusanani, simulating sex, Padlock beats him on the shoulders, back and legs with a thick stick. “My arms soon became paralyzed by the heavy blows...she won the day” (194). On the heels of this incident, Serenity and Padlock dispatch their wayward son to the seminary in the hope that this site of extreme obedience and religious-sexual submission will discipline him into requisite behaviours. He is now expected to learn how to acquire a male sexuality that is far more narrow and controlled than the heteronormative standard. In effect, his sexuality will in the seminary be denied, and sublimated into prayer, stoicism, and service.

Negotiating Seminarian Power, Masculinity and Sexuality

Similar to the violent domestic space that had been intent on “crushing his personality in the mortar of conventionality” (114), Mugezi realises that “the hydra at the heart of the autocracy commonly known as the seminary system bore three venom-laden heads; brainwashing, schizophrenia and good old fashioned dictatorship” (198) and was not any different from the controlling ethics of producing governable subjects that characterised the institution of family. As in his own family, at the seminary he counteracts any attempts to reconfigure his sexual urges and rebellious self. He discovers that “just as in the dictatorship I had left behind, at the seminary I found myself in acting school, because survival here depended on how well you adapted to your new role and how wonderfully you performed it” (198). Here, Mugezi supports a form of conformity which, paradoxically, is aimed at subverting despotic

power and gaining power for himself. Through this strategic performance of identity he is able to negotiate the repressive life of the seminary by tricking and manipulating his fellow students as well as members of staff into being subjects under his control, hence emphasising how “dictators beget dictators” (Cooper 87). When it comes to how he treats people, Mugezi’s motto at the seminary seems to be “use [them], abuse [them] and then drop [them] in the gutter where [they] belonged” (202). Under the economic hardships of the Amin regime, the seminarians are faced with a severe scarcity of food, and even its scant availability is determined by “racial, gender and generational hierarchies of power, with the European Fathers at the helm” (Cooper 96). As Mugezi bluntly observes: “white, nuclear-warhead-privileged priest above the black, shit-scared peasant priest, who was above the shitty-assed peasant nun, who lorded over the wormy peasant faithful-man, woman, child” (269). At the bottom of this heavily hyphenated hierarchy are the hungry black pupils, boys who are not only expected to suppress their growling hunger, but also their adolescent carnality.

However, in spite of the apparently strict religious and moral codes of the institution, inconsistencies exist, contradictions of rule and practice which show how individuals turn systems to creative, in this case, sexual, use. For example, some of the seminarian boys use their sexuality as a way of gaining material favours, approaching the nuns who “cooked for the priests with all their hearts and all their throttled sex drives” (230). The terminology and idea may be located within the established repertoire of heteronormative male-female relations. However, when applied to priests and nuns, the effect is shocking. It implies the power of a heteronormative sexual imaginary (that even members of a devout religious order could be thought of as sexual beings!) but it also finds the unsettled, discrepant moments which mark supposed religious piety, asking us to look again at the priests and nuns as flesh and blood human beings labouring to manage sexual and gendered subjectivities in hierarchies which to some extent replicate those of ordinary society. The relation between the young boys and the nuns, a transaction to secure food, is highly transgressive. The young seminarians are in the process of attaining the hailed and privileged position of priest, and nuns are already established in the religious sect. Isegawa finds the troubling interrelation between stomach hunger and sexual desire, using the connection to highlight sexuality as a complicated, rather than simple, series of needs, pleasures and satisfactions.

Also, in a context of scarcity, Mugezi recognises that a person’s sexuality renders him vulnerable, and this becomes a potential weapon. Mugezi plans to use sexual compromise

and bribery as a means to protect himself from further bullying, attaining power for himself by subjecting school bullies to blackmail. For example, he appeals to the ego of Lwendo, a notorious school bully, by volunteering to do for him “all the things he found demeaning for a second year student” (201). This is a carefully-thought out strategy to catch Lwendo in a compromising situation with Sister Bison, “a fat little black nun with very round legs, very round arms and a very ample behind on which fantasizers said one could stand the fat Jerusalem Bible without its falling off” (209). Mugezi’s language in describing the nun - laden with misogyny and objectification - echoes the same demeaning attitude that he inscribes on the female body within the transgressive act between the nun and the seminarian. “Lwendo stuffed the nun with powerful, deliberate, loaded thrusts” (210). The power and dominant agency that he attaches to Lwendo’s pelvic thrusts echoes his own lust for power which he wishes to use against others. The power that he wields from the knowledge of this particular transgression (which would warrant expulsion for both parties) frees him from Lwendo’s power. In the process, though, Mugezi’s imagination becomes schooled in another version of the violent male sexualities from which his parents had hoped to protect him.

Seminarian life, which was aimed at producing obedient male subjects, aims to repress the boys’ sexuality through religious dogma that emphasises “how special” their call was and how different they were from all the sinners (285). Refusing to conform to the seminary’s conventions, Mugezi eventually expels himself by forging the rector’s signature and recommending himself to good schools. Jones describes Mugezi as “an ‘excessive’ figure who resists any attempt by the reader to foreclose on his alterity” (100) which is the state of being other or different. He is victim and perpetrator, oppressed brother and son and loving grandson (Cooper 105). By portraying Mugezi as such a complex character, the author seems to be implying that masculine sexualities are multiple and not stable since their performance are contingent on myriad social factors and power in relationships. Mugezi’s subjectivities are transient and multiple as he negotiates the difficult terrain of Idi Amin’s regime and the fraught power relations of the domestic family home.

To echo Tamale, then, I find that the multiple ways in which Isegawa in *Abyssinian Chronicles* engages with African male sexualities overtly *trouble* our thinking about sexual norms and behaviours, encouraging the reader to question the ways in which our assumed knowledge has been constructed and circulated. I briefly discuss this in the subsequent section through the usually unexplored sexual sphere of incestuous desires.

Outside the seminary, over time, his identity morphs as his childhood undergoes “a death of sorts, sloughing into adulthood” (284). His eyes open to the world “taking in vistas they had hitherto been blind to” (284). Notably, he becomes disillusioned with Amin whom he had previously considered his godfather, as if borrowing a proxy authority and powerful political influence. This “peeling away of old skin” (284) affects the continued shaping of his sexuality. When he goes to live with his maternal aunt Lwandeka, the fact that she has several children with different fathers supposedly “opens his eyes” – but only to the very blinkered assumption that she must be a “whore”. He does not ask about the men, or label them. He does not consider that a woman may be sexually vulnerable to men. Rather, he is simply fascinated by the idea of his aunt being loose; the very notion resurrects old childhood memories of female “nudes, labias gaping and beckoning to both customers and voyeurs” (294). The concept of female sexuality ingrained in Mugezi’s mind is a salacious spread of female body parts that tends to conflate women’s sexual agency with prostitution. Isegawa is not averse to representing the persistent limits of his protagonist’s masculinised imagination, showing how it falls back on specular clichés.

Again, the frustrated Mugezi struggles with the repressed desire that seems to have become a constitutional feature of how he thinks of, and wishes to enact, his maleness. He transfers his unsatisfied desire for Lusanani onto his aunt, again willfully flouting socially-accepted norms of sexual conduct in fixating on a female relation. The narrative situation is neatly handled. By taking care of his little nephews he begins to envision himself as The Father of her children, borrowing the lineaments of the husband-father’s male role. This can be considered a surprisingly progressive masculinity, as his generous imaginative move is to ‘become’ the sole male parent of all these little ones from different fathers. However, the benign cannot last, and he begins to think like a conventional husband, and the idea of his aunt with another man infuriates him. “I loathed seeing her talk to any man. I would get seizures when she talked to her man friend. [...] As the ‘man’ in the house, as the ‘dad’ of the children, as the number two in command, I felt both insulted and eclipsed” (294). Mugezi, for all his earlier rebelliousness, seems set to reprise the limited, possessive sexual conventions of patriarchal masculinity. This is how tightly it holds, Isegawa seems to suggest, a despotic force which takes some undoing.

Isegawa almost replays the incident with Lusanani in his depiction of Mugezi’s inappropriate desires towards his aunt. As in the Lusanani scenario, here the young man also has murderous, Oedipal fantasies of supplanting his “rival” (who acts fatherly towards

Lwandeka's children) hoping he would be crushed by a car. "I wished impotence on him because I knew that after the smiles and the gifts, he would lie on top of Aunt, push his large penis inside her and make her emit silly sounds" (295). He feels "invaded and demeaned" by the presence of his aunt's lover, an injured feeling which implies his bruised manhood, as he has failed to coax or coerce his aunt's sexual desires to answer his own. Here, the supposedly powerful male is more vulnerable, Mugezi's own sense of male sexuality veering confusingly from one situation to another. We see from his sexual fantasies about his aunt that for Mugezi, who has absorbed hyper-masculine codes and ideologies of what it means to be a 'real' man, control and aggressive actual and imaginary agency are core to his understanding of male sexuality. He even attempts to dominate by proxy: to establish whether his aunt derives pleasure from her man friend, Mugezi resorts to voyeurism, peeping through the keyhole and listening to her moans. These he compares with Lusanani's "elaborate songs" and with Sr. Bison's "simple, clean, very effective sounds" (295) when he had caught her having sex with Lwendo. However, he realises that his key-holing in an attempt to listen is sexually frustrating for him as his object of desire is unattainable. The voyeurism sets a distance between him and his own desires, but also brings them maddeningly close in focusing so narrowly on their object, showing his masculinity as fragile, and unrealised, given the power he invests in sex. There is no comforting "position of detached mastery" (Silverman 146). Psychologists speculate that voyeurism is a form of visual reassurance intended to reinforce masculinity by safely playing out a male's fear of merging with the mother, and being de-mastered, which seems apt, in Mugezi's case.

In conclusion, Isegawa in *Abyssinian Chronicles* challenges our assumptions of a monolithic sexuality by offering us some rather unusual examples, in the context of African fiction, of sexualities which are more habitually ignored or marginalised, categorised transgressive, delinquent, or inappropriate. Through the character Mugezi, his associates such as Cane, and his parents Padlock and Serenity, the novel suggests that sexuality is neither a static homogeneity, nor coherently or collectively defined, or indeed experienced. There are moments when sexualities escape control from governing institutions including family, state and schools, veering into more elusive psychic-emotional sites. Because of Africa's colonial past where "untamed sexuality" was a central factor behind the move to civilize the savages, especially in respect of supposedly brutish, lascivious, black male sexuality, one often finds a rather moderate depiction of sexual identity politics in African fiction, with writers steering clear of describing overtly sexualised behaviours which could seem to endorse Africans as

crude sexual beings. However, Isegawa pushes quite far in his representation of young male sexuality to disrupt the myth of children as innocent, asexual beings without (the right to) sexual volition or desire. Isegawa illustrates how a dominant socio-political milieu can partly be reflected in both parental controls and in the development of a boy's sense of sexual self and appropriate male behaviour, but the novel is also riven with deliberate instances where young boys attempt to negotiate or resist learned forms of sexual behaviour. Mugezi escapes both his mother's control as well as institutional control by appropriating power for himself through sabotage and other subversive elements, and yet from another angle his masculinity is modeled on analogous forms of dominance.

“Out” on the Margins: Non-normative Sexuality in Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*

We should begin to nurture a new generation of scholars who will not flinch from questioning the assumptions underlying the ideas fed to them, the way their predecessors were seldom inclined to do. (Isidore Okpewho 69)

Continuities and Discontinuities in Representing Homosexualities

Over the years, the predominant representation of Africans engaging in same-sex sexual practices or expressing same-sex desire has tended to corroborate the views of so many African heads of state, legislators, religious authorities and ordinary citizens who view homosexuality as an alien practice. In his 1983 article which examines the representation of homosexuality in West African literature, Daniel Vignal notes that “for the majority of (African writers), homophilia²⁰ is exclusively a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants; by outsiders of all kinds: Arabs, French, English, *metis*, and so on. It is difficult for them to conceive that homophilia might be the act of a black African” (74-75, italics in the original). Likewise, in his article “‘Wheyting be dat?’ The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature”, Chris Dunton, who builds on Vignal’s work, observes that homosexuality is regarded as foreign to Africans, “almost invariably attributed to the detrimental impact made on Africa by the West” (423). He further notes that that its treatment in literature (for example in Ama Atta Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*) provides “a convenient reference point – a closely defined narrative element – which helps reveal the general thematic concerns and the larger narrative strategy of the text” (422). Nevertheless, both critics observe that some writers do present homosexual characters with a degree of empathy, albeit within the framework of western inflected behaviour and that some of the texts project “exceptions and ambiguities” in order to conclude that African writers are “not consistently and dogmatically homophobic or heterosexist” in their texts (Epprecht “Recent Trends” 153).

In his review of recent trends in the representation of homosexuality in African literature and film, Marc Epprecht remarks a significant shift in the treatment of same sex practices as well as sexual desires. He argues that since the 1990s, there has been a notable

²⁰ Vignal prefers to use the term homophilia to symbolize his intentions not to be “corralled to the sole sexual dimension of homosexuality” (63). The term is borrowed from an American group called the Mattachine Society which wished “to express the notion that it was their same sex (homo) love (philia) that united them rather than just sexual behaviour” (Quimby and Williams qtd in Zabus “Out in Africa” 10).

increase in the number of authors writing about non-normative sexualities and gender role non-conformity in Africa (“Recent Trends”153). These new studies and representations demonstrate “the remarkably different ways in which some variant of a heterosexual/homosexual binary formation plays out” (Tucker 11) within different African locations. In her book *Out in Africa: Same Sex Desires in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Cultures* Chantal Zabus, who explores how same-sex relations are represented in African literature, attributes this growth and complexity in research and representation in the 1990s to the “advent of queer theory and, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the titanic clash between sexual universalism and cultural relativism” (11). There are now even more portrayals of gay characters in literature and film who challenge the conventional stereotypes and assumptions about African sexuality as a monolithic and homogeneous entity. Epprecht further observes that recent fictional treatments of homosexuality illustrate that authors have shifted from the conventional portrayal of homosexuality as a symbol of western decadence and immorality, as situational or a crime (for example stories of same sex practices in prisons) to a more complex representation which includes the possibilities of love between people of the same sex. This entails presenting homosexuality with the dignity that is usually lacking in the politically homophobic rhetoric of most African nation-states, and also challenging the status quo of homosexuality as un-African.

Framing my own analysis of Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*²¹ within Epprecht’s overview, I read Huchu’s representation of homosexuality as responding to Okpewho’s insistence that African scholars and writers ought to question the assumptions of various “social truths” imposed upon them by a range of ideological state apparatuses. Huchu’s is the first Zimbabwean novel with a homosexual as the central character, although authors such as Chenjerai Hove and Shimmer Chinodya have dealt with homosexuality in their published works.

Perhaps the most notable precursor of Huchu’s handling of this contentious issue is Dambuzo Marechera, who wrote about the topic in the 1980s, “preced[ing] the fraught debates surrounding homosexuality, commencing after 1995, which have profoundly, often problematically, shaped the direction of sexual orientation discourse since then” (Shaw 90). His work is “indispensable to the development of an anti-heteronormative critical discourse, as yet lacking in studies of Zimbabwean literature” (Shaw 90). While Marechera is not “necessarily progressive” in his handling of homosexuality, his fiction brings “crucially

²¹ Tendai Huchu, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2010. All references in this section are from this edition.

important insights to issues of identity, selfhood and sexuality” (Shaw 90), all of which Huchu develops.

The Hairdresser of Harare, first published by Weaver Press, is set within a politically and socially homophobic Zimbabwe under the protracted, highly repressive Mugabe regime, in which censorship of literature which featured taboo subject matters was rife. This implies the defiant capacity of literary narratives, their potential to place in circulation more nuanced responses to sexualities than those advocated by the state.²² Indeed Huchu’s text – as with subsequent novels depicting same-sex desire in African contexts – implies that “the desires of these men and women in whatever social formation or relational nexus cannot be quenched precisely because” (Zabus 5) the ‘queer’ subject by definition speaks from “the margins in that by virtue of his, her or hir position as excluded, that subject’s desire interrogates what the mainstream discourse of heteronormativity tries to conceal” (Zabus 12). Over the last few decades, the term “queer” has come to refer to a range of positions and theoretical perspectives that challenge all normative assumptions of gender and sexuality as fixed, thereby “dislodg[ing] systems and structures from their comfortable niches” (Schehr 30). Representations of marginal sexualities in fiction, then, have the potential to “produce – unwittingly or consciously – sites of resistance from which alternative models of subjectivity can be generated”, or imagined (Zabus 12). Because of its capacity for “dialogic amplification and polyphonic aesthetics” (Zabus 4), the importance of the novel form, as the analysis will show, in the examination of marginalised sexualities and the multiple debates and dimensions surrounding the issue, cannot be over emphasised. The plot and character challenges to normative sexualities in Huchu’s novel remind a reader that sexuality is never simply a coherent monolith coercively produced by ideological-political power, however extensive and autocratic that power may seem to be.

The Hairdresser of Harare is set in contemporary Harare during the socio-economic crisis endured by ordinary Zimbabweans following the international sanctions against Mugabe’s increasingly dictatorial ZANU-PF government. In the relationship between the central characters, the novel clearly shows the wealth differentials between the township poor and the well-connected rich political class, with their government connections. The novel is narrated by Vimbai, an ambitious single mother in her mid-twenties who is struggling to make ends meet in a country severely affected by severe currency inflation, scarcity and

²² Perhaps the lack of censorship against this novel might be attributable to the fact that there is no naming of, and even no direct references to, President Robert Mugabe in the text; the book is therefore not particularly a threat to the person and office of the president which is the usual expedient justification for such censorship.

drought. There is scant food on the shelves, an unreliable fuel supply, and a 90% unemployment rate. Additionally, it is a country that is becoming increasingly repressive in its violent attempts to suppress dissenting voices. Vimbai describes herself as “queen Bee” (3), the best hairdresser in Harare, and she is considered the ultimate artiste at the salon where she works. Because of her styling and cutting skills, she is considered by Mrs. Khumalo the salon’s owner to be “the goose that laid the golden eggs” (2). However, this is only until Mrs. Khumalo hires Dumisani Ncube, a twenty-two year old male hairdresser who turns up at the salon and soon wins over Vimbai’s customers with his pert charm, hairdressing expertise and engaging combination of outspokenness and diplomacy. Vimbai dislikes him at first: her regulars now insist on him doing their hair, *and* he gets promoted to salon manager, trumping her long years of successful and loyal service. However, when Dumisani begins renting a room in Vimbai’s house, she discovers his kind and generous side and she falls in love with him. She also discovers that he comes from an affluent family with ties to the Mugabe government, and that Dumisani fell out with his family for reasons he refuses to disclose. Readers, though, are more astute than Vimbai, and catch the subtle hints that the author offers in the novel with regard to Dumisani’s sexual orientation. He is homosexual, but Vimbai doesn’t realise this until towards the end of the narrative events.

Dumisani is gay but not ‘out’, since he knows the consequences which coming out would entail. In order to maintain the pretense of heteronormativity, he masquerades Vimbai as his girlfriend to his family, the relationship offering an expedient mask, a disguise, which mutes the implicit threat of his unconventional sexuality. However, he also begins an affair with Mr. M_, a liberation war hero married to the woman called Minister M_, a ZANU-PF politician who is a client of the salon, and who aspires to be president. When Vimbai subsequently discovers that Dumisani is gay, she reports the affair to Minister M_, and the furious woman sends her political thugs to eliminate him. But Dumisani survives the attack, and goes into exile in the UK where he can live openly, without being persecuted for his sexual orientation. However, he is forced to leave behind the people he has grown to love and respect, among them Vimbai and her daughter Chiwoniso.

Gibson Ncube argues that Huchu’s open representation of homosexuality possesses an “illocutionary force” which exerts pressure on “monolithic conceptions of sexual identity and potentially incites readers to perceive differently a subject that has hitherto remained taboo in many parts of Africa” (66). Here, Ncube draws on Maria Pia Lara’s ideas, and in this subsection I more deeply examine the novel through Lara’s theorisation of literary works as “emancipatory narratives [that] create new forms of power [and] configure new ways to fight

back against past and present injustices” (5). However, to distinguish my focus from Ncube’s, which compares and contrasts the stylistic and narratological techniques employed by Huchu and the Moroccan writer Abdellah Taia so as to “depict the quest by their gay protagonists in assuming their homosexuality” (66), I examine how Huchu uses character and language in relation to homosexuality to question and contest a panoply of institutional practices – Zimbabwean nationalist culture, law and religion – that constitute part of the norm-generating apparatuses that govern what Foucault has conceptualised as ‘regimes of truth’ in the shaping and controlling of sexualities. I also examine the ways in which the novel demonstrates how contrary sexual narratives demand recognition (Lara 4), becoming apparent despite regulation, emerging from within the constraints of norms in spite of systematic efforts to produce ‘appropriate’ forms of sexualities. Although Lara’s theoretical framework is feminist in origination and perspective, it is nevertheless applicable in the analysis of non-normative sexualities in the sense that, like women’s experiences, marginalised sexualities exemplify othered, even abjected positions, voices that are silenced or compromised through “their relation to the power structure and the signifying system” (Schehr viii).

In tandem, I develop Ncube’s reading of Huchu’s enquiring representation of homosexuality as participating in the African quest to integrate into “the global economy, indeed the global economies of language, exchange and sexuality” (Gallagher 167). Indeed, in Huchu’s fiction and even further across the texts on which my dissertation focuses, we see versions of global labels of sexuality such as gay or lesbian, reflecting the internationalisation of such identities as well as the transnational influence of LGBTI organisations (Zabus 12). At the same time, though, these African fictions address specifically *local* instances of such sexualities, implying the tensions between transnational and national contexts, and the ways in which local contexts exert a tension upon ‘international’ concepts and practices, while adapting them to local pressures. Huchu, for instance, was born in Bindura, Zimbabwe in 1982 but emigrated to Edinburgh, Scotland, when the economic situation in Zimbabwe grew precarious. Kizito Muchemwa asserts that “the writer in the diaspora occupies a liminal space, and mediates the melancholia of those who find themselves in strange lands and the anomie of those left at home, who experience many types of deprivation” (135) including various modes of social injustices. Huchu uses the critical distance that separates him from the country of his birth to broach the contentious issue of his home country’s continued criminalisation and ostracism of same-sex sexualities which are framed within discourses of filth, disease and disgust, ironically by a system of government which is itself increasingly premised on moral and political corruption, a decay which in turn attests to Zimbabwe as a

diseased/dis-eased state. For Huchu, the diaspora “constitutes a freedom of space” for the articulating of marginalised voices, a position which does not necessarily exist in Zimbabwe due to “excessive systems of control” over individual subjectivities (Ncube 68). In his interview with *The Scotsman Magazine*, Huchu comments on the advantages which elective exile from his home country has accorded him: “Living in Edinburgh lent me the gift of perspective, the ability to see things from a distance. From Alexander McCall Smith I have tried to pinch a light touch and a bit of magic and humour to fuse into my narrative of contemporary Zimbabwe” (“Tendai Huchu in *The Scotsman Magazine*”, n.p). I interpret this “gift of perspective” as manifesting itself, in part, in the writer’s ability to create an interspace between here and there, enabling an ethically-implicated but also often humorous response to narrow assumptions about ‘normal’ sexuality in the Zimbabwean context. At the same time, I suggest that Huchu’s diasporic position is fragile, not firmly secured. The verb “lent”, for instance, signals the tenuous, provisional nature of the distance he has claimed as a writer, since his position is inflected by the privilege of his present geographical-spatial location in Scotland but at the same time cannot necessarily eschew the cultural intricacies that inflect his representation of homosexual desire. In this respect, my chapter grapples with challenging questions, among them: to what extent does Huchu’s representation of gay African characters depart from the circulation of western-inspired gay African characters without necessarily essentialising queer African identity, keeping in mind that African homosexualities can never be “comfortably slotted” into an “identity politics” synonymous with that “carved out of gay and lesbian liberation struggles” (Zabus 5). Nor can it simply “display queer and even post-queer characteristics” (Zabus 5). Can Huchu’s representation of homosexuality even be said to unsettle not only homogeneous notions of homosexuality, but also of a western discourse of queerness? In my analysis of Huchu’s novel, for instance, I am mindful of Spurlin’s caution that ‘queer’ is not the clear antithesis of heterosexuality, a “readymade totalisation that is refigured” simply to be “moulded in any local context” (71). Rather “the usefulness of queer [must] be understood as a kind of ‘unstoppable alterity’ that continually holds authoritative understandings of national belonging and citizenship in question, to the extent that national cultural hegemonies have resulted historically in the denial of full participatory citizenship for those who do not fit into renewed inventions of national culture, including those marked by sexual difference” (Spurlin 71).

As I have already indicated in my introductory chapter, the discourses constituting homosexuality in African contexts have often debated whether it is African or not. The most vocal detractor has been a Pan-Africanist or nativist claim which argues that homosexuality is

a western import, a mark of perversion and decadence, a vestige of colonialism. Epprecht refutes this claim by arguing that empirical evidence shows the long-standing existence of same-sex practices in Africa (“Hungochani” 10). Through my analysis of Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*, I demonstrate that perceptions and fears of diversity may arise from the “nation-state’s fantasy of itself as masculine” and the imagined capacity of the “imperial imprint of homosexuality” to feminise the nation state (Spurlin 70). Extrapolating from William Spurlin’s analysis of non-normative sexualities within the Maghreb, I show through my analysis that the political rhetoric conveying these fears points to spaces of “ambivalence” and uncertainty “at the site of the nation-state’s authority” (70). The nation state attempts to contain these threats to the desired virility of its identity by “extending its principles of justification to groups excluded from the exercise of power” (Spurlin 71). Identities which threaten the image and efficacy of state authority, supposedly feminising or tainting it, are subject to forms of repressive excision.

Destabilising Gender and Sexual Norms

The Hairdresser of Harare “confronts and dramatises a key area of cultural debate in postcolonial southern Africa”, the challenge of imagining and expressing “alternative, non-patriarchal masculinities under social conditions of extreme violence and deprivation” (Primorac and Chan 720) which produces not only hegemonic masculinity but what Msibi terms “anxious masculinities” which encourage the spread of homophobic judgement and even violence. From his position as an African writer in Britain, Huchu takes on the task of representing Zimbabwean socio-economic and cultural milieus which normalise the (in)visibility of homosexuality in that country. In so doing, Huchu brings into an internationalised public sphere, via wide and influential literary readerships, some of the significant historical silences which are constitutive of the heteropatriarchal narrative of Zimbabwean nationalism. As Oliver Nyambi notes, following Lara’s ideas, literary narratives offer “an opportunity to study the imaginative disposition of the ‘powerless’, the vast majority who are outside political power, where we can infer something of their take on the politics of their lived experiences and time-space” (1). The salon as the primary setting of the narrative embodies such trenchant ordinariness. As Huchu discusses in an interview on bookshybooks.blogspot.com, “The salon acts as a microcosm of Zimbabwean society. In a society stratified by class, this is one of the few spaces people from all walks of life can interact” (“Meet...Tendai Huchu” n.p).

And yet the narrative tension depends on Huchu's decision to position the salon as a complex gendered domain, one conventionally female, which the presence of a male hairdresser then disrupts. The salon serves as a "social hub and an information dissemination centre" and "this feminised space" is used by women "to exchange information, tips and advice, and help one another to source basic commodities and bribe their way to the fronts of various queues" (Primorac and Chan 720). Indeed, Mrs. Khumalo's salon is patronised by women of all types, among them nurses, accountants, and other varieties of local business women, all of whom are looking for ways to survive economically. Among these ordinary strugglers Huchu places the potential political flashpoint figure of the female Minister M_, a ZANU-PF stalwart, who arrives in her "shiny black Mercedes C-class Benz" (15).

Of the resourcefulness of the women, Lisa Ncube and James Greenan (2003) state that it is undeniable that women entrepreneurs are major actors and contributors to economic development and are becoming increasingly visible in the local economies of developing countries such as Zimbabwe. In a country affected by political and economic malaise, where "you have to learn to be a jack of all trades" (14), this interaction of women from all strata serves as an empowering ground for various kinds of engagement with issues of socio-political concern to the citizens, *and* also for embodying the close links between politics and supposedly personal lives. The salon functions as a variant of Habermas' public sphere where ideas are freely expressed, circulated and debated. In this masculine dominated Zimbabwean context, ordinary women, especially, tend to be a subordinate category of persons, and in the salon, they are free to articulate a polyphonic voicing that unevenly counters and overlaps with the public dimensions of the state. The salon is a liminal space which is not entirely secure. The same space is sometimes threatening, exposing the tensions and fissures in the provisionally drawn-together group identified as the clientele, while bringing intimate governance and political governance into tricky conversation. If the salon is the light-hearted locale of chatty banter and gossipy anecdotes, it is also, as Stephen Chan and Ranka Primorac note, "a public sphere marked by increasingly complex perfidies and despairs" (602) associated with the (so-called) Unity government.

For example, it is within the salon that Minister M_ proposes that her henchmen threaten Trina, a white Zimbabwean supplier of hair products whose farm has already been repossessed by the ZANU-PF government. It is also in the salon that Dumisani is almost beaten up by these thugs for being a 'traitor' for trying to protect Trina. Here, too, he meets Mr. M_ who saves him from the violence. Far from being merely a cosy female space distinct from political violence against minorities such as women, white people, and homosexuals,

the salon is right in the thick of things, deftly depicted by Huchu as a site in which contestation and counter-contestation over sexual and political allegiances play out. The relative expressive freedoms associated with the salon are clearly also shaped by dangerous contingencies.

I read the positioning of Dumisani, a gay character in this conventionally female space, as functioning metaphorically within the text as an attempt to destabilise the boundaries that have been placed on the bodies of homosexuals and to create a space for new narratives which have previously been suppressed. As Pia Lara posits, “narratives in the public sphere can permeate, erode and transform our self-conceptions in the act of stepping into the public arena” (69) therefore making contentious issues such as same-sex practices more visible and comprehensible to the society. In the same vein, complex, emotionally-engaging literary narratives about the difficulties of being gay within a homophobic context may coax readers to change their perceptions about what is categorised as normal and abnormal.

When Dumisani first steps into Mrs. Khumalo’s salon, responding to the job vacancy for a hairdresser, he encounters resistance which has nothing to do with his as-yet unrevealed sexual orientation. The mere fact of his being a man is enough to induce mockery. The owner of the salon categorically dismisses him, having naturalised the assumption that hairdressing is not men’s work: “Young man, d’you think I am looking for a garden-boy? I want a hairdresser” (7). Vimbai’s thoughts endorse this view: “These were difficult times and jobs were scarce but I’d never thought that men might try to get a *woman’s job*. A male hairdresser, who’d *ever heard of such a thing?*” (7). The word ‘thing’, here, even serves a subtle derogatory purpose. Through Vimbai’s and Mrs. Khumalo’s statements, we infer the local society’s designation of what is male and female, the sexual division of labour emphasising an apparently natural polarisation. At first encounter, Huchu’s depiction of a gay hairdresser seems to rely on the old stereotypes of campy, effeminate characters that are prevalent in western popular culture. However, the events of the narrative suggest, rather, that Huchu is attempting to destabilise such notions. Within the Zimbabwean context, his representation of a male in a typically ‘female’ profession destabilises fixed notions of gender and work. Huchu problematises the conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity by presenting Dumisani as a well-groomed man who had a “dozen sweet-smelling perfumes, aftershave, imported bathing foams and shower gels” (64) but who was at the same time “comfortable with his own masculinity” (38) despite the fact that “he would chat with the girls and feel like one of them” (38). Dumisani’s efforts to groom himself and appear

masculine re-enact what Raeywn Connell calls “a very straight gay” identity. This ‘very straight gay’ identity paradoxically allows Dumisani to be ‘unmasculine’ at the same time. Connell explains that such a construction of gay identity is “clearly not built on a lack of masculinity” but rather on “some engagement with hegemonic masculinity” (742). At the same time, though, this performance is vulnerable, and can arouse suspicion. As Vimbai observes, the “stiff manner in which Dumi walked suggested something was not quite right” (72). Her remark reminds us that the mechanisms put in place to control and regulate homosexual mobility and identities are represented through his very embodiment, which is awkward and alienated from the familiar, comfortable range of bodily movements associated with self and enabling self-expression, and that even minor deviations from supposed norms can lead people to doubt the ‘truth’ of a person’s apparent orientation.

Huchu opens up spaces for the embodiment of alternative masculinities which unsettle essentialist notions of how to be a man. He does this wittily, channeled through the comments of the salon’s clients. As one remarks, “[T]o find a man who can groom himself in Zimbabwe is next to impossible, but what are the odds of finding one who can groom you as well? (38). Dumisani is presented as something of a liminal figure, comfortably adept in supposedly female and even feminised behaviours and skills, and yet also fitting the dominant physical ideal of masculinity which, reinforced by popular culture, is perceived as appealing to women. This character allows the author to work between the claims of heteronormativity and alternative male sexualities. Vimbai immediately assumes that because of Dumisani’s characteristic male handsomeness, he ought to be in a heterosexual relationship: a “guy like him being single was next to impossible. He should have had a girlfriend” (82). Here, her own internalisation of sexual codes governs the way in which she projects Dumisani’s sexual identity. Dumisani’s self-representation also seems to position him as good ‘husband material’, ‘every girl’s dream’, since he is charming but at the same time respectful and responsible: “Flirting with the clients seemed like second nature to him but he always held back and kept things professional” (83). Huchu dramatically complicates all these assumptions when Vimbai reads Dumisani’s journal and discovers that he is gay:

DUMI IS A HOMOSEXUAL-*Ngochani*. If it wasn’t written in his hand and before my eyes, I would have denied it. I could not have foreseen this. He spoke like a normal man, wore clothes like a normal man and even walked like a normal man. Everything about him was masculine. Didn’t homosexuals walk about with handbags and speak with squeaky voices? [...] Which one of them was the man and which was the woman anyway? (166)

The upper case letters are a textual and “psychological marker that immediately captures the attention of the reader” (Ncube 70), the deviance of the font size exclaiming Vimbai’s disbelief and outrage at his assumedly aberrant sexual orientation. The italicised Shona word “ngochani” (a derogatory term for ‘homosexual’) functions in the same way (Ncube 70), driving home the particular African cultural context of Dumi’s gayness, and associating it with the threats to prescriptive ZANU-PF propaganda for a proper, robustly untainted Zimbabwean identity. Vimbai here emerges as highly normative in her assumptions, attaching stereotypical notions of gender directly to physical expressions of sexual orientation when she muses “which one was the man and which one was the woman”. She (like many people) mistakenly superimposes hetero patterns onto homosexuality, and is also pruriently intrigued by the homosexuality she purports to despise. The quotation also indicates that she equates homosexuality with abnormality since, for her, men are ‘naturally’ supposed to partner with women. She insistently repeats the adjective ‘normal’, but even this use protests too much, thereby insisting on her perception of Dumi’s abnormality, his deviance from the male standard. Echoing caricatural social beliefs that gays are easily identified (even indelibly ‘marked’) by their fey fashion sense and falsetto pitch, Vimbai’s personal thoughts intersect with entrenched norms, and in so doing attest to the prejudiced discriminatory practices of heteronormative sexual discourses. The attitude of Huchu here is also a little unclear. The language that he has Dumisani use in his journal to mark his falling in love with Mr. M_ echoes the ‘knight in shining armour/damsel in distress’ trope prevalent in popular romance fiction: “Met strong, dashing man who literally saved my life...” (165). Here, oddly enough, Huchu runs the risk of lapsing into normalising stereotypes as a means to render both Dumi and homosexuality ‘normal’. This could seem something of a capitulation.

That said, Huchu’s representation of Dumisani as meeting many of the visual and social criteria for ‘authentic’ masculinity works to contest the association of an effeminate man with homosexuality. In effect, the author renders notions of masculinity and sexuality as unstable constructs which are not easily susceptible to visual cues. This representation also mocks heteronormativity which visually typecasts a ‘normal’ male appearance as necessarily heterosexual. Huchu’s treatment of Dumisani’s character therefore exerts “pressure on simplistic notions of (gender and sexual) identity and disturb(s) the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity” (Day xi).

This representation invites a reading via Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity which unsettle deeply-rooted assumptions that ‘natural’ or biological sexual attributes determine a person’s gender, which then determines sexuality. She illustrates how

the gendered horizon of social reality is not a given but an iterative construct which nevertheless has tangible social effects. Butler speaks of the power of “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign,” arguing that through repeated acts of gender performance as entrenched in society – trousers for men, dresses for women; male ageing as sexually distinguished, female ageing as sexually defunct; assertive men as bosses; assertive women as bossy... – we continuously enact the hegemonic, hetero discourses of reality, making them appear natural and necessary (“Gender Trouble” 270). Given the power of a heterosexual matrix:

[t]he act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again. (Butler 272)

In effect, for Butler, gender (and the associated sexuality) is not what we are but what we do through iterative performativity, following the rules that produce heteronormative discourse. She argues that by subverting gender binaries and performances we can dispel the myths of ‘naturalness’ surrounding gender-role stereotypes (Tamale “Introduction” 12), something which Huchu demonstrates through Dumisani’s character.

Policing Non-Normative Sexuality

Butler’s theory of gender and sexuality as performance exposes the fictitious character of the hegemonic conceptions of sexuality that law, culture and religion help to construct. In his novel Huchu demonstrates the role played in policing sexualities by institutions which aim to reinforce social truths. They regulate sexualities that are perceived to deviate from the norm by punishing them and ostracising them. The novel shows how the othering discourse which perceives homosexuality as perverse, filthy, disease, and moral decay is assisted by the practices of religious institutions as well as family, both of which attempt to determine how gay people imagine and express their sexuality:

Brothers and sisters, don’t you see the signs in front of your eyes? Look at Zimbabwe. Ask why the Lord is punishing us like this. It’s because the whole earth has become like Babylon or Sodom and Gomorrah.[...]You must be on the lookout for homosexuals and sexual deviants. Perverts shall burn. How can a man and another man sleep together? God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. Can a woman and a woman make a baby? (72)

The pastor at Vimbai's church attributes Zimbabwe's political, economic and social malaise to the presence of discrepant sexualities, dissident embodiments such as homosexuals and prostitutes, people who do not conform to the heteropatriarchal script. The judgmental sermon sanctions pious and discriminatory moral codes, yet Vimbai exalts the sermon as "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. I could feel his words coursing through us all and touching our very souls" (72). Under the alibi of religion, she is in thrall to intolerance that vilifies sexual difference in preaching ostensibly God-given moral norms. The scene points to the persuasive role that Christian religious languages, rituals and symbolic practices play, in masking as 'holy' what are in fact punitive and exclusionary behaviours, not only in facilitating the governing of sexualities via stigmatising spiritual edict, but simultaneously in linking this to views of the properly powerful and devout nation. In the above-mentioned church scene, Dumisani suddenly goes quiet, implying that he feels condemned both in the immediate church community and damned in terms of the afterlife because of his "perverse" "unnatural passions" (166).

The fact that institutions in Zimbabwe such as Christianity (in its nexus with politics) prohibit gay people from living openly according to their felt sexual identities means that gay people have to devise means through which to live regular, 'normal' lives, meeting at special places informally-designated as accommodating to gays and even resolving to masquerade the heteronormative codes with which they do not identify. We see this in Dumi's behaviour, where he takes Vimbai as his date to his brother's wedding and introduces her as his girlfriend so that his sexuality will not be brought into question. We learn through Dumisani's journal that when he did tell his family he was homosexual, the news was very badly received. His sister Michelle explains:

Dad went ballistic, Patrick (his brother) wanted to bust his knee caps, it all went crazy. Nothing happened for a year until one of his friends mentioned in passing that he had met Dumi on holiday with some white guy. You should have seen my dad howling with rage. To try and protect the family name, dad arranged with his pals in police to have the Canadian dude deported before anyone knew what was up with his son. (185)

Such threats apply even more broadly than in the Ncube family, for as a gay friend of Dumi's says ominously, "They are clamping down on us. We have to be extra careful" (85). His phrasing conveys the violent antagonisms of state body in its assertion of control over the reviled homosexual body. The term "clamp" conveys the repressive state's violent attempt to suppress dissident sexualities; it also points to the dehumanising of homosexual bodies,

implying that they are like pieces of wood to be shaped into better, useful form, or even that they are bodies which require medical intervention in order to have deviant parts excised. Certainly, Dumisani's sexuality is seen as a shameful taint upon the respectable image of the politically powerful, affluent Ncube family.

Repeatedly, we have the metaphor of disease used by characters when referring to Dumisani. For example, when he introduces Vimbai as his girlfriend, his mother exclaims, "Only the best for the girl who cured my son" (117), the ostensible heterosexual relationship as curative evokes malignant shadow images of a diseased, pathologised bodily identity, a point I have already addressed earlier in this dissertation when discussing nationalist Zimbabwean ideals of the state as potently robust. Because of this systemic will to categorise what is considered normal and abnormal, Dumisani himself admits to conforming to socio-conventional beliefs that label his orientation perverse: "...for a long time I used to think of my gayness as a cancer for which I needed treatment. Then I met Colin and he told me how wrong I was. Now, I realise it is just something I was born with and as long as Zimbabwe can't accept it, I'd better live somewhere else" (184). By having Dumisani accept that his orientation is inherent, natural to his biology even though it disrupts the social construction and performance of normative masculinity, Huchu risks a dangerous assertion, querying a still dominant perception, in Zimbabwe and indeed in multiple African nations, of homosexuality as a western import introduced to naïve, susceptible African subjects in colonial times. Through Dumisani, Huchu subverts the hegemonic sexual script that overvalues a monolithic male sexuality, and which associates supposed discrepancies with an anti-African discourse of imperialism. Dumisani's decision to leave the country "which wants to force him to be what he is not" (186) symbolises his resistance to attempts to condition his sexuality to meet socio-political norms (Ncube 73).

Countering Narratives against Non-normative Sexualities and Zimbabwean Nationalism

As it happens, though, Huchu is also interested to demonstrate, in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, that attitudes towards the subject of homosexuality - a contentious and sensitive topic in many parts of Africa - are not as unanimous as the dominant homophobic religious-political rhetoric maintains. Huchu broaches this via the plot device of a philosophy club, a group of so-called "lunatics...talking nonsense" (175) who met "across the field" (175) seated on rocks. Their debates allow Huchu room for a nuanced, local debate on the question of homosexuality, enabling the author to present "multiple perspectives regarding homosexual

desire in a land that claims to be against it” (Lipenga 47). Huchu’s intention to begin a debate on homoerotic desires can be framed within Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia:

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. (Bakhtin 493)

The multiple discourses construing homosexuality in Huchu’s novel offer an appropriate space in which to apply the notion of heteroglossia. Bakhtin highlights that within the multiple utterances directed towards an object, there is also the existence of opposing, contradictory utterances which function alongside those articulations endorsed by socio-conventions. In a ‘club’ which is modelled on the trope of the “mad philosopher” (drawing elements from Plato’s concept of the “allegory of the cave” and the “philosopher king” who alone is able to see the truth amongst people who have been programmed to think in a rigid, prescriptive manner), Huchu presents a space in which his narrative can perform a different voicing of othered homosexuality.

This articulation unsettles the assertions and assumptions voiced by Vimbai, her church pastor, and Minister M_. It is the questioning, dissenting voice of the marginal character Fungai, Vimbai’s older brother. Appropriately named Fungai, an honorific and pluralistic Shona verb which means “think”, he remains the only member of Vimbai’s family who maintains ties with her after she’d fallen out with the family over a question of inheritance. Although Fungai dropped out of university owing to the family’s financial constraints after death of another brother, Robert, while he cannot pay the fees, Fungai still actively pursues knowledge by what could be considered guerilla tactics, sitting in lectures and working in the university library. In some respects Fungai may seem odd. He lives according to what Vimbai calls a “weird theory” (54) – one closely linked to various form of peripatetic philosophical thought: he walks everywhere because walking brings him “closer to the truth” (54). For him “cars were unnatural” (54); they moved unnaturally fast, and one couldn’t see the world for what it really was (54). This slow, deliberate thoughtfulness, however quirky and apparently out of keeping with modern times, enables him to make reflective, considered responses and judgements. Fungai is an important figure in the curious philosophy club I have already mentioned, a gathering of fellows which attracts the label of ‘madness’, and is marked by socio-cultural difference. Fungai objects to conventions which

simplify life into polarities and homogeneity, and his more open, diverse world view then influences his take on homosexuality. For Fungai, homosexuality is “not only there but it is actually necessary” (177); he argues that:

Between the two genders there are a myriad possibilities, the leap from male to female is not as straightforward as our senses tell us. Therefore when you look at what you think is a man and what you think is a woman, you often fail to recognise or acknowledge all other ambiguous possibilities.[...]If there weren't this subtle range of distinctions, then these two sexualities would not exist; there would be one or none but not two genders. (177).

This suggests the difficulties of ‘explaining’ sexualities in popular parlance; the challenges of thinking through sex and gender in relation to lived experience. However, the fact that Fungai risks these explanations in a repressive Harare attests to his free-thinking inclinations, the desire to connect philosophical abstractions to the complex materiality of life’s challenges and questions. Working from the understanding that gender is constructed, “a kind of imitation from which there is no original” (Butler “Gender Trouble” 21), Fungai undermines the fixed dichotomies that are generally invoked in order to binarise gender and sexuality, creating imaginative space for the possibilities of multiple embodiments, orientations, and performances of gender. Because of the wide spectrum of possible identities, non-normative identities as Butler argues “work neither to copy nor emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalised idealisation” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 340). By underscoring that “the illegality of homosexuality is a product of man-made laws” (178), Fungai points to this constructedness of normative sexuality and by implication to the biased power relations through which sexual norms designate homosexuality unnatural.

Even then, however, the situation is represented in the novel as complex. Huchu seems to imply that the issue is a very sensitive one and that the perceived abnormality of homosexuality is deeply embedded in the psyche of even those who consider themselves enlightened, progressive thinkers. Consider, for instance, that soon after Fungai thoughtfully addresses Vimbai’s question about homosexuality, exploring possibilities in debate with members of the philosophy club, things go awry. Fungai’s careful justification of homosexuality leads to the collapse of the philosophy club, the members abandoning one by one. Eventually, “Whenever Fungai walked with his dogs, youths called him the *ngochani* and kept him at arm’s length. Only his friend Tonderai remained with him and even he perhaps only because with his breath he could find no other friends” (178). This is a poignant

indictment, on the part of the author, of enduring prejudice against homosexuality, and associated pariahdom. The condition of ostracism and marginalisation is the shared burden of the putative ‘ngochani’, the dogs as ‘beastly’ companions, and the lonely, tainted outsider who suffers from halitosis and is thus cursed by constitutional ‘foulness’. Fungai becomes a figure who is burdened with the name of homosexual not because of his sexuality but because of his liberated thinking, his refusal to concede to hegemonic norms. Here, Huchu reminds readers that perversity is an imagined and attributed form of socio-cultural denigration in contexts which refuse to allow difference, rather than some inherent, evidentiary condition for which a person ‘deserves’ stigmatising.

In addition to imagining small, fragile spaces of idiosyncratic free-thinking which attempt to challenge normative sexual views in Zimbabwe, sites such as the philosophy club, Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* also presents an interesting counter narrative to the official discourses on nationalism and belonging. In order to make this clear, let me briefly return to my earlier contention that the presence of homosexuality in the nation is assumed, in hegemonic heteronormative views, to present a feminising threat to the masculine state since this particular form of (un)male sexuality is associated with cowardice, weakness and inefficacy, all supposedly feminine qualities. Many prominent black Zimbabweans, among them politicians and church leaders “maintain that homosexual behaviour is 'un-African', a foreign 'disease' that was introduced by white settlers and that is now principally spread by foreign tourists and ambassadors” (Epprecht “The Unsayings” 632) thus disassociating homosexual practices from the ‘unified’, ‘masculine’ Zimbabwean state. Achille Mbembe identifies Afro-radicalism and nativism as two vectors which have locked African thought about identity and freedom into an oppositional stance, preventing nuanced participation in a forward-thinking intellectual project that would “concern itself with the modalities of reinventing a being-together situation” in the racial sense (Mbembe 250) and, I would argue, in terms of sexual orientation. As Ranka Primorac argues in her book, *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe*, the Afro-radical and nativist narratives have had “far-reaching effects” (9) on the national body politic. She contends that a combination of these two narratives has been central to the politics of Zimbabwe, “deployed by the ruling party as a means of justifying and motivating the state’s drive towards what it wishes to represent as the third *Chimurenga* or uprising - the final successor to the anti-colonial revolts of 1890s and 1970s” (Primorac 9). The third *Chimurenga* discourse operates around the politics of exclusion through various modes towards all bodies (including opposition parties and homosexuals) that are configured as agents of the West and therefore enemies of the

state, thus a threat to the existence of national governance (Mangena 894). Zimbabwean nationalism, like many African nationalisms, is framed within masculine ideals and the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial narratives of the liberation wars espouse a hyper-masculine orientation which emphasises violence, strength, weapon-use and dominance over women (see Adelman, 2003; Cockburn, 2010). On the one hand, narratives of violence meted out against the oppressive Rhodesian government are glorified and celebrated as part of the history of liberation mainly dominated by male war heroes and excluding the narratives of women from this history and the combative roles they played. On the other hand, narratives of rape and male sexual abuse of women – by male guerilla fighters and government soldiers, violating ordinary non-militarised women, female guerrilla fighters or war collaborators - are silenced and censored, thus perpetuating a privileged, even repressively masculinist voice as *the expression of Zimbabwean nationalism*.²³

In *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Tendai Huchu works creatively with these historical-political patterns. The female Minister M_, for example, is a staunch ZANU-PF supporter who aspires to the presidency. She “had joined the liberation struggle when she was only fourteen [and] trained in Zambia with ZANLA and had fought bravely against the Rhodesian Army” (16). Minister M_ is an intriguing figure, since her role and characterisation point to femaleness as a site of struggle and ideological contest in the entrenched masculinised space of an independent, post-colonial Zimbabwe. Like many historical female guerrillas, despite experience as a bush fighter, she conforms to gender expectations in her role as a wife. Her position as a former guerilla soldier warrants attention especially in relation to the operations of gendered power dynamics within the familial space.

In a heteronormative matrix, her position as a guerilla is associated with her having bravely and uncharacteristically assumed “male roles”, as a woman (Hungwe 40), although during the liberation war women usually served in more traditionally female capacities: cooking for the guerrillas, nursing them and ‘entertaining’ them (the euphemism for sexual servicing). Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi notes that the wartime slogan for women was “Forward with the cooking stick!” and points to other catchphrases that continued to enshrine the nurturing, maternal or sexual roles of women even during the liberation war for political freedom (19). By actually *fighting* in the war alongside men, as Chipso Hungwe argues, “many female soldiers hoped to earn respect” (40) and a sense of deserved equality. The assumption was that the entrenched gender hierarchy would be dismantled once women had

²³ For an ethical appraisal of the sexual conduct of male guerrillas see Molly Monyanganise 2015.

proven themselves as intrepid and as resourceful as men. After the war, narratives of male service and heroism were glorified and immortalised in books and through monuments. However, expectations of equality were not realised after independence for women; women who had participated in the war were branded unrespectable and prostitutes, all on account of the supposed sexual freedoms which were said to have been enjoyed in the ‘bush’. As Nhongo-Simbanegavi aptly sums it up, the dominant sentiments with regard to women who fought in the war or who participated in the war in whatever role was that “women from the bush are a problem” (146). After the war, most of these women were left by their husbands; some were forced to conceal from their husbands their participation in the war, for fear of stigma. Many, in re-entering civilian society, had to conform to stereotypical gender roles in order to be accepted (Hungwe 41). It is in this context that a reader needs to understand Minister M_’s complex social performance as an ex-guerilla, a wife, *and* a politician. She combines an explosive aggregation of domestic compliance, sardonic rebellion, senior political aspiration, the will to exert political influence, and even to order violence.

With specific regard to homosexuality, Minister M_ echoes government-supported homophobia. This is clear when Vimbai goes to beg her to spare Dumisani’s life. “It says here that he has a visa to go to Britain [...] It should suit him well there. Their government is full of gay gangsters. They even walk the streets parading themselves. He will be happy in Sodom” (187). Operating within simplistic binaries of moral and immoral, western imperialism and African authenticity, Minister M_ demonises the supposedly permissive west while essentialising, as an example of properly ‘African’ integrity, Zimbabwe’s refusal to tolerate deviant sexualities. In effect, her attitudes coincide with and even represent the bigotry of the nationalist political narrative about same-sex relations. At the very least, homosexuals are “an inconvenience” (185) which disturbs national purity; at worst they are amoral, criminal exhibitionists who should be exterminated. Minister M_, I note, quite deliberately uses the term “gay” as a pejorative. She associates homosexuality with the attempted impositions of foreign imperialism, and then also deftly turns this into a caricatural emasculation of the British government, in comparison with the virile Zimbabwean nation, by implying its ‘gayness’.

Huchu is adept at using his characters in order to prompt questions about normative views such as those held by Minister M_. Consider the ironic intimacies of the relationship between Minister M_ and her husband, and the ways they negotiate the intricacies of their sexuality within the private space of their marriage. From Minister M_’s reaction when she hears about her husband’s homosexual indiscretions, we get insight into the marital

performance of ideologies that enact the normative scenarios of female and male. For example, she deems male sexuality as, naturally, heterosexually insatiable, and female sexuality as passively subordinate. This is clear in the way that she explains the homosexual infidelities of long-married men: “You see, men like my husband are funny creatures – when they reach a certain age they feel the need to revive the excitement that they once had in their younger days. They look at their wife and she has aged [...] They begin to experiment, first with younger girls...” and then, the implication is, with men (172). However, Minister M_ is deliberately silent on this taboo issue, allowing the unsaid to do the necessary ideological work. In the process, normative sexual codes continue to uphold the marriage, and evidence pointing towards sexual difference is excised. For this political ‘power couple’, their relationship in the novel serving as the representative face of the nation, marriage *must* serve the normal heterosexuality which in Zimbabwe is the proper foundation of nationhood. The couple must publicly demonstrate their “united” front, evident in the way Mr. M_ accompanies his wife to the salon where he sometimes “hung about and chatted while her hair was being done” (15), sustaining the illusion of an unquestionably heteronormative partnership. From another angle, though, marriage also acts as a tool for policing male sexuality to shield and to ward off all possible ‘threats’, to close off all possibilities of transgressions even though all these attempts prove to be futile. The fact that heterosexuality is “always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that it ‘knows’ its own possibility of becoming undone” (Butler 26).

Huchu undoes the illusion. By depicting a putatively straight male war liberation hero as engaging in a homosexual love affair, Huchu destabilises the nationalist narrative that homosexuality is un-African and further problematises the construction of hyper-masculinity which buttresses the liberation struggle. Just as in his portrayal of Dumisani, Huchu’s rendering of Mr. M_ avoids the blatant stereotype of the effeminate gay man, such that characterisation subtly prompts readers to question their easy, heteronormative assumptions about sexuality as visibly manifest in a man’s appearance. Strategically, in the representation of the uncertain sexual-ideological terrain which undergirds the novel, Huchu renders Mr. M_ as the embodiment of an ideal Zimbabwean masculinity. The man is brave, tough, authoritative, self-assertive and ambitious – and all in relation to the socio-political narratives of the nation’s struggle against colonisation and its emergence into independence:

Mr. M_ had run away from school to join the war against colonial oppression. He had distinguished himself on many occasions and was known to have been one of the fiercest commanders operating in the north of the country. When the war was over, he

joined the newly formed Zimbabwean National Army and had served until 1987 when he left to form his own businesses. (109)

As a struggle veteran, “an intrepid guerrilla fighter” (135), his visible, official narrative is celebrated and constitutes an endorsement of the collective national male heteronormativity which exalts a militarised masculinity and in so doing naturalises a homophobia which is not only an everyday mundane but also an explicit feature of state discourse. However, Huchu turns the epitome of proper masculinity to tactical use, complicating polarities, encouraging a reader to work through ideas about African male sexuality. In his homosexual affair with Dumisani, a relationship which is marked by expressions not only of sexuality but of affection, even love, Mr M_’s maleness eludes definition in the preferred national terms. We can read *The Hairdresser of Harare* as an exploratory demurral in relation to the official political narrative that “continually evoke[s] and erase[s] its totalising boundaries . . . [and] disturb[s] those ideological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha 215). The narrative contests the official narrative that favours a heterosexual, often misogynist, monolithic sexuality and silences alternative sexualities on the grounds of their inappropriate, neo-colonialist influence. Huchu problematises the official narratives of the nation-state and the liberation war that have been built on hegemonic, hyper-masculine ideologies by presenting a war liberation commander who is the embodiment of masculinity and yet enjoys a homosexual love affair.

Marriage, Masquerades and Masking

In a pattern of marital relation widely familiar in post-independent Zimbabwe, Mr. M_ likes to put his wife “in her place”²⁴. Albeit that his impulse is just, this is reflected in the way he overrides his wife’s decision to terrorise Trina, a white Zimbabwean whose farm has already been grabbed, “‘*Iwe. Usakanganwe kuti murume ndiyani panapa*’ (Do not forget who the man is here) Mr. M_ said pointing a finger at her” (107, my translation). Mr. M_ positions himself within the workings of a patriarchal society that grants him power over his wife by virtue of being male and confers a subordinate position on the woman regardless of her official position as a minister. Interestingly, despite all the power that she yields outside the home, Minister M_ submits to the dictates of patriarchy within marriage; she doesn’t challenge him but simply keeps quiet after her husband’s rebuke. This is a complex range of allegiances. Huchu makes it difficult for a reader to occupy a simple either/or position of

²⁴ The act of putting Minister M_ “in her place” by Mr. M_ coincides with Chipso Hungwe’s discussion of male and female gender roles in post-independent Zimbabwe in her paper “Putting them in their place: ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ women in Zimbabwean gender struggles”.

approval or censure. A reader might be critical that the man berates his wife but at the same time approve of his clemency towards Trina. Once the narrative reveals Mr. M_ as homosexual, there is a further complication to factor into the mix: is the intention to correlate the man's more enlightened political views with his homosexuality? How does this enlightenment co-exist with his patriarchal behaviour towards his wife? Is the 'patriarchal' in his case a play/ploy, a performance, even for the couple themselves, of a hyper-visible line of male/female *precisely* in order to remind Minister M_ that her husband remains a Mr despite his homosexual inclinations? I do not have ready answers.

Huchu's treatment of Mr. M_ as a male character has him simultaneously occupy two modes of masculinity, each repeatedly nuanced by the other. On the one hand, Mr. M_ occupies a hegemonic masculinity as he conforms to the masculine nationalist script which values male aggression and superiority; after all, his credentials speak for themselves since during the guerilla liberation war he had "trained men like that (youth militia) in [his] day" (185). On the other hand, he also belongs to what Connell calls a "subordinate masculinity" because his sexuality, which is at odds with the form of hegemonic masculinity that he embodies, presents a "feminising threat" to the state and its essentialising ideologies. Spurlin argues that counter narratives of the nation act as a queer space and a method of exposing nationalism as "a narrow ideology of national signs, images, and systems of totalisation that are potentially oppressive to those left on the constitutive outside of (re)formulated discourses on nationhood" (73). Minister M_ continues to reproduce this excluding discourse by dismissing her husband's homosexual desires as "something radical, they become beasts with their experimentation" (172). Her use of animal imagery to describe men who have sex with men echoes Mugabe's infamous declaration that homosexuals are perverse animals, worse than pigs and dogs.

In fact, the manner in which Huchu represents the relationship between Dumisani and Mr. M_ challenges common assumptions that define gay characters' lives exclusively in terms of rapacious, animalistic sex (Tamale "Researching and Theorising" 12). Dumisani at one point refers passionately to Mr. M_ as the love of his life – which shocks and even disgusts Vimbai: "He used passionate terms like 'the love of my life', which only men and women should use" (167). Further, when a regretful Vimbai calls Mr. M_ after she learns that Dumisani had been beaten almost to death, "he began to sob uncontrollably on the phone. He kept on saying he should have protected him" (182). Such emotions of passion, distress and guilt illustrate a deep affection and attachment between the male lovers, well beyond the sexually physical. The tenderness that Mr. M_ shows towards Dumisani in the hospital also

points to this love: “He gave him a gentle stroke on the face then stopped as if he had suddenly realised that we were there” (184). Clearly, Huchu is commenting on the still entrenched social requirement, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, through which heteropatriarchal restrictions on same sex relations demand that gay couples hide their affection for one another, masking preferred orientation. Indeed, the heterosexual matrix is so powerfully established, in Zimbabwe that transgressions seems almost inconceivable. We learn that Dumisani and Mr. M_ have “met many times, going off to secret locations where they pretended to be related. No one batted an eyelid if two men rented a hotel room, they would just think them relatives and leave it at that” (167).

Minister M_, however, is wise to the codes. In order to eliminate any potential taint to her political image and presidential ambitions, Minister M_ summons ZANU-PF youth militia – christened as “war liberation heroes” – to kill Dumisani. This action will also curtail any immediate possibility of her husband expressing his homosexual desires. The fact that Minister M_ mutters “not again” (172) to herself when Vimbai approaches her with Dumisani’s journal which details his love affair with Mr. M_, illustrates that Mr. M_ has on at least one other occasion engaged in a same-sex affair, but that husband and wife have agreed to a complicity, masking his sexuality behind a heterosexual marriage because of the state’s policing of homosexuality.

The necessity of masking is made clear in the narrative when Mr. M_ disguises himself by “wearing a large farmer’s hat that covered his face” in order to visit Dumisani at the hospital. Mr. M_ makes a clumsy attempt to pass himself off as an indisputably heterosexual man. Yet this cannot ever be more than a provisional feint, as the very removable, transparent object disguise of the hat implies. This in turn hints at the impossibility, even, of any absolute (sexual) identity. Notable too, as an extension of this performative, is his elaborate intention to devise an anniversary surprise plan for his wife as a way of visiting Dumisani. Again, we note how the upholding of the ideal heterosexual institution of marriage is used as a mask for marginalised sexualities as well as a shield against homosexual inclinations. In the novel, masquerading and deflection imply how Huchu’s homosexual characters mediate their sexuality. The masquerade serves as an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time, in itself implying the paradoxical pressure towards, and yet unlikely realisation of, any singular sexual identification.

The common perception that ‘dissident’ male sexualities can be ‘normalised’ by containing them within heterosexual marriage is also evident in the way Dumisani’s family is quick to accept Vimbai into the fold without any knowledge of her background. She is barely

herself in this charade. In one sense, she is reduced, via the family's careful self-interest masquerading as 'kindness' and 'care', to a generic female placeholder. The fact of her womanhood, rather than any distinctive personality or personal attributes, is the most significant aspect of her relationship with Dumisani, since in the family's eyes it is her biological femaleness which will keep Dumisani's renegade sexual impulses in check. At the same time, paradoxically – and all while the primary motivation for her being welcomed into Dumisani's prestigious family circle is not revealed to her - she is singled out and praised as The One, *the* exceptional woman who has brought the wayward son back towards the desirable domestic space of marriage. This logic *deceptively* turns on the familiar (though tellingly contradictory) heteronormative discourses of sexuality: romantic love between a man and a woman; the heterosexual family as regulatory socio-biological reproductive unit; a man as a 'good catch' and a woman as a tempting snare, and so on.

For all her tentative questions about Dumisani's family, Vimbai does not realise that these surface norms underwrite more occluded normative impulses in the service of policing sexual behaviours. She is duped. The family purportedly encloses Vimbai lovingly within its ranks but this is simultaneously a closing around 'itself', its core members, in order to foreclose against the irruptive disclosure of the threatening counter-narrative which has prompted (indeed *provoked*) their supposed extension of hospitality. (This brings to mind Foucault's [1980] notion of the family as a cell of enclosure and containment.)

Notably, it is also the social respectability of Dumisani's family which enables this heteronormative masquerade as a disguise for their son's perceived deviance. Their upper middle-class status, secured through affluence and government connections, intersects with Vimbai's own longing for security of income and ambitious career advancement. If she has subtle qualms about Dumisani's relationship with her, she tends to allow these to be overridden. She becomes perversely complicit in the scenario that is playing out, and it is the cultural capitals of 'money', 'love' and 'status', the naturalised 'fundamentals' of the mythical 'good life' to which only the elite ever seem entitled, which blind her to the more pervasive realities of her relationship with Dumisani.

Dumisani plays along with a charade that is both of his family's and his own direction, in order to avoid drawing attention (once again) to his sexual orientation. He performatively extends fondly chivalrous concern towards Vimbai as his female companion. He holds Vimbai's hand to ease her anxiety as a first time flier, and at the resort where his parents have sent them on holiday, he gently and patiently teaches Vimbai how to swim. These kind gestures, though, are a shield, a deflective form of protection against the public

re-surfacing of what has been perceived by his parents as a shockingly ‘defective’ masculinity. It would be easy to dismiss Dumisani’s tactics as callous; he appears only to use Vimbai as a convenient part of his socio-sexual mask. But Huchu’s representation of Dumisani is more nuanced than it first appears, inviting readers to view homosexuals as complex human beings with fragile emotions and difficult identities, just like everybody else.

The intimate space of Vimbai’s house and the relationships within the house offers particularly interesting insights into the humanity of the characters. Both Vimbai and Dumisani are exiles from their own families; he because of his sexual orientation, she on account of refusing to relinquish to her insistent brothers the house that their dead brother specifically bequeathed to her. The space of Vimbai’s small house and the relationship that Dumisani forms with Vimbai and her daughter highlights the poignancy of the inhumane exercise of exclusion which contravenes the human need to belong. Huchu presents Dumisani as a kind, generous man in the way he helps out Vimbai by being the handyman around the house, repairing broken things as well as helping her daughter with her school assignments. This is a culture of loving intimacy. I read this as Huchu’s attempt to humanise and personalise homosexuality in the face of the widespread vilification and violent hatred expressed towards homosexuality as a ‘perversity’, both in and beyond Zimbabwe. He normalises his homosexual character by giving Dumisani human feelings and contradictions shared by all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

However, as his precarious position in Vimbai’s little house demonstrates, Dumisani’s sense of belonging ‘inside’ hetero conventions is insecure, both because masking entails a suppression of self, and because homophobic attitudes impinge on normative domestic bliss. Huchu illustrates the instability of Dumisani’s position as a gay Zimbabwean man in various spaces. Consider Vimbai’s reaction when she finds out he is gay. Despite the close relation that they have developed over time, her first reaction is typical; she feels so shocked that she must ‘out’ him, chasing him from the house, pushing him to the margins beyond the normative pale. Even more disturbing in Vimbai’s reaction is her assumption that “Phillip the rapist was better than Dumi the homo. I drank cup after cup of tea as if it could wash me clean of what I knew. I had a day before the pervert came back to my house” (168). Vimbai and Dumi have become friends, but her heteronormative disgust at his queerness is so extreme that Phillip, the sexually violent hetero male, is nevertheless imagined to be morally superior. Phillip has abused her, sexually violated her body, and further inflicted emotional and financial distress on her in denying responsibility for their daughter Chiwoniso, who was born as a result of the rape. Yet in Vimbai’s prejudiced eyes, such a brutal man, despite his

sexual crimes, is preferable to Dumi. Phillip may be a rapist, but at least his desires fall within the ambit of normalised, reproductive heterosexuality. On the other hand, she attributes to Dumisani's same-sex desires and consensual sexual relations with another man the revulsion of moral perversion and filth. In such terms, his stigmatised body demands to be expelled from the community, while Phillip's virile, normative sexuality is granted the right of continued proximity. More violent versions of this expulsive 'outing' – itself a brutally perverse parody of a gay man's own, self-affirming decision to 'out' his orientation to others – are repeated in Minister. M_'s attempts to have Dumi killed, and in his subsequent exile to the UK. The message is clear: as a homosexual, he is reviled, expendable, and marginal, considered in dominant heterocentric frames of reference.

Overall, *The Hairdresser of Harare* draws our attention to the difficulties of being gay within a deeply homophobic society, charting through the story of Vimbai, Dumisani, their friends, relations and workmates how sexual identities are negotiated within restrictive political contexts. By openly depicting non-normative sexualities, Huchu creates an empowering space which “a homosexual slant/voice” (Lagabrielle 63) can occupy in order to destabilise entrenched heterosexual norms, in life as well as in bodies of (African) literature. By centralising the characters' experiences around same-sex desire, the narrative not only offers flesh-and-blood agency to these forms of sexuality, it also inscribes a narrative of resistance within various intersecting power nexuses. By broaching taboo boundaries, Huchu destabilises apparently firm official discourses of homosexuality, working to reveal the very fragility of borders which culture prefers to position as clearly defined. Huchu's narrative thus “confer[s] legitimacy” (Ncube 73) upon “abjected experiences and subjectivities” (Lagabrielle 63). As Pia Lara reminds us, literary narratives enter the public sphere as cultural and aesthetic constructs capable of creatively accommodating that which “was previously left out or conceived as irrational”, in this instance the centrality of a subject that has been fraught with many disempowering meanings: perversion, sickness, dirt. In Pia Lara's terms, Huchu's novel thus extends the narrow limits of the normative within public spheres of reception and the social imaginary; the text, through its range of character relationships and the bringing together of surprising ideas and experiences, has the potential to prompt in a reader an openness towards the workings of an inclusive process in which homophobic societies renew their meanings of justice (55). Huchu participates in this endeavor by addressing a subject which is highly contentious in the context of a repressive, autocratic regime. Through his presentation of gay characters as ordinary people, people with dreams and daily routines, people who are capable of care and concern, truth and deception... - the entire range of

human emotions and actions, Huchu reconfigures the deficit model of homosexuality as deviance, and encourages readers to rethink the naturalised assumptions of gender performance that tend to mark more limited, conventionalised 'understandings' of sexuality. He demonstrates that even in repressive political contexts where sexual behaviour is vigorously controlled through both formal government edict and the informal popular policing of preferred appropriateness, sexuality and masculinity are in fact highly unstable social constructs, rather than fixed, essential norms.

CHAPTER THREE

POWER AND THE EROTIC: REPRESENTING COMPLICIT AND SUBVERSIVE FEMALE SEXUALITIES

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (Lorde 53)

Preamble

Using three fictional texts, this chapter considers illustrative examples of how contemporary African female writers engage with questions of female sexuality, whether explicitly sexual in nature, such as eroticism and sexual agency, but also highlighting the implication of sexuality in the gendered roles of motherhood, love, and marriage. I explore how the selected writers set these modes of being in intersectional relation with various patriarchal institutions. Here, I am especially interested in how female African writers of fiction depict the complex mediation of female sexualities by the state and the family, and by religious and cultural bodies. Often times, female sexualities are mobilised in the service of national identity, and I focus on the different degrees of co-option and coercion, containment and escape, associated with representations of female bodies and sexualities. My texts are Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*²⁵ and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. I hope that my analyses of these illustrative texts, however partial and selective, will go some way towards contributing to important debates around the ambiguities of fictional representations of female sexualities in texts by contemporary women authors who write in relation to the extant powers and inheritances associated with repressive African regimes.

Signe Arnfred contends that “[e]ven if sexuality and (white, male) sexual desire have been active factors in establishing the very notion of Africa and Africans, sexual pleasure and desire have rarely been objects of study for scholars studying Africa-female sexual pleasure, and desire even less” (20). This chapter is my attempt to engage with such observations from

²⁵ Although *Tropical Fish* is sometimes considered a collection of short stories, following Lynda Spencer and comments by the author, I choose to analyse the text as a series of interconnected narratives which can be read as novelised.

a literary angle and to critically examine how contemporary female African writers have represented the multi-faceted ways in which African women experience and express sexuality. I argue that the four selected writers represent sexuality as “simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency” (Vance 1). I have selected these texts because the writers illustrate some of the ways in which the trajectory of current African women’s writing in repressive contexts revisits issues of female sexuality previously engaged with by pioneer writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, re-locating the concerns within more contemporary African contexts in order to examine continuities and discontinuities. The writers I have selected also engage with topical issues such as migration, totalitarianism, globalisation and gender through the lens of sexuality, emphasising what Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie has called the “female writer and her commitment” (61).

Contesting essentialist representations of women that position women within the static, stereotypical framework of the rural domestic tradition versus the sophisticated modern woman (or its equally clichéd variant, the Madonna versus the whore), Ogundipe-Leslie contends that these representations (mostly espoused by male writers) do not offer legitimate insights into the complex, shifting realities of African womanhood (61). She argues that the female writer should be committed to her “third world reality and status” and that “being aware of oneself as a Third World person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies” (64). While such expressly political foci may not seem, at first glance, to involve questions of sexuality, my chapter will demonstrate their co-imbrication. In the same vein, Florence Stratton argues that the mother trope, famously celebrated by the Negritude poets, was converted into the prostitute metaphor, hence becoming ubiquitous to the African male written tradition in nationalist narratives. The embodiments of this metaphor “are one of its defining features” (Stratton “Periodic Embodiments” 120). She further posits that even though the conflation of the images of the mother and the whore was at times reconfigured to represent woman as a symbol of change within post-independence African nations, these images continued to present women as homogeneous, monolithic characters:

Whether she is elevated to the status of a goddess or reduced to the level of a prostitute, the designation is degrading, for he does the naming, whereas her experience as a woman is trivialised and distorted. Metaphorically, she is of the highest importance, practically she is nothing. She has no autonomy, no status as a

character, for her person and her story are shaped to meet the requirements of his vision. One of these requirements is that she provides attractive packaging. She is thus constructed as beauty, eroticism, fecundity-the qualities the male Self values most in the female Other. (Stratton 123)

Underlying such narratives is the notion of the nation as “a closely knit, stable and nurturing family...a healthy, growing, energetic and disciplined body” (Posel 139). When imagining the nation, “this repertoire of images and metaphors - particularly those of the body and the family” in turn offers “symbolic recipes for the healthy containment of sexuality within the community of the nation” (Posel 139). The female body and sexuality (even when the orientation is normatively heterosexual and not othered, non-normative sexualities) become the site for managing sexuality in terms of ‘healthy containments’. Disciplining the body and stabilising the family are then primarily understood as “techniques for the production of a procreative and life-sustaining sexuality” (Posel 139) which is more pronounced in repressive nationalist regimes. If uncontrolled, sex is considered to have dangerous potential to unsettle the family and corrupt the body and “within this symbolic schema, therefore, aspirations to nationhood are intimately linked to the productive disciplining of sexuality as a force of order rather than chaos” (Posel 139).

In the masculinist-nationalist matrix, questions of femaleness and nationhood have found uneasy relation, as evidenced in African literature. In her analysis of Chinua Achebe’s early fiction, for example, widely considered foundational to an African canon, Andrea Powell suggests that precisely because of this male writer’s influential role, the “dismissal of gender issues” and “gender-determined blind spots demand careful scrutiny” (167). The characteristic tendency is that “[w]omen’s lives...serve as little more than fodder for the exploration of masculinity in a ‘first things first’ approach to nationalism, an approach which dictates that Africans deal with national problems before they move on to ‘less important issues’, such as gender politics” (Powell 167). Stratton concurs that “a gendered theory of nationhood...excludes women from the creative production of the national polity,” since ‘woman’ in this schema is narrowly defined as body and sexuality, “produced or constructed by the male writer as an embodiment of his literary/political vision” (Stratton 122). In this imaginary, ‘He’ “is the active subject-citizen” while ‘She’ “is the passive object-nation controlled and manipulated by him”, the woman “symbolises his honor and glory or his degradation as citizen” (Stratton 122). In “linking Africa with woman's sexuality” the male writer “constructs his own self-image and that of his nation on woman's body” (Stratton 122). In other words, the primary focus, in such an undertaking, is not on female sexuality *per se*,

but more expediently on female sexuality as a mediating proxy for the equated potencies of masculinity and nationhood. As my research will indicate, these exaggerated virilities are dangerously exacerbated in political contexts in which ‘the nation’ has been commandeered by despots and autocrats, and in which femaleness, sexuality and women’s bodies are subordinated as material and symbolic terrains upon which to enact destructive, masculinist ‘ideals’.

Absent in much traditional African fiction is a sense of the complex and heterogeneous ways in which women’s sexualities, their lived desires and the delimitations upon sexual being embody an intricate range of female-gendered experiences, and the diverse and multifaceted inflections of the sexualities conventionally designated female. African women writers have long chafed against such constraints. Consider, for example, that the habit of representing women in stereotypical and limited ways is what compelled Mariama Bâ to call for a more nuanced representation of women in fiction written by female authors than “the nostalgic praise to the African Mother” produced by man “in his anxiety”. Instead, the woman writer in Africa” needs to “present the position of women in all its aspects” (cited in Schipper, 46-47). Bâ goes on to foreground as urgent subject matters the question of pervasive institutional injustice against women, whether in politics, the street, or the family. To her list I would add the matter of women’s sexualities, and the need for female writers to use literature as a form in which to explore this elusive, difficult, still taboo topic, as an intersectional space of intimate embodiment and desire, and institutional governmentality.

My chapter illustrates the importance of female writers’ attempts to represent female sexualities, efforts marked by uneven success, but crucial nevertheless in beginning to create a nuanced recognition of sexualities as a valid, if challenging, fictional focus for African literature. Elleke Boehmer argues that “through claiming a text and a narrative territory – women sign into and at the same time subvert a nationalist narrative that has excluded them as negativity, as corporeal and unclean, or as impossibly idealised” (94). “To write,” she says, “is not only to speak for one’s place in the world. It is also to make one’s place and narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity” (Boehmer 94). Boehmer further points out that postcolonial women writers have “questioned, cut across, upended or refused entirely the dominant if not dominatory narrative of the independent nation. They have placed their own subjectivities, sexualities, maternal duties, private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives” (Boehmer 6). My own study contributes to a critical understanding of such an important project. In the present chapter, I address the following questions: How do these female authors’

representations of gender and sexuality offer possibilities for the conceptualising of new, sexualised subjectivities and identities in the face of patriarchy? How do these representations depict alternative ways of viewing black women's bodies and sexuality in relation to their agency, choice and independence? How do they unsettle images of women and socio-cultural conventions of sexuality that underpin nationalist representations (still inflected by racist and colonial mythmaking)? How do the female characters in the fictions, coming from different backgrounds and generations, renegotiate inherited and contemporary constructions of their sexualities? While I cannot answer such questions conclusively, the questions are useful exploratory prompts, enabling me to venture a tentative investigation of the possibilities and constraints of African female sexualities as they have been written by authors narrating women's experiences in the contexts of post-independence-cum-despotic politics.

While using more contemporary examples, my method begins by extrapolating from Susan Andrade's *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms 1958-1988*, where she shows that female writers' inclinations to depict the domestic sphere (in comparison with male writers' tendency to address the public sphere) demonstrates not polarised experience but the interconnections of public and private realms of human life. The domestic space "offers as sharp an analytical perspective on collectivity and national politics as does the arena of public political action" (Andrade 1). By "elucidat[ing] new meanings in the domestic sphere of life and in intimate relations between people" (Andrade 1), I am able, in relation to the mediation of sexualities, to theorise innovative elements of co-relation between domestic home spaces and the authoritarian political contexts of the state. As Susan Gal contends, in her analysis of the feminist critique of the public/ private dichotomy, "far from being incompatible, the principles associated with the public and the private coexist in complex combinations in the ordinary routines of everyday life. [...] feminist research has successfully shown the error of assuming stable boundaries between the private and the public" (79).

Despite some shifts in contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality, in patriarchal societies sexuality is still widely considered a tool through which to control women's capabilities and mobility. Melissa Steyn and Mikki Van Zyl argue that "women's sexual autonomy is constrained by discourses that 'fix' them in terms of a natural disposition towards emotion - romance, nurturing and maternity, as closer to nature and nurture" (4). Tamale further notes that in many African contexts, men are generally believed to be the rightful owners of the public space which is "the locus of socially valued activities, such as politics and waged labour" ("Eroticism, Sensuality" 9). Women, on the other hand, are relegated to the private space which constitutes "the mainly unremunerated and undervalued

domestic activities performed by women” (Tamale “Eroticism, Sensuality” 11). The role of women in the domestic space is to provide the “necessities of productive and reproductive social life gratuitously while remaining economically dependent on their male partners” (Tamale “Eroticism, Sensuality” 11). Thus, in addition to being an important means of maintaining African women’s domesticity, regulating and controlling their sexuality is central to the survival of patriarchal and capitalist structures and systems such as the state, the family, the church. Such varieties of co-related, controlling institutions aim to reinforce gender hierarchies and to inculcate socially-desired appropriate gendered behaviours which in practice disadvantage female bodies and sexualities. The body, as Pumla Gqola posits, is centrally located in “many of the lessons girl and boy children imbibe about aesthetics, value and being-in-the-world” (3). How women and girls carry their bodies, how they dress, how they conduct themselves sexually – all become markers that determine their conformity (or not) to modes of respectability and received ideas of ‘proper’ femaleness.

Certainly, as with understandings of desire, categories of respectability shift over time and in different contexts, such that prevailing definitions of the respectable and the unrespectable in relation to femaleness carry particular meanings in specific cultures. Being a social construct contingent upon diverse social factors, respectability is an unstable category, one which non-conformist women themselves cause to change, when they subvert and transgress. However, even across cultures the broad category of respectability seems to remain an enviable and sought after status position for women. Here, we must note that the meanings associated with the respectable (and the unrespectable), for women, are closely tied to enactments of the body and the expression or containment of sexualities. Chipso Hungwe’s work on ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ women in the context of Zimbabwean gender struggles remarks that the ‘respectable’ woman is one “who is treated with deferential esteem, and who is perceived as an honourable and dignified member of her community or society” (33). An ‘unrespectable’ woman, in contrast, is perceived as “dishonourable and lacking in dignity; she will attract social opprobrium” (Hungwe 33).

However, in a slantwise argument, I propose in this chapter that since certain behaviours are not usually considered respectable, this potentially positions such behaviours as purposefully transgressive for women, a locus of *resistance* to hegemonic codes. The implication is that some forms of supposedly undesirable femaleness may be willfully premised on denigrated notions of unrespectability in order to subvert categories of approved femaleness and the associated normative behaviours. In my analysis of the four texts, I therefore consider how the embodied, sexualised self’s multiple relationships to societal

modes of respectability, values and aesthetics “play roles in how people negotiate place and power, and inform how we traverse the terrain of sexualisation” (Gqola 3). Rather “than being a mere tool, then, the body acts as both the site and language through which positioning” in relation to gender and sexuality “is negotiated” (Gqola 3).

In light of the debates and scholarship outlined above as well as raised in the introductory chapter, my own study examines how some contemporary African female writers engage with the control exerted over female bodies and sexualities under difficult political situations, while at the same exploring how certain cultural institutions such as motherhood and marriage ambiguously provide room for the empowerment and negotiation of female sexualities. I explore the extent to which these female writers demonstrate that “the female body does not remain an object of men’s discourse, nor of their many arts, but it becomes the principle for a female subjectivity that is experienced and chosen by women” (Irigaray qtd in Cazenave 127). At the core of this chapter is the notion that these writers explore the multifarious ways in which African female sexualities are experienced through gender and orientation.

“Bad Girls Get Raped, Good Girls Go to Heaven”: Negotiating Inter-generational Constructions of Female Sexualities in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*

From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations (Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come*, 7).²⁶

This section examines various elements of the process of socialisation and its implications for gender identity formation and sexuality in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*. Socialisation is understood in this chapter as “the process by which society’s values and norms, including those pertaining to gender [and the imagining and expressing of sexuality], are taught and learned” (Renzetti and Curran 61). Gender, for example, is co-implicated in a range of socialised norms. It is through socialisation that the infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable being, embodied in the ways of the culture in which he or she was born. Socialisation is therefore a critical means by which societies formulate, preserve and indeed change, their cultures and identities. Agents of socialisation include school and peers, institutions from which human beings learn values and codes of conduct (Giddens 288). Family is also an instrumental agent of socialisation, and Giddens suggests that “it is through family members, in particular mothers, that children learn particular values and morals of society in order for them to fit in” (288). In patriarchal cultures, family as an institution plays a potent role in socialising the young into normalising sexually-differentiated roles, an aspect which Sara Mvududu and Patricia McFadden perceive as “a very authoritarian function”, at times (15). Socialisation as authority and indeed often authoritarianism is “directed by all the major institutions in our society- religion, traditions, culture, the law, the educational system” (Mvududu and McFadden 15). As my textual examples will show, males are usually conditioned to imagine life horizons as fathers, breadwinners, achievers and masters of family households, while females, whatever their somewhat expanded life opportunities, remain persuaded into forms of nurturing, subservience and obedience which are expected to prioritise the good of others, among them husbands, children and relatives (Kambarami 2). As Sandra Lipsitz Bem observes, “nearly all societies teach the developing child two crucial things about gender: first...they teach the substantive network of sex-related associations that can come to serve as cognitive schema; second, they teach that the dichotomy between male

²⁶ Sefi Atta, *Everything Good Will Come*, Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2004. All page references are to this edition.

and female has intensive and extensive relevance to virtually every domain of human experience” (45).

Pertinent here is that the category of woman is not only constantly defined *in relation* to man, it is also defined as dependent on and subordinate to man. Educating young females in the domain of sexuality and the meanings attached to their bodies is carried out by the female members of the family, primarily mothers but also aunts, grandmothers, and community figures and the media. My interest in this section explores how assumptions of female bodyhood, femininity and sexuality are constructed and transmitted within intergenerational frameworks of mother-daughter/ grandmother-grandchild relationships as well as within peer relationships. The chapter focuses on the female characters’ interaction with each other, how they formulate, mediate and relay multiple, gendered discourses of female sexuality within “the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society” (Marianne Hirsch cited in Brown-Guillory 3). In my analysis, I consider the domestic space as a re-fracted mirror of broader societal constructions of female sexuality, in which sense I envisage not simply that they disempower women by ‘reflecting’ hegemonic norms, but that they simultaneously offer spaces - means, ideas, actions...- through which such constructions can be negotiated, resisted and reworked. On the matter of domestic space and femaleness, Lucille P. Fultz argues that “this putatively ‘normative’ sphere is the site where mother and daughter encounter each other as gendered subjects” (229). It is here, for instance, “that the black mother in her role as nurturer and enabler prepares the daughter, through example and precept, for her (prescribed) role as woman and mother” (Fultz 229).

Spanning the turbulent years of 1971 to 1995 in Nigeria, a context characterised by civil war and despotic military regimes, Sefi Atta’s novel tells the story of two girls, Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare, who forge a life-long friendship in spite of the family prohibitions (and physical distance) which might impede their friendship. Enitan, the young narrator, paints a vivid picture of growing up within this volatile political context: “I knew that our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had another Major General heading our country. For a while the palaver had stopped, and now it seemed the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two” (9). The novel, which Atta herself describes as a story “about a girl/woman at odds with patriarchy” and “reads like an angry rant in part” (“Women Writers Round Table” 112), is also a story of female growth, of increasing awareness of the patriarchal restrictions which govern all

aspects of women's lives. Here, Atta parallels "the woman's battle at home against the men in her family who rule her" with the fight against military dictatorial rule (Sy 102). As Enitan surmises at one point in the novel, "even if the army goes, we still have our men to answer to. [...] bring on the women when the enemy is the state. Never when the enemy is at home" (196).

I foregrounded the quotation by Enitan, the main protagonist in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*²⁷ at the beginning of this section as it emphasises the role of discourse in the socialisation process and its function in the formation of gendered identities and sexualities. Drawing on Foucault's ideas, I suggest that Atta demonstrates through her female protagonists that the "self" is to a certain extent a product of particular knowledge engendered by dominant discourses. Foucault reminds us that it is through discourse, paradoxically verbose and clear, that expectations, experiences, and events are constituted and constructed. He further points out how particular knowledge (for example about women) produces and reinforces a certain 'truth series' about female sexuality, which is subsequently internalised and manifested in various subjectivities such as wifeness and motherhood. In tandem with Foucault, (albeit in a slightly different context), Harry Garuba also remarks that discourses "possess real effects and, through the power of normalisation, exert an influence on subjects" (268). Examining how the discourse of sexuality has been central to the development of the self, Foucault concludes that one becomes the "subject of one's sexuality" and at the centre is the self located within "a rich conflictual inner world" (Spronk 9). This self-understanding is shaped by external factors such as dress, body, language, and lifestyle (Spronk 9). Foucault's examination of how discourses generate subject positions and how people embody, transgress or reconstruct such positions is important not only in this chapter but in the broader study in the way we (re)think about sex and sexuality.

Latent in discourses are layers of implied signification that inform what is said, why and how it is said, what is not said and why. Discourse, as Foucault contends, involves power because it is about knowledge, and language and narratives are key vehicles for producing and mediating knowledge. Power is thus a multiplicity of force relations of which discourse and knowledge are key elements, "immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation, as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them" (Foucault "History of Sexuality")

²⁷ I will hereafter refer to the novel as *Everything Good*.

92). Accordingly, as my work on the Atta novel and on the other female-authored texts selected for the present chapter will demonstrate, language is not merely an explicitly directed, repressive power, but *productive* of knowledge in more dispersed forms. This has consequences for the possibilities and constraints associated with female sexuality and sexual conduct and, indeed, for the creative treatment of such subject matters in the modes of representation which characterise imaginative texts such as novels and short stories.

In respect of literary modality, for example, it is worth noting that two texts addressed in this subsection (*Everything Good* and *Tropical Fish*) use and adapt the bildungsroman form, the authors working with the convention that this form demonstrates “the development of the protagonist’s mind and character in the passage from childhood through varied experiences...into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one’s identity and role in the world” (Abrams 200-1). Commenting on the centrality of sexuality as a motif in bildungsromane by women, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland argue that “Repeatedly, the female protagonist or Bildungsheld must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive ‘normality’” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 12-13). The element of bildung in the three works of fiction is well-suited to my study, for it directs me to an inquiry into the female characters’ shifting embodiment of and negotiation through the received truths of their sexualities.

The women in Atta’s novel encounter oppression on two fronts: domestic patriarchy in the home and family, and the patriarchal repressions of the state. As Marilize Pretorius argues, in *Everything Good* “the dictatorship of men in the home thus becomes an allegory for the dictatorship of a group of elites, predominantly male, in the country as a whole” (139). However, both Enitan and Sheri undertake subversive gender actions: one female character manipulates the traditional patriarchal system from within, and the other attempts to refuse it via rebellious defiance of sexual norms. Ayo Kehinde and Joy Mbipom argue that “in demythologising and deconstructing the stifling structures in a male-oriented society, Atta instructs women on the way out of retrograde patriarchal domination through the practical actions of gender-assertive Enitan, Sheri”, and other bold women in the novel (69). Atta’s narrative thus “constructs realities that recreate a formidable women’s world” (Kehinde and Mbipom 69). The narrative depicts this challenging behaviour in the context of a continued oppression against women via “certain socio-cultural and economic factors that collude” to

secure “their victimisation in post-independence Nigeria, which is defined by multiple drudgery” (Kehinde and Mbipom 69). As Ruth Nnodim explains, *Everything Good* offers “a field of contested female identities” for as “the life histories of the novel’s key female characters unfold, the novel sets up a space for enacting contested imaginations and practices of urban female identity, which are not dissolved into a feminist utopia. Instead, varieties of female subjectivities are explored in their different facets, and these subjectivities come to constitute viable spaces from which women can and do formulate empowering identities” (Nnodim 328), expressions of sexual identity among them.

Atta presents an observant eleven year old protagonist who quietly notices the antagonisms between her parents, a recurrent narrative technique in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Madeline Hron notes the preponderance of precocious child narrators in third-generation Nigerian fiction, linking this to the authors’ own agonistic relation to their positions as children of the post-colony.²⁸ Enitan comes from a privileged background; her father, Sunny Taiwo, is a lawyer who heads his own law practice. Their house in Sunrise Estate “on the outskirts of Ikoyi” is a space where “men chatted mostly about cars and money; the women about food prices, paediatric medications, work politics, and Disney toys” (198). Here, “consumerism is the natural expression of the inhabitants’ privileged position. But economic depression, the lack of infrastructure, and the oppressive political atmosphere invade the domestic and public life of all urban dwellers and require readjustments” (Nnodim 323) in what Mbembe and Roitman refer to as urban “regimes of subjectivity” (154).

Enitan describes their home as being located by the “Lagos Lagoon. Our yard stretched over an acre and was surrounded by a high wooden fence that could drive splinters into careless fingers” (7). The fence protects, and yet also connotes potential threat; for all its height and firm materiality, it is a porous zone, about to injure the fingers of any might wish to scale it, whether outsider, or insider. For the most part, the high wooden fence shields the house from the penetration of prying eyes and the potentially dangerous world beyond, and Enitan’s childhood is sequestered, protected. She reveals that at “an age when other Nigerian girls were masters at ten-ten, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit our partners with sudden knee jerks, my favourite moments were spent sitting on a jetty pretending to fish” (7). Despite the poignantly collective plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’, which imply the child’s reaching towards belonging and shared female knowledge (and

²⁸ Also see Christopher Ouma, “Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction” Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, 2011.

perhaps also carry something of the author's complicated claiming of affinity with place and culture), the narrative makes it clear that Enitan's isolation is closely orchestrated and policed by her devout mother, Arinola, who on account of religious reverence is determined not to raise a delinquent (38). Through the character of Arinola, Atta shows how religious excess and indoctrination influence sexuality, personalities, gender relations as well as familial relations. Enitan describes her mother, who was once a professional woman in her career as a chartered secretary, as resembling a column in her white church gown (18). This metaphor suggests Arinola's self-presentation as an asexual being, removed from the impurities of the wider world. The comparison obliterates suggestions of worldly femininity and sexuality in favour of rectitude and purity. And yet at some point prior to the religious fundamentalism, Enitan reveals that "my mother had smiled. I had seen black and white photographs of her, her hair pressed and curled and her eyebrows penciled into arches... Many men tried to chase her" (22). This suggests that Arinola had once participated in the fashionable modes of femininity characteristic of urban Nigerian women of the sixties and that this self-representation had been sexually appealing to men. Atta thus draws our attention to the nexus between consumerism and the construction of femininity and sexuality. Atta's representation of Arinola is located within shifting embodiments of sexuality which marked female "independence", within the context of a changing, early political independence in a modern urban culture of the sixties whereby African women were beginning to gain considerable access to and participation in public spaces and activities. The over-determined intersection of gender, nationalism, materialism and consumerist culture in the term "independent" is important as it points to the multiple, even contradictory meanings of the term. The working woman (like the younger Arinola), in stepping out of the domestic space, for instance, "occupied an increasingly visible and contentious position" within what Peter Bailey has called "modern sexualised consumerism" (148). Through Enitan's description of her mother as a young career woman, we see the conflation of women's role in an "emerging consumer society" and the centrality and ubiquity of "sexuality and desire" within "contemporary, bureaucratic work place culture and power relations" (Reikee 42) which however continue to place the patriarchal male gaze at the center. This is an intriguing angle on more usual questions of women's sexuality in the context of political independence from colonial structures, and the mobilising of 'femaleness' in the service of narratives of new, independent nationhood and the burden that is placed on women as the carriers of tradition.

Atta also reveals in the novel that Arinola's "desexualisation", her restriction of her daughter's potential sexuality and her withdrawal from the social scene as well as from her

family can be attributed to experiences which have blunted her self-identity, including her ability to acknowledge her sexuality. In part, her sexual-emotional mutedness is a traumatic effect of grief, after Enitan's little brother dies of sickle cell anaemia. The loss of her son is exacerbated by her husband's infidelity and his lack of attention and emotional support during the grieving process in particular, as well as in their marriage more generally. When Enitan is older, it later transpires in the novel that Sunny has all the time had a secret second family. This clandestine familial mirroring also reflects (and becomes a latent narrative motivation for) his wife's closed introversion and withdrawal from the marriage. The child from Sunny's affair is born a year after Enitan's brother's death. Arinola then, wracked by a situation which has wrenched from her many of the familiar roles of mother and wife, becomes puritanically asexual and absolutely devout, giving her all to the church. This is a space which Atta in an interview describes as "communities outside communities that [had] failed them" and which gives her the "semblance of power and freedom" ("Sefi Atta: Something Good Comes to Nigerian Literature" 2005).

As Atta's comments imply, the freedom is ostensive. If Arinola's increasing devotion to her church is intended as a solace to heal her multiple traumas, it comes oppressively to govern her emotional-expressive life, and her sexuality. She refuses to have any intimate relations with her husband and prefers to think of herself as asexual. Enitan, deprived of her mother's love, is "left to imagine that it was true that she had once showed affection. If she didn't anymore it was because it was there in the Bible: God got jealous" (23). Enitan's justification for her mother's emotional deficiency is quite literal, interpreted as sanctioned by scripture: the child knows that the Bible (Exodus 20:3) stipulates God as a jealous god, ordering that one shall not show devotion to anyone else but Him. The child herself has clearly been educated into the pieties of religious doctrine, to the extent that it provides the immediate logic for her mother's behaviour. Enitan is unable to understand the labyrinthine convolution of emotions that has wounded her mother. It is clear, though, that the interpretation of Christianity that Arinola adopts after the death of her only son is one that restricts the expression of emotions, sanctions the desexualisation of the body, and regulates the extent of her interactions with others.

In *Everything Good*, Arinola is closely associated with the kitchen as the preserve of the obedient wife. Along with her religious conviction comes the intersecting belief, preached by church authority, that a woman's role is to cook for her husband and children, to keep house. Arinola tries to socialise Enitan into accepting such normative constructions of womanhood, constantly calling her to "come and help in here" (7). In comparison Sunny,

Arinola's husband, presents himself as being "for the liberation of women", and labels his wife a "kitchen martyr" (21), one whose elected self-definition confines her to the domestic space. However, Sunny's progressive views about female equality are ambiguous, and differentiate between the relative freedoms of girlhood which diminish into womanhood, and are severely curtailed with wifedom. Here Atta uses the gendered relation between husband and wife, and father and daughter, as a pointed device to reveal the contradictions which underpin his stance, and indeed which inform heteropatriarchal norms. Despite his supposedly liberated views on female equality, for instance, he refuses to relinquish property to his wife as compensation after their divorce, hence keeping her dependent on him. Furthermore, despite his advocacy of his young daughter's independence, he is critical of the older Enitan vis-à-vis her sexual choices, hoping to bond her to a subordinate female position subject to male control, an attempt which Enitan resists.

When her father dismisses her opinions about women's mistreatment by men in Nigerian society, Enitan reveals, "Whenever I stood on my soap box, he wanted me to step down. When he stood on his, it wasn't a soap box; it was a foundation of truth" (196). He actively discourages Enitan's political opinions and even differentially characterises men's and women's rights to advocate for or against gender and sexuality as a politics. And yet throughout her childhood, he conditioned her *towards* such independent thinking. Arinola's explicit efforts, from the beginning of their daughter's girlhood, to inculcate a socially acceptable womanhood in Enitan is a point of tension between her and Sunny. When he finds Enitan in the kitchen cutting and frying plantains, he sarcastically remarks, "I see your mother is making you her understudy again" (20). He is critical of the studied, socially-rehearsed iterations through which his wife would have their daughter internalise the inherited script of gendered performance, in persistent preparation for the culturally respectable role of future wife and mother. Enitan resists her mother's efforts (the narrative voice implying her naiveté), rebelliously announcing that "Kitchen work was ugly" (20); "when I was older I would starve myself so I wouldn't have to cook. That was my main plan" (20). Throughout the novel Enitan resists received norms which link her future to narrow identifications as a woman - though when it comes to food, starving herself would only play into another facet of conventionalised femaleness.

Arinola's position in socialising her daughter is one that I read as ambiguous, for as much as she represents herself as asexual, she simultaneously tries to produce a proper woman out of her daughter not by *denying* but rather by *acknowledging* the potentialities of her sexuality. Arinola's relationship with her daughter is a distant one, characterised by rules

and regulations that emphasise authoritarian maternal power. The flow of information within the mother-daughter relationship is hierarchical, passed from top to bottom, a vector influenced not only by religion, but by generational authority. It aims to preclude the possibility that the received knowledge will be questioned, an aspect which echoes what Tamale has described as the “informal cultural systems of education that largely emphasises children’s unquestioning obedience to adults” (“Introduction” 5). Arinola’s educating efforts constrain her daughter’s individual becoming, as her socialising techniques aim to replicate the habits and lineations of female respectability by ingraining proper notions of behaviour and (non)sexual conduct in her daughter. For instance, using herself as an exemplar of proper feminine conduct through bodily posture and movement, Arinola rebukes Enitan, saying that *she* “stood tall and squared her shoulders, even as a child, she said. She would not play rough, or slump around, so why did I? Her question often prompted me to walk with my back straight until I forgot” (18). Arinola often uses fear and shame to monitor Enitan’s actions and as punishment to ‘persuade’ her conformity to “appropriate” behaviour:

My mother never had a conversation with me; she talked and knew that I was listening. I always was. The mere sound of her footsteps made me breathe faster. She hardly raised a hand to me, unlike most mothers I knew, who beat their children with tree branches, but she didn’t have to. I’d been caned before, for daydreaming in class, with the side of a ruler, on my knuckles, and wondered if it wasn’t an easier punishment than having my mother look at me as if she’d caught me playing with my own poop. Her looks were hard to forget. At least caning welts eventually disappeared. (19)

The passage highlights the role of mother as implicit pedagogue in heteropatriarchal society, one whose role overlaps with that of the tyrannical state in the cultural suppression of female sexuality in the way it is subsumed under male authority both on the home front and the public space. Acknowledging the potential of her daughter’s sexuality, Arinola uses the psychic violence of shaming as an effective technique for governing her daughter’s behaviour even when she is not personally present to monitor this, substantiating Foucault’s notion of the ideal mechanisms of discipline which ensures “permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (“The Panopticon” 201). For Arinola, the effects of shaming in producing appropriate behaviour prove to be more lasting and impressionable than actual physical punishment given in order to persuade Enitan to conform. The shame is an emotional miasma the girl absorbs, and into which she is assimilated, as into an informing gender matrix. The shame manifests both as the prevailing norm for females, and as an internalised aspect of her developing female self.

In the quotation, the displacement of rebuke onto an action *not* actually carried out but projected is quite telling. The child, even in her language (‘poop’) links her mother’s judgmental gaze to an infant’s toying with bodily waste. This is an imagined (yet psychologically typical) action of discovery that is unwittingly taboo, yet is necessarily understood to be immediately configured by the authority of adult oversight as repulsive. Enitan has *not* behaved transgressively. She has done nothing wrong. Yet from infancy she has already been so psychically schooled into proper, polite imaginaries that it is enough for her mother’s eyes to look in her direction and she self-judges her *unactioned* behaviour *as if* it were filthy transgression. The implication, by analogy, is that her growing female sexuality is individually intuited as taboo, *and* already culturally so construed, meaning that the girl is constantly subject to the pressures of both external and interiorised surveillance.

Consider how Arinola’s attempts to educate the pre-pubescent Enitan about sexuality and the biological functions of female bodies are framed within body-shaming narratives which construct female sexuality as “bad”, “filthy” and “morally corrupting” (McFadden 52). The secrecy which accompanies the “talk” also reveals how issues of sexuality and bodily agency are often shrouded in taboo:

My mother sat opposite me. “Do you remember, when you used to come to church with me, that some of the sisters would miss church for a week?”
 “Yes, Mummy.”
 “Do you know why they missed church?”
 “No.”
 “Because they were unclean,” she said.
 ... She told me the most awful thing about blood and babies and why it was a secret.
 “I will not marry,” I said.
 “You will,” she said.
 “I will not have children.”
 “Yes, you will. All women want children.”
 Sex was a filthy act, she said, and I must always wash myself afterward. (23)

There are a number of points to note from this conversation between mother and daughter. Firstly, Atta employs a technique which deliberately uses narrative gaps, preferring not to explain, but rather invoking a reader’s perceptive projection. This creates a subtle textual space of expression and withholding which aptly reflects the difficult subject of the discussion. At the same time, Atta’s technique points to the ways in which gaps can operate as if to naturalise authority, closing the possibility of questioning in relation to the finality of Arinola’s statements. Additionally, consider the religious and cultural influences determining the way female sexuality is constructed and perceived by the two characters. Inspired by what

Signe Arnfred calls “a Christian moral regime” (which is highly inflected both by Judeo-Christian culture and African indigenous myths-cum-taboos regarding menstruation), Arinola informs Enitan that menstruation is dirty, justifying the ostracising of women from public space on the basis of a natural aspect of the female body. Her perspectives are located within gender normative codes which pathologise female bodies by stigmatising.

Simone de Beauvoir has argued that the pathology behind women’s menstruation is embedded in the social construction of the category of woman as an “other”: “the blood, indeed, does not make woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity” (169). The social construction of menstruation as a woman’s curse, a marker of shame, something to be hidden “is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other...That is to say, menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is a curse” (Kissling 4). Arinola’s perspectives also corroborate Patricia McFadden’s arguments that in “all patriarchal societies, women and girls are taught, consistently and often violently, that their bodies are dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting, corrupting, imperfect, ugly and volatile harbingers of disease and immorality” (55). This impinges on the way women as a group are taught to imagine their bodies, and extends to the subsequent sexual restrictions to which they adhere. Arinola also intimates that within the religiously sanctioned frame of reproductive marriage as a legitimate context, sex can be positively construed. In her narrative of female sexuality, marriage is the pinnacle of female achievement for every woman, “divine and sacrosanct...the most appropriate place to be in terms of conducting sexual activity and or the procreation of future generations” (Mvududu and McFadden 63). Her educating efforts are framed within a heteronormative matrix that conflates female expressions of sexuality with the goal of reproduction, repressing central aspects of sexuality, such as desire, the erotic, and passion. Her biologically essentialist assumption that “all women want children” accedes to a dominant discourse in which women’s bodies are (socially) reproductive vessels, and sex fulfils the Biblical injunction to multiply. Sexual pleasure is disallowed. She teaches Enitan to associate sex with shame and dirt. As McFadden elaborates, we can understand that “[a] fundamental premise of patriarchal power and impunity is the denial and suppression of women's naming and controlling their bodies for their own joy and nurturing” (55). This form of socialisation, which shrouds female sexuality in expedient varieties of mystery, stricture and taboo, encourages women to express shame about their bodies and to apologise for their female embodiment.

Atta conveys this point in Enitan’s response to her mother’s pointed lesson. The child shudders at the horror of female embodiment, its fleshy materiality of “blood and babies”

which paradoxically, *because* of its express and undeniable viscerality, must be “a secret”. The doubled shock of femaleness, its impossibility, induces in the young girl shame and fear. She is riddled with anxiety about her female sexuality. Here, too, the ‘riddle’ is the contradiction of femaleness as ‘open secret’, a perplexingly contrary form of self and social governance which makes it seem, to the weeping, desperately confused girl, that the “prospect of dying young seemed better now” (23). Even allowing for her youthful melodrama, the hyperbole of this statement evinces the extremity of Enitan’s growing dread of her femaleness and nascent sexuality, “a reluctance to assume the feminine status that the girl knows is subordinate” and tainted (Young 100).

“Good girls, Naughty Girls”: Reconfiguring Constructions of Sexuality

This section examines how daughters can re-negotiate the gendered norms of sexualities as imparted to them by their mothers, via the influence of girls’ close female peers. The friendship between Sheri and Enitan which I focus on in this section forms an example of sisterhood which perseveres through trials that they experience because of their gender. As Janet Todd explains:

[S]ocial friendship is a nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather smoothing their passage within it. If their destiny is almost always sexual and heterosexual...women’s salvation is social, for they may ‘fall’ sexually, but must rise socially. Here the support and acceptance of other women is essential, since through their teaching of female lore, criminal or conventional, women aid and sustain each other (4).

Similarly, Obioma Nnaemeka explains that “women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves” (19) and this we observe in the way Enitan and Sheri’s friendship anchors them in the processes of reinventing themselves from traumatising events such as Sheri’s rape and Enitan’s broken relationships.

In *Everything Good*, Sheri Bakare’s mere presence in Enitan’s family house, her dressing, her behaviour and her freedom to speak, completely unsettles Enitan’s sensibilities of what it means to be a good girl. Sheri is the biracial daughter of the polygamous family of Chief Bakare who lives next door to the Taiwos. On the first day they meet, Sheri is wearing “a pink skirt and her white top ended just above her navel. With her short afro, her face looked like a sunflower. I noticed she wore pink lipstick” (14). Sheri’s bold dress style, which casually snubs respectable female gender codes, prompts the obedient Enitan to question the

responsibility of the girl's parents: "Didn't anyone tell her she couldn't wear high heels? Lipstick? Any of that?" (16). Enitan concludes that Sheri has had no "proper home training", and assumes this is because she comes from a Muslim polygamous family, an arrangement contrary to Enitan's own nuclear, Christian family. For the child, educated into monogamy as the only proper marital relation, polygamy implies a deviation from the norms of sexual morality which can therefore never produce a respectable, morally upright child, even though such marriages may be customary, and shaped by relations she cannot understand.

Also unsettling the westernised norms of Enitan's family, Sheri most of the times lives with Alhaja, her grandmother, a woman who disregards the prescriptions of respectable womanhood upheld by Arinola's church. Enitan is taken aback when Sheri starts dancing publicly and reveals that she dances with her grandmother:

Through the fence we heard Akanni's juju music. Sheri stuck her bottom out and began to wriggle. She dived lower and wormed up.
 "You like juju music?" I asked.
 "Yep. Me and my grandma, we dance to it."
 "You dance with your grandma?" (15)

Juju music is "a style of Nigerian popular music derived from traditional Yoruba percussion" which was made famous in the 1920s by AbdulRafiu Babatunde King, popularly known as Tunde King. The origin of the name 'juju' music are relevant here. Some maintain that this "popular music came to be called juju because [King] performed only in the late evenings for social gatherings of the elite and never on the streets" (61). Since "it was taboo for ladies to appear on the streets at night" (Alaja-Browne 61), the music was considered "tailor-cut for the enjoyment of nocturnal spirits" (Martins 1966, 30). Alaja-Brown adds that 'juju' also references the widespread belief among Lagosians (at this time) in the strange, even "sinister powers" of the night, when "mysterious beings" might be around. Juju implies both the denigration of "indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices" that colonisers had "found among the different African nations", *and* the ways in which Africans subversively maintained such beliefs as a form of local cultural agency (58-9). If Enitan cannot fully articulate her objections, to a reader, the implications are clear: juju music meant transgressive, insalubrious pleasures – an impropriety for a child and an old woman, and potentially disruptive of decorous Christian morals and obedient socio-political governance. Interestingly, the word means "to throw" in Yoruba, implying the liberated (or, for some, lascivious) movement of the body. The juju dance clearly has sexual undertones and in Enitan's view, an opinion inculcated via her upbringing, the dancing is by implication a

sexualised bodily freedom of expression that should not be associated with either good girl children, or with elderly women. This view subtly points to how Enitan is influenced by her mother's refusal of female sexuality, and its application across the various life stages of femaleness, whether youth or old age. For Enitan, juju music is only suitable for the likes of Akanni, Sheri's gardener, since her refined class mores discriminate at the level of both social hierarchy and of cultural taste, categorically deprecating his worker status by associating it with the sensual, unbridled embodiment of the disrespectable form of 'dark' juju street music.

As Kehinde and Mbipom note, Enitan's meeting with Sheri is of "great significance, as it marks her transition to an entirely new stage of life" (68). It is from Sheri that she learns about different aspects of her sexuality and this sets her on a path of growth and discovery. Enitan's interaction with the liberal-minded Sheri causes her to re-evaluate her conditioned reasoning. Yet even Sheri's free thinking with regard to her sexuality is couched in a patriarchal discourse which views femaleness and female sexuality as subordinate to the pleasure and purpose of the male. Consider how Atta uses an extended conversation between Sheri and Enitan to exemplify how girls' socialisation framed within patriarchal narratives of gender influences the way the girls imagine their future selves. Sheri fantasises about spectacular female visibility; she longs to become an actress who will be wearing "a red negligee", "fur coat" and "high, high heels" (30) at glamorous events. She dreams of adoring fans who desperately desire her attention - to which celebrity infatuation she will respond by slipping into her car and speeding away (30). Years later, Sheri goes on to become Miss Nigeria and to participate in the Miss World pageant, thus living in the spotlight of popular fame that she had craved as a girl. In Sheri's description of her idealised female self, commodified mediations of women's sexualised bodies play a powerful role, a curiously exaggerated and yet commonly familiar image repertoire of women seen on TV, themselves often de-individuated, just as Sheri's dream itself seems clichéd and mass produced, undermining rather than realising any supposedly distinctive female 'self'. Enitan, on the other hand, tells Sheri she dreams of becoming president, contrary to her father's wishes:

"I want to be something like... the president"

"Eh? Women are not presidents"

"Why not?"

"Our men won't stand for it. Who will cook for your husband?"

"He will cook for himself"

"What if he refuses?"

"I'll drive him away"

"You can't" she said.

Yes I can. Who wants to marry him anyway?" (30-31).

Enitan, in comparison, dreams of being a lawyer, and as a child is encouraged in this noble aspiration by her father. The same father, however, much like Sheri, scoffs at her apparently unrealistic higher goals, such as the improbability of her ever being president. Such a high status is considered not merely beyond this individual girl, but beyond the pale for women, whose life horizons are set in terms of wifedom, and the boundaries set by patriarchy. Sheri's response to Enitan's dream of becoming a president demonstrates how effective socialisation is with regard to the way we construct our gender identities and how we understand our potentialities. For Sheri, young as she is, patriarchy has already naturalised the norm that political power and leadership are the precincts of men, although in saying to her friend that "our men won't stand for it" she shows her awareness of gender discrimination as well as her understanding that the limits upon women's achievement are socially constructed, not the result of intrinsically lacking capabilities. At this stage we begin to see in Enitan's character elements of defiance against restrictions placed on femaleness, an issue I will explore later on in the present chapter.

Both Sheri and Enitan acknowledge that marriage and its associated domestic servitude is the expected female destiny, although their conversation toys with reconfigurations of this designated future, testing, between themselves, the possibility of refusing and rescripting their awaiting narratives. If Sheri, once she is famous, imagines throwing off the overweening adoration of her many fans by driving away in a fancy car, Enitan suggests that *she* will be president, her husband will cook because she demands it, and if he won't, well, she will just drive him away. It is clear that the girls are imagining freely, but without seriously believing their games. The girlish games are a space in which they can playfully push limits and express hopes. If this, then that. And if not that, then...forget marrying a man anyway! The very freedoms of the girls' narrative play, in the repeated statement and refutation it entails, the girls proposing an idea, having it countered and disproved, and leaping over likelihood and causality to another flighty possibility, shows Sheri and Enitan play scenes and trialing a series of the preposterous and the probable, digressive and obedient ideas about a woman's life possibilities which frame for the girls and for a reader the received limits of a girl's probable opportunities in the co-inciding ruling cultures of both respectable family life and masculinist national patriarchy.

These Women Force Us To Rape Them

It is from the sexually precocious Sheri that Enitan learns about her body and about sex. Although I have implied, above, the complex confluence of pragmatic clear-sightedness and

female longing for possibility which characterise Sheri's young life, there is more than a little truth in Harry Olufunwa's description of Sheri as "fearless, garrulous and supremely self-confident" (10). Sheri "proffers a set of alternative attitudes and visions of the world that tantalises the more reticent Enitan" (Olufunwa 10), coaxes her to explore aspects of her sexuality that have been clothed in taboo. Because of her mother's policing of who she can talk to and what she can read, the naïve Enitan is ignorant about even the physical lineaments of sexual intercourse. Her knowledge is limited to "blurred images of a man lying on top of a woman" (24) and because of this she is unable to decipher the relationship between Bisi, their 'house girl' and Akanni, the Bakare's gardener. She thinks Akanni is simply visiting Bisi, until Sheri enlightens her.

Using casual popular phrasing, Sheri tells Enitan that "he is doing her" (32). She then more graphically elaborates: "Sex. Banana into tomato. Don't you know about it?" (32). Sheri's remarks scandalise Enitan's 'good girl' sensibilities. Enitan covers her mouth when Sheri first talks about sex, underscoring sex and sexuality as a secret, even unsayable issue, one not to be spoken about, especially by children. The action of covering and subsequently being left open-mouthed, speechless, demonstrates Enitan's shock at Sheri's scandalous revelation and emphasises her perception of Sheri's actions as transgressive. This incident in the novel clearly marks the distinction between the girls' respective socialisation. Enitan's mother has instilled in her daughter the associating of shame and secrecy with any evidence of sexuality, never mind actual sex. Sheri, though, tells Enitan that "my grandma told me" (32) about sex. Alhaja's educative role with regard to issues about sexuality, in contrast to Arinola's, is more accommodating to a growing girl's nascent sexuality, acknowledging the potentials of her sexuality and the need for her to know about human sexuality. Despite her initial upset, Enitan soon wishes to know more about the physiology of sex:

"When you..." I asked. "I mean, with your husband. Where does it go? Because I don't..." I was pointing everywhere, even at the ceiling.
 Sheri's eyes were wide. "You haven't seen it? I've seen mine. Many times." She stood up and retrieved a cracked mirror from a drawer. "Look and see."
 "I can't."

...

I dragged my panties down, placed the mirror between my legs. It looks like a big, fat slug. I squealed as Sheri began to laugh. (32-33)

Enitan's inability to articulate her question clearly – the ellipses and hesitations, along with the embarrassed and erratic pointing away from suggestive embodiment towards a variety of dispersed places which deflect attention from sex – signals her embarrassment at her own

ignorance, and her discomfort with Sheri's frankness even as she is simultaneously requesting pointed explanation. Notably, while Sheri is apparently knowledgeable, her naming of genitals as 'banana' and 'tomato' *also* euphemises intercourse. This may be because she herself, as a child, is really less informed about sex than her knowing performance implies, or she may also be coding her explanation in terms of familiar food objects for the benefit of the innocent Enitan, perhaps as her own grandmother has taught her about sex through a cultural discourse that might be considered appropriately coded and oblique for a child, working through analogy to convey, while simultaneously minding the boundaries of cultural taboo.

The quotation immediately above illustrates how Enitan has been socialised not only to consider sexuality in the abstract as a prohibited unspoken, but also to stigmatise her female genitals as proscribed and shameful and therefore "untouchable", and to be concealed at all times even from oneself, whether eyes, or hands. From her own experience of being reprimanded for peeping at herself, Mumbi Machera observes that most African societies teach girls to believe that it is "bad manners" to look at one's genitals and that "a good girl never looks at that place" (160). Again, even here, the act of describing the looking is veiled, obeying the taboo even when hoping to counter its inappropriate norms. Such experience rings true in Atta's representation of the girls' conversations on female embodiment and sexuality. Moreover, the fact that both girls continually refer to the vagina as "it", displacing more explicit nomenclature, conveys how both girls have internalised societal constructions of the vagina as "unnamable". Enitan's disgust at what she sees, and the metaphoric comparison that she draws between her vagina and a slimy slug, highlights the assumption that the vagina is associated with lowly disgust, as well as threatening notions of the unformed, and even the dirty and the creaturely.

Enitan's initial refusal to look at herself is steeped in culturally widespread traditions that restrict girls from viewing their genitals, since this would encourage the further transgressive possibilities of locating, in the very contours of the female's body, females own sexual pleasure. Her discomfort, then, if it attests to her girlish squeamishness, can also be read as an enfolded analogue of patriarchy's preferred, persistent dogmas that subject women's sexuality to male control by keeping it within the experiential confines of male-female relation. In terms of heteropatriarchal narratives, 'the mirror' cannot be allowed to reflect to a girl or a woman the possibility of only female (even solipsistic masturbatory) pleasure; that pleasure must always be envisaged through male relation. If tomato; then

banana. Sheri's own proud proclamation that she has seen her vagina many times indicates her disregard for socio-cultural attempts to control female sexuality. She has many times flouted the taboo. That this occurs from within her grandmother's house implies not merely the power of individual female rebellion, but a wider secret sabotage; the subversive power of transgenerational female knowledges that elude systemic male prescription about women's sexuality. Sheri is used to taking the mirror from its place in the drawer – a place that is cunningly at once hidden, and yet familiarly known, much as is the vagina. She is used to placing the mirror between her legs, and looking deeply and intimately at the hidden place that 'ought' to be invisible to her as a girl, and indeed kept invisible to her as she grows into womanhood. The mirror is cracked, implying its age and yet is continued precious use. The cracked mirror is not useless; it enables the girl, in the house of her grandmother, to break and transgress acceptable notions of female sexual propriety, creating an experiential-narrative arc which, in terms of Atta's writing, implies the possibility of divergent depictions of conventional female sexuality.

Enitan's friendship with Sheri sparks her interest in her own sexuality and her desire to learn about the workings of sex and sexual relationships. She inclines to conclude, in a condemnatory tone, that "the world was full of sex" as she reflects on the multifarious ways in which sexualities are played out in her neighbourhood. This range encompasses the male same-sex couple from whom her father had bought their house; Akanni and Bisi's sexual encounters, and the clearly vigorous sexual activity of the polygamous Chief Bakare who has numerous children in his household. Even though her mother's influence mediates her own attitudes to sexuality, Sheri's insistence that she read a romance novel called *Jacaranda Cove* intrigues Enitan, heightening her curiosity to discover more about sexual relationships from popular texts which, in their mixture of frank and melodramatic representation, call into question the anti-sexual stringency of her mother's religious strictures. Enitan's conflicting fascination with and taboos about sex lead her initially to read "the first page of Sheri's book, then the last" (36), a tentative, fractured reading method which embodies her desire to know more, and yet her simultaneous act of self-policing against what her mother would consider morally corrupting literature. As Janice Radway notes, for women, the romance novel often "addresses the needs, desires and wishes that their male partners cannot fill. And by doing so, it creates a feeling of hope, provides emotional sustenance, and produces a fully visceral sense of wellbeing" (12). Through psychic-emotional engagement, then, the romance might offer Enitan a site of representation in which to reconfigure normatively sexualised gender

relations, allowing her both to negotiate and at times to refuse the sexual proscriptions which her mother upholds. And yet other scholars might point out that the appeal of romance novels entails a form of assimilationist control, subtly tying female sexuality and emotions precisely to the culturally dominant norms which romance purports to challenge. Joanne Hollows remarks the contradictions associated with the genre, observing that “the ideal romance offers readers the opportunity to escape from a world characterised by the excesses of male power into a utopian world”, *but* that this is almost invariably a world “in which *heterosexual* relationships can work” (79, my italics). Such paradoxes attest to the difficulty for a girl of imagining her female sexuality; if her sexuality may at times wish to project imaginatively beyond narrow norms, even such creativity cannot fully escape, and finds itself subject to these norms through forms of subtle, implied regulation in which gender and orientation are conflated in a heteropatriarchal matrix. This recalls Foucault’s arguments about the automatic functioning of power in the way that subjects begin to self-police without the explicit coercion of authority.

In Enitan’s reading of the romance novel, her fear of taboo is overcome by the tantalising description of “a man and woman kissing and how their hearts beat faster” (36). She is prompted to read the passage again, and to “search the book for more passages like that”, marking each of them for later reading (36). This is an act of repeated narrative self-pleasure which works in relation to Judith Butler’s argument about gender as a socially iterative practice. In reading romance fiction and finding it enticing, is Enitan trapped in the endless cycle of gendered social performance, her reading further inculcating her into normative patterns of male-female desire – charismatic and physically impressive male saviours; sexy female submissives? And/or is her reading even of these patterns *also* legible as a small irruption of personally pleasurable challenge, in which she seeks to find a way into sexuality different from her mother’s repressive indoctrination, the girl’s sense of sexuality, here being based on pleasure, albeit heterosexual? Answers elude me, and I believe this is part of the power of Atta’s treatment of female sexuality in the novel, where it is allowed its fugitive imaginary. Arinola, though, when she discovers her daughter’s reading material, allows for no such productive uncertainty. She reproaches the girl, and punishes her, a maternal policing which seeks firmly to re-inscript proper morality: “She grabbed my ear and shoved Sheri’s book under my nose...Her fingers were like iron clamps...‘I go to her suitcase, find this... this... If I ever catch you talking to that girl again, there will be trouble in this house, you hear me?’” (37). Arinola’s inability even to name what she has discovered in Enitan’s suitcase, using the recurrent deictic referent “this”, emphasises her shocked

revulsion. Arinola's determined effort to subdue Enitan's nascent sexuality manifest as painful physical punishment, and linguistic threat which extends to the injunction against playing with Sheri.

She attempts through aggregated modes of female authority as mother, wife, respectable community figure, to coerce Enitan into acquiring a preferred version of femaleness. We are never sure whether to interpret her actions as a painfully pragmatic response to the prevailing gendered status quo, the inescapable truth of which she believes her daughter must learn in order to survive, or as a blind obedience, co-opted to patriarchal control. Whatever Arinola's motivations, her efforts prove futile, as Enitan is defiant: "My mother had more hope of squeezing me up her womb than stopping our friendship. Sheri had led me to the gap between parental consent and disapproval. I would learn how to bridge it with deception, wearing a face as pious as a church sister before my mother and altering steadily behind her" (43). This is a complex, performative declaration. It is made covertly, to the reader, rather than in explicitly outraged confrontation against the mother. Even with the hyper-exaggeration of the claim – the impossibility of Enitan ever *actually* being physically returned by the incensed Arinola to the womb, and by implication to the controlled, pre-natal space of self-identification and necessarily shared embodiment with the mother - the declaration comprises a subtle creative space invented by Atta in order to prompt a rethinking of the relationality of female sexualities. As Enitan remarks, "Sheri had led me to the gap". Here, the symbolic resonances of 'gap' or hole, or what is 'missing', suggest that the 'passage' sets the maternally embodied space of the womb, with its intimate reproduction of associations of femaleness with motherhood rather than sexuality, in provocative juxtaposition with the unnamed vagina of Enitan and Sheri's earlier conversation. It. 'It' is at once the sexual act embodied as male-female, *and* the vaginal site of female sexuality which may be pleurably experienced independent of male physicality or socially approved reproduction and birthing.

If Enitan's friendship with Sheri prompts her to start questioning the approved knowledge that has shaped her girlhood over the years, the "gap between parental consent and disapproval" must entail a process of masked negotiation, since outright defiance would mean severe reprimanding and more restrictions. Thus Enitan resorts to ambiguous tactics of manipulation which constitute various shifts between conformity and subversion. For example, whenever her mother is not around, she sneaks out to meet Sheri and comes back just in time before her mother returns.

Even after declaring to readers that she will rebel, as a teenager, Enitan's attitude to sexuality is tied to notions of female respectability. While she secretly fancies a boy in her class, she fails to take initiative in following her desires, knowing that men are the ones who do the chasing. Sheri, on the other hand, assertively pursues what she wants, deciding whom she will date and for how long. Her bold and untoward female personality is further expressed in her clothing. For example, she confidently wears a black skirt and a strapless top to a youth picnic at the beach, while Enitan wears a t-shirt and dungarees, deliberately de-sexualises herself. As a fourteen year old, Enitan is unsure about her body image, a sense of self approval undermined by institutionalised values for the designation of what constitutes a desirable female body. According to Taiwo Olorunjoba-Oju "body image refers to personal constructions and public projections of our body and body parts, often in attempted conformity with parameters of 'beauty' established in socio-cultural or non-personal contexts" (n.p). Enitan's thin body is not representative of ideal Nigerian beauty: "The girls in my class called me *Panla*, after a dry, stinky fish imported from Norway. Girls overseas could starve themselves on leaves and salad oil if they wanted. In our country, women were hailed for having huge buttocks. I wanted to be fatter, fatter, fatter, with a pretty face, and I wanted boys to like me" (46).

Enitan's lack of female voluptuousness excludes her from local norms of attractiveness; her skinny body is even demeaned for signifying the inappropriate, alien standards of Western female beauty. This is complex. The Nigerian norms subvert racially skewed, Eurocentric inscriptions of beauty in order to reclaim an aesthetics of African embodiment, but this cultural subversion then becomes, for some, an excluding dominant. In a perverse irony for Enitan, whose wealthy middle class family subscribes to many imported cultural-capitalist norms of class hierarchy, the fact that thinness is reconfigured in local terms as aesthetically undesirable for girls and women has the effect of further marking Enitan as different, a negative quotient which contributes to her uncertainty about how to define her 'self' as it relates to the socio-cultural positioning of forms of 'proper' femaleness.

On the other hand, Sheri is described as "the Nigerian man's ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman's station" (105). Despite her strengths, though, these physical-cultural features leave her vulnerable to male objectification. Let me discuss this a little, given that I have previously emphasised Sheri's transgressive attitude to received notions of female sexuality. In Atta's fiction, different aesthetic values are deliberately attributed to Sheri's and Enitan's bodies. Ventriloquising societal expectations of female bodies and sexuality with regard to dressing and conduct, Enitan says of the fourteen year old

Sheri: “Sheri was no longer a yellow banana. She could easily win any of the beauty contests in my school, but her demeanor needed to be toned down. She was *gragra*. Girls who won were demure” (57). In other words, Sheri’s beauty vis-à-vis her dressing and her public conduct do not neatly coincide with the demure behaviour that is socially praised and rewarded in beautiful women. Sheri’s position with regard to the place of women is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, she has “some regard for women’s station”; on the other, her indecorous attitude and behaviour thwart the respectable limits that are placed on women’s bodies. However, Sheri’s taking charge of her sexuality exposes her to misogyny, since her frank agency can be mistaken as an expressly erotic invitation to men. Her presence at the beach picnic and her close interaction with the boys runs the risk of positioning her as loose, a girl who must be taught her proper place en route to becoming an obedient woman. In this respect, I also notice something of Sheri’s vulnerability. Consider Enitan’s remark that “Sheri already had a boyfriend in school. They had kissed before and it was like chewing gum, but she wasn’t serious because he wasn’t” [55]. Again, as in the earlier reference to tomatoes and bananas, the analogy between gum chewing and kissing marks the relative youthful inexperience, sexually, not only of Enitan, but also of Sheri, who has told her friend what kissing is like. Also, Enitan’s observation implies that some of Sheri’s apparent nonchalance towards sexuality is not a mark of any female sophistication and experience, but is shaped by the casualness with which boys, as men in the making, habitually treat potentially intimate relationships. Sheri performs her relationship with her boyfriend as uninhibited, non-possessive and non-committal, because the boy has himself been taught to prefer independence and sovereignty as his male right.

Sheri is raped by the neighbourhood boys. “Sheri was lying on the seat. Her knees were spread apart. The boy in the cap was pinning her arms down. The portly boy was on top of her. His hands were clamped over her mouth” (62). The author’s criticism of the violence is unmistakable. It is a violence executed on Sheri’s body but not condemned by the society as her actions prior to the rape are interpreted as inviting. Enitan and Sheri are close female friends, yet Enitan’s private thoughts aptly convey the normative public indictment of Sheri:

Yes. I blamed her. If she hadn’t smoked hemp, it would never have happened. If she hadn’t stayed as long as she did at the party it certainly would have never happened. Bad girls got raped. We all knew! Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys, following them around, thinking she was one of them. [...] It was her fault. (65)

Enitan blames Sheri for not embodying appropriate female behaviour. As result (so the perverse logic would have it) of her own range of socially transgressive behaviours – drug use, being out too late in a potentially dangerous context, being bold, being unrefined, being convivial, being insufficiently feminine, and overly matey - she provoked the boys to rape her. Enitan seems to find Sheri responsible simply in the very fact of her *being*, a being in the world which does not conform to female codes. This echoes patriarchal society's views which place the blame of sexual violence on women's actions, dress and the like, where deviations from established standards of propriety, for women, are believed causally to justify the force that men might subsequently perpetrate on women's bodies. These views are premised on the assumptions that women's self-assertion manifested in their gestures and body movements as well as "women's sartorial agency" are always directed at men and "held to be an invitation to an erotic encounter that might often lead to unwanted consequences" (Bakare-Yusuf "Nudity and Morality" 117). The underlying assumption is that female bodies should be "disciplined and protected from any potential masculine sexual terror that acts under provocation" (Bakare-Yusuf "Nudity and Morality" 117). By policing female bodily agency and investing dress choices with sexual meaning, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf further argues, "it appears to be a matter of logic that regulation should follow in order to protect women from the inevitable masculine desire and terror that is provoked by exposed flesh" (Bakare-Yusuf "Of Miniskirts and Morals" n.p). Bakare-Yusuf further explains that such a position "tacitly reaffirms the normative power of heterosexuality as the only legally, theologically and culturally legitimate form of sexuality" and yet the image of heterosexual desire presented within this discourse is "one of potential threat and abusive power relations, which women must both subscribe to and be protected from" (Bakare-Yusuf "Of Miniskirts and Morals" n.p). Thus Enitan's statement underscores the gender differentials that are placed on sexual freedoms and performances. As a girl, Sheri should not have stayed out as long as she did and she should not have exercised the same freedom of mobility that is accorded to the boys. In this framework, the rape is an act of disciplining and punishing her transgressions; an *ideological* as well as physical technique for putting her in her proper place as a girl who is becoming a woman. And Enitan agrees. However, the instability of the collective pronoun 'we' also hints at the fear which shapes Enitan's judgmental response: is 'we', in the preceding block quotation, a gender-undifferentiated social collective; does it refer to the group of all women whose bodily identity names them female and 'thus' puts them at potential risk, or does it refer especially to the young female-gendered cohort of schoolgirls, in whose circles Sheri and Enitan move, and whose behaviour is defined in relation to that of

the boys? The small, unsettling contingencies associated with this pronoun prise open a space of narrative questioning, enabling a variety of other possible responses to the rape of Sheri. These responses are unexpressed at this point in the narrative, and (for all a reader knows) may nowhere in the actual plot unfolding be directly voiced or addressed. In this regard, as the present chapter will later discuss, it is also through Sheri's violent sexual experiences that Enitan learns to *deconstruct* her own ingrained notions of female sexuality.

The Shame of Rape

Sheri falls pregnant from the rape. At around the same time, another military coup occurs, and although Enitan at this stage blames Sheri for the rape, she nevertheless sees parallels between the rape and the violence enacted by the military upon civilians: "As if the picnic hadn't done enough damage that summer ...there was a military coup" (69). She concludes resignedly, "our world was uniformly terrible" (69). (In the above ellipses, I deliberately omitted Enitan's other remark – "as if the rains hadn't added to our misery". This statement seems a mere gripe, and sits oddly with the seriousness of the rape, and the coup, implying Enitan's continued, youthful inability to distinguish degrees of seriousness. That said, we might counter that Enitan's indiscriminate jumbling together of the rape, the weather, and the coup attests both to the taken-for-grantedness of intersecting forms of violence, social and climatic, and also to the naturalising power of ideological systems in which individual's feel unable to enact agency.)

News of Sheri's rape is only made public when she is hospitalised after a failed abortion, which she attempted herself using a metal coat hanger. The botched abortion – which means a continued pregnancy - compounds the damage to her reputation that Sheri experiences after the rape. Sheri names Enitan as a witness in the rape, and Enitan's parents are angry that their daughter's name and image are tainted by association. As Arinola sees it: "Your friend is pregnant,' my mother said. 'She stuck a hanger up herself and nearly killed herself. Now she's telling everyone she was raped. Telling everyone my daughter was involved in this. She patted her chest" (68). The idea that Enitan is being implicated in such disreputable events infuriates Arinola (as well as Sunny) not only because it slurs her daughter's good girl image but also because it reflects badly on her mothering skills, publicly seeming to disavow her maternal efforts to (re)produce a respectable daughter. (Arinola's solution is to subject Enitan to a cleansing ritual at her church.) The Taiwos' reactions to the news of Sheri's rape, as well as the wider community's reactions, reinforce the habituated practice of blaming the female victim for the violence inflicted on her body, and indeed of

assuming that no rape happened, merely careless consensual sex for which the girl should be held responsible.

In her article, “Too Ashamed to Report: Deconstructing the Shame of Sexual Victimization”, Karen Weiss argues that “cultural narratives regarding gender, sexuality, and sexual crimes themselves contribute to victims’ own definitions of their situations as shameful. Victims who are ashamed or anticipate disapproval from others will be hesitant to disclose sexual victimization and especially reluctant to report their incidents to the police” (287). Sheri fails to report the rape to the police or even to her family. Nor does she discuss it with Enitan. They only speak of the rape years later, when they are women in their twenties. Instead, thrown back upon her own already suffering body by social mores which further wound her via responses that encompass condemnation, disapproval and lack of support, she attempts to terminate the pregnancy on her own. In effect, the rape is protected by a series of layered secretcies, which unreasonably turn the victim into a form of complicit ‘perpetrator’ in her own shame. She cannot reveal what has so evidently happened to her, despite there being witnesses, either because the social context does not construe the sexual encounter as rape, or because the rape is not construed in terms which hold the males responsible. The rape becomes Sheri’s painful female secret, aggregated by the attempted abortion, and then the inescapably female-embodied, public visibility of pregnancy, which she cannot conceal. In effect, Sheri is obliged to grow further into the damaged, iconic representative of sexual promiscuity. In defining the notion of shame as an imbued response of rape, Weiss argues that:

[A] sociological understanding of shame suggests that individuals define and respond to situations according to both the reflected appraisals received from particular audiences during social interaction and from the anticipated or imagined reactions from society in general. Therefore, individuals can experience shame without ever having received negative feedback but simply from the assumption that if others were to know what happened, they would react with condemnation, disapproval, or disdain. (288)

The shame of Sheri’s rape and attempted abortion, cause the Bakare family to move away to another neighbourhood, hoping to put a spatial and emotional distance between their daughter, the tainted friendship, the place where the rape happened, and the projected negative associations upon their local reputation as a family. (As Weiss notes, the pervasive belief in many patriarchal cultures is “that women’s modesty and purity is a direct reflection of the family’s reputation and honor” [289].)

The trauma of the rape affects both girls, as they grow into women. Sheri “had been an open child and she became a cautious woman, somewhat cynical” (Atta n.p). Years later, when as a student in London Enitan attempts to have sexual relationships with men, she still feels haunted by the memory of Sheri’s rape; she does not enjoy sex, and she fails to forge lasting relationships with men. However, in the protracted process of trying to process the recollected event of her friend’s rape she does begin to unlearn the notions of female sexuality that have been drilled into her since childhood. Her move to England soon after Sheri’s rape introduces Enitan to a culture that is foreign from her own, and she must adapt: “I was in England for nine years, coming home only for vacations. My parents sent me to a boarding school there after summer, as was the fashion in the seventies, and for the first time I would have to explain why I washed my hair once a week and put grease straight back in” (73). This “meeting and mixing of cultures and subjectivities on a renewed global scale” underscores what Chielozona Eze has defined elsewhere as “the condition of transculturality” (100). Central to the notion of transculturality is the idea of motion which can be understood in this context as:

[T]he movement of subjects from one place to another, gaining new knowledge, widening their horizon and thereby adopting new worldviews and identities. The entanglement with new realities and the validation of new, hybridised worldviews usually have the consequence of unsettling hitherto stable and monolithic identities. (Eze 101)

Enitan’s views on the circumscriptions which govern female sexuality are destabilised in this new space. For instance, it is through her friendship with the woman Robin Richardson that Enitan reconfigures her learned ideas regarding rape. “She was the first person to tell me that nothing a woman does justifies rape. ‘Some girls encourage it,’ I said. ‘Who taught you that crap?’ she asked. I couldn’t remember, but bad girls got raped was all I’d heard before, and of the bad girls I knew, not one had taken her matter to court” (74). Enitan is perhaps being disingenuous in not recalling where she’d learnt about a woman’s blame for rape; or, perhaps, Atta implies that even beyond any individual message or instruction to that effect, Enitan’s mistaken idea is the result of pervasive culturally-normative codes which underpin popular takes on male-female behaviour.

Another example of Enitan’s difficult relationship to sex occurs in respect of intimacy with her boyfriend. Prior to losing her virginity, she had always thought that she did not have any claims to her own sexuality. “The first person to tell me my virginity belonged to me was the boy who took it. Before this, I’d thought my virginity belonged to Jesus Christ, my

mother, society at large. Anyone but me. My boyfriend, a first-year pharmacy student at London University, assured me that it was mine, to give to him” (73). The power vectors in operation here are tightly enmeshed. Enitan’s narration highlights the prescriptive authoritarian nexus of the intertwined institutions of culture, religion and family, and the combined roles they play (whether concerted or more erratic) in the mediating of sexuality and the ideologies which shape the understanding and expression of sexuality. As I have pointed out elsewhere in this study, cultural and religious imperatives divest female sexuality of self since notions of women’s sexual purity are tied to the honor of the church, the family and indeed the larger national project. Even though Enitan’s boyfriend helps her to deconstruct such notions and to reclaim sexual agency, his belief that her virginity is hers to give to *him* (a potential lover’s playful suggestion? A chauvinistic assumption?) delimits her autonomy. He locates her female sexuality only as premised upon his male sexual desire, reproducing norms. Other alternatives – sexual or not - are taken out of the equation.

However, even after she discovers her right to her own sexuality and potential sexual pleasure, sex for Enitan is marred by the recollected trauma of Sheri’s rape. The physical pain of having sex for the first time and the tangible fact of semen trigger memories of Sheri’s sexual violation:

After I thought he pierced my bowels, I burst into tears.
 “What’s wrong with you?” he asked.
 “I’m sorry,” I said. “I have to wash.”
 It was his semen. I couldn’t bear the thought of it leaking out of me and rolling down my thighs. But each time I opened my mouth to tell him, about Sheri and me that awful summer, I thought my voice would blast my ribs apart...so I said nothing. (73)

Her weeping positions her, in the man’s mind, as unstable, or immature, but so many years after the rape, Enitan is brought not to sexual release but to graphically associate the pain of first-time sex with Sheri’s trauma. What claims her imagination, during and after sex, is not pleasure, but pain, a pain which is physically specific to losing her virginity, and which in a sudden rupture of clarity her traumatic memories of witnessing the violent sexual assault on Sheri during childhood conflate and enlarge and release into a sense of brutal piercing similar to what she knows, now, Sheri must have suffered during the rape. The intimate moment of her first sexual experience, even in the context of a relationship with a boyfriend, shocks into Enitan’s mind the visceral image of Sheri’s raped body, “blood on her pubic hairs, thick spit running down her legs” (63). The experience of sex as trauma for Enitan is ongoing. The response of her boyfriend is even more clichéd, even callous:

The next time around my boyfriend strummed me like a guitar. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. ‘Maybe you are frigid.’ Frigidity was a form of mental illness, he said. We would eventually separate one night, when he complained that I was just like other Nigerian women in bed. ‘You just lie there,’ he said. ‘Like dead women.’ (73)

Here, the metaphor of strumming underscores the sexual instrumentalism that Enitan feels in her boyfriend’s efficiently expert handling of her body. He plays her properly; she is expected to respond. The matter-of-fact tone of the passage highlights her dissociated detachment. Enitan is not ‘frigid’, as the boyfriend stereotypically suggests, unable to concede his own failure to arouse her. Rather, she is experiencing a delayed form of post-traumatic stress, precipitated by her becoming sexually active. While she has not herself been raped, she witnessed Sheri’s rape, and then repressed it, inflicting a damaging denial. The ideas of Elizabeth Letourneau, Heidi Resnick *et al* may usefully be extrapolated to the agony of having been a close witness to the rape of a person close to one. They suggest that in the aftermath of rape, “the ability to feel emotions is often impaired in individuals with PTSD, and these emotions may also include feelings associated with intimacy and sexuality” (Letourneau *et al* 322). Enitan’s lack of sexual arousal is a response to her unresolved feelings towards her friend’s rape, perhaps even her youthful complicity. I am also inclined to read the boyfriend’s dismissive metaphorical use of the phrase “dead women” to refer to Enitan and other Nigerian women with whom he has been intimate as pointing to the idea that Enitan’s response to sex as well as his response are culturally mediated. ‘Death’ implies the ultimate passivity, complete lack of living volition. I believe that Enitan’s passive response can also be interpreted as the manifesting sign of internalised values regarding sex, views such as those advanced by her mother: for a woman to show sexual interest and initiative is to transgress a longstanding taboo; women should be recipients, not agents, the latter being a sexual right reserved for men. Rather be criticised for being passive, the comments imply, than being so sexually bold a woman as to invite rape...

When Enitan moves back to Nigeria, the cross-cultural exchanges she has experienced with people in England influence her perspectives on sexuality as well as her rights to exercise sexual agency. She is now an adult, living beyond her parents’ ambit, yet her sexual decisions still pose a challenge to socially normative discourses of proper female sexuality. While she is performing compulsory national service in preparation for her career as a lawyer, she becomes involved with Mike Obi, an artist. (Here, Atta sets sexual intimacy in uneasy relation with state claims upon identity.) Her father is displeased with the way she

acts in Mike's company, alleging that she is 'too free'. She resists his efforts to exert paternal (even patriarchal) control over her, and this becomes a point of tension between them.

"You know," he said. "I may not know much about youngsters today, but I know a few things and I don't think you should be making yourself so available to a man you've just met."

I crossed my arms. "In what way?"

"Your demeanor. A woman should have more...comportment. And you can stop following him unchaperoned, outside for a start."

"Unchaperoned?"

"Yes," he said. "He might think you're easy. Cheap. I'm telling you for your own good."

I walked away. Unchaperoned indeed... "This is modern Lagos," I said over my shoulder. "Not Victorian London."

"This is my house," I heard him say. "Don't be rude." (128)

Even though he claims to be a champion of women's rights, and had once encouraged in his young daughter a feisty challenge to normative female roles, Sunny's opinions corroborate Shalini Nadaswaran's observation that in most Nigerian patriarchal societies, the father claims "assumed responsibility and dominance over his daughter" (25). (She goes on to say that this is considered a right to be "transferred to her husband, who becomes her new figure of authority".) Sunny's paternalism is framed within a gender ideology that denies women their agency, sexual or otherwise, and even infantilises them. In the extract, in which the father rebukes his fully grown daughter, we harken back to the narrow circle in which Arinola had been expected to function as a woman, and against which she reacted not by explicitly rebelling, but by pushing limiting norms beyond their impossible limits, solidifying sexual repression into the further, powerful constraint of religious dogma. By implying that Enitan is demeaning, even prostituting, her female value through supposedly unbecoming behaviour, Sunny echoes the view that equates 'demure' with proper female conduct. Furthermore, by ordering Enitan not to be alone with Mike, unchaperoned, Sunny enforces prescriptive male codes of control over women.

Mingled together in such a view is a melee of incoherent opinions which figure male desires as naturally aggressive and predatory, women as desirable only when pure, purity as itself as a socially-ideologically mediated category, femaleness as volatile and necessitating control, and female sexuality as potentially insatiable once aroused, hence requiring careful social regulating. Enitan, however, invokes the public, modern African city space as the rightful context for her liberated femaleness, the apt correlative of her own desires and expansive ambitions as a woman. The notion of a chaperone, to her, is an anachronism. But Sunny simply brings the argument home: he shifts the terms from the public space to the

private, the immediate locale over which he still retains traditional control: the family, and the family house. These spaces, and all within them, are subject to his authority. The threat of expulsion directed at his daughter, which points to his sanctioned power as a patriarch, is challenged by Enitan. She upholds a modernity that unsettles the “power relations and symbolic meanings of gender whereby moral discourses in relation to sexual behaviour are played out” (Spronk 7). In respect of how she ‘should’ relate to men, Enitan refuses to heed her father – his powerful fusion of edict, advice and warning.

Enitan describes how, soon after her argument with her father, she and Mike “drove back to his place and ripped our clothes off... We made love on the mattress and then on the floor” (132). On several occasions she also spends the night at Mike’s house even though she is still living under her father’s roof. It could be said that Enitan’s and Mike’s lifestyle testifies to “a process of social fragmentation deeply affecting familial structures, especially in the metropolises, resulting and giving rise to changes in patterns of cohabitation and sexuality” (Mbembe 110). However, even though Enitan consciously challenges the script of respectable womanhood in her conduct with Mike, there are still moments of slippage in which she falls back into conventional postures, framed by the binary lessons of good girls and bad girls. On one occasion, she jokingly accuses her boyfriend of liking sex too much, to which Mike responds by further seducing her and mocking that “his landlord, the whole neighbourhood, the whole world even, was about to know how much sex he liked” (132). Feigning resistance, she shouts, “They will think I am a slut!...Please! They’ll think I am shit” (132). What is a reader to make of such jesting? I find myself wondering what Atta is doing here. In the context of Sheri’s violation, why have the narrative turn to what could (without too much of a stretch) be read as a mock rape (even a mockery *of* rape)? In the contact of Enitan’s delayed trauma at witnessing the rape, and her sexual inability to respond, why have her respond now in this way, so (disturbingly) playful? Possibly, though the incident sits awkwardly, Atta is hoping in the space of a young woman’s heterosexual desire to perform a further range of complicated responses to sexual behaviour, just as she already has, for example, in scenes between the childhood friends, the mother and daughter, the rape.

As an authorial tactic, this does not completely pay off. It is distressing, for instance, that in her casual banter around the word ‘slut’ Enitan invokes the damaging clichés through which female sexual agency is habitually criticised. This is complicated by the fact that it is not even Enitan who is at this point expressing a hunger for sex, but Mike, on whom the label ‘slut’ would never be imposed. Instead – again typifying a received sexual norm – the man’s sexual appetite is one to be publicly announced. This declaration is to be spread not only to

the immediate residents of his rented apartment, but beyond in the neighbourhood, and even further beyond, to the exaggerated spatiality of ‘the entire world’. He need not deflect his desire; it is a proud, socially approved mark of his virility, one that he can aggrandisingly assume is sanctioned the world over. Enitan’s worry – which she seems partly to deny - is that *she* will be labeled the slut for having and enjoying sex so frequently, and for being improperly noisy, while she’s at it. Enitan’s statement, situated within the expanded range of African female sexualities that Atta has so carefully narrated in charting the femaleness of Enitan and Sheri, could signal the double standards that accompany gendered behaviour but also, further, the ways in which sex and desire are not easily obedient to moral norms. As this sexual incident between Enitan and Mike suggests, sexuality can play out very improperly, transgressively, via an unsettling parodic impulse that shows scant regard even for political correctness.

Sheri’s life trajectory is very different from Enitan’s. In her interview with Ike Anya, Atta describes Sheri as a better negotiator of patriarchal forces than Enitan, since Sheri realises from an early age that “education cannot change what’s inside a person’s veins” (104). As a strategy for manipulating the patriarchal system from within, Sheri maintains that “it is easier to walk around a rock...than to break it down and you still go to where you are going” (251). This observation, marked by combinations of realism, cynicism, and expedience, is relevant to Sheri’s development as a woman. The Nigeria of which Atta writes is a country ruled by corrupt and amoral military leaders whose bejeweled, designer-dressed wives (Mama 5) perform charades of charity. In such a context, one has to find strategies of surviving. Nigeria becomes a country where sexuality is deployed as a tool to get ahead in life. Having witnessed firsthand the corruption of the military and politicians, of “people who got rich on their backs... she who slept with an important man to get her directorship...he who slept with the same important man and received a multimillion naira contract” (249), Sheri too uses her sexuality for survival by becoming “part of the sugar-daddy circuit in Lagos” in order to provide for her family when she (along with her step mothers and siblings) is evicted from the family home after her father dies. (These sexual transactions include clandestine same-sex activities by top business men whose homosexual desires are hidden behind closed doors for fear of social reprisals. They only engage in same-sex sexual relations as acts of bribery.)

In the same interview with Anya, Atta observes, “Every Nigerian knows a Sheri. Ostensibly, she possesses power because of her beauty, bottom power as we call it at home, but the reality is that she is an objectified woman, a piece of ass” (n.p). In exchange for a

furnished apartment and money to support her family, Sheri becomes the mistress of the chauvinistic Brigadier Hassan, a Muslim man who already has numerous girlfriends, two wives and whose oldest daughter was less than ten years younger than Sheri. Tellingly, Enitan describes Sheri's brigadier as "one of the military men who deprived me of my right to vote" (108), a member of the elite who benefited from the military control of assets, and set in place what is effectively a dictatorship. Despite its limits, Sheri consciously uses her relationship to a powerful man as a contingent, negotiating space for better living conditions for herself, manipulating patriarchal forces that oppress her by strategically performing the conventions of womanhood. She cleans the apartment thoroughly, spends much time "preparing for Brigadier Hassan: her hair, her nails, dabbing perfumes and cooking meals" (157), even wearing hijab to cover her hair in deference to his strict Islamic adherence. At the same time, she gains economically from the relationship as he takes her to Paris, and to Florence, flying first class for shopping. Even though she is conscious of the brigadier's controlling strategies in the way he monitors and regulates her movement, Sheri persuades herself to accommodate his wishes, as she is "getting what I want in return" (104). The relationship is thus not simply one of unilateral male domination; instead, in a calculatedly transactional exchange of different modes of desire, there are reciprocities through which the female partner elicits material satisfactions for the sexual and gendered performances she cultivates with such mastery.

Her relationship with the Brigadier, though materially driven, also serves an emotional function for Sheri. Though primarily transactional, it fills a gap even while it simultaneously *creates* a gap, in that it prompts Sheri's longer-term decision to become the mistress of a wealthy man instead of looking for a man to marry who would look beyond her inability to bear children, a result of her botched abortion. For the first time, she talks about it with Enitan: "What did I know? Taking a hanger to myself, with all the biology I studied. I still thought I had a black hole inside me. So, which single man from a normal family would have a person like me?" (102). The stigma that comes with Sheri's inability to have a child in a society that believes "better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren (102) demonstrates how society constructs women's value as "directly linked not only to the womb as agent of reproduction but ... also [to] the socio-political function/ benefits ascribed to the womb" (Nfah-Abbeneyi 105). Her barrenness intersects with society's view of her as damaged goods, and motivates her to have this affair. In their paper, "Deconstructing the 'sugar daddy': A critical review of the constructions of men in intergenerational sexual relationships in South Africa", Tamara Shefer and Anna Strebler argue that "while economic

necessity is recognised as a major motivator for involvement in sexual relationships in exchange for material benefits”, research also points to “other factors which contribute to these relationships, for example aspirations toward middle-class consumerism, status for both the young women and men, as well as emotional investments” (58).

Clearly, Sheri’s relationship with the brigadier – which Enitan criticises because of how he treats her friend - is motivated by multiple vectors, and morphs into varied forms, some of which enable and others of which constrain her female sexuality. However, since she is not married to the brigadier under either customary law or civil law, being his mistress grants her considerable freedom to break away from him when he becomes over controlling. Here, even though Sheri could be said to conform to conventions of gendered sexuality in her relationship with the brigadier, she draws the line at physical abuse. Indeed, she considers herself as a case of female exceptionalism, calmly warning: “where I differ from most women is, if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you” (104). She goes some way towards reclaiming her *own* sense of her self-worth when she refuses his violent desire to control her sexuality, limiting it to himself, intent on restricting her sexual rights as his supposed prized possession. “Nobody hits me. You hit me and I will hit you back. God no go vex...Telling me I’m a whore for going out. Your mother is the whore. Raise a hand to Sheri Bakare and your hand will never be the same again” (170). In beating the brigadier, Sheri uses a heavy cooking pot, the same kitchen vessel that symbolically has represented his efforts to coerce her into his domestic satisfactions, without even the status of marriage. We hardly need reminding that the kitchen has traditionally been constructed as a “defining space for women’s role in the home”, but it is still instructive to appreciate that Sheri “subverts this oppressive space by using it to defend and free herself”, thus “redefining the kitchen as symbol of resistance and liberation for women” (Pretorius 130). Indeed, it becomes clear as the plot develops that Atta is consciously using this locale in relation to Sheri’s changing notions of female identity as not limited to either sexual and/or domesticated spheres, for the kitchen becomes the space through which Sheri repositions herself as an economically independent woman through her catering business.

In the course of the novel, Atta illustrates how sexuality and gender are shaped by apparently non-sexual institutions. She shows that culture, religion, family and other gendered sites and structures of power serve to regulate the self’s understanding of the body, of agency to act, of obedience and subservience, and so on. The institutions in effect mediate sexual relations and consolidate control over identities. Several characters exemplify this, among them the ‘Mother-of-Prisons’ whom Enitan encounters in jail, and Enitan’s mother-in-

law. These are women whose gendered and sexual subjectivities as wives and mothers intersect with various forms of authoritarianisms and abuse. Atta illustrates how these forms of authoritarianism over (and injustices towards) women's bodies take their toll on women's psyche. The character known as 'Mother-of-Prisons' is a woman languishing in jail, teetering on the brink of insanity due to the loss of her children to her husband's family after his death, and her subsequent incarceration after killing her would-be rapist in self-defence. Prior to her husband's death, 'Mother-of-Prisons' in her role as a good, servile wife, had capitulated to societal pressures of female respectability by pretending that her no-good husband who couldn't keep a job was providing for them when in fact it was she who was feeding the family: "Like a fool I was telling everyone that it was my husband who was providing, you know, to boost him up. Then he started telling everybody that, yes, he was taking care of the family, he was providing" (278). Similar complicities appear in Enitan's mother-in-law, for she exemplifies a woman who subordinates her multiple self-identities in favour of the socially-validated, and validating, roles of wife and mother of sons. These approved social positions for women enable her to conform to forms of respectability which are sanctioned by patriarchal society, and hence to confirm her importance as a woman. Enitan says of her:

She was one of those women who swallowed her voice from the day she married. She was a nurse and yet her husband and sons, all lawyers, thought she couldn't grasp the rudiments of Offer and Acceptance, so she acted like she didn't. She... walked around with her underskirt hanging out. Whenever she tried to join their legal discussions, they teased her. [...] If they mentioned the word hungry, she ran into her kitchen and began to boss her boss around" (183).

Despite being educated, in the presence of the men in her family, she effaces her knowledgeable self, rendering herself insignificant by performing the role of an ignorant woman whose only expertise is that of the kitchen. In their positions as males, the husband and sons naturalise their superiority as inherent to their maleness, disrespectfully teasing and dismissing the woman of the house as insignificant. The irony, of course, is that these clever men fail to see the woman's calculated performance of servility and ignorance as a strategic act which enables her to negotiate a preferred position in the house. Through this performance she succeeds in retaining her husband's devotion and attention: "he loved his wife so much he wouldn't eat stews prepared by anyone but her" (183). Yet I am bothered by the cost to her; she has to sacrifice her own opinions, desires, and pleasures as well as accede to the subtle control that her husband exerts on her.

In conclusion, Atta demonstrates how the sexuality of her female characters - girls and women who live for the most part within the repressive contexts of various Nigerian dictatorships, and patriarchal families – is shaped by a persistently binary system in which female sexuality is categorically delineated in terms of the good and the bad, the obedient and the rebellious, the licit and the illicit. (Where a female character moves beyond Nigeria, for a time, living in a national-geographic space which tends to be socially considered more liberated, or progressive, even here she finds her female sexuality and desire defined by conventions which privilege or prioritise the male.) Atta's novel foregrounds a number of scenes or episodes in which relationships between male and female, men and women, boys and girls, are highlighted, and in so doing she shows the challenges, for her female characters, of living in relation to prescriptive regimes for gender and sexuality, the various assimilations and complicities, as well as difficult attempts to re-appropriate norms, to resist, to reconfigure their understandings and experiences of sexualities into more agentic shapes. In the section, I have engaged with a number of narrative instances in *Everything Good*, showing via the notion of respectable womanhood as mediated through sexual behaviour and the proper conduct of the female sexualised body, that certain modes of female behaviour premised on the margins as deviant or unrespectable are necessary correlatives of the socially-preferred propriety which operates in the Nigeria of the novel, and indeed more widely. The 'improper' performs difficult work in the narrative, helping to expose the ideological fictions of female gendered roles and associated sexualities. The improper not only has the potential to subvert limits placed on proper female sexualities, but to disrupt as unjust the very properties of the proper, and propriety. I noted in the section that expressions of female sexualities which are perceived as transgressive are met with patriarchal hostility, emphasising the tensions arising from the pleasures and dangers of female sexuality. I have also suggested that the notion of desire, much like its apparent binary, 'the respectable', is an extremely unbiddable, recalcitrant category, and that if *Everything Good* reminds readers of the continuing tendency towards differentially hierarchical and polarised male and female sexualities, especially in repressive political contexts where conflated powers are attributed to the nation envisaged as male nation, female sexuality may take confusing shapes, mixing resistance with compliance, and making it difficult for a reader simply to assert that a character is sexually subordinated or that she has overthrown prescriptive sexual expectations.

“Ambiguous Pleasure”²⁹: Representing Eroticism and Female Sexual Agency in Doreen Baingana’s *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*

They say that long time ago funerals sometimes turned into celebrations, and now I see why. I imagine orgies even; sex as a loud, unrestrained, mocking laugh at death. After the burial, in the dark, dark nights... men and women mourned together. They fought death by showing how alive they were, right then, in the face of it. *Let us live*, their bodies would say. *Let’s make more life! More of life. We die because we have lived...* Bodies writhed together, and it was good. What better way is there to bury your dead, if not to go lustfully after life? (“A Thank You Note” Baingana 96, emphasis in original)

In this section, I examine Doreen Baingana’s representation of sex and female sexual agency in *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*. I focus on how Baingana’s representation of female sexual agency exemplifies the problematics shrouding women’s explicit expression of sexual desire and pleasure and how such agency is ambiguously framed within contested normative expectations of gender. Baingana writes within a context where “the theorisation of the erotic is not without its pitfalls”, where patriarchal edicts permit the discourse of female sexual pleasure so long as “it gives credit to (men’s) virility...so long as the phallus both as the organ of pleasure and as transcendental signifier is affirmed” or only where women can affirm their pleasure in private and to others of their own gender (Nfah-Abbenyi *Gender in African Women’s Writing* 25). As my dissertation suggests, Baingana’s text is part of a corpus of work by postcolonial female African writers that explores the identities of women as sexual beings, venturing into difficult cultural-political territory.

Since its publication in 2005, Baingana’s novelised collection of narratives (on which form I will say more, subsequently) has begun to attract critical attention, prominent among this being Lynda Gichanda Spencer’s unpublished PhD dissertation. Spencer examines how Baingana “interrogates complex, contradictory, ambiguous and often conflicted questions of home and exile with their concomitant issues of belonging and alienation/estrangement and how they are intimately tied to the maternal bond” (174). Elizabeth Vogtsberger, for her part, argues that although *Tropical Fish* (like Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue*) “represent the adolescent girl’s journey toward self-articulated autonomy in different ways, they each foreground the role of supportive communities that help the girls find strength in their voices, speaking out, and telling their stories” (n.p). As a departure from these previous studies (albeit acknowledging their foundations), I seek to

²⁹ I borrow the title from Rachel Spronk’s book *Ambiguous Pleasures: Middle-Class Self-Perceptions in Nairobi*. I work with her research in my analysis.

analyse how Baingana's representation of women complicates the commonplace assumption of women as "objects of pleasure rather than as subjects who ought to have pleasure" (Nzegwu 254). As even this brief quotation implies, if questions of femaleness and sexuality can seem obvious, and complacently naturalised in globalised contemporary culture, women being positioned as "objects of pleasure", the more elusive truth of the matter, as fiction has the capacity to demonstrate, is an intricate interplay of powers: coaxing, coercion, compulsion; attempts to insist on the continued validity of objectification, and attempts to countermand in respect of female subjectivity – with even the latter being phrased in a discomfiting language of edict and injunction. Women "ought to have pleasure"... While sexuality is mediated by a multitude of factors, I argue that Baingana's representation of the erotic experiences of her characters is not restricted to the materiality and concomitant "symbolics of economic, religious, political relations" (Berliner 13) but extends further into the confusing realm of corporeal experience and emotions, attesting to women's need to imagine their sexualities in relation to multiple, often contradictory, forms of modern womanhood, both local and global.

Set primarily in Entebbe, Uganda, in the immediate aftermath of the rule of military dictator Idi Amin, *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*³⁰ chronicles the coming of age of three sisters from the middle class Mugisha family, a family which, due to the father's drinking problem, experiences a dramatic change in class circumstances. Patti, the oldest sister, recalls how he is fired from his job at a large bank, and publicly shamed on national television, a fall from grace which is, for the family, compounded by the deprivations and oppressions of the existing political-economic circumstances.

The three Mugisha sisters are Patti, the eldest and a "savedee" (104), a born again Christian; Rosa, "wild" and sexually precocious, and Christine, the youngest, an imaginative and adventurous child who (Patti worries) "is more like Rosa...or at least wanted to be" (40). With this intriguing cast of related, youthful female characters, the stage is set for Baingana's fictional explorations of varied yet intersecting facets of female coming of age in a particular locale that is also part of a rapidly changing, internationalising world. By the end of the text, indeed, readers have charted elements of femaleness and sexuality in Entebbe, in the African diaspora of Los Angeles, and then again in the more recent lineations of contemporary Uganda.

³⁰ Doreen Baingana, *Tropical Fish: Tales From Entebbe*, New York: Harlem Moon, 2006. All references are from this edition.

As Annie Gagiano notes in her review, “there are no village scenes or rural landscapes in this text; this is modern, urban Africa as witnessed by three girls and young women who see themselves primarily as members of a youth cohort similar in class; African but definitely not ‘traditionally’ so” (n.p). Baingana describes these stories, which are narrated from multiple, alternating points of view through different narrative modes (a letter, a diary entry, a conversation...), as being “linked like sisters, forming a family that is stronger than its individual parts” (Preface to Harlem Moon edition, xiii). Consciously contesting the stereotype of an homogenised ‘African woman’ as victim with no agency, Baingana’s interlinked short stories “provid[e] a variety of perspectives on growing up African, Ugandan, and relatively privileged” (Boswell 138). These stories depict the ordinary, “everyday rhythms of the girls’ lives” and portray the multiple factors that inflect African women’s subjectivity, thus providing what Barbara Boswell calls “a textured and complex picture of middle-class African womanhood” (138).

Baingana herself explains in the preface that she was not interested merely in depicting “the horror” experienced during the politic instability of Amin’s regime. She wanted to explore “what kind of lives, interior and otherwise, were created amid or despite the difficult circumstances beyond the survival” (xii), and she thus subtly draws our attention to how the political affects the personal, and how female lives, in particular, entail complicated intersections of embodiment, sexuality and ideology. Drawing nuanced, erratic rather than direct parallels between Idi Amin’s repressive regime and the relations of Maama and Taata in the Mugisha household, Baingana “deftly evokes the way in which despotism at first induces fear, then soon becomes normalised as individuals adapt in order to cope and survive” (Boswell 140). The stories thus “demonstrate the ways in which ordinary people go about living their lives, surviving political repression and economic decline” (140).

With regard to sexuality in contemporary African urban settings, in my analysis I draw on Rachel Spronk’s extensive research into the erotic practices of young African professionals in Kenya. She argues that “‘good sex’ relates not only to the pleasurable corporeal experience of engaging in sexual encounters, it also augments a gendered sense of self that expresses particular meanings of being young and ‘modern’” (Spronk “Sexuality and Subjectivity” 3). Spronk also observes how an “instrumentali[sed]” approach to sexuality “in most studies fails to take into account issues of desire, pleasure and intimacy and how these relate to self-perceptions” (Spronk “Ambiguous Pleasures”7). While I am sensitive to the specific cultural context of Spronk’s research – Kenya, after all, is not synonymous with Uganda; Africa is a continent, not a country – a premise of my dissertation is that it is

potentially valuable to test the extrapolation of ideas across African national contexts, much as Sylvia Tamale has done in her influential edited volume, as a way of extending debates around African sexualities. In my examination of how Baingana's female characters fathom their sexual agency in relation to the constraints of cultural, historical and religious forces, I also borrow from Audre Lorde's theories on the erotic as "a life force of women" (53), a form of empowerment that comes from the joy of acknowledging a range of psychic-bodily pleasures that offers extensive imaginative possibility in the development of self. As in several of the previous analyses in this dissertation, I also draw on Foucault's idea that power "prescribes an 'order' for sex that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility" (83), which means that certain cultural norms of sexual behaviour are constructed as the absolute "truth" in a hierarchy about how proper human sexuality ought to be while others are regarded as deviating from the norms. This critical constellation will enable me to examine how female characters - variously and at various, perhaps even contradictory moments in their lives - comply with, contest, and reconfigure dominant ideologies that aim to produce respectable female subjects. Here, it is important to concede that while I do not analyse the book in its entirety, I do offer remarks on intersectional African female sexualities which could be tested in relation to the narrative as a whole. In my analysis of Baingana's fiction, I follow a similar approach to that used in my discussion of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good*. I locate the fictional self within a continuous, shifting process of negotiation, complicity and resistance in relation to dominant sexuality discourses. Such discourses may be widely effective in the production of female subjectivities, but they are also subject to surprising forms of re-imagining. This reminds us that if female sexuality is constrained and subject to ideological-political repressions which work to iterate preferred codes of femaleness, female sexuality *also* remains in important respects ungovernable, refractory, tactically turning received norms to fragile forms of self-inventive use.

My first point of entry is the opening piece, "Green Stones", in which Doreen Baingana vividly presents the domestic as a space where mother and daughter encounter each other as gendered subjects in a domain characterised by lush, adult sexual overtones. The story is narrated from the childhood perspective of Christine by her older self who has since moved out of her parents' home and travelled the world. Lynda Gichanda Spencer argues that "by juxtaposing the narrating with the experiencing self, Baingana suggests the young self giving birth to the older self in complicated ways" (176). Through the narrative, we learn the gendered family dynamics of the Mugisha family, conveyed in the intersection of public personae and private intimacies in the parents' marriage. Maama is "a state bureaucrat; a

hard-working and rather dour personality and a strict (and prejudiced) Anglican Christian” (Gagiano n.p) and these attributes influence the way she perceives herself and relates to her daughters. Whatever her female modernity, her position as wife and mother is firmly rooted within traditional patriarchal constitutions of respectable womanhood: when her mother-in-law Omukikuru visited, Maama accepted that she had to “leave work early and cook special dishes for her: black beans prepared with ghee or steamed biringanya” (5). This is because the mother-in-law refuses to eat food cooked by the ‘house girl’, who is from an ethnic group lower in the social hierarchy. “Despite Maama’s efforts,” though, “Omukikuru’s mouth got tighter and tighter with disapproval” (5), her own cultural position in the family hierarchy entitling her to show criticism of her daughter-in-law. The small incident, in which several women and a girl are involved, allows Baingana to questioningly exemplify the fraught collusions of women in relation to the conventions of patriarchal social structures such as ethnicity, marriage, and family. It is not simply a matter of agreement, but of tense accommodation to norms which women themselves are expected to uphold. Omukikuru uses the privileged status granted to her by patriarchy by virtue of her age and being a mother of a son to exercise power over her daughter-in-law who in this particular context of a marriage is perceived as inferior, even though she is an educated professional. As my discussion will show, similar tensions obtain in respect of women’s sexuality.

In the family, Baingana parallels “Ugandan women’s (and at times men’s) complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship to Amin’s military state” (Decker 3). Similar to the everyday lives of Ugandans under and immediately after Amin’s rule, the fear of terror and punishment is pervasive in the Mugisha household to a point that it becomes normal. However, this nexus of tyrannies is depicted by Baingana in subtle, discerning ways, which often hint at the female subjects’ simultaneous complicity and emergent subordination in regard to pervasive power dynamics of controlled imposition, enraged failure, subdued quiescence, and tentative questioning. Taata, qualified as an accountant, is a controlling, alcoholic patriarch who “held himself in all day like an ever-present threat, and then at night unleashed himself and his whole tight day on Maama” (10). Theirs is a “love wrapped in insults and complaints, drunken nights, slobbery sorries, and silent mornings” (14). Taata holds a tight grip on Maama, restricting her movements and even her interaction with the children, which he considers indulgent. He views his daughters as a female collective to be instructed and rendered obedient: “Taata quickly sent us out of the room. He was like that. He greeted us, me and my older sisters, as a group” (10). When he occasionally buys the children gifts, he almost automatically answers to the expected affective investments of fatherhood,

and prefers to channel the gifting through Maama's mediation. He does not want the messy complications of emotions. His parenting is limited to financial providing, and when he can no longer fulfill even this instrumental function, his sense of proper masculine purpose is destroyed. Rearing children in Taata's eyes is a female domain. While Taata frequents bars every night, Christine reveals that "Maama didn't go out", and certainly "not to parties" (10). Additionally, when he is still employed, Taata travels, which for the female household is a welcome respite from his authoritarian control: "We didn't mind his travelling; we were freer then, and Maama was ours.... [T]he day he was to come back, the air itself felt different" (10).

From the family's model of heterosexual relationship, Christine also learns about "appropriate" sexual behaviour and public intimate acts between partners. Her parents "didn't kiss in front of us, or touch each other, or say dear unless Taata was drunk. That was embarrassing TV behaviour" (11). From Christine's statement, we note the tensions between local and supposedly globalised versions of sexual mores which further complicate the identities of citizens as modern, postcolonial subjects. Within the family, sexuality is construed as a "private" affair and the public display of affection is framed within narratives of shame. It is dismissed as deviant and foreign behaviour which should not be emulated by proper women.

Maama's performance of womanhood is the embodiment of female respectability extolled under patriarchy. Her sexuality is restrained, "locked in the room of marriage" (13) and largely controlled by Taata for even her bodily expressions in the way she dresses are dependent on what Taata wants. However, Taata's control of Maama is not bluntly coercive but rather exercised subtly as it is effected through Maama's complicit participation in normalised rituals of femaleness as *femininity*. Maama indulges him, performing womanhood according to Taata's patriarchal preferences: "Every time Taata went on a trip, he brought Maama beads and pearls as gifts" and on the day of his arrival "Maama wore a special dress, usually flimsy, pale pink or blue, and bolder lipstick" (10). The mother, here, is disjunctively summoned from the maternal into wifehood, which itself is for this incident presented as erotic, rather than simply domestic. Even the very young girl child notices her mother's sexualised concessions to the father and prevailing expectations of women's femaleness not only as femininity but as sexuality. Christine surreptitiously views her mother rendering her sexuality more pronounced and rewarding to the man's gaze. Seductive lipstick. Sheer garments. Christine sees her mother shift into a different female mode of behaviour than the motherly, one which, the child intuits, without being able to articulate, situates the woman as

obliged to acknowledge marriage as a sexual domain governed by male desire (or power imperative), and to perform the requisite repertoire of hospitable sexual welcome.

Maama's multi-layered performance of womanhood is powerfully enticing to the girl-child, probably because it combines contradiction – at once submissive and erotic, maternal and sexual. Maama's perplexing female power coaxes the young Christine into desiring to emulate a similarly enigmatic gender model. At the same time, Christine is conflicted between “her desire to be like her mother, and her recognition of the feminine mystique that constrains her mother” (Spencer 177). The intimate physical relationship between her parents especially intrigues her, and draws her into making voyeuristic escapades to their bedroom when they are at work. For the young Christine, the bedroom, with its aura of “sacredness”, “as if it was a quiet, empty cathedral or mysterious fortune-teller's den” (1), transforms into a metonym of her parents' union, which she imagines through “an impenetrable, alluring force” (Boswell 139). Drawing parallels with the headboard scene and a young boy's sexual awareness in Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, I conjecture that Christine's girlish imagination summons sexuality as at once a forbidden domain for children, and yet at the same – *because* it is taboo - alluring to her own fascination with her nascent sexuality. Even though she has witnessed the cracks in her parents' marriage, she nevertheless views marriage as a necessary mode of relation for men and women, and within this, she senses that gendered power roles entail more than the direct assertion of a man's social and physical authority upon a woman. The situation is a more baffling combination of violence and capitulation, often played out in sexualised ways.

In her parents' bedroom, thrilling to the sensuous aura of the bed, the darkness, the collection of exquisite jewellery that her father has gifted to her mother, the inquisitive yet naïve Christine associates the wearing of jewellery with the epitome of adult female sexuality. Fingering through her mother's jewellery, exploring the pieces through touch, taste and smell, she wonders, “Was this what it was like to be kissed?”(8). The overloaded sensuality becomes erotic, pointing to the ways in which even apparently ordinary objects and situations can elicit sexual pleasure. In other words, “sexual pleasure comes in varied forms and is experienced very differently between individuals” (Chigudu 51), which Christine will later experience as a grown up, in her sexual relationships.

Playfully posing in front of the bedroom mirror and imagining herself as different famous characters while draped in her mother's beads, Christine toys in embodied, even self-pleasuring, detail with fantasies of the “kind of femininity” she will inherit from her mother:

When I grew up, I would use lots of cool white cream like she did: Ponds, Venus de Milo, cocoa butter, perfumes called Lady, Chanel, Essence. I'd paint my fingernails and toenails with designs in glaring red, and fling my hands around dramatically like a conjurer. Wear lots of lacy panties, petticoats, bras, and stockings, all in frilly white and pink, with flowers and sequins, and become Maama. Women were nice and pleasant and sweet, like a bowl of fruit or fresh flowers (7-9).

This kind of femininity which Maama performs and which Taata demands becomes ingrained in Christine's young mind as the ultimately appealing form of feminine embodiment: "I wouldn't go to work like Maama did; instead I'd spend the whole day preparing my body, and wait patiently and beautifully for my husband, the president" (10). The author's sardonic tone is unmissable, underscoring the naiveté of Christine's childish misapprehension. (There is a tension between Christine's fantasy of wanting to be like her mother and her mother's reality. Maama works and yet the young Christine's fantasy includes no work. Perhaps Christine attributes the apparent cracks in her parents' marriage to her mother's decision to work which as a result impinges on the hours she could have used to be femininely perfect for her husband.)

Through example, Baingana implies, Maama has taught her youngest daughter the destructive model of diligent, appropriately sexualised femininity upon which society depends. And yet Baingana also concedes that the child finds this femaleness sensual, attractive, and that the decorative version of femaleness is powerful. In some respects, we might conclude that this is because the child has been so completely ideologically conscripted that she can envisage no alternatives. In other respects, though, the narrative seems to hint that the body is its own perverse desiring machine, finding pleasure in touches and ideas that 'ought' to be limiting. I notice, in this passage, that Christine already accepts that her female ideal will be incomplete if not performed within a relational context, with a man, preferably an influential man, politically significant, but honorable: "I'd be a president's wife, a good president, not an army man, of course"(10). The child's imagination momentarily acknowledges the fact of larger systemic failures of good governance which her extended fantasy requires her to subdue. The political irrupts into what one would imagine is the highly personal space of sexual daydreaming, implying the undeniable pervasiveness of the political, *but also* the confounding conflation of pleasure and repression which may lead a person to elusive desires.

The ritualistic little ceremonies which accompany Taata's conferring upon Maama of the gifts he has bought while travelling, illustrate her femaleness as a complex of divergent impulses and emphases. She is servile and auratic. Maama's over determined status as

woman is “reiterated each time her husband performs the intricate ritual he uses to present his wife with various types of jewelry” (Boswell 138). “For you,” Taata says as he presents Maama with the green necklace he had bought in Egypt. The theatrical gesture of draping her with the necklaces marks his own imagined status and dignity, a proxy conferral which symbolises her borrowed dignity, which is really a subordinate position of prized possession. Like an obedient wife “She bowed her head and he gently passed the heavy green stones over her hair and neck, then arranged them carefully on her bosom” (11).

Rituals are not innocent actions. As John F. Sherry *et al* note in a study on gift giving, “we found participants articulating resentment emanating from forced involvement. Gift giving frequently becomes a contest, even an ordeal. Both giver and receiver may be caught in the snares of...unattainable expectations....Dissatisfaction with the exchange increases as personal control is relinquished (237). Given the husband’s history with his wife, behind Taata’s “arranging” of the jewellery around Maama’s neck, we may read carefully orchestrated patterns of patriarchal control over the female body and sexual agency. The gift exchange features as a control and negotiation mechanism disguised as benevolence. As Irving Goffman might observe, the hostilities between the parents are mediated and redirected through the gifting. The wife, already damaged by the husband’s habitual distance, alcoholism and frustrated rage, is coaxed through the exquisite jewels into once again (re)materialising as the perfect emblem of the husband’s ideal femaleness. That this fantasy is passive, receptive, obliging, quietly abjecting self in the service of the husband’s reparative needs, says volumes about the preferred forms of male and female sexuality at play in the narrative relations.

Perhaps, though, there is more to it. For we are still left to fathom the disquieting remainder of this episode: the fact that the child Christine surmises that her mother, in accepting the gifts, is “crowned”, and her father “was her humble subject. She accepted his adoration with a smile in the silence” (11). The metaphors are archaic and monarchic, and could be dismissed as inappropriate, merely calling up worn-out figures of male-female power relations. But the metaphors also retain other energies, less easy to explicate, in which the modes of passion and possession that shape a man and a woman’s sexual relationship blur. Is the child’s reading of the situation simply incorrect, the little girl too unworldly to understand, framing the encounter between husband and wife in the exaggerated language of her colonial story books, a soft-focus lens apparently more appealing than the blunt violence of outright political tyranny in national rule? Or is this another instance in which Baingana, while pushing for the obvious ideological reading, also awkwardly and reluctantly

acknowledges, in the in-between figure of the child and her unformed consciousness, that the repertoires of human sexual and intimacy can prove difficult to understand? Barbara Boswell suggests that the customary jewellery ceremonies, establish “a template for the type of womanhood Christine, Patti and Rosa should aspire to, and a guide to intimate relations between the sexes” (Boswell 138). However, I demur at the idea of a ‘template’ which implies a fixed idea of sexuality, formulaic and easily susceptible to explanation. Instead, I turn to the child, Christine, as she “savours” the scene between her parents “like an exquisite piece of chocolate slowly melting in my mouth” (11). The language is rich, voluptuous, freighted with the mysteries of desire and the uncertain duration of pleasure. Whatever the power dynamics, the scene also implies that a man and a woman may agree, for an inexplicable constellation of sensuous affective illogics – at odds with the dulling duration of the more everyday gendered power blocs - to indulge in preferred roles, each deriving uncanny satisfactions and pleasures that play out beyond overt power binaries of male repression and female subservience. Indeed, as we note through the development of the girls as depicted in *Tropical Fish*, their sexualities materialise very differently, and none of them simply reprises the gender performance of their mother, even while Christine and Rosa, for their parts, find themselves having to negotiate the complexities of male-female desire, just as their mother did, their sexual relationships both shaped by and reaching beyond the contexts of overt power. The point seems to be that sexuality inevitably entails negotiation and reconfiguring, and that this is never a simple matter to determine.

Rusi the ‘house girl’

Rusi, the so-called house girl, also offers insight into how female sexuality is mediated and performed in the narrative. Rusi’s position in the house is in some respects analogous to that of Maama since her femaleness is another version of the labour of womanhood, and she crosses the boundaries of various kinds of “domestic labour” that she is supposed to perform. Rusi’s sexuality, though, is not susceptible to analysis via the uncertain vectors of female-male desire that I have grappled with above. Rusi is explicitly a servant in the house. She is subject to the husband, and the wife. Her own desires are deliberately absent in the narrative, for her sexuality is clearly subordinate, not agentive. As a servant she occupies a zone of uneasy intimacy, privy to the details of Maama and Taata’s private, sexual lives because she must clean the ‘secret’ area of their marriage, their bedroom. In an aptly knotted tautology, pointing to the difficulty of untangling meaning, Christine finds Rusi’s mundane habitual role in disturbing the mysterious space of the parental bedroom disturbing:

Rusi pushed the huge mound of her breasts like pillows ahead of her as she energetically marched in. She pulled back the thick curtains and flung open the windows to the startling sunshine outside [...] Sprinklings of dust floated in the sunlight as Rusi shook out the sheets and dusted the coffee-colored bedside tables and mirror. Her talk and laughter filled the air, offending me. Had she no sense of the room's sacredness? (3)

As becomes clear, however, this room is not in any sense sacred for Rusi – unless the sacred is associated solely with obedient duty, stripped of mystery. Beyond even the dutifulness of house chores, Rusi unsettles the young Christine because her domestic roles overlap with those of her mother, who by implication is servile. Indeed, the ease with which Rusi slips into ‘wifeliness’, the supposedly privileged role reserved by marriage for Maama, throws Christine into a state of confusion. Christine happens on what seems to be Rusi’s more intimate performance of “wifeliness” with Taata, a glimpse that conveys not solely Rusi’s transgressive blurring of boundaries, but also makes undeniably visible the categorical blurring of female domestic and sexual labours upon which society is founded, and which marriage consecrates as normal. One day, coming back unexpectedly early from school, Christine finds Rusi and Taata in “The Bedroom” (16). The capitals emphasise the special status accorded to this room by the child, and also convey the disturbingly inappropriate displacement of her mother, when she witnesses her father and Rusi in the bedroom, busy with she’s not sure what:

There was Taata with no shirt on...I could see he was drunk because his face was an oily brown and he had on a slack silly smile. He was sitting on the bed with no shirt on, no trousers. Rusi was sitting on the floor below him, smiling. [...] I was stuck at the door, looking at his naked chest, hairless, the light brown colour of weak tea. Rusi close by, his knee touching one of her heavy breasts. (16-17)

Taata. Nakedly disheveled. Rusi. Smiling. On the floor. Christine cannot quite process this situation as an inappropriate sexual encounter between ‘master’ and ‘maid’, but the author’s attribution is clear. The young girl’s response, trying to make sense of what she sees (*what does she see?*), is premised on logic: Rusi has been coaxed by Taata into the bedroom and “she had to smile, to pretend to listen to him, to act servile” (16). She is a woman, and extremely lowly, so could not challenge Taata in any way. Rusi’s response to Taata is mediated by complicated intersections of gender, class and sexuality. Her smile could indeed be coerced, a resigned expression of the highly differentiated power relations between her and Taata: if he wants her, sexually, she cannot resist. He is her employer. Not only is he male, he is drunk, and potentially violent. She knows enough to know that she had better

appease him. (This resembles Maama's placating of Taata, at times). As Christine's logic has it, Rusi "couldn't stand over him; her place was there on the floor" (17). However, Rusi's sexual encounter with Taata could witness her own extreme poverty and deprivation. She may have agreed to his crude fumbblings (or to sex) because this transaction holds the promise of relative material gain and financial benefit. He is a middle class man, albeit an unemployed drunkard, and he might have made her expedient promises. The narrative leaves things unclear. Nor can one completely rule out mutual feelings for Rusi's compromising situation with Taata: after all, she was the one "who spoon-fed him when he was weak and delirious after severe drinking bouts" (17) instead of Maama. Baingana sets Rusi's performance of the labour of womanhood in an uneasy tension with Maama's performance of wifehood, rendering very indistinct the boundaries of power and differences between the two women in this household.

Fantasies and Realities: Reimagining Gender and Sexuality

In "First Kiss" we continue to read of the awakening of Christine's sexuality and her transition towards realising herself as a sexual being, a young woman who desires and is desired. The story recounts Christine's first kiss, at a party with an older boy, and how the same boy casually stands her up after promising to meet her for a secret date the following day. We observe how a certain pattern of expectation of relations with boys and men based on her family history is deeply embedded in Christine's psyche (Gagiano n.p). Even though "having older sisters made Christine feel and talk older" (35) and taught her "a lot that her school friends didn't know" (35), and even though her childhood occurred in the complex sexualised family dynamics of the Mugisha household, at fourteen, her ideas of heterosexual relationships are also informed by the images she encounters in the romance novels she reads.

When she is thinking through her first romantic encounter with Nicholas Bajombora, an older boy from a wealthy, influential family whom she meets at a neighbourhood party, she imagines herself as the heroine of the romance novels that she spends her school holidays reading. Forms of fantasy thus continue to play a role in the way she imagines male-female relations as well as provide a space for her to explore her increasing interest in sexuality which she is socially prohibited from doing on account of her gender and age:

Fantasy was so much better than real life. Christine became the plucky heroine waving her fan, singing...as she strolled through spring gardens or the drafty halls of Rossborough Castle. She inevitably fell in love with the hero, the tall, dark (African?) Lord Wimbledon, long before he won the heart of the rebellious witty heroine, Lady Thomasina. She imagined his shapely thighs in tight white knickerbockers, his

ponytail long like a pirate's...No one could resist him, not even Lady Thomasina, who had a mind of her own, but no fortune alas. (37)

The images that Christine absorbs reproduce certain stereotypical expectations about masculinities and femininities as well as unequal power relations which extend to the performance of sexuality. The male hero is assertive, rich and irresistible and he exemplifies the mechanisms of power that come with good looks, money and good breeding. At the same time, his irresistible sexuality, the fact that in romance novels “you already knew that the Lord would get the Lady” (44) implies the supposedly inevitable desires and lustful, aggressive sexual natures of men (Vance 4) while simultaneously complicating the agency exercised by the heroine. While the heroine is presented as witty and rebellious, she is helpless to resist the hero’s powerful desires. Her only possible shield of independence against his claim upon her might be her own fortune, which “alas”, she has not! Baingana has a good deal of fun with the sexually exaggerated yet markedly decorous registers of historical romance fiction. The images and plot roles circulated in the Georgette Heyer novels that Christine reads are archaic gendered scripts that influence how she imagines herself, as a modern young woman, responding to men. And yet these narratives are also self-aware fictions; Christine does not simply succumb to the hyper-ventilated descriptions, they make her feel ambiguous about the male-female roles in the story – and, indeed, make her feel the ambivalence *of her own* variously titillated and skeptical reactions to textual representations of sexual pleasure and desire.

As she gets dressed for the party, the historical romance swirling in her imagination, she imagines herself becoming “Lady Thomasina preparing for a ball” (39). She is “hot-combed” by her indulgent elder sister Patti, who also lends her a pair of red high-heeled sandals, in which she teeters off to the get-together (Gagiano n.p). At the party, when she shies away from showing Nicholas the twinkling stars in the night, she rebukes herself in an attempt to regain confidence by adding that “she bet Lady Thomasina would have” (43). I am intrigued by the way in which the story accommodates misgivings around the projected figure of ‘the hero’ (the “Leaning Tower of Nicholas” [42]), while simultaneously plying – or perhaps playing off against - the stock logic of the generic romance novel, as Christine allows herself to be “swept off her feet” by an incarnation or local approximation of Lord Wimbledon who also comes from a rich family and was such a “prize” too.

Earlier, in the time of Christine’s reflecting on her reading of romances, the author indicates in a deliberate interpolation – “She inevitably fell in love with the hero, the tall,

dark (African?) Lord Wimbledon, long before he won the heart of the rebellious witty heroine, Lady Thomasina.” (32) - that Christine experiences doubt regarding the inherited colonial narrative tropes of western romance. The predictable adjectival triumvirate, for instance - ‘tall, dark and handsome hero’ – is not only offered in Baingana’s text as a trite cliché, it is in the Ugandan context of Christine’s experience *explicitly* destabilised as any easy node of identification: what does ‘dark’ mean, for Christine, a black girl in a continental context long mischaracterised by British authors such as Heyer as ‘the dark continent’? Baingana inserts the parenthetical “[African?]”, as if inviting a reader into the very confusion of Christine’s thoughts, her struggle to translate an apparently simple, but in fact ideologically overloaded word.

The darkly handsome *African* hero is deliberately positioned by Baingana as both/and. In terms of contextualised codes, his physical attractiveness coincides with his wealthy class status as an appealing, youthful Ugandan male sexuality, manifesting to the young Christine and her female peers as a beautiful “deep, dark, smooth black” (36), placing Christine’s descriptive perceptions as bound within the conventions of western romance. This raced identity, though, is also set in relation to the inherited, supposedly universalised narrative norms of the ‘dark’ hero, creating an unsettling textual space by presenting a ‘dark’ hero who belongs to the Banyankore ethnic group. Baingana’s narrative strategy thus works with and against the norms while simultaneously subverting the idea of a romance hero as always western. As Jane Bryce and Kari Darko point out, earlier African women writers such as Aidoo began an African, feminist subversion of the persistent strain of Eurocentric narrative models for women in African writing. Baingana extends this postcolonial feminist impulse, via subtle moments of transculturation in which western romance conventions are encountered in the context of young Ugandan female experience. As Bill Ashcroft avers (acknowledging central exponents of transculturation such as Fernando Ortiz and Mary Louise Pratt), the “fundamental reality of postcolonial creativity is that texts are produced and ‘consumed’ in a variety of cultural contexts, which forces us to consider that moment of contact between producer and consumer when the horizons of different worlds inform each other” (410). “‘Transculturation’ posits the contact zone as a constructive rather than [necessarily] contestatory space, one of intersubjective contact and mutual change” (411).

The parenthetical “[African?]” creates a moment of postcolonial rupture, a forceful but also necessarily unanswered questioning: [?]. The punctuation marks assert that the word ‘African’ does not fulfill the neat function of synonym for ‘dark’. Instead, despite racist colonial connotations, Baingana insists on a persistent, discrepant distance between various

uses of the word. She gouges a small hole, a culturally and racially specific emotional-conceptual puncture, in the formulaic mode of supposedly ideal romantic masculinity. As it happens, this is a gap which Nicholas Bamjombora will subsequently occupy. It's not that the dashing young black man, in failing to turn up for his promised date with Christine, is by definition a failed romantic hero. The narrative suggests, rather, the failure of the trope. The very model of unrealistic masculinity which such tropes propose is unapt, and unlikely. Another aspect to this is that the historical romance tends to rely on sexual euphemism – piercing eyes, heaving bosoms – but Christine's first semi-sexual experience, being kissed by Nicholas, is much less romantic and more fumbling. After the kissing, a reader is likely to recall the earlier observation that the romance novel “was a fun read, but left Christine with a vague feeling of disgust, the same sick satisfaction she felt after eating too many sweet oily *kabs*” (37).

Christine's uncertain exploration of her youthful female sexuality occurs in a context where she is the lastborn sister, and where, since primary school, it has “been a scandal even to *talk* to boys (36, emphasis in the original). In beginning to relate to teenage boys she must carefully stake claim to her wishes among her sisters, and to Maama, lest she be dismissed as ‘the baby’ or either assumed to be ‘fast’. Again, with the boys, she walks a confusing line between inexperience and this new grownup relationship business. In negotiating this terrain of constrained freedoms, she urgently wants “adult things [to] happen” (35) to her, very studiously performing her ‘womanhood’ by “danc[ing] at parties, talk[ing] to boys nonchalantly” (35). This want is also coupled with relinquishment, however, for she ‘lets’ things happen, passively. She allows the drunken Nicholas liberties because she assumes that this is what is expected of her, since this is what men and women do. Firstly, he takes her out into the dark garden then gives her a whisky-laced drink which “burned her throat and brought tears to her eyes” (42); to save face “she forced it down with a cough” (42). Further assuming that she will welcome (or at least submit to) his own desires, he puts his arm around her shoulder and begins to kiss her:

He put out his cigarette on the branch, then his face closed in and his lips were on hers. “My lipstick!” she thought, as he chewed away at her lips, then snaked his tongue into her mouth and ate some more.[...] Soon, she couldn't breathe, didn't know how to, but just in time, he broke away. “Nice,” he said, as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. (43)

This is an intriguing passage. The closest analogue to kissing that Christine can summon is ‘eating’ or ‘chewing’. This implies her childish sexual greenness, but also gives a valid, very

visceral sense of how she experiences Nicholas's response to her body. The 'hunger' to eat 'some more' is his alone; Christine is taken aback by the intrusive physicality of sexuality, thinking how the kissing will ruin her perfect lipstick. As the kissing intensifies, she feels smothered. Perhaps she is holding her breath, uncertain how to respond. Perhaps Nicholas is too aggressively performing his own, overly vigorous notion of properly robust kissing. Either way, she is nonplussed at what is happening *to* her. Christine is left in the passive position of the one who is consumed.

But even this word is double-edged, since however stifling the kissing, she is also breathlessly caught up. The experience of kissing is ambiguous, conflicted. Christine cannot decide whether to regard it as "yucky or nice" (43). Her idealistic expectations of popular literary romance are disappointed, leaving her feeling empty, but also yearning for more than this experience: "So *that* was kissing. That was it?" To process her thoughts, she wonders whether even sexually au fait characters in fiction would be similarly conflicted: "Would Lady Thomasina be this confused?", and to this she appends, "Would Rosa?" (43). Her sister Rosa is someone Christine considers worldly. Rosa messes around with boys; Rosa knows about fashion; Rosa is sassily confident. But readers perhaps notice more than the child. The narrator remarks, for example, that while Rosa has a boyfriend, she "preferred being with him in public, showing off their love, rather than when they were alone, which time she spent fighting off his roaming hands" (40). Again we sense discrepant desiring and spatial relationship economies at work: the boyfriend, in his young male (hetero)sexuality seems to be focused on securing the privacy which might facilitate his access to his girlfriend's body, either by persistence or force, with the goal of actual sex. In private, she is more likely to submit, but also less likely to be able to refuse. The girlfriend, in comparison, is depicted as more interested in demonstrating their shared love, as a couple 'in love', to friends and others in public places.

Partly because Christine is unsure about whether she liked the kiss or not, she agrees to meet Nicholas the next day. She is also partly infatuated with the idea of being desired: "*he* wanted to see her again. To kiss her some more!" (43 emphasis in the original). If in some respects she has internalised the workings of a patriarchy which seeks to convince her that a woman's sexuality is premised on satisfying male desires, she also rebels against maternal restrictions placed on her mobility, determined to exercise her own agency by going on the date. She is dressed in her tight denim skirt and the same borrowed, high-heeled sandals she had worn at the party. Christine waits in the enervating Sunday afternoon heat. It is only after almost an hour, when she is killing time by walking around the decrepit school buildings,

empty for the holidays, where she had completed her primary years, that she acknowledges: “the assignation devised by the then drunk, and now undoubtedly hung-over, youth is never going to transpire” (Gagiano n.p). It is interesting to note how she links her abandonment by Nicholas with the insidious decay of the buildings and people’s suffering during Idi Amin’s repressive regime.

Things must have started falling apart years ago. She hadn’t noticed it then, probably because she was here every day. The change was gradual and the result normal, like many other things about Amin’s time, including the everyday fear in the air. She remembered how everyone had laughed in astonishment, then got used to it, when Amin by decree banned minis and wigs ... (48).

Although “Amin’s presence and legacy in the family’s life is muted, but still palpable” (Boswell 141), Christine’s linkage of Amin’s repressive regime which blurred the boundaries between private and public spaces in the manner in which it imposed restrictions on bodies and sexualities, reminds us of how Christine’s own performance of gender and understandings of sexuality, though seemingly personal, cannot entirely be disentangled from the wider political forces at play.

Ambiguous Adventures: Money, Power and Sex

Christine’s sexual agency is made even more complex in “Tropical Fish”, a piece which depicts her life as a student at Makerere University where she begins an affair with a white British expatriate. Struggling to “liberate herself from colonial values and desires” (Ahlberg 415), Christine’s relationship with Peter affords her a more affluent lifestyle in the luxury heights of Tank Hill outside Kampala. As she explains: “Up there, diplomats’ huge mansions hide behind cement walls, lined across the top with shards of cutting glass. Rent is paid in dollars only. Swimming pools. Security guards, and he wanted me” (101).

In the story, we see Christine attempting to map out a sexual identity distinct from what she has come to understand are the narrows of her mother’s life, illustrating Baingana’s authorial interest in charting “the divide between the rebellion of youth and the conformity of the older generation of women” (Alberg 411). Spencer posits that Christine’s move to this major Ugandan city, distant from “the restrictions of home and the maternal gaze, can be seen as a rite of passage, leaving behind her innocent childhood and entering into adulthood” (178). I am not so certain of this neat crossing, since many of the narratives have shown even childhood as a sexualised, rather than ‘innocent’, domain, and even in the city it is clear that Christine’s upbringing shapes her sexuality. Her reading of romance fiction, similarly,

suggests that modern identities are messily formed across mobile relations of home and away, childish and adult.

Kampala allows her to explore her sexuality and negotiate her identity as a woman in ways that digress from the maxims about female sexuality that she has been taught, although these cannot simply be cast off. When she meets Peter for the first time, because “of my lifelong training to catch a suitable mate...I found myself immediately turning on the sweet, simpering self I reserve for men. I recede into myself, behind an automatic plastic-doll smile” (98). Christine performs a script of womanhood that defines female sexuality as a complex performative of socially accepted behaviours in which the woman *enacts* her own effacement of individuality in order to show herself conforming to norms. She recognises that these cloying behaviours require her to divide herself into different selves. Her ‘I’ recedes into the ‘myself’ that houses a residue of authenticity, and instead the masquerade of socialised femaleness is presented, the saccharine persona she feints for men, appearing unthreatening, non-dominant. That this is a vestigially childish pose, and long-shaped by commodified codes, is implied in the reference to the unrelenting fixity of the doll-like smile, always a copy of a copy, always a substitute for the real which is endlessly deferred. Christine’s deadened mask of demure demeanor is a performance that dissimulates respectable womanhood, the very dissembling implying that such properness is itself a ruse. Her awareness of the simpering role she affects renders her almost immotile: she cannot play the role, yet also she cannot not play it.

Grappling with the expectations that modern Ugandan society has for her as a woman to get married and have children with “someone from the right family, the right tribe, right pocketbook and potbelly, and have him pay the bills” (108) – the projected horizon is given sardonically in the narrative as a predictable litany, narrowing the mockery down to the large belly which signifies the supposed importance of the putative husband. Christine decides to use selective sexual relations as a means through which to explore her identity. She is in a contradictory position. On the one hand, she is a young woman seeking the unlikely prospect of finding a good government job in an economy which has been almost destroyed by the violent racialised despotism of General Idi Amin, and by the sweeping international trade sanctions which sought to discipline his tyranny. On the other, however, this same society commodifies the value of her female sexuality through culturally entangled status norms which draw expediently on the patterns of both traditional Africa and of European modernity. Christine has a university education, for example; with her degree she would be “worth exotic cows, Friesians or Jerseys, not the common long-horned Ankole cattle” (108).

“Tropical Fish” seems to suggest, in the narrative arc of Christine’s experience, that volatile socio-cultural pressures - sudden political shifts and whims; the persuasive coercion of internationalising trends, and also the uneven continuation of regional, ethnic and other group traditions – converge into a ‘perfect storm’ upon the female body, which loses individuation and becomes a commodity in the order of the brightly coloured fish that Peter’s business exports from Uganda to England.

For Christine, as she sees it, her sexualised body becomes *the* site for experimenting with female freedoms that combined forms of proprietorial culture deny her. Her free-spirited student self prefers not to imagine the long view. Marriage? “I didn’t have to think about that for two more years. For now, I had my game: being someone else, or no one, for a few hours” (108). Christine’s casual attitude towards sex implies the restrictive eventual horizon of domesticated heterosexual norms. Her attitude shifts between using sex as an escape mechanism, “a holiday” before the real life ahead of her, and as a medium through which to experience pleasure. As Spronk indicates, “sex is a medium for a variety of feelings, emotions and needs. People have sex for fun, to fulfill a desire for intimacy, for a physical thrill, to procreate, to exert power, to humiliate and so much more” (7). With Peter, Christine chooses to enjoy the material benefits of the relationships and also the pleasurable physical intimacies that come with the “silent sex pact” (109), the tenderness of touch. Baingana risks attempting a sensuous language which suggestively evokes the couple’s exploratory eroticism and the young woman’s musings about the uncertain, novel relations which might exist between the socially predictable female emotional narrative of ‘love’ and the more unfamiliar physical pleasures-cum-loss of self entailed by sex:

Peter undressed and joined me, his penis curled up shyly in his red pubic hair. He spread my thighs gently and played with my lips. I closed my eyes, shutting out everything but his careful, practiced touch. Sank, sank, into the pleasure of it...Peter crept up over me and entered slowly, and I thought, maybe I do care for him, maybe this is all that love is. A tender, comfortable easing into me. (108)

Sex “activates a host of intra-psychic” affects, for it brings about the “blurring of body boundaries and the sense of self that occurs in the tangle of parts and sensations” (Vance 5). The above passage conveys this sensuous quality of ambivalent loss and finding of self. In the act of sex, as Christine’s responses show, a person may experience “irrational connections...and a range of rich sensations” (Vance 5), an intimacy which obscures boundaries between logic and emotion, and prompts a person into confusion about projection and reality. Christine feels herself sinking into pleasure to such an extent that this

overwhelming sensation seems to be the essence of love. However, she also vacillates, suspending decisions, a strange, indecisive form of present being in which exquisite pleasure, romantic love, and companionable care all co-exist, confusing her.

She likes the sex. She exercises sexual agency by choosing to have sex with Peter and acknowledging that nobody forced her. She says, “He wanted me for sex, and I knew it, and agreed” (104). The frank acknowledging of the undeniably sexual nature of her relationship with Peter entitles her, as a female, to claim previously unimagined bodily liberties: “I was free to walk around the house naked, a gin and tonic melting in my hand. This made me feel floaty, a clean open hanky wandering in the wind. I didn’t have to squash myself into clothes, pull in my stomach, tie my breasts up in a bra, worry about anything, be anything” (104). She feels unconstrained in respect of moral and bodily decorum which has in the past seen her submit to restrictions upon behaviours that are considered inappropriate – such as indulgent drinking, nudity, and allowing her body to move naturally. The passage shows an uninhibited Christine enjoying her femaleness in ways beyond the hidebound, ways which a shocked society might condemn as ‘loose’. By discarding the pressures to be something she is not, she challenges patriarchal impositions of prescriptive subjectivities for women. Christine’s desire to experience her femaleness at large and at liberty, beyond restrictive norms, may be understood in terms of African women’s deliberate choice to challenge oppositions of the respectable and the improper by “lay[ing] bridges across such dualistic dichotomies...given that the very nature of their own lives does not obtain at the level of these dichotomies as they simultaneously experience self and other within multiple contradictory locations and by so doing construct for themselves multiple identities/ subjectivities” (Nfah-Abbenyi “Calixthe Beyala’s ‘femme-fillette’” 101).

Christine willingly participates in the sex, and she also has a refreshingly realistic take on sex, wondering to herself “why men fell asleep so easily, so deeply, after huffing and puffing over you?” (97), and describing Peter as “plop[ping] down heavily on top of me after he came” (97). In such accounts, Baingana suggests that Christine has moved quite far beyond any credulous hankering after the bodice-ripping stock-in-trade tropes of historical romance fiction. Baingana herself, in venturing to depict female sexuality and sexual experiences in such language, even in writing of repressive social contexts, clears new ground. She begins to phrase what Zoe Norridge defines as “a language of intimacy, a language of the body, a way of speaking about close physical and emotional contact” (30).

However, aspects of Christine’s narration imply that quite often sex is *not* something she takes pleasure in; rather, sex is done to her, while she is almost a bystander. Similarly,

sex is unthinking, similar to the pupil's compliance at school, "Something I just did" (97). Several of Christine's remarks hint at her rather passionless disinterest and bodily disconnect. Points such as this return me to Christine's image of her free body as "floaty, a clean open hanky wandering in the wind" (104). The visual is fresh, and pure. It connotes her pleasure in experiencing, for the first time, her liberated female embodiment. And yet the after-image niggles: a hanky? A handkerchief is a small nothing, almost an inconsequential nicety. It comes in handy, yes, but is easily lost. It is simple and adaptable, able to be used without thought to wipe a child's snotty nose, to dry tears, and to blot up a man's semen.

The relationship between Christine and Peter is shaped not only by a gendered hierarchy, but by the relative powers ascribed in Uganda (as an ex-colony) to racial identity. Because of these unequal relations, which compound gender differentials, she even fails to negotiate safe sex, despite the fact of his sleeping with other local women: "we used condoms most of the time. I didn't say anything when we didn't" (108). The first time they have sex, Christine is repeatedly conscious of 'whiteness'. To her mind, Peter's whiteness, coupled with his polite Englishness, shape his oddly careful treatment of her, his tendency to engage in sex not with his entire body, but rather with a quiet, systematic discipline, a procedural step-by-step:

...he took my blouse and pants off methodically, gently, like it was the best thing to do, like I was sick and he was a nurse, and I just lay there. In the same practical way he lay down and stroked me for a few appropriate minutes, put on a condom, opened my legs and stuck his penis in. I couldn't bring myself to hold him in any convincing way. I thought I should moan and act feverish, overcome by a wild rage of some sort, like white people in movies. But I was feeling well fed and well taken care of; a child full of warm milk. One thought was constant in my head like a newspaper headline: I am having sex with a white man. It was strange because it wasn't strange. He was done in a few minutes. He tucked me under his arm like an old habit, and we sank into sleep. (103)

At the forefront of Christine's mind during this sexual encounter is Peter's identity as a white man. She is not sure what this whiteness 'means'. Her thoughts more-or-less settle on the fact that she finds Peter no different in intercourse from other men. He is dutifully considerate of her, going through the necessary motions of foreplay; when he thinks the time is right, he enters her; and in a few minutes, it's all done and he's happily satisfied, ready to sleep. This familiar routine conveys Christine's rather perplexed sense of men's relationship to sex. It seems to entail busy business, rather than physical-emotional intimacy. In this regard, Peter is no different. Despite what she may have been told or warned about sex with an expat, or what cultural proscriptions apply – her reference to the newspaper headline in her head indicates

that ‘Ugandan Woman in Sex With White Man’ could be shocking, breaking news – in fact sex with a white man is merely sex with a man. It is only remarkable for being so unremarkable.

Before she takes this view, however, she self-consciously wonders whether, in order to please Peter, she should perform a cultural version of sexuality that a worldly European man might prefer, gasping and impassioned. Here, her own ideas of supposedly ‘white’ sexuality are culled from films she has seen. She simultaneously draws on this informal image repertoire in wondering how to act during sex, *and* she experiences the sense that she is perhaps *mistaking* these images, misapplying them beyond the generic performative space of exaggerated movie spectacles. Her uncertainty suggests the half-naturalised hold, upon an individual’s imagination, in an African city far from global centres of cultural influence, of seductive mediascapes of normative sexuality. Should she? Shouldn’t she? If popular media circulate apparently decontextualised (yet usually Americanised) modes of sexuality to which men and women the world over ‘should’ aspire, Christine’s personal-cultural circumstances also lead her to doubt the universal applicability of such modes. Also relevant is her urge to please Peter, her desire to act in ways which will not thwart his established sexual anticipations. Her subordinating of her own pleasure to his insinuates the persuasive combined authorities of two discourses: that of race, which historically empties ‘whiteness’ of racial markings in order to secure it as normative, a-racial matrix, and that of gender, which functions similarly in respect of a naturalised, male-ordinate hierarchy in which ‘female’ is less significant. Admittedly, it is clear that Christine also gets pleasure from Peter’s body, “feeling well fed and well taken care of; a child full of warm milk” (104). The language, though, is somewhat curious. Is Christine conscious, here, of her Freudian infantilising in respect of her perversely passive and yet desiring role as child/female, and Peter’s as father/male, supported by the milk/semen implication? I am not sure. Certainly, in the early stages of their relationship the sex she has with Peter entails a complex mobility of exploitation and complicity, subordination and desire, which destabilises as well as reprises aspects of received sexual expectations.

Beyond the bedroom, Peter’s treatment of Christine more obviously enacts colonial male patterns of sexual conduct with ‘native women’. Assumed. Hierarchical. Categorical. At whim. He refuses to include her in his expatriate social life, for example, even though she regularly has sex with him. He leaves her behind when he travels to Nairobi on holiday, which Christine, clearly disappointed, justifies using her own classist gender discrimination against other women, sneering that he prefers to take “some ignorant waitress or something”

(105). This comment simultaneously reflects badly on her, for in it she concedes Peter's openly-acknowledged position as a serial playboy, even as she expresses a continued wish to see him, despite her being an educated, middle class, supposedly independent woman. (Such comments also recall her demeaning remarks about Peter's elderly male servant Deogracias. She is scornful of his raw, black appearance – “big bare feet like boats” - and finds it “vaguely offensive” that he speaks to her in Luganda, not English, an over-familiarity, as if she were “at his houseboy level” [103]. Baingana makes it clear that in a highly unequal, economically under-privileged society, historically subject to repeated ethnic-cultural divides which are used as justification for military rule, and the accumulation of power by tyrants, ordinary people are liable to internalise an hierarchical sense of power, right and exclusion.)

In his own little Ugandan power plays, a reader notices that Peter's business authority uneasily coalesces with his male power over Christine. The sex between them, it becomes clear, is part of his self-serving, unethical business methods. The first time that Peter takes Christine to his business premises (on the way back to university), an Indian businessman called Jagjit arrives to sell Peter illegal dollars. Seeing this man, Christine reflects soberly on the unjust treatment meted out to Indian Ugandans many years before by Amin. Jagjit simply gives Christine a dismissive once-over, “summing up the situation” (110), assuming she is some sort of good-time girl. Peter proceeds very humiliatingly to scam the helpless man. He substitutes a fake \$100 bill for one of the man's genuine notes, a note Peter then purports, much to the man's dismay, to tear in half. Peter's action is a canny feint, of course, with Peter destroying his own fake note, and then pocketing the real note without having had to pay one million Ugandan shillings for it. Christine doesn't care about his unethical methods. She thinks Jagjit deserved to be duped, because he was so casually dismissive of her as a local black woman who kept company with a white male expat like Peter.

A little later, though, when Peter teasingly pieces the two halves of the \$100 bill together and half-seriously suggests he might give them to Christine, she is not sure what to think. What is he paying for? What would she be conceding, if she accepted? The questions are never resolved. The fact that this incident features as a flashback almost at the end of the story, only after Christine becomes pregnant, implies that she has been a long time learning to discern the relatively similar positions of herself and Peter's other Ugandan business partners. The only difference is that she is his sex partner.

Peter does make some self-serving exceptions to keeping Christine in his bed, but out of his daily life. He very kindly allows her to accompany him to Entebbe Sailing Club, but the “high membership fees and selective sponsorship rules” (105) made her feel “very black”

(105). She may be a beautiful trophy girl, but the elite aura of the club leaves her in no doubt that she is not really a member. She is there under sufferance, under Peter's extension of visitor rights. In her own right, she could never, ever belong. The relationship between the two carries Baingana's criticism of neo-colonial racism, disguised as business, even 'business-as-usual', in post-independent Uganda. Baingana points to what is effectively the highjacking of the Ugandan state and its resources and opportunities by expat British business (with the collusion of various corrupt political elites) which turns the country from questions of equality and democratic governance to the pleasures and profits of vested interest groups, using both natural resources and female 'human resources' as enjoyments to be accessed at will by wealth (the new 'master').

Most notably, Peter also refuses to disclose his surname to Christine, telling her to call him 'Mr. Peter', the same title he demands be used by Deogracias, his so-called houseboy. Despite the fact that Christine shares intimate nights with him, he relegates their relationship to the paradigm of master-servant relationship. (The servant's Christian, Latinate name, 'thanks be to God', hints at the historical collusion between colonial religions and capitalist commercial interests in shaping and justifying Uganda's obedient service to various forms of foreign master.) While their non-exclusive, business-like sexual pact inhibits the development of emotional intimacy, Peter does kiss Christine in public. However, this is less affection than a display of power that combines his racial, male, generational and class authorities. Note that he only kisses her in front of other black people, meaning that a simple kiss signals multiple subjugation.

Firstly, he obliges Christine's body and emotions to materialise his will, expediently stripping the kiss of any possible romantic feeling between lovers. One could argue, here, that Christine ought never to expect this romance, given their practical sex arrangement. But her own failing attempt to keep sex and intimacy separate mean that despite her rational mind, her body feels differently. She longs for more than mere sex. What she gets, though, are kisses inflicted in the spirit of a power. Secondly, Peter's deliberate kissing of Christine in front of black people willfully visibilises his sense of cultural and male superiority. It is not only that he disregards what might be customary local sexual proprieties, but that he does so as a rich, older, white man, knowingly in order to assert his male, racial, and economic superiority. His actions leave Christine vulnerable to public ridicule, as people mock:

Who was this girl being kissed in broad daylight by some old *mzungu*? Aahaa, these *malayas* are becoming too bold. Couldn't she find a younger one at the Sheraton? One man shouted to Peter, for the crowd, in Luganda, "She's going to give you

AIDS, look how thin she is!” Another one answered. “It’s their fault, these *bazungu*, they like their women thin. Let them fall sick.” General laughter. (107)

In a section of the text which uses vernacular language to remind us of cultural power differentials, a different form of insider/outsider, mastery/ignorance – a reader momentarily experiences the oddness of translation, for the local language is *already* given in English, with only a few words of Luganda to unsettle the apparent seamlessness. Christine is scorned for being with an older white man, as if she couldn’t do better, given that fancy hotels offer rich pickings. The crowd’s mockery then also draws elements of inappropriate consumer cultural female body norms *together* with those of AIDS: both entail extreme thinness. The perverse intended joke is that a wealthy old white man, having preferentially chosen as sexy companion a local black woman who meets Western standards of female beauty which are ridiculously alien to Uganda, will get to enjoy the sexual favours of the model-like black beauty he so desires, *but*, in the process, because it is increasingly difficult in impoverished African contexts to distinguish thinness as desirable beauty from dangerous disease or (even hunger), what such a man ‘gets’ may be more than he has banked on. Christine is vilified by implication as a proxy prostitute, a threat to the moral and physical health of Ugandan society. But, the crowd jeers, perhaps this would be a fitting ‘end’ for those foreigners who, like the old *mzungu*, benefit from continued cultural imperialism.

Thus, if Christine is in some regard exercising her own sexual agency through the relationship, she is also “simultaneously performing a kind of sexuality that marks her as local, representing the tropical fish: she may be moving into a cosmopolitan world, but her British lover increasingly typifies her as a Ugandan woman” (Spencer 178). For both of them, sex is a businesslike arrangement. For Christine, this is transactional sex, in return for which she acquires pleasurable benefits, among them easy access to small material luxuries such as “bubble bath”, the “lovely warm green froth that was a caress all over” (108). Such comments help us to understand that the sex is a temporary shield during her student years before the terrifying need to find work in a severely depressed economy, which is in contrast to “the gin-and-tonic” (107) life of the well-off expats. At Peter’s, she can revel in “abundance, the luxury of wasting” (108), because she has had a life of economic scarcity and constant injunction, whether in the family home, or in a Ugandan society struggling to emerge from economic sanctions, and constant political turmoil. Peter’s preferential economic-cultural position as a white English businessman in an ex British colony, entitles him to all manner of comforts and privileges which are impossible for ordinary Ugandans in

the post-Amin years. (Ahlberg claims that Christine has been “seduced by the foreign” [416], but my own approach in this chapter suggests a more complex dynamic between pleasure and incorporation. Christine’s narrative voice, in the story, also constantly wavers and weighs up, belying the simple notion of blind seduction.)

For Peter, their relationship is generally one of sexually convenient circumstance, with occasional companionship. He scarcely even thinks of his actions, and not as problematic, so naturalised are his customary sexual-relational habits with a(nother) young black Ugandan woman. Readers, though, understand that he is assuming his right to exercise a cultural-economic prerogative. In his actions, we see the consequences of an unthought-of patriarchal capitalism, in which gendered and economic hierarchies merge, a neo-colonial legacy of historical exploitation segueing into the powerful influence of an emerging market economy of unequal trade vectors, where various forms of exploitation occur unremarkably as central to everyday life, the status quo. In this matrix, Christine’s attractive female body is objectified to be enjoyed as an exotic commodity – while taking pleasure in her, he observes that her body, in different places, has “so many colours all over” (104). The analogue is between various forms of resource: native women, Uganda, and the bright tropical fish from Lake Victoria that Peter exports to England at a huge profit, having “paid next to nothing to the local fishermen” (98).

As the narrative development indicates, an arc which follows Christine’s own gradual understanding, Christine begins uneasily to sense this connection when she waits in the office of the abortion clinic, and kills time reading a magazine “article about all the species of fish that are disappearing from Uganda’s freshwater lakes and rivers because of the Nile perch”:

It was introduced by the colonial government Fisheries Development Department in the fifties. The Nile perch is ugly and tasteless, but it is huge, and provides a lot more food for the populace. But it was eating up all the smaller, rarer, gloriously-colored tropical fish. Many of these species were not named, let alone discovered, before they disappeared. Every day, somewhere deep and dark, it was too late. (100)

Baingana does not explain, but we see that this is a point of entangled moral-emotional agency for Christine. She has decided to have an abortion, which is a decisive act of biological self-care in comparison with her lack of sexual volition. The doctor “is kind, like Peter” (109), and the whole business is “efficient”. She does not feel anything. But she does find herself wondering: “Why did I always seem to have my legs spread open before kind men poking things into me? I let them” (109). The article she reads, about coloured fish, implies her gradual coming-to-consciousness about the messy conjunction, in her body, of

pressures of femaleness, sexuality, class, race, neo-colonialism, locality – and indeed personal moral responsibility. She does what “had to be done” (109) but continues to feel troubled. The pessimistic phrase, “somewhere deep and dark, it was too late”, is used to describe the exploitative resource extraction of the exquisite tropical fish Peter exports from Uganda, their plentiful beauty diminishing, dying. The idea also works in relation to popular and persistent images which circulate ‘Africa’ as the dark continent, ravaged by disease, hunger and exploitation. The beautiful tropical fish which are being devoured by the alien Nile perch in the deep dark waters are compared to the vulnerable people of Uganda, who are struggling in an economy that has collapsed and whose natural and human resources continue to be exploited by foreigners, in the guise of investors. The picture offers no hope for respite, prosperity. As such life is futile, destruction is imminent. (In an elusive sense, “somewhere deep and dark, it was too late”, also seems to gesture towards the destructive intimacies of the ravaged body – Rosa’s death from Aids, and the multiple deaths of friends in her once lively, exuberant student cohort.)

Nor does Baingana give a reader any respite from the as yet incoherent merging of what might become ‘insight’, for Christine, into the way her sexuality has influenced her life. After the abortion, Christine turns up at Peter’s offices, unannounced. She simply wants to tell him about the abortion, to share this with him, as a way of asking, albeit too late, for intimate acknowledgement, something beyond the obviously sexual. Peter is kind. Tactful. Peter reads the discreet note Christine hands him, a note merely stating the fact of the abortion, and in reply he writes, “Do you want some money?” (112). Humiliated, Christine shakes her head in response and there is silence between them after that thus marking the end of the relationship. It finally dawns on Christine that their six month sexual relationship had indeed been a transactional relationship marked with hierarchies and complexities of race, gender and repressive local politics which are cut across by foreign interests in uneasy ways hence framing the young female black body as an uneven personal/political terrain. At the same time though, Christine is able to negotiate her sexual agency even though in difficult and often ambiguous ways within this economically and socially repressive state which seems to have already set up a path which Christine, as a woman is destined to take.

Local Myths and Sexualities

The following section focuses on Rosa, the second oldest and the most sexually precocious of the sisters and how she exercises sexual agency in a way that negotiates the tensions between sexual danger and sexual pleasure. When we encounter her as a teenager in ‘Christine’s’

story “First Kiss”, Rosa is shown already to have a “dirty book” hidden in her suitcase, “a naked woman on the cover, her body twisted in a weird position” (50). Her clandestine interest in pornographic material illustrates her nascent fascination with transgressive elements of sexuality which demonstrates how she attempts to reconfigure learnt forms of sexuality. In “Passion” we encounter Rosa as an intelligent and inquisitive young woman whose narrative reflects “a critical, frequently satirical perspective on the many colonial vestiges within their (all-girl) school set-up” (Gagiano n.p) at Gayaza High School, “a boarding school that used to be a missionary school back in the colonial days” (56). Through Rosa’s account we note how school as a “truth generating institution” plays a role in reproducing a preferred regime of sexuality, of knowledge about female subjectivities and sexualities that continues to perpetuate a gender hierarchy that disadvantages women.

But even within this postcolonial setting there are anomalies. The white teachers were resourceful, “hardy old ladies” who “faced army men with guns for our sakes during the Amin days and each coup thereafter” (56), yet the structure and policies of the school continue to extol conventions of female bodily decorum based on inherited, colonial ideologies about gender:

We must be graceful, hardworking, and upright; disciplined enough to withstand the hordes of lusty men at university, in offices, or on the street who will try to “spoil” us- unless, of course, they want to marry us. Then, as educated, faithful wives, we will work alongside our Christian husbands in our modern civilised homes (bed sheets folded to make perfect hospital corners), while serving our country in a lauded profession. (57)

Additionally, it is important to locate these instructions as proper modes of conduct for *African* girls, the underlying assumption being that of an “unbridled” African sexuality which, “juxtaposed with the imported and highly conservative sexual norms of Europe” (Tamale “Researching and Theorising” 15) needs controlling and proper management. The schooling of the girls at Gayaza, which despite many years of Ugandan independence closely resembles that of the colonial days, is aimed at producing respectable female gendered subjects in terms of sexual morality, dress codes, behaviour and religious mores. (Even the encoding of masculinity, in the view of the Gayaza educators, is framed within a vestigial colonial view, as suggested by words such as “hordes” and “lusty”.) Interestingly, here the socialisation of the Gayaza girls points to how the centrality of sexuality and the systematic formation of gendered and sexual identities “continues to reverberate in the protracted post-colonial moment” (Osha 64). It is also pertinent to note that at the fore of this type of

socialisation is the idea of the heterosexual family which is implicated in the notion of the nation as a family. In this sense then, “the idea of the nation is incompatible with the unruliness of sex” and therefore “the disciplining of sexual energies and the constitution of a productive, life-giving sexuality inheres in the idea of a stable, orderly and unified nation” (Posel 139). In this case, disciplining female bodies and positively channeling their sexual energies towards home and family and away from desire and bodily pleasure sets the foundations for the (re)productive project of building the nation.

At the center of such socialisation is an outmoded “Victorian-type repression of information about sex” (Gagiano n.p) which in turn only enflames the adolescent girls’ fantasies about sex, a taboo activity which Rosa remarks they perceive as “that unmentionable, dirty, shameful, and most fascinating thing” (61). Rosa’s tone in this story, typical of her extrovert character, is very colloquial, very easy in its subversions of authority for example how she characterises the teachers at her school. For example, she calls Miss Okello, a tough teacher, “a ball of a woman” and Mr. Mukwaya, her literature teacher, is “Walking Wodo” (61-2) or ‘walking wardrobe’. Because there is no sex education on the curriculum at the school, no one to address the teen girls’ imaginative curiosity about sexual issues, in a spirit of youthful rebellion the girls improvise by exchanging an indiscriminate muddle of “reliable biological information and ridiculous myths with one another” (Gagiano n.p):

We learned about *real life* from our roommates. In the dark, in bed, we stuffed our mouths with sheet and blanket to hide our laughter or gasps of fright but as soon as the teacher left, we continued on in excited whispers...we listened to stories about ghosts and powerful *juju*, and learned what’s what about sex, imagining all the gory details. How men were strange, illogical in their cravings; so this was what you had to do to get them. (59 emphasis in the original)

Indeed it is from this piecemeal exchange of sexual knowledge about men’s impulsive and insatiable desires, “this problem of wanting women too much, and they can’t control it” (60), that Rosa’s friend Nasuna implants the idea of an experiment in Rosa’s mind. The experiment involves “secretly...rub[bing] a safety pin while looking *directly* at the man you like, and you’ll get him excited. Just like that. Then he will do anything for you” (61 emphasis in original). The knowledge that these girls share is premised on what Wendy Hollway terms the “discourse of the male sexual drive”, a set of assumptions that “confers particular meanings on men’s sexual feelings and behaviour” (63). The ‘sex drive’ is assumed, firstly, to be a “natural propensity that men have. Second, it makes them want to have sex with women and thirdly, it is normal and healthy not just because it is natural but because it is the

product of a biological necessity - an evolutionary imperative - which ensures the survival of the human species” (Hollway 63). The potential success of the *juju* experiment excites the girls as it would provide a site through which to subvert as well as negotiate the power that determines their subordination to men within the gender hierarchy in patriarchal society: “This would be the first step. *Then* you simply refuse to give him what he wants, see? You make him suffer and plead until he is almost crazy and has nothing else to do but propose” (68). The girls’ remarks on the *juju* experiment intersects with views of masculinity that construct sex as a “natural” need for men, as the sole purpose for engaging in a relationship with a woman to the extent that they would actually allow themselves to be manipulated just to ‘get it’. The horizon of desire for the girls is not sex, but the culturally-inflated romance of the marriage proposal, which supports the conventional message to girls that love and marriage are the apex of women’s being, the ‘marriage plot’ a bearable trade-off for domestic servitude.

For Rosa and her girlish roommates, repeatedly rubbing the pin invokes thrilling sexual correlations. This gesture, performed upon an analogous, prosthetic object, emphasises the excitable naïveté of the girls and their limited knowledge of sex, believing it rather mechanical. A pin in a girl’s pocket, rubbed secretly, threatening to prick her finger to bleeding in the enclosed dark, is a tactile, sensual sympathetic magic: the familiar domestic ‘pin’ of female needlework and household chores imaginatively ‘rematerialises’ as the mysteriously elusive ‘penis’ of the tabooed yet fetishised male body. To some, this ‘*juju*’ may seem a laughable premise. However, we should consider that the rubbing is part of a coded metaphoric repertoire through which taboo sexual knowledge, still physically off-limits to younger girls, is nevertheless acceptably introduced into young female friendship circles, part of an indigenous sexual knowledge on erotic practices which is passed from one generation of women to another, via means such as oral tales, and ‘*juju*’. Tamale in her paper “Eroticism, Sensuality and ‘Women’s Secrets’ among the Baganda” argues that “metaphors and symbols provide an acceptable medium of accessing the secret world of unverballed sexuality, shifting it from the ‘private’ to the ‘public’ realm” (92). Furthermore, Tamale argues, “it also allows for coded communication about sexuality” (“Eroticism, Sensuality” 92). While this knowledge is usually “decipherable by women and other adults but hidden from children”, it is possible that the girls have accessed it, or even that this particular action is intended to familiarise girls not merely with their eventual pleasuring of men, but also of their female power.

Rosa is resolute in her determination to prove whether the *juju* works, or not. She wants to know whether a woman can indeed exercise projected power over a man's sexual desire. She half believes, and half derides, and then again vacillates. The incident locates her unevenly between two modes of knowing, the Christian ethos of the school, and the realm of African belief systems. These two modes of knowing (historically considered disparate by colonial discourse, and set in moral opposition, despite the superstitious elements of Christianity's virgin birth and the pagan resonances of wine as blood), compel the modern subject to negotiate a position between the two. Clearly, this also points to the ambiguous positioning of her own developing female sexuality, and she must work through various modes of 'education' in order to satisfy her passionate curiosity about female sexual potential. These modes include formal schooling (with its Christian, British strains); informal girl-talk or 'kaboozi', as it is known, and also fragmentary inheritances of 'African customs' that circulate as an erratic, intriguing cultural capital among the young woman. (For all we know, Rosa's porn magazines may also play a role here, contributing to her fascination with sex, and to her uncertainty about female sexuality as agency.)

Rosa decides to test the efficacy of the *juju* by conducting an experiment on Mr. Mukwaya her literature teacher. The choice of Mr. Mukwaya as the subject of the experiment occurs because he seems to be the most attractive of the range of male teachers at the school. (Literature also happens to be Rosa's favourite subject.) As I mentioned earlier, this teacher is nicknamed the "Walking Wodo" because he "is tall, straight, stiff and thick", like a solid wardrobe, a description which also offers a cloaked reference to the 'pin' and the unnamed 'penis'. Additionally, besides, Mr. Mukwaya provides a particular challenge for Rosa because she knows he is a passionate man, passionate about *literature*, and if she is able to distract him when he is deeply engrossed in teaching Shakespeare's *King Lear*, this would be significant proof of the *juju's* power.

Rosa's obstinacy is also driven by her desire "to refute (or confirm) the validity of European-based, missionary-inspired, disdainful dismissals of 'African magic'" (Gagiano n.p). She says: "I was irritated by all the propaganda against 'black magic' and the way it was insistently pounded into our supposedly still-soft heads" (55). As Tamale argues, "through religion and its proselytising activities, African were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the 'civilised ways' of the whites" (16). Puzzling and irksome to Rosa is why there is such a strong insistence against *juju* if it doesn't exist, and has no power. Rosa decides to brave possible embarrassment and punishment, and to conduct the illicit experiment. Coincidentally (occult enchantment?), it happens that when she rubs

the pin, the teacher “scratched himself *right there!*” and also “smoothed down *the front* of his pants, then half-sat back on the edge of the desk” (75). Rosa’s inappropriately intense, physically pointed stares and constant fidgety ‘rubbing’ also convey unsettling sexual innuendoes, causing the male teacher visible discomfort.

In a decision which is quite risky, given the situation, he keeps Rosa back after class. He reprimands her: “‘Passion, Rosa. Don’t waste it.’... ‘You young women here, you are so protected from everything. Unlike Cordelia.’ He smiled. ‘But not forever. You will be forced to grow’” (78). He reminds this clever young woman that she is toying dangerously with passion, which is not merely a synonym for sexual thrill, but a vital life – creative, but also potentially destructive. He also draws her attention to the relative *luxury* of passion, referring not only to the culturally remote, literary figure of Lear’s youngest daughter, but also confiding intimacies regarding his own mother and sisters. “‘My mother was already married at your age. My sisters –’ He broke off abruptly and shook his head” (78).

In the story, then, Rosa’s experiment in sexual curiosity does not arouse lust in her teacher; nor does the transgression provoke him to anger. Instead, he offers a quiet, mitigated authority, verging on personal rapport, to a smart but potentially injudicious young woman who is naïvely blind to her own privilege and possibility. Mr. Mukwaya’s implied advice to Rosa is not only against using her youthful sexuality to manipulate men as she may be hurt in the process; it also embodies, in his considerate person, an expression of adult male interest in her *beyond* the sexuality in which she is so invested. He hopes to urge her towards the difficult understanding that passion is a physicality not merely to be thought of or experienced as ‘sexual’, or even ‘romantic fantasy’. Passion is more transgressive, since it exceeds its cultural association with sexuality, and encompasses the potency of imagination, the desire to live in experience and thought. His own passion, for instance, is Shakespeare, which some might consider an inapt colonial co-optation, but which, in his own circumstances, endows him with a world of insight and empathy which enables him to connect with his promising young female student with integrity and honesty, beyond the sexual provocations her youthful female sexuality excites her to project.

The Exuberance of Youth and Sexuality

“It started as a rumour. We discovered it was a disease. We found that it was an epidemic. We have finally accepted it as a tragedy” (Samuel Okware qtd in Thornton 77)

In “A Thank-you Note”, written from Rosa’s point of view, Baingana shifts abruptly ahead in Rosa’s life, and a reader discovers the difficult aftermath of the life lessons that Rosa has been offered in “Passion”. In the story, Rosa’s life is sensitively and poignantly located within the spread of HIV and AIDS among the young African middle class. In the process Baingana concedes the dangers, but also refuses the stigma associated with the infection. Baingana’s representation of AIDS and the agency of sexuality in the contraction of HIV unsettles “the age-old, seemingly inexorable process whereby diseases acquire meanings (by coming to stand for the deepest fears) and inflict stigma” (Sontag 182). The story, which is a narrative of deep introspection of Rosa’s life as a student, is presented in the intimate form of a letter by a dying Rosa to her former boyfriend David: “Dear David, I can’t just let this go without saying bye, to let you know I got what you gave me and I am sure it was you” (81). Even though the ironic title of the narrative might be thought sardonic, Gagiano argues that it is not entirely a “bitter reproach, for Rosa writes partly to expose to David her awareness of his probable responsibility for her infection, coupling this accusation with a defiant proclamation of the dread topic so as not to be complicit in the social silencing (and dangerous taboo-making) of necessary AIDS awareness” (n.p).

Rosa refers to the slow insidious and destructive spread of the epidemic as “a harmless cloud from afar” which has “turned into an invasion of insatiable locusts, a cruel blanket covering us all” (81). The time that Rosa and her friends were in university is also the height of Uganda’s social chaos, “when Idi Amin was being driven from power by the Tanzanian army” (Thornton 76). It is also the same time that the euphemistically-named ‘Slim’, “the Ugandan disease”, had spread to the general urban population from more isolated regions, “where it had clearly been endemic for some time. Ugandans began to recognise the major symptoms, and gave the sickness a name” (Thornton 76). Rosa recalls how at about the beginning of the epidemic her university cohort of comparatively privileged young Ugandans thought the disease would never touch them, that it was confined to the poor, ignorant and rural masses. Rosa and her student friends imagined themselves special, even invincible, thinking they were free to have multiple concurrent sexual partners without being affected:

[W]e whispered these rumours about *them*, the villagers, but didn’t talk about us, did we? Now we are all connected: one big loving community. Back then, we thought we were different, separate from the Rakai kind; they were born suffering, after all, but not us, oh no. We were at Makerere University; we were the cream of the crop. We had dodged the bullets of Amin, Obote, all the coups, the economic war, exile and return, and here we were on the road to success. We were the lucky ones, the chosen few. (86-7)

The passage implies how sexuality and sexual freedom become a site through which to forge identities which declaratively affirm youthful modernity and its entitled, exuberant pleasures. The “Rakai kind”, in comparison, is a derogatory label for a supposedly menial, ill-educated social group which, in a tautological causality, is because of such inherently inferior traits is born to suffer, and thus proves susceptible to the disease. The reference to the many military coups and multiple socio-economic volatilities also contextualises the students’ sexual liberation. They have been through so much, and survived, that they feel heroic, untouchable, almost invincible. Nothing can stand in their way. Baingana suggests – and the narrating voice of Rosa corroborates - the personal ramifications of political instability. To grow up in a culture ravaged by repeated coups and severe nationwide economic hardship, to experience families ruptured by the associated violence, physical suffering, and the lacerating effects of exile and uncertain return, all of these can entail an unstable inheritance. A youthful population becomes devil-may-care, enthralled by its own determined spirit of pleasure and vital, spirited power.

As a student at Makerere University, Rosa thrives on wild, reckless bodily enjoyment: “this body of mine only worships pleasure” (82). Like many of her cohort, she disregards old-fashioned cultural mores and decorum, intent on enjoying her youthful female sexuality. Rosa and David spent “whole days in bed licking each other...trying to pass the point of need, to exhaust desire” (83). This exercise of sexual agency and experimentation eschews the customary sexual constraints (among them marriage and duty) of the generation of their parents. For them, “the experience of sex” is both “an important bodily pleasure” and a “perceptual knowledge that affirms their specific position” (Spronk 3) in contemporary Ugandan society. If Rosa and David, after sex, are always left with sexual energy in reserve, at the same time, the sex also leaves them feeling unsatisfied. The sense is of young people seizing pleasure in a directionless way, unsure, after the many controls that have been exerted over their bodies in the past by contexts of family, school, and violent state, what their lives are for. All is focused upon young body. The body is present. The body feels desire. Acting on such impulses seems the obvious response, but does not then provide the desired satisfaction. The erotic passion in which Rosa and David indulge so freely, and which eventually ends her in physical demise, suggests that she has not properly understood Mr. Mukwaya’s warning that passion should not be wasted but channelled towards self-development and a beneficial future.

Rosa's narration of the students' exercising of their sexual freedoms further reveals the entangled gender and class dimensions which influence their various liaisons, and the subsequent spread of the virus. She writes to David:

I am sure you, like the other campus boys, went down to those slums to drink crude *waragi* and enjoy crude women, because you were too poor to entice campus girls with chips and wine and money to perm our hair and buy new shoes. And we campus girls were not entirely innocent either. Frustrated campus boys watched but couldn't stop their girls turning to the older, richer *mafutas* in town, or top soldiers, new ones for every regime, just like how new, prize girls joined campus every year. (88)

Baingana's descriptions of the disease and the way it spread so widely among people of different classes and ages works to imply that sexuality forms a paradoxical network of interconnections among many different people. On the one hand, sexual liberties and mutual pleasure conjoin partners across otherwise divergent classes. On the other, the very sexual passion that overcame the class barriers behind which the young, privileged Ugandans, just like the students at Makerere, had imagined themselves exempted from infection, results in the spread of death.

Rosa's letter is not one of simple blame. It comprises a melancholy 'thank you' for her emerging consciousness, the self-reflective thought of living mindfully in her body. The university campus as a microcosm of the widespread practice of sex with multiple concurrent partners becomes what John Iliffe defines as an "epicenter of HIV infection". He discusses this in relation to an uneven, strained political-economic "modernity that bred individualistic choice, extreme differences of wealth, sexual adventurism...and complex, disassociative networks through which HIV could pass" (53). The situation is dire.

Nevertheless, even though Rosa's body has begun to fail, and she is grieving the loss of many friends who have succumbed to the disease, she still cannot deny the potent vitality of the joyous sexual freedoms and exuberance of youth with which she and her friends have celebrated life. She even imagines the power of the erotic as having the ability to challenge death, "sex as a loud, unrestrained, mocking laugh" (96). On the possibilities of sexual pleasure, Audre Lorde posits that one of the ways in which the erotic functions is in:

[t]he open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy ... That self-connection shared is a measure of joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not have to be called marriage, or god, nor an afterlife. That is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognised at all (87).

Thus even though Rosa has “burning scars, leaking sores, gray skin” (96) – Baingana does not stint in describing the terrible physical appearance of the debilitating body - she refuses to hide her body in shame. This, she insists, this decrepit, degenerating body, is still mine. She is her body. Her body is her life source. This is the same body that men used to desire. “What better way is there to bury your dead, if not to go lustfully after life? I must *scream* against death just like I used to with life. I must live even harder” (78). Rosa’s position raises interesting contradictions. It is only when nearly dying that she can affirm her vitality in a directed, purposeful way – to mock and challenge the finality of death. Rosa reasons that, “to decline in melancholy is to surrender even more than one’s life to death” (Gagiano n.p), thus challenging the stigma inflicted on her body.

In *Tropical Fish*, Baingana portrays the complexities of female sexuality and the ambiguities surrounding sexual agency and the notions of pleasure. Female sexuality, as a social construct whose rules are encoded in male-centered discourses which seek to (re)produce preferential, subordinate subject positions, is actually a volatile, contested collocation of forces, desires and agencies. Baingana demonstrates, through the linked narratives of the Mugisha sisters, that female sexuality is variously compelled and compelling. The contradictory, yet intersecting, claims of youth, gender, race, class and personality are unevenly negotiated, variously co-opted and contested. I have argued that Baingana’s representation of erotics and sexual agency is not only limited to it being metaphors and symbols of economic, religious and political relations but that it is a corporeal experience that these young women desire, negotiate and engage in. By negotiating received norms about sexualities, Baingana’s young women characters engage with their need to create multiple forms of modern African femaleness.

“Your Barrenness Brings Shame Upon Me”: De-reproducing Motherhood, Sexual Desires and Pleasures in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*

Sex, as a theme, is important to me because even though across religions and societies it is an essential ritual that ought to be pleasurable, we have found ways to bleed the pleasure out of it, we have taught ourselves to suppress that which is instinctive. The woman is targeted here. She has become the one who cannot, must not, enjoy sex, as if sexual pleasure for her translates to promiscuity and narcissism. This is of great interest to me. (Lola Shoneyin, “Lola Shoneyin on Freedom, Feminism and Polygamy”)

In some respects, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010)³¹ implies that ‘the family’, as a conventional horizon of expectation for a woman as wife and, ideally, mother, works in the domestic space and the space of imagination to *assert* the preferred patriarchal culture of the state, through a cohort of constraining norms that materialises, for the wives, as forms of relation that are varieties of the autocratic, coercive, and persuasive. (A woman, for example, might be coaxed by the institution of the family into working against her own interests, for the sake of the husband, the children, the opinions of neighbours. Within a polygynous marriage, too, she might mobilise the very powers of patriarchy against other women, advancing her own preferential prospects.) Simultaneously, though, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* author Lola Shoneyin uses fiction as a creative space in which to *explore* the roles of women and men in polygynous marriage, aiming to engage readers in negotiating into *plurality* received questions of sexuality, sexual power, and sexual desires. Such a multi-faceted questioning, spatially situated within the unevenly prolific domestic relations of a polygynous marriage and its expanded family, purposefully disrupts complacent conflation of female sexual desire and pleasure with the supposed biological ‘imperative’ of the female body to reproduce. This novel is an excellent example of a woman writer’s emphasising the plurality and complexities of representing African sexualities, foregrounding the multiple forms and practices of marriage and relationships in a particular African national context.

In many patriarchal African societies, marriage functions as a domain (cut across by complicated combinations of cultural, political, legal, customary, biological, gendered, generational and other contingencies), through which women’s sexuality can be controlled. Often, women’s female identities are at times subsumed under the titles of mother and wife, attributed categories which name and seek to ensure the lineage of the man. Sylvia Tamale

³¹ Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, London: Serpent’s Tail, 2010. All references are to this edition. I will also refer to the text as *Baba Segi’s Wives* in short.

argues that “this model of patriarchy requires that the man's acquired property and wealth is passed on to his male offspring”, and therefore it becomes imperative to control women's sexuality “in order to guarantee the paternity and legitimacy of children when bequeathing property” (“Eroticism, Sensuality” 11). As a result, “the monogamy of women is required, without necessarily disturbing or challenging the polygynous sexuality normalised for men” (Tamale “Eroticism, Sensuality” 11). Vuyiswa Ndabayakhe and Catherine Addison explain that “polygamy – in its common form of polygyny – ...remains a sign of the unreconstituted patriarchy still prevailing in many African societies” (89). They point out that while

debate about polygamy is often strangely absent from the media and society in African countries, this is certainly not the case in fictional works from this continent, which very frequently explore the issue of marriage. The power of the novel to represent the inner life of a subject has been used by many writers – especially female ones – to expose the sufferings of women participating in polygamous relationships. As this paper will demonstrate, African novels generally militate against polygamy, showing it to be the enemy of freedom, equity and democracy and also a traitor to honourable and trusting human relationships (90).

The notion of polygyny as an institution which oppresses women is one of the most contested phenomena in African fiction. Various female authors, including Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, have portrayed polygyny as a “continual source of female suffering and oppression” (Ndabayakhe and Addison 90). In her 1987 paper, “Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa”, Katherine Frank proclaimed polygamy “the most glaring and sexist feature of traditional African society” (18). However, the situation seems more complex. Obioma Nnaemeka has suggested that such totalising criticism is mistaken, blind to the subtle agencies of women:

In western/feminist discourses, African traditional practices are reified and cast as impositions on women. It is unthinkable in such imperialist discourses that African women actually *choose* to have co-wives and some *choose* to be circumcised. African women who are in polygamous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims. (168)

For proponents of polygyny as a form of polygamy, the institution has some merits for women, among them female sharing of household labour, which frees time for the wives' small business undertakings outside the home, which benefits the women, as well as the entire household (Ware 189). Seth Nomenyo argues that for the wife, polygyny may be very liberating, for the presence of the other wives makes it “possible for her to free herself at regular intervals from the chores of married life” (232). Then again, counter critics aver that

the marrying of more than one wife at a time fundamentally benefits the man, as the wives and children provide cheap labour, the capacity to expand his property, and to enhance his status (Hayase and Liaw 296).

The pros and cons of polygyny as a “conjugal form” (Ndabayakhe and Addison 94) are contentious, even more so if we factor in claims in which polygyny is understood as helping wives to “share the burden of the husband’s *sexual* demands” (Ware 189, my italics), enabling a wife on occasion to “rediscover the freedom to use her time for her personal concerns and to fulfill her own desires” (Nomenyo 232). This implies the possibility that in the polygynous context, women can motivate their sexuality variously, as instrumental and/or as libidinous, towards their own preferred ends. It may be, for example, that women in a polygynous marriage, being obliged to share their husband, may feel sexually neglected, or unfulfilled. As my discussion of Shoneyin’s novel will show, the debates informing polygyny are not easy to settle, and Shoneyin’s text draws a reader into precisely this complicated nexus of responses.

Shoneyin has not hidden the fact that she views polygamy as oppressive to women, for it pits women against each other. In an interview with Fredua-Agyeman, she claims that modern polygyny is an institution in which women participate because they are illiterate, unskilled and have been led to expect limited ambitions and aspirations because of their femaleness. She also implies that many polygamous wives come from rural areas where they were not educated to imagine themselves as anything other than a man’s property. That said, while in *Baba Segi’s Wives* three of her characters who are in a polygamous marriage are indeed illiterate, they are not by any means depicted as docile or gullible; in addition, precisely *because* they harbour ambitions beyond their circumstances they are prompted to devise sharp-witted strategies of interim escape which enable them somewhat to bypass the dutiful confines of the marriage.

Set primarily in 2001, *The Secret Lives of Baba’s Wives* is a story about a modern day Lagos polygamous family. Ishola Alao, also known as Baba Segi, is a boisterous, vain and illiterate patriarch with four wives: in order of seniority, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Bolanle. Shoneyin cannily constructs her cast of female characters so as to produce not only the necessary narrative tension which often hooks a reader, but also so as to introduce into established cultural norms a perplexing, contrary element which cannot easily be reconciled with arguments for or against polygyny. She unsettles her readers, whatever the views of polygyny they might bring to their reading of the novel. The first three wives, for example, are illiterate women, and they enter into the marriage because of their constrained financial

and social circumstances. It is not quite by force, and yet their life situations seem to oblige them into marrying Baba Segi (or a man very like him). In comparison Bolanle, the youngest wife, is a university graduate. To the dismay of her mother, she chooses to marry Baba Segi. However, this is because of her traumatic secret: she was “ruined, damaged, destroyed” (149-150) after being raped at the age of fifteen by a stranger who had given her lift from the bus stop and accordingly feels no man could really want her. The prevalence of rape in patriarchal societies as evidenced by the three texts which feature such violations on women’s bodies and integrity, for example Bolanle’s rape here, Vimbai who is raped by her boyfriend in Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Sheri’s gang rape in Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* evinces the close link between sexuality and social power configurations whereby male hegemony in its dominance confers power and a right to access women’s bodies even without their consent, and often with impunity, for the violator. Here in Shoneyin’s narrative, one might initially wonder whether the author is not attesting to the woundedness of women who enter polygynous marriage arrangements: illiteracy and rape, while apparently of different orders, are historically both commonplace systemic social injuries inflicted upon female embodiment. In the same line of thought, in his analysis of the novel, Chielozona Eze argues that by portraying a polygamous family, Shoneyin’s goal is not necessarily to “dismiss the system of polygamous marriage in her Yoruba culture”; rather she is “interested in exposing the tensions within that culture” which “disrupt the tendency to conceive of culture as a bounded whole, and to use it to justify the power dynamics in intersubjective relationships” (311). All of Baba Segi’s wives enter into the marriage because of societal forces which continue to marginalise and oppress women due to their gender. And yet the issue of polygyny in the novel becomes more complicated in its representation as it is more than just a negative space of oppression with no gap for resistance, reconfiguration or negotiation.

Additionally, Shoneyin’s use of humour as one strategy in a narrative which features very serious topics (among them sexual abuse and domestic violence), is unexpected. In their introduction to the edited collection *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein offer comments which can be extrapolated to Shoneyin’s use of humour: “laughter is not considered a cultural attribute of a specific postcolonial space or a marker of an inherent otherness; laughter is rather considered a device which is self-consciously employed and strategically positioned in textual constructions or an effect elicited by these constructions” (1-2). Madelaine Hron also explores the uses of humour in advancing even serious causes such as human rights. She mentions Shoneyin’s novel,

commenting that its satire of polygamy and arranged marriage is gentle rather than acerbic, resembling the humour of the popular American television series *Sister Wives* (2015). The implication is that the author of *Baba Segi's Wives* is interested in discovering relevant ways of mediating a reader's understanding of polygyny in a contemporary African context in which older traditions and new cultures find awkward encounter, and in the tragic-comedy of laughter and tears may offer some way forward. Possibly, even, the gentle humour might be a means to draw attention to the troublesome questions associated with polygyny, in a way that is cleverly persuasive for readers rather than outright alienating, especially if they are unaccustomed to thinking critically of the issue. If in many "fictional accounts of polygamy, women suffer from neglect, betrayal, abandonment and their own and others' envy and jealousy" (Ndabayakhe and Addison 98), in the novel, Shoneyin uses humour not only to portray difficult issues such as the jealousy and hatred that exist between the wives (for example Iya Femi constantly refers to Iya Segi as a fat frog because of her weight) but also to present light-hearted critiques of social concerns such as the religious hypocrisy of one of the wives. Even Baba Segi himself is the butt of some of the jokes circulated among the wives which demonstrates their own subversion of Baba Segi as a patriarchal authority who is unable to father children, and manage his household.

Baba Segi has seven children with his first three wives and he wishes for more children. However after two years with Bolanle, his fourth wife, she still remains childless. Because his virility has already been proven (seven children are surely substantial testament...), and because society has "constructed masculinity and fertility through the ability of the man to have children [and] since male[s] are inherently fertile, infertility and childlessness" are "considered feminine" (Odinga 463), Baba Segi assumes that the problem is with Bolanle. My convoluted sentence construction here is deliberate. It gestures rhetorically towards the potential misapprehensions associated with Baba Segi's assured belief in his male potency, and also to the convoluted, playfully hyperbolic narrative scenarios which Shoneyin invents in order to subject socially serious issues to wryly comic reconfigurations that test a reader's naturalised assumptions about male and female roles and sexualities. Bolanle, for her part, insists on undergoing medical fertility tests (to the dismay of Baba Segi's three older wives, who are worried that their long charade will now be undone), and the tests indeed reveal the secret that the wives have collectively guarded over the years: Baba is sterile. Yunusy Ng'umbi usefully argues that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* "subverts what is considered the norm by rendering the male character impotent" (73), though of course he must mean 'infertile', since Baba very evidently does *not*

suffer from erectile dysfunction. He regularly batters and pummels his wives (words I will subsequently discuss) with his erections, but fails to produce viable sperm. Ng’umbi adds that polygyny in the novel is used by the women as a social institution to challenge patriarchal power and that the wives manipulate men’s ‘impotence’ and irresponsibility as weapons to negotiate power in the family. I prefer to shift the focus somewhat in this section of my own study, where I argue that in the space of polygynous relation amongst the husband and the wives in Shoneyin’s narrative, women garner multiple opportunities to explore their sexuality, despite the domestic emphasis upon male power and satisfaction. In some respects, the wives achieve sexual satisfactions and pleasures which are denied to them, and they simultaneously reconfigure and subvert the limits that are placed on their female bodies and sexualities. Obioma Nnaemeka’s theory of nego-feminism is applicable to the wives’ reworking of patriarchal power in order to challenge the gendered constraints of their sexualities:

Nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation. [...] In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around”. African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal landmines. In other words it knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts” (377-8).

Nnaemeka’s thinking points to the nuanced and context-specific strategising which can be discerned in apparently fixed socio-cultural patternings of African gender relations. Nnaemeka’s theorisation points to the agency of women in strategising and navigating against oppressive structures. Note Nnameka’s subtle use of prepositions in the above quotation: negotiation may occur *with*, and/or it may occur *around*. This form of canny slippage is important for the strategising used by Baba’s wives, as they work variously within and beyond the family domestic sphere in order to express their female power, as mothers, (co)wives and sexual beings. Nnameka’s idea points to the elusive bargaining of power between men and women, and women and women, which finds points of intersection with Foucault’s ideas of power as not fixed but diffuse. Such dispersion, as Michel de Certeau observes, introduces a tension between Foucault’s panoptical thesis, revealing it as a complex fiction or “rhetorical art” (191). We gradually discern what is in effect Foucault’s contrary desire both to reproduce such totalising omniscience in his over-arching theorising of power, *and* his simultaneous insistence on the tactical possibility of “heterogeneous micro-

techniques” which subversively re-script panoptical discourse (192). It is precisely such productive instabilities, I suggest, which help us to understand the actions of Baba Segi’s wives as occurring at once within, and beyond, the social space of the polygynous marriage, since this marriage restricts their femaleness and yet is also unable to determine its variance, and its limit, its agentive, micro-physical moves which destabilise the framing order.

Baba Segi’s Wives slightly differs from the other novels discussed in this chapter with regard to the degree of detail in its setting. Unlike the other novels, where state politics in conjunction with cultural politics are very clearly depicted as exerting an influence on female subjectivities, embodiment and sexualities, the 2001 context of Shoneyin’s novel is more obliquely narrated. The novel implies a nation still recovering from Sani Abacha’s autocratic military rule, but the narrative only tangentially refers to state politics and the consequences for female sexuality. However, we do infer the workings of state politics through rampant evidence of the breaking of the supportive obligations of social contract between state and subject. Prominent here is bad governance in the form of corruption, nepotism and systemic poverty, all of which trickle down to more intimate relations among men and women. Such conditions permeate the textures of the entire novel, and in particular have adverse effects on the lives of poor, vulnerable women:

Ayikara was more than four or five parallel streets laced by lasciviousness: it was a spirit. The dark buildings were full of women whose faces glowed under ultraviolet lights. These women lived for other women’s men. They cooked for them. Drank with them. Fought over them. Fucked them. Nursed them. Slapped them and loved them. And when the longing love caused made them ill, they surrendered their lives and died for them. (2)

Such a paragraph makes it clear that debilitating socio-economic conditions are implicated in a nexus between domesticity and complicated gendered power and sexual relations between men and women. In such dire conditions, sexuality becomes a space where various forms of female agencies towards economic survival, sexual desires, intimacy and love are exercised.

Earlier in this section, I mentioned the question of humour, which is again pertinent in relation to Shoneyin’s shifting of attention from the state and its policies to the exuberantly entangled intimacies and power games of the polygynous family situation. To capture the realities of ordinary Nigerian life, Shoneyin in *Baba Segi’s Wives* calls upon a vital carnivalesque energy which snubs Big State politics by pushing them from the centre, in effect satirising the false strictures of those spaces habitually designated politically important by embedding the narrative within the gendered politics of sexuality which comprise those

taken-for-granted aspects of human governance that are customarily reinforced by the patriarchal state in collaboration with other apparatuses such as religion. In this regard she invokes sexuality as a wide-ranging Rabelaisian desire which cannot be contained by dogmatic norms and discursive injunction. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, “[n]o dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook” (3). I find in *Baba Segi Wives* that the ‘Rabelaisian’ impulse upends the authoritarianism of the sexual status quo. Shoneyin’s narrative disrupts patriarchal power and the many assumptions about polygamy, male infertility and the monogamous impulse of female sexuality. At the same time, it does not romanticise such disruptions, for the unfolding of the story motivates varieties of ribald humour and satire, characters with a degree of typicality and yet individuated, pained details.

In order to examine the “texture of the lives of her female characters” (Eze 320), Shoneyin employs a variety of narrative techniques, shifting from the omniscient narrator to “the riches” of the first person point of view which enables each woman to tell her own story. Baba Segi may be the putative head of the household, and ‘the wives’ are his; and yet it is the wives who animate the narrative with their interrelated female stories, entering a reader’s imagination as individual women whose identities are not neatly synonymous with their identification as Baba Segi’s spouses and mothers of ‘his’ children. The author herself explains in an interview with Wana Udobang that she wanted readers to “‘hear’ directly from the wives” as “this opportunity does not come about very often. Women in polygamous homes are often cagey about their personal views because there is too much at stake” (n.p), since in a polygamous marriage, “a wife seen to be exposing matrimonial secrets could jeopardise her place in the family” (n.p). But Shoneyin cannot bring herself to discount that “every woman has a story” so that in “my head, I created an invisible character that they could all talk to, hence the conversational tones of each narrative voice” (Interview with Wana Udobang n.p). This dialogic, conversational texture works in interesting tension with the humour, a reader sometimes holding a character’s experience, views or thoughts at an ironic, emotionally arch distance, and at other times sharing in an affective intimacy with her, boundaries dissolving.

Of “Pounding” and Masculinities

Baba Segi’s notions of masculinity derive from closely intertwined assumptions about male virility, sexuality and sexual performance. As Iya Segi, his first wife reveals, “[w]omen are

my husband's weakness. He cannot resist them, especially when they are low and downcast like puppies prematurely snatched from their mothers' breasts" (103). Women, for Baba Segi, are weak subordinates to men. Vulnerability in women - which supposedly exemplifies their gender subordination - appeals to his male ego as it offers him the space to perform his masculinity by providing for women, and taking care of them. And yet this is also marked by inconsistencies, since his insatiable sexual desire for women is what causes him to marry another woman despite the fact that he already has three wives.

His belief in the superiority of men over women extends to his (un)imaginative conceptualising of a woman's body and sexual agency, and his own prowess during sexual intercourse. Of his new young wife, for example, he remarks:

It annoyed him that Bolanle was the reason he had come [to consult Teacher, his mentor], when just two years ago he had boasted of his conquest: how Bolanle was tight as a bottleneck, how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed; and how she took the length of his manhood on her back-splayed out and submissive. He didn't quite know how he would tell the men that all his pounding had proved futile. (4)

The passage shows how Baba conflates various forms of male authority; even the intercourse is instrumental, since sex must produce children. Bolanle's failure to conceive by implication casts aspersion on Baba's potency. His boasts, in effect, have come to nothing. In a patriarchal society where "sexual potency gives social potency, value and self-esteem to men" (Silberschmidt 242), and where sexual pleasure for women tends to be erased as unnecessary or inconsequential, the combination of Baba Segi's ejaculations, thumping and procreative futility with Bolanle becomes an embarrassment for him. It is his own guilty secret, to be concealed from "the men" although his young wife's still slender, unfruitful body will as it were betray him *again*, announcing exactly that which he hopes to hide. Despite performing all the most virile of reproductive actions, according to the dominant social script; despite ostensibly proving time and again his manly authority, this very same authority is repeatedly undermined because his virility is called into question by the failure of Bolanle to conceive. For all its demonstrable iterations in the bedroom, physical actions which are often subsequently re-circulated in boastful male conversations, Baba's prolonged "sexual prowess" after two years has not produced the desired results: a child.

Baba Segi is described by his wives as being very well endowed: his "penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well hung" (132). The size of his penis also functions as a supposed marker of his dominant masculinity and power over women. For Baba Segi, "pounding" 'proves' his sexual prowess; he must pound in order to produce – for

himself, and his wives - his proper sense of masculinity. The sexual pounding is a physical assertion of the socialised demand for a husband to demonstrate patriarchal dominance over his wives, because they are women. Ironically, though, this numbing action not only denies mutual pleasure, it *also* does not produce the supposedly ultimate desired effect, which is a child. Since Baba Segi's focus is not on pleasure – neither his own, really, nor that of his wife - the sex does not entail sensual joy, and nor, for all its repetitive, performative ‘reproduction’ of socially dominant codes of maleness, does it allow him to reproduce in terms of the offspring that would credentialise his masculinity. Baba Segi knows no more than repeatedly to treat the female body – in the varied embodiments of his different wives – as a vessel to be filled with socialised expectations. In the above passage, he not only disregards Bolanle's sexual pleasure, he pays no attention to the pain he inflicts on her through his incessant battering. Additionally, it seems that sex with Bolanle, the university graduate (when he himself is illiterate) is shadowed by his own insecurities, which require that he remind her of her proper place as a woman.

Kopano Ratele argues that sex is sanctioned to “reaffirm aggressive heterosexual masculinity and to assert control over women” (Ratele “Masculinities and Maleness” 2), especially in contexts where “the ruling form of masculinity supports the idea of females being subjected to males” (Ratele “Masculinities and Maleness” 2). The corollary is that female sexual pleasure will “be subsumed to male sexual pleasure” (Ratele “Masculinities and Maleness” 2). Jennifer Oriel corroborates Ratele's ideas by arguing that while “sexual rights advocates recommend that sexual pleasure should be recognised as a human right...the construction of sexuality as gender-neutral in sexual rights literature conceals how men's demand for sexual pleasure often reinforces the subordination of women's sexual enjoyment” (392). These discussions are illustrated in Baba Segi's intimate relations with his wives. Although Baba Segi celebrates his sexual prowess as part of his manhood, he denies his wives any sexual fulfillment through his clumsily driven, even violent ‘lovemaking’. For Bolanle, having failed to fall pregnant after two years of his ministrations, Baba's blunt, aggressive sexual technique reminds her of the debased feeling of being raped as a teenager:

It must have been my vulnerability that aroused him because he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible. It was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn't make light of his husbandly duties. He wanted to fuck me pregnant. If there was ever a moment when the memory of being raped became fresh in my mind, that was it. (44)

The language that Bolanle uses to describe the sexual relationship – instrumental, workmanlike, and premised on power – conveys the traumatic nature of the intercourse between them, a bodily onslaught which summons the repressed memories of pain and objectification she experienced during the rape. The language highlights the emotional disconnect between the husband and wife, the lack of intimacy as a couple which disallows mutual sexual fulfillment. In Baba Segi's mind, sex for women is merely a means to procreation; emotional intimacy and pleasure are not part of the encounter. I also note, though, that this misconception is so deeply entrenched in his mind that he even disallows the possibility of *his own* pleasure with Bolanle, insisting instead on a desperately emphatic performance of male sexuality *upon* Bolanle, which translates into his performance, externally *and* within her, of his “husbandly duties”. The sex is at once driven by and constrained by social discourses which demand reproduction, linking it to status and cultural authority. For both man and woman, then, the only reciprocity envisaged is that of biological transaction: the husband is ‘naturally’ obligated to impregnate the wife who in turn is ‘naturally’ expected to conceive.

Interestingly, it is not only Bolanle, the inexperienced young wife, who uses verbs such as “hammering” to characterise Baba Segi's forceful sexual technique. The other wives refer to sex with Baba as “pummeling”, for example, another term which connotes a physical drubbing, an insistent beating. For instance, Iya Tope confesses that “[a]fter a night with Baba Segi, the stomach is beaten into the chest by that baton that dangles between his legs” (50). The ‘baton’ evokes a weapon of police control; a device of force used to discipline and quell unruly crowds. This is how the wives experience sex with their husband. It is an act of physical domination, which also attests to Baba's having himself internalised dominant codes of proper masculinity. Certainly, sex with Baba Segi is not “figured as pleasurable, supportive, loving, and empowering”; not characterised by “mutual desire and participation” (Norridge 28).

However, despite the homogenising battery of patriarchy in the figure of Baba Segi, which would relegate the wives to subordination and dependence, the three wives find unorthodox means through which to subvert phallic patriarchal power at the embodied source, as it were, the instrumentalised penis. They turn the threat of Baba's infertility to their own cultural advantage as wives who need to be mothers for their own self-fulfillment as well as to maintain their positions in the marriage, *and* in some cases to seek the fulfillment of their sexual desires.

“Do You Want to Remain a Barren Maggot?: Undermining Patriarchal Power through Male Infertility

Shoneyin shows how polygyny limits women’s ability to achieve sexual fulfillment which in this context is constructed as an exclusively male domain. For Baba Segi, who believes “he is more than all women and most men” (87), his wives’ desires and sexual fulfillment are subordinate to his own insatiable desires, which are themselves shaped by received ideas of acceptable masculinity and thus make satisfaction *less* likely. As I suggested above, in the marital context even these desires have been shaped by a discursive and conceptual regime which prioritises sex in the service of reproduction, leading to the subordination of sexual pleasure. Also, in his decisions to take additional wives, Baba Segi is oblivious to the anxiety that lack of sexual pleasure and fulfillment cause to his existing wives. For example, when Baba Segi announces his decision to take Bolanle as his fourth wife, Iya Tope’s main concern is the number of days that she will now get to spend with Baba Segi:

My only worry was that Bolanle’s arrival would disrupt the sex rotation. Baba Segi normally went from wife to wife, starting each week with Iya Segi. By Thursday, he’d start the cycle again, leaving him with the freedom to choose whom to spend Sunday night with. Baba Segi used this night to reward whichever wife had missed a night because of her menstrual flow. Sometimes, a wife would have Sunday night if he knew he’d been heavy-handed in scolding her. [...] Now that a new wife had joined us, one of us would have only one night a week. (47-8)

Perhaps her sentiments are surprising, given that she describes Baba Segi’s “lovemaking” as violently unenjoyable. Perhaps I should argue that Iya Tope has been assimilated into dominant patriarchal codes regarding female sexuality which have persuaded her to position her body as being of service to male sexuality regardless of how many other women there are to offer the same “services”. Perhaps some part of the argument must be that it is through regular, ideally frequent sexual encounter that a wife in a polygynous marriage believes herself best able to exert a form of control over her husband, the relative privacy enabling her to reinforce the interests of her own position, vis-a-vis the other wives. The anxiety of Iya Tope might stem from threats to cultural status, with possible implications for her social position and *perceptions* regarding further child-bearing even though the problem of impotency is not with her or the other wives. (The polygynous system ensures that Baba Segi gets his sexual needs satisfied every day of the week. The wives must wait their turn. The addition of a fourth wife hence decreases the number of days for each wife from two to possibly one.)

Whatever the more prosaic, structural arguments, Iya Tope's concerns also imply the possibility of a wife's autonomous longing for sexual-emotional satisfaction, beyond the clumsy or discomfiting sex with her shared husband. The point in the novel is that in relation to a complex of arrangements and feelings, the three existing wives devise a counter-means through which to destabilise the system that threatens to systematise their opportunities for sex. Here, while the home situation may be a microcosmic analogue of a larger political autocracy, it is important to understand that while the wives may seem to be set one against another, each serving her own individual ends, it is also clear that over time the first three wives establish a sisterhood of shared complicity within the polygynous marriage in order to manipulate Baba Segi's infertility to their own advantage. I would therefore not be inclined to entirely agree with Ndabayakhe and Addison, for they insist that not

only do African authors frequently show, in painful emotional detail, how detrimental polygamous relationships are to the happiness of women, but these authors also deny that the institution even offers women the compensations of sisterhood. While friendship between women is cherished by many female writers, none of them finds that being married to the same man encourages sisterly or tolerably harmonious relationships between co-wives. Even male authors who project a positive image of polygamy do not manage to demonstrate sisterhood among co-wives as a convincing norm. (Ndabayakhe and Addison 102)

As I see it – without my having to be a general apologist for polygyny as a marriage system – the first three women who are married to Baba Segi manage to look out for one another even though their reason is primarily to protect their secret from Baba Segi. For example when Iya Tope gets carried away with her extramarital relationship with the butcher, she neglects her household duties as well as her maternal duties. When Baba Segi begins to wonder what is going on with her, Iya Segi makes excuses for her and even instructs her own children to bath Iya Tope's children, covering up any imagined maternal neglect. The three wives for *years* keep the truth of Baba's infertility a secret known only amongst themselves. This supports Oyeronke Oyěwùmi's suggestion that “different groups of marginalised women can create new spaces and social locations for themselves within the dominant culture”, in effect taking “the margins to the centre and vice versa” (273). This implies that the marriage space becomes a “social location” through which to disrupt the workings of patriarchy. If Baba Segi is named in the title of the novel, a ‘titular’ respect in keeping with his patriarchal status, in the course of the narrative Shoneyin not only sardonically undercuts this male prerogative, but crafts a plot in which the women acquire their own differentiated female powers - as

wives, but also as individualised women. More details of this will emerge in my subsequent discussions.

Money, Lust and Iya Segi's desires

Iya Segi, Baba's first wife, "mother-of-the-home" (20) and mother to his two oldest children, is the wife who controls the Alao household and its secrets. Her own power might seem to derive solely from her cultural position as the first wife, and the first to give Baba Segi children after "lap[ping] up the dark green powder her husband had sprinkled on her palm" (3). And yet, unbeknown to Baba, she is the *master* strategist of the house, since she knows that he is incapable of making any woman pregnant. Her plans evolve both in order to safeguard her position in the marriage, and to retain access to her hard-earned money which her mother had unlawfully given to Baba Segi at the time of their marriage ceremony. In response both to cultural pressures and her own sense of entitlement as a woman, Iya Segi devises a plan which will ensure the continuation of Baba Segi's lineage, thus securing her position in the marriage and enabling her to control her money. At the same time, the plan protects Baba Segi from the ridicule of being infertile if the secret came out; this paradoxically serves the same patriarchal hierarchy that controls female sexuality by making it synonymous with procreation. The lines of meaning that Shoneyin explores are entangled. In simple terms, though, the solution is masterful: Iya Segi gets impregnated by Taju, Baba Segi's personal driver, and succeeds in maintaining her position in the house. (This proxy pregnancy also then drives the narrative onwards, leading to the artful complexity of the story.)

What do readers discover about Iya Segi? Raised by a single mother whose husband "pursued another woman's hole and died inside it" (97), Iya Segi is socialised into resisting patriarchy by her mother's hatred of men: "Men are nothing. They are fools. The penis between their legs is all they are useful for. And even then, if not that women needed their seed for children, it would be better to sit on a finger of green plantain. Listen to my words. Only a foolish woman leans heavily on a man's promises' she said" (97). Shoneyin's register, here, is wonderfully localised, and uses bathetic comparison to diminish the imagined stature of men. Phallus. Penis. Plantain. The line of mockery renders power minimal, little more than a minor commonplace. Iya Segi's mother's subversive sentiments render masculinity useless except for the service it can perform for women. These sentiments portray forms of female knowledge which go against conventions of how women ought to perceive men. At the same time, although Iya Segi's mother's radicalism in advising her daughter to reject the institution

of marriage hinges on envisioning a separatist world without men – a world in which the familiar and essential plantain vegetable could wishfully fulfill the function of the culturally over-inflated penis - her worldview is still located within an ideology that posits motherhood as pivotal in African cultures and women's lives. In this regard, Oyewumi argues that motherhood is a position of power and it is “the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women” (1096). Whatever its contradictions, Iya Segi's mother's constant derision of the uselessness of men teaches Iya Segi self-autonomy as she starts selling *fufu*, a small market business which brings her much money which she hides under her mattress and in pots. (These sites are interestingly linked to female domesticity and marriage duties, and are here unsettled as locales of female economic independence.) Iya's mind becomes so focused on making money that she has no time or desire to think of anything else: “My fingers liked the feel of money. My eyes liked to see the piles of money swell. I worshipped money. Even when boys teased me over the flap of flesh that circled my neck, I was not bothered. I looked at them and sniggered, knowing their fathers' fathers could not have the fraction of the wealth I had accumulated” (98). The language, here, combines the sensual, seductive appeal of money (“feel”, “swell”), with the social status that wealth endows. This is particularly so for a young woman, and even more so for a young woman who is subject to the casual mockery of boys, minor ‘men’, on account of her physical appearance. In Iya Segi's relational world, money replaces man and marriage as it were, becoming a substitute. The point, I think, is that prompted by her mother's views, she does not simply acknowledge the conventional female interpellation, where a girl is expected to answer society's ‘hailing’ her via the established institution of marriage, rather than developing economic independence.

As Shoneyin's plot would have it, however, the situation is even more complicated. Readers might differ on this point, the degree to which they find the author's motivation for what happens next plausible, or perhaps expedient. The gambit, whatever the extent of its supposed success or failure, is relevant in carrying Shoneyin's wish, as a writer, to perturb complacent sexual mores. It is only through happenstance that Iya Segi's lack of interest in sex suddenly strikes her as more specifically an indifference to *heterosexual sex*. She notices a carpenter staring at the buttocks of a female tomato seller: “It wasn't until the day I went to call the carpenter to repair our bench that I realised there was a whole path in life that I had never trod” (98). For the first time in twenty-three years she is confronted with erotic feelings – and for a woman. She says, “I could not stop looking at her. Her walk, her filthy tongue, her short-cropped hair, her bare feet – everything about her fascinated me. I was awash with lust”

(98). The depiction here is perhaps contentious. The tomato seller is shown as being attractive to Iya Segi because she flouts respectable femininity in her lively, idiosyncratic embodiment of femaleness. And yet Iya Segi's response could be said simply to reprise a male gaze. The tomato seller's female 'difference', with its enticingly crude speech (oddly silenced, as it happens, in the text) and blithely independent appearance which pays no regard to prettiness or politeness, might be said to other this woman. Her robust, uninhibited manner and unrefined (or natural?) looks embody both the naturalness *and* the supposed transgression of Iya Segi's 'deviant' desire, locating the woman as closer to earthiness and hence to sexuality than women who are orientated towards 'proper' heteronormative codes. I am uncertain whether the shortcomings are Shoneyin's, or whether the author is attempting to depict Iya Segi's own circumscription within a normative male matrix of desire, even though the object of her desire is female. The tomato seller becomes the focus of Iya Segi's thoughts, day and night:

I couldn't get the girl out of my mind. For comfort, I started to count money, but before long, I was lying dreamily on the bed. There was money everywhere, spread liberally over my thighs, my neck, my upper arms. This is how my mother found me – bathed in money, wearing the notes like a garment – when she barged in at midnight. She was equally alarmed to find me naked but for my pants. My clothes were strewn all over the room. Mama concluded on the spot that the root of my madness was money. 'You have made money your husband,' she said. (99)

When Iya Segi's hopes of seeing the girl again are not realised – the author seems unable to transgress beyond the hint of queer sexuality - she does indeed attempt to satiate her thwarted desire for the tomato seller with her tangible, accumulated wealth; this is *an attempt* to deal with her disappointment and her sexual frustrations. The pleasurable, material feel of the notes on her body, the liberal plenitude of the notes overwhelming her, washing over her, is the correlative of her expansive sexual feelings for this woman, unspoken, perhaps even not fully formed, fantasies that are refused gratification.

When Iya Segi's mother realises that money has become a fetish for her daughter she contradicts her own stance against the power of patriarchy by making it her mission to marry off her child as soon as possible. I am not sure how to read this move on the part of Shoneyin. Perhaps there is an element of risible social comedy, in that the mother all-too-easily switches from her dismissive mockery of men to finding in marriage the quick solution, or even curative, to what she (mistakenly) imagines is her daughter's obsession – money. The humorous undercurrent here works through substitutability: the mother has initially directed the girl away from men and towards earning money. Then, when *that* desire apparently

enlarges beyond what is considered appropriate, the apt corrective is assumed to be ‘a man’, which age-old solution will swell into the familiar social reproduction of marriage, and family. The future children, in essence, would become the material evidence of the most desirable social currency – the wealth of offspring generated by sexual reproduction. The sardonic authorial undercurrent is: if a girl isn’t fixated on money, or a man, *what else could it be?*

However, despite her mother’s efforts to direct her daughter’s attention from money to the dominant economy, for females, of husband and marriage (I wonder about the separation of these, in some respects, since both are co-implicated, as the stories of several of the wives show), Iya Segi is not interested in meeting the eligible men in the village; her mind remains captivated by the tomato seller. She searches for the woman. She finds her again – only to have the realisation of her utterly forbidden desires stall her courage. Instead of declaring herself (is it, I ask myself, that even this sexually outspoken novel cannot grant a woman such a transgressive degree of sexual desire?), she spends the day stalking the tomato seller and marvelling at the fact that they breathe the same air. The inarticulate longing continues, in thoughts that have no means of expressing same-sex attraction other than through dominant heteronormative codes: “I can’t explain why but I wanted her for myself. I wanted to build a house for her and keep the key between my breasts. I wanted to dress her in the finest *aso oke* so she could parade herself for my delight alone. I wanted to lock her between my thighs” (101).

In this breathless fantasy, the boundaries between sexual desire and the exertion of power overlap. The language through which Iya Segi expresses her longing for the desirable tomato seller - even in interior consciousness, *to herself*, replicates the conventional ‘provider’ discourse that is habitually associated with the male role in heterosexual relationships. What are we to make of this? Is Iya Segi, despite her same-sex desires, being portrayed as caught up in, complicit with, the behavioural codes of normative heteropatriarchy? Perhaps. Her response in contesting is simultaneously continuous with a replicating mimicry of what Judith Butler calls “the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (*Gender Trouble* 13). And yet I also maintain that this encoding does not simply fix Iya Segi firmly within the patriarchy, her desire colonised to the extent that she cannot ‘imagine’ differently, despite the evident *difference* of the sexuality that is being imagined. Yes, she wants sole possession of the tomato seller, and even as she wishes to care for her, building a house, and bestowing luxurious gifts, the author makes it

clear that such ‘care’ might also entail a form of carceral enslavement, an abuse of power. Shoneyin very pointedly draws attention to Iya Segi’s use of a heteronormative discourse in relation to her same-sex fantasies, thus creating a conceptual *discontinuity* in the reader’s experience which invites criticism. Shoneyin is using this as a deliberate strategy of what we might call re-writing (in keeping with postcolonial impulses) to challenge and disrupt the entrenched, even tyrannical patterns through which normative sexual desire is habitually imagined, corralling even the non-normative within its preferred domains. This, too, is an authoritarian regime, of a sort, which derives from a wider social matrix that permeates even the shape of sexual fantasy.

The daughter’s own secret desires remain hidden, displaced by the mother into an assumed hunger for wealth which then supposedly needs to be further displaced into motherhood. The multiple layers push the fragile glimpse of lesbian desire further and further to the margins of even imaginative (never mind experiential) possibility. In a pointedly predictable outcome, Iya Segi’s mother, herself about to die, succeeds in finding a husband who will marry, and by extension, discipline, the financial ambitions of her overly independent daughter. This is another wryly comic pushing of narrative up against more conventional, serious expectations, in which the most transgressive of the daughter’s impulses, her queer desire, is blithely unaccounted for, because it is unknown to her mother. In the visible terms of the surface on which the narrative plays out (psychic desire escaping attention), Iya Segi is married off to Baba Segi because the mother – more even than she wants her daughter’s economic independence, which she has herself all along advocated – now, in the face of the daughter’s ‘lust’ for wealth, in preference wants her girl to have the respectable, established cultural narrative of husband and children. As part of the arrangement, further overturning her earlier subversive tendencies towards patriarchy, the mother, without her daughter’s consent, gifts Ishola Alao (who later becomes Baba Segi) all the money that her daughter has earned and saved. In a complete volte face, suddenly conforming to patriarchal practices which prefer to restrict ownership and the accumulation of wealth to men, thereby consolidating women’s dependence, Iya Segi’s mother disburses her daughter’s wealth to a man in order that he will marry and care for her. Again, the author reveals the perverse underpinnings of this so-called care. It is at points such as these, I think, that Shoneyin’s clear-eyed treatment of marriage arrangements shows their basis in sustaining and reproducing a transactional economy not that different from the selling and selecting of goods in a marketplace. The implication of the mother’s treatment of her

daughter – a selling out, as it were - is that the naturalised marriage plot is so powerful that it can (*must*) overcome any possible alternatives or counter-narratives. In the space of Shoneyin's story, even the *clandestine* undercurrent of transgressive female desire – Iya Segi's secret desire for another woman - is re-absorbed into compulsory heterosexuality before the transgression of eroticism between women can physically materialise, and become a serious threat to established gender norms.

Iya Segi is told by her mother: "It is every woman's life purpose to bear children. Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living? That is not how I want to leave you in this world" (101). Iya Segi's essentialist argument about womanhood corroborates Laretta Ngcobo's observation that in many African societies "every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group". A woman without a child in such societies as the one in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is perceived as incomplete and becomes what John Mbiti defines as the "dead end of human life, not only on genealogical level but also for herself" (144). Iya Segi's mother's comments about reproduction and the narrative treatment of female same-sex desires in the novel intrigue me, and lead me to speculate whether female same sex desire is represented as ghostmaking in the sense that it does not reproduce patriarchy but rather challenges how gender and sexuality are constructed under patriarchy. Iya Segi is therefore forced to marry Baba Segi (for whom she feels no attraction) against her will but decides to use her sexuality to take back control of her money which is responsible for making Baba Segi rich. Even though she does not particularly enjoy sexual intercourse with Baba Segi "the pain in my belly spread through my back and up my neck to my ears" (103), she uses her body and sexuality to control her money and to manipulate her husband into allowing her to open some shops for herself. Very overtly pledging her loyalty to Baba Segi, she says "'I will follow you anywhere, my lord.' I raised my buttocks and let him fill me again. I would follow my money anywhere" (103). Money for Iya Segi represents the path for freedom and self-determination, a life where she will one day be able to live as she has always wanted. Even at the end of the novel, this freedom has not materialised. Instead, she has needed to accept compromise, one which uneasily implicates further women. Baba Segi uses Iya Segi's money to build successful businesses, which success in turn enables him to marry more wives, who in turn are "weakened by the prosperity he offers" (104). Iya Segi for her part decides she is better off living within the frame of her husband's life, with the important qualification being that she is the woman who pulls the strings, manipulating a restricting situation towards more

self-sustaining ends. Iya Segi's understanding of her role provides a good illustration of the concept of nego-feminism in the face of patriarchal control:

They (the co-wives) know that *I* am the true provider. My husband only thinks he controls this household and I let him believe that he does. I *want* him to believe he does but *I* am the one who keeps this household together. Good things happen here because I allow them. *I* alone can approve vengeance and only *I* know how to bring calm (104; italics in original).

The emphasis on the italicised “*I*” underscores the position of power, authority and privilege that Iya Segi has negotiated for herself within the family which separates her from the other wives who “live for a kind pat on the head from the mother-of-the-home” (104) and Baba Segi who thinks he controls the household. Clearly, as in her fantasies of the tomato seller, some manner of hierarchy continues to obtain in her thinking, and Iya Segi's entitlement as first wife, compounded by her intelligent duping, places her in a crucial, ordinate position among the other wives. Towards them she can be patronising, and sometimes even physically and verbally violent. Iya *Segi* lives up to her customary name as first wife, taking the name of the man upon her own. The power she holds in the household can be destructive, for she rallies the other wives into ostracising the new wife, Bolanle, and even poisons her food, a violence which backfires when Segi her first born child accidentally eats the food instead of Bolanle. Shoneyin seems to be emphasising that Bolanle is the interloper, especially since her educated status makes Iya Segi and the other wives feel inferior. Additionally, of course, it is this educated knowledge which enables Bolanle to insist on seeking medical attention for her inability to conceive, an action which threatens to out the shared secret of the other wives, which they will at all costs seek to protect, lest the carefully-nurtured pretence of patriarchal household order be disrupted, with consequences at their and their children's expense.

Iya Tope and Iya Femi's Sexual Adventures

The secret of how children are produced in the Alao household is shared by Iya Segi among her co-wives Iya Tope and Iya Femi. Both women, like Iya Segi, are married to Baba Segi not out of choice but because of their circumstances. For example, Iya Tope is offered to Baba Segi by her farmer father who works for Baba on the land he acquired with Iya Segi's money. As compensation for a failed harvest during an extended drought in the village, Iya Tope's father gives her over to Baba Segi. Reduced to a commodity, Iya Tope is exchanged from one patriarchal form of control to another, her father assuring Baba Segi that even though she was not a great beauty she was “strong as three donkeys” (81). After many

months in which she does not fall pregnant, and Baba Segi threatens that “[I]f your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (84), Iya Tope desperately seeks alternative ways of conceiving a child. If it’s not pleasant in Baba’s house, at least she is not reduced to female peasant labour. She certainly “didn’t want to go back to the village; in Baba Segi’s house, [she] did not have to plant and harvest cassava” (84).

Notably, despite having Baba Segi for three nights in a week, she is not sexually satisfied by him, being subjected to his pummeling: “I would have happily given up *my* nights as well. There were weeks I ached so much I could hardly sit” (83). When she spots the (appropriately characterised) ‘meat-seller’ in the market, she is instantly attracted to him and initiates an explicitly sexual exchange: “I held it there [the money] and took his eyes into mine. At first, he looked surprised but then he closed his fingers around the money...He led me to his home and he took me. [...]He made my body sing. He made me howl when he bent me over; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly” (85). Shoneyin’s syntax here, in terms both of vocabulary and rhythm, graphically expresses the pleasurable eroticism. The adjectival phrases are rhythmically layered in the passage, corresponding to the physically and imaginatively exhilarating lovemaking being described, the verbs changing in intensity, tracing the heightening and subsiding of pleasure.

Chinelo Ezekulie (in rather idiosyncratic prose) explains that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi* “deals copiously with taboo subjects such as sex, sensual pleasure, and fertility. Many literary writers shy away from explicitness when handling such subject matters”, but “Shoneyin demonstrates literary bravery and uncommon ingenuity in using taboo vocabulary and erotic language” (42). At the same time, Ezekulie suggests that Shoneyin relies on a proliferation of tropes, predominant among these being metaphor, in order to treat questions of sexuality obliquely: “The effect is to allow the reader to grasp the actual message via implicature” (42). This research is more linguistic in focus than literary (and it is sometimes simplistic), but it does support my point that Shoneyin both addresses the dearth of representations, in literature, of African female sexualities, and yet also encodes her descriptions subtly, enabling forms of metaphoric deviance that are apt for her questioning of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality.

Noteworthy in my exploration of Iya Tope’s female sexuality is that it is she who initiates the affair with the meat-seller, using her body to signal her desire. In this, she flouts still pervasive conventions (especially in patriarchal African cultures) that construe women as the passive recipients of sexual attention, and even then only within the bounds of marriage. The fact that she *pays* for sexual pleasure also serves to disrupt traditional notions of the

commodification of sex, a notion often premised on the male use of the female body. In this case, the meat-seller's body is 'procured' by Iya Tope for her own gratification. She acts of her own volition, in the interests of her own pleasure. She reveals that, "For four years, that was how I lived: three days of pummeling from Baba Segi and a day of healing from the meat-seller" (86). She maintains the affair for forty eight months without Baba Segi's discovering the relationship, bearing three girls, children whose paternity she attributes to Baba Segi. Shoneyin, however, then shifts the narrative in order that readers not forget the informing contexts in which supposedly individual sexual pleasure is entangled. Already, of course, we might (vaguely) appreciate that Iya Tope's sexual liaison with the meat-seller is the source not only sexual delight, but of the *children* which her reproductive duties demand of her as wife. Exacerbating these personal-political complexities, Iya Tope's personal hankering after sexual pleasure then proves to be a distraction, for she neglects her duties around the house including her mothering, which proves to be a threat to the maintenance of the secret that the children in the house are a result of affairs. Iya Segi chastises her: "I will not let you destroy this home with your excess. You have allowed the concubine to become the husband. I have not known anyone to worship a penis the way you do" (86). Iya Segi's scolding words shame her into realising how much she had neglected her children and she decides to use pain in order to substitute her need for pleasure by biting her lip hard whenever the urge for sex came.

In respect of Iya Femi's female sexuality: this woman, Baba Segi's third wife, maintains her relationship with Tunde, the son of the woman to whom she was working in the house where she was sold off by her paternal uncle. Tunde is the first man with whom she ever had sex. When Iya Femi loses her parents as a child her father's brother sells her into house slavery to a woman whom Iya Femi refers to as Grandma. As justification for his greed, her uncle invokes patriarchal dictates in denying Iya Femi her right to inherit her parents' property, arguing that a "girl cannot inherit her father's house" (121) because "she will marry and make her husband's home her own" (135). The male-centric logic of the claim, tightly bonding together the patriarchal roles and rights of father, uncle, husband, will acknowledge no female demurral. Iya Femi's experience leaves her understandably bitter. The twenty plus years she spends being abused in the household into which her uncle sold her create a venomous, revengeful woman. As a way of escaping Grandma's physical and emotional abuse, Iya Femi begs Taju, Baba Segi's driver, to help her find a husband and Taju tells her that Baba Segi has enough money to marry several wives: "Then make him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt forever. I have no relatives so there is no one for

him to pay homage to” (144). The narrative possibilities of Iya Femi’s female life, in this situation, apparently one of choice, remain poignantly dependent on the very forms of male privilege and patronage that have already led to her abuse. Yet, in time, Iya Femi takes advantage of Baba Segi’s infertility, using Iya Segi’s advice to get pregnant out of wedlock as a way to continue her love relationship with Tunde who sexually pleases her. (This also allows her to exact revenge on Grandma, who is Tunde’s mother.)

Iya Femi contrasts Baba Segi’s lack of bedroom skills with Tunde’s deftness: “He wasn’t like Tunde at all. There was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening. Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts. Tunde never did that; he always shook his water onto my belly” (130). Tunde is portrayed as a considerate, expert lover. Baba Segi is inept, a clumsy lover who does not know how to coax his own pleasure, or that of a woman. Shoneyin’s description here is more explicit than the earlier instance featuring Iya Tope. Set in contrast to Tunde’s sexual prowess and willingness to satisfy, Shoneyin’s vivid description of sex between her and Baba Segi evokes tactile and oral imagery, placing the sensuous body at the heart of the sexual encounter. Such explicit descriptions serve the purpose of outlining what is sexually pleasurable for Iya Femi, debunking the more instrumentalist, mechanical, male-serving sex that she endures with Baba Segi. (That sex is male-directed in terms of its reproductive drive; Baba does not focus on his own pleasure, either.) At the same time, the explicit descriptions clearly delineate Baba Segi’s performance failures. Iya Femi continues to seek sexual pleasure and satisfying physical intimacy from Tunde, who in the process also fathers her two children. Simultaneously, she seduces Baba through tactical female placating and apparent submissiveness, so that he favours her more than the other wives. Iya Femi deliberately uses her sexuality to manipulate Baba Segi and secure advantage. This pits her against the other wives but also, in terms of benefits which accrue to her own life, undermines the very patriarchal power which aims to render her gender and sexuality subordinate to males.

In some respects, then, Shoneyin’s narrative of polygyny shows how this form of marital institution degrades women’s dignity by setting them in potentially adversarial relation in a customary, hierarchical system which superordinates the male. The wives’ playing one off against another is hardly surprising; it is a mirror effect of the fundamentally male-privileging polygynous marriage structure, in which women must compete for benefits, even if they are also able, in difficult circumstances, to rally together for collective female ends. Here, of course, the interloper figure of the newest, youngest, and most educated wife

poses a potential challenge to the household's longstanding, established female 'administrative team' which subverts the patriarchal governance of their sexuality on which the reproduction of polygyny is premised. Bolanle represents a threat to the domestic structure, and through her supposedly flawed infertile embodiment Lola Shoneyin is able, in her narrative, to highlight both flaws and floutings in Baba Segi's patriarchal but secretly female run household, a situation in which economics and sexuality are entangled. Shoneyin's narrative thus also demonstrates how women's multiple roles as daughter, mothers, wives do not neatly conflate. The women are variously able to reconfigure through inventive tactics the same institutions that would habituate their oppression and subservience. Assumptions about the female as wily; assumptions about motherhood as fundamental to womanhood; assumptions about daughters as/and good/s; assumptions about wives as obedient; assumptions about the male as noble patriarch...all of these are subjected by Shoneyin to varieties of pressure with degrees of serious and playful treatment. The outcomes, for the women who are 'Baba Segi's wives', often deliberately resist easy ideological certainty, or even moralising. Reproduction, sexual pleasure, sisterly alliance, female competition: such facets of the women's location within polygyny show them purposefully seeking to negotiate the constraints of patriarchy towards female-oriented ends, prominent among these being an exploration of female sexual pleasure through means that have not conventionally been considered appropriate or desirable for female respectability. By venturing towards the sexual pleasure which is denied to them in a patriarchal domestic context which insists on the privileged reproduction of male rights of sexuality and lineage, women's sexual pleasure and indeed power is factored in to the more familiar story of female oppression.

Some brief concluding remarks to this chapter might point to the continued contentiousness of the question of representing female sexuality in patriarchal African contexts. A version of this chapter was given at the 17th ACLALS (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Conference in July 2016, my presentation following that of a male scholar from Nigeria, also on the Shoneyin novel. Our papers could not have been more different. This speaker, Mr. C, conceded that Shoneyin "writes as an advocate of women's emancipation" and her narrative is "probably also a way of keeping with the times", but he objected strenuously that her style is marred by "unstinted prurience" and an "assault on cultural norms". Shoneyin's language, and her focus on sexuality, were to him very troubling. "If we continue in the direction that Shoneyin takes," he worried... "so explicit; such graphic detail...where will African fiction writing end up"? The descriptions of

intercourse, he shuddered, were often almost pornographic, and when Baba goes to the clinic, and must produce his ejaculate, this episode covers an overly lengthy “three good pages”. How many times did we have to read the degrading word ‘penis’, he asked, when the female parts are treated with discretion, and never named? (I was in no mood to engage him, just before delivering my own paper, but I thought about this language, and its battering, pummeling effect. I thought about the penis reduced to a utilitarian producer of sperm. It seemed to me that Shoneyin, in such descriptions, after his functionalist sexual encounters with his wives, was only giving Baba his due.) Picking up on the spirit of the audience, in which there was a preponderance of African women, the moderator of the session had a field day. She suggested that Mr. C was more concerned with the male ego than with the emotional well-being of the women, whose happiness or dissatisfaction, even beyond the personal, also has consequences in the novel for the family, a fact which Baba Segi blithely ignores. One point that perplexed the chair was Shoneyin’s decision to have the three wives keep the secret of Baba’s infertility and their solution to this predicament even from Bolanle. Why? She wondered, for this persistent secrecy enables Baba to turn full circle, as it were, and to bring the women back into the polygynous fold. They score an ‘own goal’, she felt.

As I have already done in this chapter, I attempted to make the case for the vulnerable status of the three wives, under force of the male decision to take a fourth wife, especially since she has the advantages of youth and university education, which they lack. I also found myself agreeing, to some extent, that the secret, even once open knowledge, does not open up the institution of polygyny far enough. That said, Shoneyin has risked a great deal in tackling a difficult, contentious topic. Following my paper, a male member of the audience also took issue with the ethnographic accuracy of Shoneyin’s details of the polygynous Segi marriage, remarking that in Nigeria – or at least some, the eastern, parts, he qualified - when a child is born out of wedlock that child belongs to the wife’s family, not to the man. To my mind, such niceties misunderstand Shoneyin’s insistence that even within patriarchal contexts, a woman has the right to bear and mother her children; the children are hers. The associated point, in the narrative, is that the harnessing of women’s sexuality so directly to the reproductive function misconstrues female sexuality as instrumental, failing to grant the sensuous, the libidinal, desire, and feelings of love. As another male audience member countered, when his peers chastised Baba Segi’s wives for their deceit and independence, the novel refuses to discount sexuality in its relation to feeling, bringing forms of romance into awkward relation with customary traditions. Shoneyin demonstrates, as in the case of Iya Tope, that both sexual desire and sexual intimacy are satisfactions to which African women are entitled, beyond

their child-bearing capacities. “This is emancipation,” the speaker said, “when a woman is free to answer to the call of her own feelings.” “Even when her husband is kept in the dark?” Mr. C objected, “Neither consulted, nor told?” At that point, the chair of the session called it a day, saying that my paper would probably be rated PG by my co-speaker, and saying to him that the women in the audience would doubtless want to talk more over tea. “Mr. C,” she said half-jokingly, “we have your number.”

CHAPTER FOUR

OTHER TEXTUALITIES AND OTHERED SEXUALITIES

As I worked through questions of African sexualities in the preceding chapters, all of which focus on the long prose form of the novel, a teasing idea began to wink in my mind: in a dissertation premised on an open-ended interest in exploring fictional representations of sexualities in examples of African novels from authoritarian contexts, had my focus on the *novel* genre led me to marginalise examples of relevant subject matter from ‘other’ forms of fiction, such as the short story? (My focus on novels was a necessary strategy, given the need for a dissertation to assert a reasonable conceptual coherence, but perhaps this also brought limits, especially given Emenyonu’s contention that short fiction is a genre that has largely been “unaddressed” or “unfilled” (1) by African literary scholarship.) I experienced an uneasiness that my express focus on the novel as a representational site of African sexualities was somehow even conceptually ‘repressive’, othering supposedly less important fictional forms. In this light, then, the present chapter aims to consider - in admittedly attenuated ways - how ‘queer’ sexualities are represented in examples of the short story set in authoritarian African contexts. The chapter builds on my earlier discussion of same-sex sexualities in Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*, and the subtle, even secretive references to the woman Iya Segi’s same-sex desires in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, examining the possibilities and limitations of the authors’ treatment of their subject matters. The current chapter analyses “Jambula Tree” by Monica Arac De Nyeko (Uganda), “America” by Chinelo Okparanta (Nigeria), “Love on Trial” by Stanley Onjezani Kenani (Malawi) and “Chief of the Home” by Beatrice Lamwaka (Uganda). I do not in any way claim that these four short stories comprehensively represent ‘queer’ African sexualities, nor are they the only stories that deal with same-sex desires on the continent. South Africa, some parts of French speaking West Africa, and the Maghreb, have a wide range of sexually transgressive narratives (in both short stories and novels) – and, in some countries, a body of associated critical scholarship - that would have been interesting for this study but unfortunately do not fit the specific focus.³²

Let me begin with a few comments on the short story in Africa. In 1982, the critic Charles Nnolim decried how African critics had “neglected the short story as a genre worthy of critical attention, even though there is already a respectable body of short stories written by

³² In French-speaking North Africa, there is a rich body of literary works on queer sexuality even dating back to the 1960s. An example is Rachid Boudjedra’s *La Repudiation* published in the early 1960s.

our most celebrated writers” (51). More than three decades later the critical gap still exists. It is curious, this relative lack of scholarship on contemporary short fiction from African countries, as writers from militarised and gender-oppressive African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda and Malawi have used the genre to “comment on various aspects of life in modern African societies: the senselessness of violence, war, religious bigotry...and all forms of injustice meted to any human group especially women and the *disenfranchised ‘others’* in Africa”, motivating for “social integration...and [the] equality of all human beings under law” (Emenyonu 6, emphasis added). Such comments imply that the short story as a form is well-suited to representing contentious, even taboo issues such as homosexuality and related sexualities that have otherwise tended to be characterised in many African contexts as deviant, and hence marginalised. Short fiction is aptly in tune with contemporary sensibility and experience; it is a flexible form, appropriately disjunctive and capable of dialogic contradiction; open to experimentation in terms of shape, ideas and voice. For this reason, the short story seems able to take risks with shape and form; it can be bolder in its brief, sudden forays into forbidden or reviled territories on the peripheries of polite society. This is in comparison with the well-worn conventions of gradual, developing narrative burden that still often mark long-form novelistic prose, where expectations of believable depth, logical plot arcs and the protagonist’s eventual reconciliation into the status quo often still hold sway, despite many newer novelistic innovations.

The present chapter examines only four short stories, all depicting facets of same-sex sexualities in authoritarian African contexts. As much as the narratives reveal the difficulties of being in same-sex relationships in contexts where both national law and entrenched socio-cultural convention prohibit such practices, the stories also give much-needed nuance to the picture, usefully demonstrating that homophobia in African is not a coherent, unified stance, contrary to what some maintain. To this end, the stories “belie the stereotype” not only “of a timelessly heterosexual” Africa, but of an African continent in which every country is always, invariably, and equally homophobic (Epprecht “Heterosexual Africa” 132).

Questions of terminology remain a challenge. Consider Alison Donnell’s remarks concerning fictional representations of same-sex sexuality in *Caribbean* literature:

[T]he terms through which to enact this reconfiguration remain problematic at the level of language, as well as of cultural politics. Caribbean writers do not adopt the terminology of the West – queer, homosexual, gay, lesbian – in order to name this experience or desire. Their writings are rather characterised by an un-naming of this desire and sexual practice. (184)

She concedes that in the absence of more appropriate terms she has found it necessary to “refer to homosexuality”, despite not wanting “to fix sexual binaries and therefore close off the possibilities of more fluid and plural sexual attachments and behaviours that are often rendered in the literature” (184). In the African context, Marc Epprecht’s research offers analogous cautions regarding the potential inaccuracy of a ‘Eurocentric’ vocabulary; he points out that “few Africans south of the Sahara even today would identify as homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, queer, or any of the other terms coined in the West to signify a more or less innate individual sexual orientation” (“Heterosexual Africa” 4). In South African scholarship on same-sex sexuality in examples of short fiction, Pumla Gqola, too, acknowledges the difficulties and contestations of terminology. As she says, ‘queer’, for instance, is a designation “equally embraced and questioned by those it seeks to include and/or speak on behalf of” (“Introduction to Queer Africa” 2):

While some use the label [queer] comfortably, others are worried about whether it adequately speaks usefully to contexts outside the geographical politics of its emergence. Does its use give credence or help challenge the homophobic claims of importation? Does it contest African hegemonies by using terms of reference that come from a place that paid no attention to queer his/her/hirstories on the continent?”
(2)

The four African stories selected for this chapter speak uneasily to the term ‘queer’. Yet I find the term useful (albeit problematic) because it enables me to discuss fictional representations of various sexual minorities or non-normative sexualities, *and* it also has the advantage of being applicable more broadly as a dissident, counter-discursive way of thinking. ‘Queerness’, *beyond* describing expressly recalcitrant *sexualities*, points to the disruption of normative thinking and practices, received ideas, styles and behaviours. In other words, it then becomes possible to think of ‘queer’ sexualities as exerting a challenge not only in respect of sexual orientation, but also upon established structures such as family and nation, and codes such as ‘respectability’ and ‘femininity’. In this chapter, my use of a term such as ‘queer’ is necessarily paradoxical in the sense that Gqola has indicated, because while it aims at “producing not a tidy putting together” of variant sexualities, it sometimes interprets the term as “a coherent sense of belonging” which can also on occasion shift slightly towards meaning “a provisional” collective identification (Gqola 2). Overall, I use the term with caution, and conditionally.

While there is still a scarcity of short fictional narratives which broach the issue of same-sex relations from the four countries under consideration in this study, I believe these writers join an ongoing pan-African conversation on the important question of normalising

so-called non-normative sexualities. The short story writers on whose work I focus in this chapter - Monica Arac De Nyeko, Chinelo Okparanta, Stanley Onjezani Kenani and Beatrice Lamwaka - join a small, but growing band of other African authors (among them Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, Rebecca Njau, Jude Dibia and K. Sello Duiker) in complicating critics' claim that African writers have altogether avoided representing same-sex relations, preferring "a sustained outburst of silence" (Dunton 445). However, despite such growing attention to gender-queer subject matter, it is nevertheless the case, as Elleke Boehmer argues, that queer sexuality "still constitutes what must be called a virtual non-presence, or at least a covert silencing, an 'unsaying' ", which gap she sees *not only* "in African writing and criticism but in postcolonial discourses more generally" (135). In relation to my own questions concerning the depiction of complex African sexualities in fiction from repressive regimes, I want to consider how the story writers depict the nature of sexuality as variously open ended and constrained, as well as how sexual matters are not limited to 'how people have sex' but encompass how they choose to identify themselves with regard to gender, and how they are identified by others.

The short stories on which I focus are notable in that they represent the significant oppression and othering associated with heteronormative, even homophobic views of sexuality, exacerbated in contexts which are politically repressive and intolerant of different sexualities. Notable, too, is that in addition to covering controversial sexual subject matters, these short stories employ diverse narrative techniques, ranging from journalistic prose to a more lyrical style. This corroborates Valerie Shaw's assertion that even though "the poetic and the journalistic are usually taken to be opposed, not complementary terms...the short story has a marked ability to bring apparent extremes of styles together, mingling self-conscious literary devices and colloquial spontaneity within the 'essentially poetic' compression of a single narrative" (5). Such an imaginative ability to create connections among apparently different categories of experience and account, even at the level of style, seems to me an important possible contribution of queer short fiction in Africa; it can 'queer' normative stories of being and identity, creating productively unusual rather than narrowly dismissive spaces for the exploration and understanding of same-sex relations. With this in mind, the chapter speculates about the following questions: What possibilities and limitations for 'queering' narrative and readers' understandings of same-sex sexuality might be associated with the different literary styles that these writers employ? In terms of thematic: what role does the conventionally gendered family, and its normative roles, play in mediating

questions of same-sex relations? To what extent do the selected authors use narrative strategies to represent a diversity of African societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships? These are among the questions that interest me.

Queering Female Sexuality

Although there is a dearth, generally, of queer narratives in sub-Saharan Africa, “this silence is particularly pronounced in women’s writing, especially when we take into account women’s levels of dissatisfaction with the structures of power inscribed within heterosexual relationships” (Boehmer 135). This silence is difficult to explain; it might be due to the quiescence of potential authors, given repressive circumstances, or it might be due to publishers’ unwillingness to consider the publication of still contentious subject matter. Overall, there are likely to be complex logics behind the relative invisibility of female queerness in fiction by African women, but the larger informing context must surely play a part, since in many African countries the very idea of female same sex-relations poses a threat to masculinity and the patriarchal workings of society which views female sexuality (both as designation and practice) as a discursive technology through which women’s bodies must be managed. As Suzanne Pharr explains:

To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman identified. A lesbian is perceived as someone who can live without a man, and who is therefore (however illogically) against men. A lesbian is perceived as being outside the acceptable, routinised order of things. She is seen as someone who has no societal institutions to protect her and who is not privileged to the protection of individual males. (18)

A lesbian identity is therefore considered a transgressive agency associated with the untoward appropriation of conventionally masculine space, declaring an explicit challenge to the naturalised functioning of patriarchy. It “is this threat to masculinity which requires rigorous disciplining of the lesbian body, constructed...as deviant femininity since it is read as mimicking men and masculinity” (Boswell “On Miniskirts” 51). In Nigeria, for example, the beginnings of a lesbian voice in that country’s fiction was vociferously censured by an outraged Uduma Kalu as “a symptom of that senselessness[...] of a carefree contemporary Nigeria [...] part of the social disorder, the fall of morality [...] the corruption endemic in us [...] the depravity, the insanity and violence of our time” (17). The outraged vitriol gushes forth. Complicating this, Unoma N. Azuah adds that the lesbian “voice also stands in sharp contrast to the existing feminist position in Nigeria, which advocates a complementary

relationship between men and women”. Feminist “writers in Nigeria tend to see men as their allies in the fight against social and political oppression and thus to foreclose the representation in their works of romantic/sexual relationships between women” (131). From this position, the very prospect of female same-sex relations presents a probable threat to the possibility of collaboration between men and women in their *shared* desire to effect social change, since lesbianism is perceived as an attempt at separatism from men, or of usurpation of the masculine.

Jewelle Gomez notes a similar pattern of absence in the African American context, in the way representations of black lesbians “continue to occupy an inordinately small space in the world of literature” (290). She argues that it is “the representation of black lesbian lives, not simply...its analysis and deconstruction that has the most immediate, broad-based and long-lasting cultural and historical impact” (290). It is only by telling stories “in the most specific, imagistic, and imaginative narratives that black lesbians take on long-term literary and political significance” (290). She seems to make a case for outspoken (even graphic?) depictions of queer femaleness in fiction, but in comparison Elleke Boehmer, acknowledging that while *explicitly* queer writing on/by women is scarce, suggests that so-called “queerness...can find expression as a queesting and/or questioning that takes as its medium a restless and (till now) nameless bodily desire, and in some cases, is encrypted in metaphor and other poetic effects” (135). Similarly, Chantal Zabus observes that “the excavation of such pleasures” through literary representations may be “wrought tentatively and with ontological insecurity” (125).

In the next sub-section, following these lines of thought – tracing the possible contradictions and interrelations of the explicit and the implied in representations of female same sex relations - I examine the extent to which Monica Arac de Nyeko’s and Chinelo Okparanta’s stories and writing styles narrate lesbian lives so as to amplify the presence and voices of a socially liminal, even vulnerable, group. In particular, I am interested in exploring the efficacy (or otherwise) of short fictions which rely on a subtle textual tactic of queering female sexuality through encrypting same sex desire via metaphor and other poetic effects. How successful can such nuance be in representing a marginalised sexuality that is already subdued, even socio-politically stifled, especially in politically repressive countries? Despite my questioning, I nevertheless believe that these writers’ decisions to write about contentious same-sex love and desire testifies to their “willingness to unveil what is mainly regarded as obscene and is consequently expunged from social discourse and literature” (Mozzato 85).

The Regulating of Female Sexuality in “Jambula Tree”

I wouldn't choose to write about something as controversial, and something that's almost guaranteed to infuriate a lot of people. I just felt it was a story that needed to be told. When I started '*Jambula Tree*', it sort of just wrote itself; and so I feel like it chose me. (Interview with Arac de Nyeko)

Ugandan society does not accommodate different sexualities. The climate is repressive. As Monica Arac de Nyeko rather coyly expresses the situation “the topic [of homosexuality], right now in Uganda, is still very contentious. It's something the society is still grappling with” (interview with Arac de Nyeko). The reality is even more blunt. In 2009, the Anti-homosexuality Bill was introduced in the Ugandan Parliament by David Bahati, a ruling party politician, against “the backdrop of a conference to expose the ‘dark and hidden’ agenda of homosexuality organised by a fundamentalist religious NGO called the Family Life Network...funded by right-wing American evangelicals” (Tamale “Confronting the Politics” 33). (Here, it is interesting to note the paradoxes embedded in such anti-homosexual attitudes which are premised on the defense of so-called African culture but which are mediated by powerful western interests, complicating any simplistic vectors of ‘homophobic Africa’ and ‘democratic West’.)

The bill further ostracised already marginalised LGBTI individuals, exposing them to additional risk of stigma and violence. The bill affirmed that “same sex attraction is not an innate and immutable characteristic”, not thereby endorsing homosexuality as natural, but vilifying it as a perverse and immoral ‘life choice’. The aim of the legislation was to strengthen “the nation’s capacity to deal with emerging internal and external threats to the traditional heterosexual family” (quoted in Zabus 151). In an expedient and a provocative tactic, ‘the family’ – a site freighted in normative culture with the responsibility of reproducing the supposedly essential common good of heterosexuality - was invoked in the authoritative discourses of legality and parliamentary justice as vulnerable to homosexual threat. By implication, innocent children and women, and ‘normal’ men – the very foundations of a nation – were in need of protection from the government. In his article, “Protecting the ‘Traditional Heterosexual Family’?: The State and Anti-Homosexuality Legislation in Uganda”, Angelo Kakande notes that “the myth of the heteronormative, patriarchal male-headed household is one that is important” not only to the Ugandan state, but to the American “Christian evangelical pressure groups” who sought influence in Uganda. Additionally, the patriarchal ideal “had resonance with traditional structures in Ugandan society”. Overall, it is patriarchy in the guise of ‘the family’ that “is held up as the

epitome of morality”, and therefore as “a structure that is worthy of protection” (19-20). The unified heterosexual family which is in state discourse construed as virtually synonymous with the best interests of the nation functions especially as a structure to ‘ensure’ that children are protected from harm by sexual predators (Kakande 20), and the maintenance of the ‘normal’ family works to reassure that particularly “improper forms of national belonging” (Keguro 275) such as supposedly deviant, predatory sexualities, are dealt with. I deliberately bring in such discourses on the family as this chapter focuses on how the authors under study represent the family as both an accommodating and hostile space for same-sex sexualities.

On 20 December 2013, the Ugandan Parliament passed the anti-homosexuality bill, and the bill was signed into law by President Yoweri Museveni in February 2014. One of the penalties for engaging in what was now the crime of homosexuality was life imprisonment, and Sexual Minorities Uganda (the rather awkwardly acronymed SMUG) reported that those Ugandans in same-sex relationships experienced immediately “a climate that encourages persecution”. However, even the repressive state cannot be considered completely coherent, for if the parliament and the president had concertedly worked to institute and then enforce the Anti-Homosexuality Act, the legality of this decision was contested by many alliances within the country. Accordingly, via another hand of the state, the Act was struck down by the Ugandan Constitutional Court in August 2014 after activist outcries and the intervention of local human rights and gender groups, as well as the international community.

Of course, in the intervening six months, the Act “had extracted a high toll on the human rights of gay, lesbian, intersex and trans people, including increased and arbitrary arrests, police abuse and extortion, threats and incidents of violence, personal violence, eviction and homelessness, loss of employment and forced migration” (Boswell “On Miniskirts” 47). This is a long and damning list of repressive actions against people in same-sex relationships. Moreover, such punishment was not reserved for those *engaged* in homosexual practices. It was further extended to those whose creative works *featured* homosexual protagonists, or the topic of homosexuality. In the restrictive, paranoid legal and social context which Museveni and his supporters sought to enforce, the threat was such that ‘homosexuality’ of any form represented a threatening spectre. This is evidenced in the summary deportation from Uganda in 2013 of David Cecil, a British theatre director with a Ugandan wife and children, whose drama production *The River and the Mountain* focused on a gay businessman who was murdered by his prejudiced employees.

Writing about queerness in such a socially-conservative context, a nation headed by a prejudiced leader with autocratic leadings, clearly entails deft mediation, in which a writer’s

defiant desire to speak out against a repressive culture is nevertheless offset against tactics of masking which might superficially seem counter-intuitive, as if reinforcing patterns of silence. This is seen in “Jambula Tree”,³³ a poignant story about two girls, Sanyu and Anyango, whose relationship is torn apart when they are caught in an intimate embrace by Mama Atim, their overbearing, nosy neighbour. After this discovery, the girls’ “names are forever marked with the forbidden” (91), a biblically-redolent phrasing by the author which attests to the prejudice of a wider culture, in which the girls’ nascent intimacy becomes a fundamental and interminable taint, ostracising them from ever re-attaining the innocent perfection of the ‘normal’. Sanyu, who comes from a rich family, is effectively exiled, sent away to England to avoid the shame of her same-sex inclinations. Anyango, on the other hand, who comes from a far less privileged, single-parent household, is left at home, in a homophobic Uganda, to bear the brunt of moral condemnation.

“Jambula Tree” won the 2007 Caine Prize, and is notable for prioritising aesthetic questions of narrative style and method over political message (Lipenga 42). Perhaps part of the story’s competition success lies in the subtle combination of form and content. The author bravely deals with the taboo issue of female same-sex desire in an African context, but demonstrates reticence in her handling of this potentially explosive topic by clothing the sexuality in metaphor and symbolism. Indeed, rather than focusing on the provocative shapes of embodied desire, she gives precedence to the society’s negative reaction against the two ‘outed’ girls, relating this to the lives of the women in the estate. I find tensions in the author’s treatment of her material. I find myself wondering whether her oblique style enables the counter-voicing of marginal sexualities or whether this re-positions these sexualities within the disempowering discourse of homosexuality as unsayable.

Consider, for example, that this short story is written in the intimate form of a letter. Sofia Ahlberg refers to the letter as being not only a “poignant and melancholic tribute to love lost”, but “an act of writing” that offers “testimony to the indestructible will to survive the poverty and malice of the Nakawa Housing Estate in Kampala” (409). The small, personal form of the letter, with its fragile re-creative mimicry of a spoken exchange, acquires potency precisely *because* of its melancholy tenderness, becoming a surprising act of defiance against the morality of both legal and socio-cultural regimes that determine to repress sexualities that do not conform to the established order. In de Nyeko’s use of the epistolary form, she shapes the story as a tender tribute to romantic love lost, creating a

³³ Monica Arac de Nyeko, “Jambula Tree” in Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba (eds). *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction*. Braamfontein: MaThoko’s Books 2013.

textual space in which a reader is encouraged to respond positively to the young girls' emergent same-sex desire. Such physical expression, the story insists, is legitimate. Such physical expression may legitimately be love, with all the associated joys and sorrows. By allowing the narrative to offer glimpses of the warm-hearted playfulness of the girls' young selves – “we used to talk...on our way to school, hand in hand, jumping, skipping, or playing run-and-catch-me” (91) – the author is able to trace the genesis of their love in innocent affection while simultaneously subverting a reader's possibly heteronormative assumption that intimacy is restricted to different genders. Indeed, it is possible that de Nyeko strategically locates the emergence of same-sex affection in the familiar, unthreatening locus of girls' *friendship*, where hand-holding and hugging are often unremarkable expressions, not loaded with more troublesome questions of desire, and sexuality. The story works with a reader's possibly complacent assumptions, and then gently unsettles them. Through such casual, easy-going descriptions of girlhood intimacy, the story prepares the ground for *retaining* a reader's empathy once the story takes a more transgressive turn, revealing the sexual attraction which underwrites the girls' friendship. Ken Junior Lipenga suggests that the story is “a celebration of individuality”, showing the “way in which the narrator and her friend resist conforming to the expectations of their society, where they are otherwise destined to become one of the ‘noisy, gossiping and frightening housewives’” (59). I am not so sure of this resilient, celebratory aspect, since the girls' individuality is broken by received mores, and they are cruelly separated. Each individual is, thus, painfully ‘individualised’, when their shared inclination had, in fact, been towards an amorous conjoining that flew in the face of isolating, marginalising social expectations.

The description of the Nakawa Estate where the two girls live depicts the discrepant gender power relations between men and women and how sexuality is used to limit female mobility and capability. The houses within the estate “are just planned slums with broken dreams and unplanned families for neighbours” (92) but the same residential area is also home to some families like Sanyu's who are well to do. The women in the estate, most of whom are illiterate, are resigned to a life of domesticity while their husbands work outside the estate and are at liberty to chase after other women:

Most of the women don't work. Like Mama Atim they sit and talk, talk, talk and wait for their husbands to bring home a kilo of offal. Those are the kind of women we did not want to become. They bleached their skins with Mekako skin lightening soap till they became tender and pale like a sun-scorched baby. [...] [T]hose women know every love charm by heart and every ju-ju man's shrine because they need them to conjure up their husband's love and penises from drinking places with smoking pipes

filled with dried hen's throat artery. These women know that an even number is a bad sign as they watch the cowry shells and coffee beans fall onto cowhide when consulting the spirits about their husbands' fidelity. (92)

Anyango's tone here is judgmental, asserting a determined intention to separate herself from commonplace forms of femininity that she finds undesirable: the neighbourhood women are indolent gossips, dependent on men, and in thrall to disabling beauty norms and traditional sexual magic.... Anyango wants none of this. The girls' close relationship is from the start premised on the free-spirited sharing of a friendship that repudiates the patriarchy's feminine, domesticated, trapped trajectory that is the lot of women in the estate. (The very environment of the estate, it seems, is a space associated with social enclosure, for women, and freedom, for men, mirroring the differential patterns which structure social 'estates' of gender.) The girls' relationship seems to corroborate Natalie Etoke's argument that "nonheterosexual relationships between women [are] a means of rebellion that challenges patriarchy" (175). The girls' rejection of the life dictated by their society also demonstrates "the divide between the rebellion of the youth and the conformity of the older generation of women" (Ahlberg 411). To this effect, the girls thus "engage in various acts of subtle rebellion, small gestures that point towards their free spirit and a desire to create a destiny beyond the bounds of the estate" (Lipenga 60). The girls indulge in the forbidden climbing of trees, reaching higher into a separate, almost secret world above the immediate horizon, where "inside the green branches", the assertive Sanyu insists to Anyango, "we could be anything". As Anyango subsequently recalls in her melancholy letter to Sanyu, her words infused with the bittersweet knowledge of a desire never fully realised, "Anything coming from your mouth was seasoned and alive" (92).

The tree climbing, like Sanyu's beating up of a classmate for bullying Anyango, is "the lesser of the rules that (Sanyu) broke.... That (they) broke" (98). Their being caught in an intimate embrace under the jambula tree, with its tellingly "unreachable fruit" (103,) is the most transgressive action of all, for it goes against the core expectations of patriarchy in which heterosexual female sexuality must learn to become properly directed towards male pleasure. The tree, a spacious leafy camouflage from the bare realities of societal restrictions, becomes a space symbolic of the girls' desired female liberty, their freedom to be whatever they wish. It is under the jambula tree that they discover their desire for each other: "that feeling that I had, the one you had, that we had never said, never spoken-swelled up inside us like fresh *mandazies*" (103). Ironically it is the same place where Mama Atim catches them in their moment of passionate, reckless abandon.

It did not occur to either of us, to you or me, that these were boundaries we should not cross nor should think of crossing. Your jambulas and mine. Two plus two jambulas equal four jambulas...You pulled me to yourself and we rolled on the brown earth that stuck to our hair in all its redness and dustiness. There in front of Mama Atim's house. She shone a torch at us. She had been watching. Steadily like a dog waiting for a bone it knew it would get; it was just a matter of time. (104)

The description “augurs post-edenic pleasures” (Zabus 151) which point towards the bitter-sweet union of the two lovers in a context which does not accommodate their preferred sexualities. Here, in broaching a prohibited sexual topic, de Nyeko relies on conventional (forbidden) “fruit” tropes. The girls’ breasts are jambula fruits which “tasted both sweet and tang” (103), and via figurative language the author further masks the already taboo. Perhaps this is for fear of alienating readers, or potential publishers, or state authorities. Perhaps the euphemistic language is meant simply to reflect the age-appropriate imaginings of the young girls. De Nyeko’s evocation of the fruit metaphors also illustrates Antje Lindenmeyer’s point that, “the suggestive shapes and textures of fruit lend themselves very easily” (474) to metaphorisation of sexuality. Fruit, “both seductive and dangerous, [...] becomes interchangeable with the female body” (473) and aptly conjures the girls’ intimate but transgressive touches. (I think also of Rita Mae Brown’s 1973 fiction *Rubyfruit Jungle*, with its titular reference to female genitalia.) In the same vein, L.A. Morriset observes that “the universality of sexual fruit metaphors may be linked to the intrinsic sexuality of fruit itself” (2). He adds that

Fruit is . . . very colorful and shaped so that it is readily differentiated from foliage. It is attractive to the eye, and tempts one to approach and touch it. Fruit exudes an appealing fragrance, especially strong and irresistible when it is very ripe. Fruit makes an ideal metaphor for sex because the two have quite similar sensual attributes. The sex organs are irregular in shape in comparison to other body parts. They increase in size and change color during sexual arousal, making them more attractive. (L.A. Morriset quoted in Veenker 2)

All of this seems a little obvious, and is deepened by extrapolating the remarks of Catherine Stimpson, in a 1981 article on the lesbian novel in English. She observes the paradoxical tendency of much lesbian fiction to be characterised by “zero degree of deviancy”, an author often preferring either silence about supposed sexual anomaly – a quietness which “would enable her to ‘pass’ or, “fear[ing] plain speech”, opting to “encrypt her text...and use codes” (366). Her example of a code is ‘the kiss’ which in lesbian narrative “has had vast metonymic responsibilities” even while “its exact significance has been deliberately opaque” (366),

uncertainly encoding both transgression and the permissible, longed-for possibility and impossibility (367). For all its sensuality, then, the fruit trope could be considered an example of such “excessive coding” (367), a complicit tactic through which the writer makes “an implicit, perhaps unconscious pact with her culture” (367). The idea could be that “the stigma of homosexuality is tolerable as long as the erotic desire that distinguishes the lesbian remains repressed” (370). As Stimpson says, many lesbian fiction writers, seeking metaphors for their characters’ passion, “turn [...] to nature...to vineyards, fruit trees, flowers”, explaining that such “standard tropes carry the implicit burden of dissolving the taint of ‘unnatural’ actions through the cleansing power of natural language” (367). It is worth noting that later in the story, de Nyeko seems able to offer more intriguing treatment of such language. For example, in an act of defiance against both government and intimate regimes which foreclose the practice of alternative female sexualities, Anyango keeps “two paintings of two big jambula trees which (she) got a downtown artist to do for (her)” (105). Here, again, the jambula tree continues to resonate with the symbolic-imaginative power of the girls’ potential same-sex love – thwarted at its inception, and yet resilient, despite societal restrictions. But through the layered meanings and allure of the painted art works which represent *two* trees, and (in a further series of aesthetic-emotional proxies and absence/presences) represents the idea of the jambula fruit and thus for Anyango the missing love, and the breasts of her potential female lover, the author invests the paintings with a meta-fictional awareness of the power of representation, rather than simply reverting to the metaphor of jambula fruit to signify breasts, and female desire.

In the de Nyeko short story, the girls’ taboo, night-time kiss under the lush jambula tree becomes the precise moment at which their intimate relationship physically initiates and simultaneously ruptures. The joint kiss breaks them apart and sets them apart from the normative culture: “our names became forever associated with the forbidden. Shame” (91). In the eyes of the community, the girls’ physical, *sexual* disgrace is legible almost as a visible inscription on the girls’ ‘deviant’ bodies, their virtual scarlet letters. Additionally, the burden of the disgrace is percolated inwards from society at large into the girls’ families, as it were transferring the systemic regime into the heart of the family space. This move reveals the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the family as a social site: it is at once meant to nurture and support a young person’s development towards independence, *but* to do so in accordance with preferred norms that might be counter to, even harmful of, the individual’s own desires. In a move which reaffirms the devastating, inexorable complicity of public and private, this re-locating of the shame from outside to the intimate home space, a form of internalising,

becomes a proxy means of controlling the girls' behaviour, since 'the family' rather assumes the role of confidential regulator, working to restrict them from ever engaging, again, in such non-normative sexual infraction. Here, shame "provide(s) the conceptual link necessary to understanding the relation between queer identity and queer performativity" (Halperin and Traub 6).

To curtail the girls' nascent forbidden sexual feelings for one another, Sanyu's parents send her to London. (In doing so, they also put distance between themselves and the source of the family's taint.) Anyango, on the other hand, has no out; her family cannot afford to extricate her from pariahdom, and she is obliged to remain on the estate, left to bear the gossiping tongues and sideways glances alone. The girls' ignominy is also extended to their parents. With Sanyu dispatched overseas, it should be easier for her mother. But Sanyu's mother, in her decorous upper middle class family, feels the stigma as a thorn in the very flesh of her respectable reputation. She is deeply and persistently scarred by the shame of her daughter's disobedient sexuality. Anyango indicates as much in her letter to Sanyu: "My mother has gotten over that night. It took a while, but she did. Maybe it's time for your mother to do the same. She should start to hold her head high and scatter dust at the women who laugh after her when she passes by their houses" (91). De Nyeko implies something of the resilience of Anyango's mother: in their small, already vulnerable, female-headed family, additionally marginalised by poverty, she seems to have developed, out of necessity, the capacity to dismiss as "dust" the proprietorial female scorn of her women neighbours, who won't let her forget that they remember her daughter's flagrant sexual transgression with a girl. We might be inclined to assume that this mother has, over time, completely reconciled herself to her daughter's sexual preferences, and that this has happened because the mother and daughter live together, closely, in their unusual little family, where understanding and acceptance have grown through the fact of daily proximity.

However, although Anyango's mother overcomes the disgrace, her repeated reference to *Sanyu's* father as a "good husband" (104) every time she sees him bringing groceries to his family home, an act which fixes him in the respected role of 'the breadwinner' and the male provider, aims to impress upon her daughter the preferential necessity of heterosexual categories when they function at their best, or 'as normal'. The assumption is that when male and female abide by the established social rules, upholding the principles of conventional socioeconomics and, by extension, of acceptable heteronormativity, the family benefits, and a woman enjoys the security of a caring, sustaining, conventional marriage. Anyango's mother seems to hope that her reiterated emphasis on the figure of 'the good husband', in the person

of Sanyu's evidently responsible father, will finally make the goal of heterosexual domesticity more attractive to her daughter, even working to reverse her 'mistaken' or willful sexual orientation. Of course, the author here cleverly undermines the belief in Sanyu's father as a good husband. Readers know, for instance, even if the local community does not, of his abusive sexual tendencies towards his own daughter. Additionally, the idealising of the good husband needs to be understood as originating in Anyango's mother's longing for a better husband than her own child's absent father.

For Sanyu's mother, the gossipy innuendo instigated by the destructive Mama Atim has damaging effects. Sanyu's mother is unable to recover from the shock of what is construed by the community as her daughter's sexual transgression. Sanyu's mother "walks with a stooped back" and "has lost the zeal for her happiness-buying trips" (104). She embodies another version of the vulnerable abjection with which the community punishes its shameful daughters. It is worth commenting a little more, here, on the matter of gossip. In his seminal paper "Gossip and Scandal", Max Gluckman remarks the socially normative function of gossip, suggesting that:

When people gossip about each other, and about outsiders, they make ethical judgements about behaviour and maintain their group's social values. At the same time, gossip is a means of social control: it polices acceptable behaviour and reinforces the values and demands of the dominant group. It's like a 'social weapon' that members of the group can use against each other. [...] It is an important means by which conflicts are resolved or exacerbated, values are maintained and transmitted, and group unity is reinforced. (309)

Being the subject of gossip because of socially shamed, unacceptable behaviour often influences one to refrain from repeating such behaviour, and also might persuade others not to risk transgression, encouraging conformity to preferred values. I grant that gossip may on occasion provide helpful, guiding constraints, but in the present short story, the character of Mama Atim makes it clear that gossip is an oppressive social control, one through which an influential female member of an older generation, schooled in traditional socio-sexual mores, can 'soft police' the non-conforming sexualities of younger females. Gossip in this instance is an informal socio-cultural regime of practice through which women's lore subtly works as an agent of normative control, colluding with more explicit, official, hegemonic patriarchal law that designates alternative expressions of female sexuality illicit.

Mama Atim is accepted as the community's premier gossip and the source of disreputable muck-raking, even though her information is not necessarily always accurate, or credible. Anyango says of Mama Atim: "That woman's mouth worked at words like ants on a

cob of maize. Ai! Everyone knows her quack-quack-quack mouth” (91). Through the image of mindless, interminably gagging ducks, as well as the imagery of ants devouring a corn cob, the author demonstrates the random yet determined destruction that Mama Atim causes. As Anyango further points out, her gossip is often sexual or even salacious in nature: “[s]he is the only who knows firsthand whose husband is sleeping with whose daughter at the estate, inside those one bedroomed houses. [...] Mama Atim knows who is soon dying from gonorrhoea, who got it from someone, who got it from so-and-so who in turn got it from the soldiers who used to guard Lugogo Show Grounds, two years ago” (93). (I return to the question of soldiers and political regimes a little later in this sub-section.)

Mama Atim’s gossip itself is a viral force, irrevocably permeating everything. Even though years pass after she glimpsed Sanyu and Anyango’s fleeting passionate encounter, she still talks about the girls to other people and persistently follows up on their whereabouts. In this way, the story illustrates the fiercely persistent negative judgment which local communities may effect upon their members, especially in the case of rebellious youthful female sexualities, which must ideally be shaped into proper femaleness. In some ways, whatever their significant social differences, Mama Atim and the girls’ mothers function collectively as the disciplining social mother, their combination of respect, rebuke and rumour coalescing into a powerful implied force which regulates young female behaviour. It is true that the girls initially (and momentarily) refuse this prescriptive, generational maternal mandate, expressing their fragile same-sex desire as girls. But their transgression cannot then be erased even by the fact of their separation and growing maturity, Sanyu in London and Anyango in Uganda. Their transgression is apparently indelible. The very norms of appropriacy, for femaleness in the local community – despite accommodating some degrees of variance among supposedly loose women, mothers and wives – conjoin to override differences in the service of directing female sexuality towards men, and away from transgressive female-to-female desire. Even Mama Atim’s daughters’-in-law, who have been “ridden like bicycles” before marriage by numerous other men, are not subject to the same degree of approbation as girls who commit the ‘crime’ of same-sex love.

It is Mama Atim who tells Anyango that Sanyu is coming back to Uganda, claiming that even “London is no refuge for the immoral” (96). Here de Nyeko’s evocation of the global north is that of a hostile place for those whose sexual identities do not conform to the norms of society which is similar to the case in most African societies despite their supposed ‘liberal’ views. Mama Atim pronounces the pejorative word ‘immoral’ slowly and emphatically to Anyango “so it can sink into (her) head” (96). Her vindictive desire to

continue shaming Anyango is a reminder of both the persistence and the internalisation of regimes of regulatory desire that at once tenaciously *and* as if naturally, monitor sexual behaviour and threaten to reprise the consequences of transgression.

The governmentality which monitors sexualities is not restricted to the discursive informality of the female cultural sphere. Indeed, its vectors both emanate from, and subtly serve to subtend, the overtly autocratic political regime, visibly embodied in the presence of the military. All over the city (its name unspecified), soldiers are ubiquitous, even “perched in our football fields” (94), and superintending people’s freedom of mobility and access. The description implies that the timeframe is that of the mid 1980s when there was political instability in Uganda until Yoweri Museveni seized control through the barrel of a gun in 1986. In her letter, Anyango rhetorically asks Sanyu “You remember those soldiers, don’t you? The way they sat in the sun with their green uniforms and guns hanging carelessly from their shoulders. With them the AK47 looked almost harmless – an object that was meant to be held close to the body –a black ornament. They whistled after young girls in tight miniskirts that held onto their bums” (93).

The casual presence – and even virility - of the soldiers illustrates the ways in which armed conflict may be eroticised and aestheticised (Ahlberg 41). The description conveys the paradoxical combination of overt and yet suppressed militarised masculinity. (We do not even need to be told, specifically, that the soldiers are *men*; their maleness is carried in their behaviour towards girls.) The soldiers are vividly present – all-the-more powerfully so, given that Anyango’s account is filtered through the distance of memory and yet is not muted, but vitally alive. The accumulated references to the soldiers’ bodies, uniforms, and weapons carry the threat of violence. And yet this capacity for violence is at the same time masked under the nonchalant guise of familiar everyday proximities. However, this ordinary space is also more complex than it initially seems. In it, established heterosexuality naturally encodes sexual intimacy through the physicality of male and female, even as it also permits (even routinises) the unequal exhibition of gendered power such as men catcalling to young girls, who themselves have become accustomed to performing their female embodiment through the received codes of sexual attractiveness and display conventionally demanded of women.

For all the emphasis on sexualised physicality, this passage is also tense with the apprehension of wider violence, the author deliberately blurring, in her imagery, the possibility of brutal, potential forms of assault by men against female bodies. The AK47s appear as innocuously attractive as pleasing bodily ornament. They are figured as objects closely associated with the male body, objects to be held close to the body, just as, by

implication, are the girls. The weapons morph uneasily between figurations of attraction and threat, mutual intimacy and sexual assault. (It is all the more effective, I think, that the writer does not make explicit the implied comparison between gun and penis; the insinuation leaves a reader unsure, unsettled. What kind of world is this, where threat seems visible and yet so natural?) The soldiers' weapons appear misleadingly unthreatening, much like the latent sexual potency of the male body.

I also note that the "new order" (94) characterised by the presence of the soldiers in deep green, is framed in parallel to the stain of morning dew drying on leaves, as if nature itself is determined "to announce the arrival of shame and dirt" (94). This parallel between a "new order" though unspecified and the arrival of shame and dirt, hints at the exclusion of non-conforming female sexualities, sexualities unresponsive to the sexy interplay of catcalling and female performance in the quotation above. The implication is that this is a society in which any form of 'disobedient' femaleness should know itself cautioned. This applies to heterosexual femaleness that might prefer not to make itself available to masculinity (patriarchal, hegemonic and/or militarised, as the case may be), and of course to forms of female same-sex sexual desire that are even further beyond the pale. Such 'pathological' bodies, we can infer, should expect to be forcibly disciplined in order to bring them correctively back into the (heteronormative) 'normal' social fold of the national ideal trumpeted by the despotic Museveni regime. The story, we recall, as it wraps to conclude, has moved closer and closer to the time of Sanyu's imminent return home. However, the informing socio-political context is one in which her relationship with Anyango, if it is going to be rekindled at all, is bound to face stigma and hardships under harshly homophobic circumstances.

The passage discussing the soldiers also brings a reader back to the particular form of this story – a letter. I notice the disconcerting ways in which the remembered presence of the military men shadows or clouds the intimate space of Anyango's personal letter, the soldiers becoming a symbolic force which forcibly intrudes upon her account of her and Sanyu's long-ago desire, a powerful reminder of society's view of their transgression. Her memory is, as it were, occupied by the soldiers even as she would prefer to recollect her private love and passion. This itself represents the ways in which supposedly personal spaces of sexual desire are always enfolded in political structures. Nor is it ever clear, in the story, whether the letter that Anyango writes to Sanyu is actually sent, or delivered. This begs the question of whether the girls, now women, will rekindle their romantic relationship, and even leads me to question whether the attachment to long lost love and self-recognition of female-same-sex

desire is equally weighed on both women's sides. Sanyu was supposedly the more assertive of the two girls, but the only form of communication which Anyango ever receives from her is five years after she left. This was a brief, tentative note, encrypted with initials, perhaps in the case of interception: "A. I miss You. S" (105). A reader is left to wonder, given changed personal circumstances and the repressive political climate, about the likelihood of the women resuming their relationship.

America

Chinelo Okparanta's Caine Prize nominated story "America"³⁴ concerns Nnenna Etoniru, a lesbian Nigerian teacher who longs to go to America to be with her Nigerian girlfriend, Gloria Oke. *Happiness, Like Water*, Okparanta's debut short story volume in which the story "America" was collected, was the winner of numerous awards, whether for fiction in general, or specifically for lesbian fiction.³⁵ Since Okparanta is herself not "decidedly out" (Stowers 141), this may imply that her fiction does not "work [...] in a discourse of specifically *lesbian* desire" (Stowers 141), and that readers can expect some reticence in her representation of female same sex-desires. However, there seems to be "a consistent lesbian aesthetic" (or at least thematic) (Stowers 140) running through Okparanta's developing oeuvre: her novel *Under the Udala Tree* (2015) centres on the life of a lesbian woman during the Nigerian civil war.

While "America" addresses the love relationship of two adult women, rather than following the emergent same-sex feelings of two girls, this story, like de Nyeko's, is also characterised by an authorial strategy and tact in which the author is cautiously aware of the dangers and difficulties attached to the open display of same-sex intimacies in Nigeria. The narrative is also characterised by a deflection of the queer relationship to a space 'beyond' the immediate working out of the narrative foci. Once again, it is interesting to speculate about such strategic sidelining. This deflection may be a pragmatic recognition of reality. Okparanta's fiction concerns a love that is expressly forbidden in Nigeria, and the very form of the story could be considered apt in that the focus on the narrator's supposedly aberrant desire is deliberately displaced in the plot: it is overwhelmed by Nnenna's narration of her struggles to acquire a visa to travel to America, and also overshadowed by accounts of the environmental concerns of the Niger-Delta and the oil spills that affect the livelihood of the inhabitants of that area. Scholar of lesbian poetics Liz Yorke might ask, for example, "Does

³⁴ Chinelo Okparanta, "America" in *A Memory this Size and other Stories: The Caine Prize for African Writing 2013*, Auckland: Jacana Media 2013. All page references are to this edition.

³⁵ See the impressive list at <http://www.chineloookparanta.com/#!awards-and-recognition/c1vaj>

such a movement depoliticise, fragment, and diffuse/de-fuse lesbian specificities?” (79). The displacement could be thought a version of the familiar story in which social issues habitually considered urgent – the state of the nation, the environment, the economy ...– take precedence over arguably second-string concerns, such as gender equality, and/or the lives of sexual minorities. And yet a reader is also asked to understand that the desiring force motivating the visa is Nnenna’s wish to be re-united in the States with her female lover, and that this private economy of romance cannot be separated from the public intricacies of the Nigerian context more widely. The story is multilayered as it deals with a myriad issues, among them bad governance, forms of colonialism, crude-oil economics, nostalgia, homophobia, and love, which happens to be lesbian love. Again, we could extrapolate from Yorke’s work on lesbian poetry to comment on the tension between love and/as politics. Citing Lilian Falderman, Yorke argues the need to understand that in depicting lesbianism, on the one hand we find that a younger generation of authors might simply take “for granted lesbian-feminist principles rather than foregrounding them in their work”, being far less likely to present “lesbian love” “in a political context than it was during the height of lesbian-feminism” (Yorke 78). On the other hand, Yorke cites Clare Coss’s insistence that lesbian writers “write about many subjects, not just love and relationships. Many are fiercely political in the cause of justice for all people. They are angry and activist. They care about dignity; they envision a world of liberty, possibility, and decency” (Yorke 78).

“America”, published many years after Yorke’s claims, and from a diasporic Nigerian rather than British intellectual space, is a story somewhere on this spectrum. The relationship of the two women is evidently crucial to the narrative, and at times is evoked with a detailed intimacy that emphasises the power of personal feeling, and yet the piece also, as should be clear even from the hubristic magnitude and all-encompassing reach of the author’s pointed title, attests to a complex, morphing network of personal-global interlinkages in a queer post-colonial cum neo-colonial context where powers of imagination and desire are entangled in larger constraints, and where the lesbian story introduces an uncertain, queer *female* orientation into what is primarily a hegemonic, transnational male capitalist economy that is becoming the new order. (Okparanta’s own position as a Nigerian-born author who has since mid childhood lived in the United States, further complicates the situation.) Haunting the story – although I have not yet been able to resolve these issues in my mind – are parallels between the familiar coercive corruption of influential national and international elites in respect of resource extraction economies, and the fragile, secret and invisibilised heart

economics of the women's lesbian love, separated by the legalities and distances which construe them as marginal.

Veronica Nkwocha describes the narrative as “a longing for a ‘*utopia*’ and with every contrasting detail between the dream destination (America) and home, the latter got darker and drearier” (np). Nnenna notes how “there were hardly any trees in the area, and the shrubs are little more than stumps” (93) in a place where “the vegetation around the Bonny River once thrived” (93). (This inverts the metonym of fruit and fecundity as a symbol of lesbian desire in the de Nyeko story.) Elsewhere, commenting on the oil spills in the area, Nnenna says:

America was nothing like Nigeria, after all. Here, roads were strewn with trash and it was rare that anyone cared to clean them up. Here, spills were expected. Because we were just Africans. What did Shell care? Here spills were happening on a weekly basis in the Niger Delta area. ... But a spill like that in America? I could honestly not imagine (108).

The passage is infused with Nnenna's hopefulness, invested as she is in the positive *difference* that ‘America’ has in her imagination, and also the author's subtle recognition of a system of global inequality which divides the world into valuable and expendable locales. The passage “sets the tone for the narrative which was a last wistful glance at home whilst hoping for the future” (Nkwocha n.p) as Nnenna dreams of a reunion with her lover halfway across the world - in a country which is in fact not free and equal. At times, her longing for romantic idyll, I feel, is marred by a naiveté that seems uncharacteristic of an educated woman, and a high school teacher at that. Okparanta's drawing of her character at times lacks credibility. In one instance, Nnenna imagines America and contrasts it with Nigeria, influenced by scenes she has seen in movies and read in fiction. She imagines Gloria, “playing in the snow - like I imagine Americans do - lying in it, forming snow angels on the ground” (109-110). This is a static image, a fixity in tension with the very movement on which her heart is set. She places Nigeria, with the typical repertoire of heat and sun, in binary opposition to America, which figures as the extreme opposite: snow. This is a little reductive, and the point of view is invested in childhood. Even at other points, she can only produce clichéd projections of ‘America’ as a place of desire, and indeed her attempts to visualise Gloria, in America, also feel flat and disembodied, almost unreal. The softly falling snow is as much a figment of her longing for this mythical place (and increasingly phantasmagoric love?) as “Pictures of huge department stores in which everything seemed to sparkle. Pictures in which cars and buildings shone, where even the skin of fruit glistened”

(102). Port Harcourt, in comparison, is grim and grubby, and her view of what America represents is in the story set in direct opposition to ‘Nigeria’, and these imaginings “(un)consciously reconfigure and reproduce the dominant stereotypical image of the African continent as a black demonic jungle or a terrain where human existence is not only precarious but almost impossible” (Okuyade 13). Despite my misgivings, though, Okparanta clearly means for Nnenna’s visions of America to be recognised by the reader as improbable, impossibly far-fetched. When Nnenna not only thinks of her lover in the snow, but further fantasises about the snow “looking like a bed of bleached cotton balls” (103), the narrative carries the sense of just how far away America is, and Gloria. The legendary ‘over there’ mitigation repeatedly forestalls the satisfactions of arrival, and of the women’s lesbian love. And the phrasing implies the author’s gentle commentary on Nnenna’s idealism which is clearly being set up for some kind of fall, or disillusionment.

Nnenna’s relationship with Gloria is introduced as a series of flashbacks when she is on a bus to apply for the visa which has already been refused her twice. The plot functions constantly as if marking time, rather than moving ahead: the hours’ long routes to and from, Port Harcourt to the embassy in Lagos and back again, entail that Nnenna takes the bus. She tries once: refusal. Go home. Wait. She tries again, travels on the bus: refusal. And on the bus for the third time, making this journey which seems constantly to result in being thwarted, and niggles against the more far-reaching trip that she desires, as Nnenna passes local sites and towns – Warri, Sapele, the Ologbo Game Reserve, Lekki Lagoon... - she imagines America and Gloria so far away, and she must also process the recurrent disdain of the embassy officials. Most recently, she has been chided for her foolishness in assuming that *America* would ever have a space for her, with her lowly *African* degree. In this way, questions of global inequality are subtly factored in to the more personal story of the women’s lesbian love, which has already withstood two years of separation.

In this narrative unfolding, readers are made aware of how the women met at the school where Nnenna teaches, when Gloria was visiting as a curriculum reviewer. This led, initially, to a close friendship which included staying over at each other’s homes, and eventually to their becoming “an item” as Nnenna’s father calls it. Their first intimate encounter takes place on Nnenna’s thirty-fourth birthday and it follows on from Nnenna’s licking of cake icing from Gloria’s finger, and then from her lips:

I remain with Gloria, allowing her to trace her fingers across my brows, allowing her to trace my lips with her own. My heart thumps in my chest and I feel the thumping of her heart. She runs her fingers down my belly, lifting my blouse slightly, hardly a

lift at all. And then her hand is travelling lower, and I feel myself tightening and I feel the pounding all over me. (97)

Nnenna's phrasing of this experience is redolent of the register and vocabulary of romance fiction. The pounding hearts; Nnenna's tightening, heightening, feelings...such details emphasise her anxious excitement at moving into the unfamiliar territory of what Terry Castle terms "female-female eros". The repetition of the verb "trace" and its actual visual and tactile act points to the sense of discovery of their lesbian attraction to each other. The word 'allowing' also heightens the sense of the illicit, and of Nnenna's willing relinquishing of control. Some readers might feel that this element of the romance plot in fiction is simply a device of patriarchal encoding and enforcement, agreeing with early feminist theorists that it is "a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole" (Blau DuPlessis 5). Numerous more contemporary female scholars, however, have begun to note that whether in hetero romance stories or when women write the romance featuring same-sex female characters, "narrative might serve as a form of resistance rather than co-optation" (Juhasz 65). Plotting, characterisation, psychic economies and language work in subtle ways beyond the directly representational, implying that "formulaic narrative patterns might embody a psychodynamic content that does not replicate a patriarchal status quo" or the supposedly trite ideologies of 'romance' (Juhasz 65). If Okparanta's story seems a little uncertain about the status it is interested in occupying in relation to lesbianism (as my discussion below will indicate), I am nevertheless inclined to grant the validity of such uncertainty, as it suggests a wish to queer received ideas of representing sexuality, even if the wish is not altogether successfully achieved.

Although the story does not tell us whether Gloria has previously been involved sexually with a woman, this is Nnenna's first such intimacy. In fact, she "had never been particularly interested in dating (men) anyway" (98), and her realisation of why she hadn't yet taken a husband is prompted by her mother's sudden interruption of the women's sexual encounter. Before her mother's pointed reference to lesbianism as the reason for her daughter's singlehood, Nnenna had never pondered this possibility: "It's an interesting thought, but not one I'd ever really considered. Left to myself, I would have said that I'd just not found the right man" (98). Operating within a hetero framework, which normalises heterosexual relationships as the only natural and legitimate form of love, Nnenna herself imagines that she would in due course find 'the right' male partner and get married.

These heteronormative social codes are both reinforced and troubled in the reactions of the women's parents. Gloria's religiously devout parents are not aware of their daughter's

sexuality, “[s]he’d have been a fool to let them know....They went to church four days out of the week. They lived the words of the Bible as literally as they could” (101). Tamale explains the role of religion in regulating African sexualities: “political religions and reinterpreted culture are the chief inscribers of same-sex sexuality as ‘un-African’ and deploy it within the discourse of ‘sin.’ Hence Africans engaged in same-sex sexual practices are viewed as undeserving...sinners” (“Contours of African Sexualities” 21). When it comes to Nnenna’s family: her mother is appalled by her daughter’s unconventional relationship and continually reminds her – a phrasing awkwardly between euphemism and injunction - of the “penalties in Nigeria for that sort of thing” (97). Indeed, in January 2014 similar homophobic legal measures to those enforced in Uganda were adopted in Nigeria, when President Goodluck Jonathan “signed a new anti-gay law that mandated 14-year prison terms for anyone in a same-sex union, and 10 years’ imprisonment for allies ‘promoting’ homosexuality, including health and HIV/AIDS workers” (Boswell 47). As the narrative reveals, in this repressive climate Nnenna and Gloria are forced to keep their relationship a secret, and like other gay people they are hyper-conscious of “mobile policemen [who] were always looking for that sort of thing - men with men or women with women. And the penalties were harsh. Jail time, fines, stoning, flogging, depending on where in Nigeria you were caught. And you could be sure that it would make the news. Public humiliation” (100). The narrator uses the phrasing “that sort of thing” several times, highlighting the pervasive view of same-sex relationships as unspeakably objectionable, and requiring of explicit penalties to oblige those who engage in such deviant practices to cease, and return to compulsory heterosexuality. A significant part of Nnenna’s mother’s shock is that “a woman and a woman cannot bear children” (98); “that’s not the way it works” (98). Rather, “woman was made for man” (99). Her response to Nnenna and Gloria’s relationship can be understood within the framework of what Melissa Steyn and Mikki Van Zyl define as “the institutionalisation of exclusive heterosexuality in society” (3), which is:

Based on the assumption that there are only two sexes and that each has predetermined gender roles, it pervades all social attitudes, but is particularly visible in ‘family’ and ‘kinship’ ideologies. Heteronormativity constructs oppositional binaries- for example woman/man, homosexual/heterosexual,-and is embedded in discourses which create punitive roles for non-conformity to hegemonic norms of heterosexual identity.’ (Steyn and Van Zyl 3)

Far more interesting than the mother’s predictable response is Nnenna’s *father’s* defence of his daughter’s relationship with her female lover. He warns her of the dangers, but then says,

matter-of-factly, “love is love” (100), an ordinary acceptance of the lesbianism that is illegal in Nigeria. His surprising acceptance certainly disappoints Nnenna’s mother who had thought that in exposing the scandalous relationship to her husband, he as the family patriarch would admonish and correct the wayward daughter, as society requires. Perhaps even the reader anticipates that he will react as his wife supposes. Nnenna’s father, however, despite being the familial representative, as it were, of the hetero-masculinity that characterises the dominant Nigerian patriarchal culture, is depicted as being open-minded and accommodating. This is intriguing. Nothing is given in the story of his background, but Okparanta’s decision to shape him as she has, unquestioningly unprejudiced against divergent sexualities, attests to the potential mutability of patriarchal culture and unsettles the blanket belief in African masculinity as inherently homophobic. (It is the category of ‘love’ which does this apparently non-ideological work; ‘sexuality’ is made a little more discreet, or palatable, by being understood as romantic attachment. Still, in Nnenna’s father we are given one man who represents a wider possible hope for change.)

When Nnenna tells her parents that she intends to follow Gloria to America, even her mother is sad. She makes her daughter promise not to get lost in America (104). The mother has reconciled herself with her daughter’s lesbian identity, despite this orientation (“that silly thing” [100]; “that thing between you two” [101]) being contrary to her personal beliefs, and disappointing to her motherly hopes. She also wishes to maintain a close relationship with her child, even when this will entail vast geographic distance. Nnenna’s father is expectedly empathetic. He encourages her, advising her not to give up on her longings. As Nnenna remarks, he said it “would be good for me to be in America...a place where he imagined I could be free with the sort of love that I had for Gloria” (103). Here, again, ‘America’ is envisaged as a liberal, tolerant space, in comparison with a Nigeria which criminalises non-normative sexualities. But a reader intuits the author’s implication: this idealised elsewhere conducive to same-sex love is a fantastical eutopia, nowhere yet in existence. Nnenna herself begins to sense as much, struggling to come to terms with the fact of a major oil spill that Gloria tells her has occurred in America. The very thing that had seemed impossible. The spill taints the idyll. On a smaller scale, too, the quiet undercurrent is that Nnenna’s parents’ acceptance of their daughter is at least ‘some place’ that the story has worked its way towards, a significant achievement in a repressive political-religious context that persecutes gay people and advocates of gay rights.

The story takes a sobering turn towards the end. After her third grilling, Nnenna finally gets her visa to study in America. Gloria has acted as her sponsor and funder, a

substantial support which must be masked as platonic, and financial. “Who is this Miss Gloria Oke?” the embassy official quizzes her sceptically. She is “A friend,” I say. And that answer is true” (107). When the official pressures her for clarification, Nnenna qualifies: “A former co-worker”. And all the while she sees raised in his hand Gloria’s letter of invitation to her, which she can only see back to front: “The paper is thin and from the back I can see the swirls of Gloria’s signature”(107). Exactly as Nnenna finally gets her visa, she begins to have doubts about her decision to leave Nigeria. Up until this point, if her right to belong as a Nigerian citizen has been subtly thrown into question because of her sexual orientation which flouts the law, her physical mobility has been inhibited by the national boundaries which mark travel. She has had to wait for permission to travel to the States, and this has been many times refused. In effect, she is not considered sufficiently desirable as a human resource, which creates an ironic tension in conjunction with the love she and Gloria have worked so hard to sustain, over time and distance.

Once this travel technicality is resolved, however, with the issuing of the necessary visitor documents, Nnenna’s courage suddenly falters, and her imagination gives conscious expression to a range of other, previously subliminal, impediments. The claims of home and tradition and cultural norms make her vacillate, despite the difficulties she has experienced in relation to these affiliations: “I think of Mama, her desire for a grandchild, and I think: isn’t it only natural that she’d want a grandchild” (111). The normative social script for women is powerful and pervasive, a gendered cultural imaginary which naturalises a range of symbols and relationships – mothers and daughters, woman and child, the comfort of family, tradition and futurity – which dangle the promise of belonging and fulfillment to persuade those designated ‘other’ to forgo their difference and return to the fold. (Note that the perceived ‘difference’ of such people has been paradoxically identified and categorised by precisely this normative culture that now seems to hold promise!)

One wonders whether Nnenna begins to consider giving up her love, and her lesbianism, in order to conform to conventional expectations of womanhood. In weighing her decision, Nnenna recalls a folktale which her mother used to tell her as child, and which, like many such tales, had no conclusion, or outright moral, always curling back upon itself. The story draws on such open-endedness. The somewhat sentimental narrative reliance on Nnenna’s recollection of a childhood memory of her mother’s oral tale embodies a cultural pull towards ‘Africa’, and staying in Nigeria. The nostalgia for childhood comfort also suggests that she is hesitating about taking adult responsibility for her own life. If she stays, she might find herself in the embrace of family, but relinquishing her current relationship

(and perhaps threatened as a lesbian, given the oppressive socio-political circumstances in Nigeria). However, her thoughts also wander and return, rather like the tale – and the repeated bus trips she has taken in her quest for the visa - and ‘America’ ends without clear resolution. It is uncertain whether Nnenna will follow her lover, or not. ‘America’ remains an unrealised destination in this story, as does Nnenna and Gloria’s maturation of their lesbian love which, Nnenna worries, might in America “also begin to fall apart” (111). The little qualification “also” carries a telling weight, implying the likely obstacles for lesbian love even in the United States, a land famous as a beacon of hope for the brave and the free.

Queering Masculinity in “Love on Trial” and “Chief of the Home”

Stephanie Newell remarks the “conditionality at the heart of ‘being masculine’” (248).³⁶ She proposes that “masculinity is a noun that seems to *demand* the attachment of adjectives”, which then renders masculinity “thoroughly adjectival” (248). She wonders whether this adjectival condition encodes “signs of the failure of [masculinity’s] autonomy and integrity as a term”, “creat[ing] a line of abandoned masculinities,” or, more usefully, whether “the array of adjectives” – hyper, hetero, queer... – can “be regarded as signs of encounter, of the mobility of manhood”, revealing the extent to which “masculinities simultaneously evade definition and demand qualification?”(Newell 248). Taking my cue from this, it is a queering of simplified understandings and representations of male sexualities that I want to explore in the present sub-section of the chapter, where I offer some remarks on alternative and normative male sexualities as “textually mediated bodies” (Newell 248) using two short fiction texts by writers from contemporary African countries in which homosexuality is illegal: Malawian Stanley Onjezani Kenani’s “Love on Trial,”³⁷ and Ugandan Beatrice Lamwaka’s “Chief of the Home”.

Many of my points regarding the representation of male same-sex relations or expressions of alternative male sexualities in these short stories intersect with Kopano Ratele’s suggestion “that the well-publicised turmoil over homosexuality in Africa is...a poorly choreographed distraction from the tenuousness of hegemonic African masculinity

³⁶ As it happens, in her paper Newell takes issue with Connell’s over-simplified assertions of a global understanding of masculinity. Newell insists that absent from Connell’s argument “is a sense, first, that local understandings of global masculinities can be plural; second, that gender terminology varies from society to society; and, third, that some masculinities may not be assimilable to “global” classifications or comprehensible within a global framework” (247).

³⁷ Stanley Onjezani Kenani, “Love on Trial” in *For Honour and Other Stories*, Cape Town: Ekaya, 2011. All page references are to this edition.

and is also imbricated with the socioeconomic development-related failures of Africa's ruling men" (116). Using "the lens of psychopolitics" (117), Ratele shows how psychosocial and socio-political aspects of homophobia intersect in working *to produce* "the homosexual as a phobogenic object saturated with politics, and, conversely, ...the politics of homosexuality as replete with psychosocial dynamics" (117). He contends that in the entangled situations of demeaning colonial inheritances and the hierarchical, patriarchal cultures which mark African society, "African masculinities" are strangely "hegemonic and subordinate at the same time, a logical contradiction that is difficult to resolve" (118). In this chapter, I suggest that such incongruity also extends to the representation, in examples of short fiction, of African men's queering of normative orientations in repressive political contexts. In my discussion, the short story form appears as a space where contradictions are unevenly explored, challenged, accommodated.

Kenani's "Love on Trial" deals with the sudden notoriety of Charles, a law student who is caught *in flagrante delicto* with his male lover in a public toilet by the village drunk, Mr Kachingwe. Motivated by smalltime opportunism, Kachingwe shares the scandal with other villagers, but only in deferred snippets: he cleverly cons his listeners into buying him tots in exchange for the "whole" story, which of course he never reveals, since he becomes increasingly sozzled. Shocked as they are, his audiences are also perversely motivated by "a curious voyeuristic desire" (Lipenga 49), hungry for the titillating details of a homosexual practice they claim to abhor.³⁸ The sensational news of the homosexual lovers disperses throughout Malawi via the media, eventually reaching international ears, and Kenani has quite some fun satirizing the various responses. (The story is told from the perspective of an unidentified narrator – dispassionate, but also apparently familiar with the daily affairs of Chipiri where the story takes place, as well as knowledgeable about Mr. Kachingwe's local notoriety as a busybody and souse.)

Kenani's story has proven extremely contentious. The story was nominated for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2012, clearly a mark of its distinction under the Caine Prize criteria. And yet, in the blogathon associated with the stories shortlisted for the competition, readers expressed significantly different opinions. Some found the story heavy-handed, moralising in tone, and patronising in advancing elitist cultural views. Others saw in the story a serious attempt to tackle a difficult, even taboo subject, in which challenging

³⁸ See Thomas McNamara's fieldwork study of 2014 which indicates that many Malawians consider homosexuality 'an act', rather than an identity, rendering them un-persuaded by conventional international arguments based on internationalist gay rights discourses.

questions of same-sex love are simultaneously (*inevitably*) caught up in contradictory relations of affiliation and refusal in respect of class, religion, and cultural identifiers. In my view, this latter is the more compelling response to the ambiguities or even lapses of Kenani's story. I am more interested in exploring the narrative shape and effects of such uncertainties, than in fixating on the story as simply formally unsuccessful, or unremittingly moralising. As 'kosherugali' remarks in a blogpost, even "if 'Love on Trial' is an 'issue-led story', the issue that animates it isn't just gay rights but what homosexuality means, how stories about it are created, and how they find impact in a media-saturated society" (n.p). The author tries to hold together, in the very close quarters and attenuated timespan of a short story, impulses which are discrepant, and possibly irreconcilable. He travesties not only the discursive-material practices of the state, media, and religion as they seek to discipline supposedly unacceptable sexualities, but also the strong-arm altruism of Western donors who paradoxically use respect for democratic sexual rights as a repressive condition of continuing foreign aid. However, this is not to say, either, that the author is always comfortably in control of his material and ideas. For some readers, he runs the risk of caricaturing the villagers as peasants, for example. I am also nonplussed by two elements of the plot: the author's push to wrap his narrative by almost killing off the gossipy Mr. Kachingwe by having him on the verge of death from HIV/Aids when his antiretroviral drugs become unavailable once the western donors withhold their aid in protest against Malawi's repressive sexual laws, and also, at the end, having Charles' media audience experience a sudden moral epiphany about homosexuality, prompted by the orator's persuasive eloquence.

Despite its convenient culmination, the story's passage is marked by more credibly divergent impulses of opinion on the question of male same-sex relations, and also of expressive register, veering between the jocular, the serious, the legalistic, the sermonising, and the matter-of-fact, and accommodating the homosexual man's private stance along with local and international collectives of public opinion. Such polyphony, to my mind, even cacophony, *announces* the writer's difficulty in trying to settle on a credibly appropriate resolution. Perhaps Kenani opts for the somewhat pat resolution precisely because he has written himself into a complicated predicament, and no adequately fitting *complex* of solutions presents itself. The issues are so complex, producing such divided views even in the dispersed court of opinion beyond the story world, that the ending cannot do justice to them. The author struggles to fit the contentious, socially-explosive question of homosexuality in Malawi into some conventional, inherited idea of 'the short story' as a literary form in which denouement and closure are expected. However, an alert reader can gauge from the outset

that the author simultaneously wishes to acknowledge that this taboo story is *not* going to be docile; it will be willful and fractious, refusing coherent comprehension and disciplined form.

For example, the narrator explains how Mr. Kachingwe, who found the lovers having sex in the toilet, always “prefers to begin from the beginning” (12), telling dramatically how he had walked in on the young men “so engrossed in their act it took some time for them to become aware somebody had entered the toilet”, by which point he “had seen ‘everything’” (12). Because of Mr. Kachingwe’s repeatedly foreshortened telling of the scandalous tale, however – unlike the lovers, he only ventures so far and no further, delaying gratification – “the story is not coherent at all” (12). In part, this incoherence is no surprise. It is due firstly to canny interruptions, and then to drunkenness. Yet in a meta sense, the spectacular story which publicly ‘outs’ Charles and his lover is marked by a more fundamental disorderliness, cut across by disjunctive interests and impulses. For Kenani has taken on a testing task, one which demands that he accommodate a plethora of positions and views. He gamely attempts to rise to the task of defending same-sex male love, setting up a humorously gossipy fall-guy in Mr Kachingwe, in relation to a charmingly sophisticated homosexual spokesman who is eloquent in his defense of gay rights, even under the closest of public scrutiny. Kenani also has Charles’ father rally to his son’s defence, rather than bluster in outrage. This suggests the possibility of male views on homosexuality at variance with those of hegemonic masculinity, and the intimate nuances of fathering which can support a son’s choice, at some risk to self. At the same time, though, Kenani’s material constantly threatens to get the better of him, as he sometimes protests too much, and even latches onto several of the very stereotypes his story aims to overturn: there’s the public toilet that forms the instantiating setting of the plot, for example, and the almost tit-for-tat HIV-Aids come-uppance for the village blabbermouth who has so casually enabled the sensational news of the young men’s indiscretion to ‘go viral’.

These features could lead some people to dismiss the story as creaky; but I would rather suggest that Kenani’s uneasy handling of the narrative speaks to the very difficulties he faces as a Malawian writer who is trying to address the subject of homosexuality, which remains taboo. For instance, it is a challenge for him to write, sympathetically, the broader popular responses when he also needs specifically to critique aspects of these responses, which inflame prejudice against homosexuals. How, without seeming partisan and even culturally superior, is he to find suitable placement, in the story, for both a more international rights’ oriented discourse (that tends to have little traction among Malawians), and for more traditional cultural assumptions about homosexuality as morally compromised? I don’t know.

My feeling after reading “Love on Trial” is one of incompleteness; the story is ‘unfinished’ not only in terms of aesthetic satisfaction, but the socio-political, and perhaps, in the context of Malawian homophobia, the story cannot *but* be repeatedly fractured and told piecemeal. In order to do justice to the material reality, the narrative *must* entail a complicated, even discrepant, series of interrelations.

As much as the story addresses homosexuality, it also invokes a reader’s knowledge of Malawi as one of the world’s poorest nations, heavily reliant on foreign aid, a country with a high HIV-Aids rate and an intolerance towards gay people which at times seems on the brink of enforced legal change, but which then regroups. (Although beyond the time-frame of the narrative, for example, consider how in 2012 contradictory pressures from ordinary Malawians, conservative NGOs and similar forces, were coercively marshalled so as to oblige the progressive President Joyce Banda to capitulate to public pressure and pull back from openly legalising gay rights. In these terms ‘repression’ is clearly a complex amalgam of forces and prejudices, beyond simply an individual nation’s parliament, or law.) The compromised narrative moves in “Love on Trial” remind me that Kenani, while Malawian-born, lives and writes from a geographical distance, in Switzerland, where he works as an accountant, far removed from the realities of the Malawian people whose travails and pleasures provide subject matter for his fiction. His positions in relation to education, the media, and village life are not neatly congruent with those of the various strata of Malawian society that his fiction represents, and whose members anyway comprise a heterogeneity of differing opinions, not easy to reconcile into a harmonious whole. Hakan Seckinelgin’s article on “global sexualities” and “the limits of solidarity from a distance” (1) is pertinent here. The implication is that – at least in part – Kenani’s authorship is a “modality of power” or “global register” of solidarity associated with the “cosmopolitan intimacies” (2) which are uneasily positioned between different forms of global civil society: “progressive groups trying to expand sexuality rights across the globe” and “regressive groups globalising a particular kind of homophobia” (2). In “most of these cases the situation is represented as a fight between local backwardness about sexuality and basic human rights” (Seckinelgin 17).

It is important to situate Kenani’s fictional short story in the context of Malawi’s notoriously homophobic socio-legal climate. Time and again, in Malawi, tensions between defenders and opponents of same-sex relationships have flared in parliament and the media.³⁹

³⁹ In early 2016, following pressure from within the country, and from western donors and human rights’ agencies, the Malawian Justice Minister reaffirmed ex president Banda’s moratorium on the prosecution of homosexuals, and further mooted securing democratic rights for same-sex individuals. However, this effort was thwarted by an interim

Homosexuality is widely framed not as a human right, but as being against the order of nature. It is popularly referenced – by politicians, preachers, musicians... – in the base language of hate speech, invoking dogs and devils, Sodom and Satan. Arguments against same-sex relationships invoke colonial-era sodomy laws, though the judiciary of an independent Malawi has put in place its own national, homophobic laws, even against *consensual* same-sex relations. Also worth remarking is that while Kenani’s narrative is a piece of fiction, it is inspired by actual events. In December of 2009, urban Malawians woke up to breaking, front page news of “a traditional engagement ceremony between...Steve Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga, who the media, police, and many activists labeled men, one of whom identified as female” (Thoreson 31). Like Kenani’s piece, “the incident began with a sensational story in the media, not the active pursuit of the state, and was heavily fueled by outlets that pathologised the couple and linked their homosexuality to gender dysphoria, infidelity and tragedy” (Thoreson 33).⁴⁰ The criminalisation of the two men’s relationship “as a de facto extension of the country’s sodomy law” brought the country’s respect for human rights under scrutiny (Thoreson 31). Malawi is a former British colony, and Section 153 of the country’s Penal Code criminalises the “carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature” with up to 14 years imprisonment, with or without corporal punishment. Section 156 criminalises “gross indecency” between males, whether public or private, with up to five years imprisonment (Ottosson 14).⁴¹ The two men were denied bail - apparently ‘for their own good’ in order to protect them from the outrage of vigilantes; they remained in jail for six months without trial. When they were eventually tried, they were “sentenced to fourteen years...hard labour, the maximum sentence in accordance with the colonial-era Penal Code” (Ratele “Hegemonic African Masculinities” 120). Many ordinary Malawians agreed with the sentence (“You got what you deserve!” and “[N]ot enough, they should get 50!” [BBC 2010]). But the sentence shocked the international community. It took the personal intervention of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon for

court order obtained by conservative religious leaders, which in effect enabled the police to arrest suspected ‘offenders’.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the Malawian couple is described as “gay/trans” (Ratele 120), the ambiguity of the forward slash a telling further mark of the difficulty of positioning, in language and idea, the supposedly ‘homosexual’ couple’s even *more* ambiguous orientation. This additionally complex facet is not addressed in the media, or in Kenani’s story, or even in the scholarship I have found. The issue is simplified to be synonymous with that of same-sex homosexuality, a route which, taking my cue from the short story which is the express focus of my commentary, I have elected to follow, albeit with some misgivings.

⁴¹ As Ratele notes, following Daveson Nyadani, while the Republic of Malawi has a Constitution which guarantees “equal and effective protection against discrimination” on the basis of race, sex, social origin, and other status, sexual orientation is inexplicably excluded from this ‘other status’ (120-121).

the two to be pardoned by President Bingu Mutharika who described the two men's actions as "foolish" and "satanic", conceding that he had pardoned them only due to pressure from donors and the international community. They were instructed not to repeat "their mistake" (Khunga n.p).

It is from these events that Kenani invents his short story, using a mixture of modes (comedy, verisimilitude, satire, advocacy...) to extrapolate the narrative consequences fomented by the discovery of Charles and his lover reputedly engaged in some form of homosexual encounter in the toilet of the public school. As the story shows, homosexuality perturbs prevailing social boundaries between categories that, while paired, are paradoxically also kept separate: male/female, sane/crazy, good/bad, clean/dirty. It threatens to blur and disrupt established patterns, to uncouple neat pairings and jumble them up. This threat seems an invitation to normative people to fix very resolutely on the negative term in the pairing, as if to delimit potential chaos by demonising that which seems out of place. (The inevitability of blurring, however, is implied by the writer in the detail that the account of the two male lovers gains prevalence through rumours spread at a beer hall by an untrustworthy character whose breath constantly reeks of alcohol.) In relation to these discourses of taint, let me focus on a contentious informing locale of the story: the school toilet. Obviously the two lovers being caught in such a place plays into the discourse of dirt and filth which is inscribed on homosexual bodies, and popular phobia of male same-sex sexual acts by definition as dirty, because 'anal' and/or bridging certain taboos of anality and orality.

In hoping to contribute to the representation of a hospitable social imaginary for homosexual relationships, Kenani still locates a crucial element of his plot in a site which, despite bodily *ordinariness* in terms of necessary defecation, is heavily overloaded with associations of disgust when conjoined to supposedly filthy, perverse sexual practices between men. Kenani's use of the toilet as the place where these two men are caught in an act of same-sex intimacy is very discomfiting to me. How does this site relate to his purported intention, in the story, to challenge negative, received ideas of minority sexualities? For Ikheloa, the all-too-obvious subtext of this story is that in "the West gays come out of the closet, in Africa, they are outed screaming and kicking from stinking latrines" (n.p). And he continues: "How an undergraduate law student ended up making love in a stinking latrine (never mind the voyeurism and the poor judgment) can only be explained by a need to contrive a plot ahead of a morality tale" (n.p). Does Kenani's story serve to reinforce or destabilise the discourse of homosexuality as filth? I would like to think that given the

difficulties of broaching such a taboo topic, the narrative creates a fictional space of “debate between interlocutors” in “an attempt to rectify the lack of generous debate in wider Malawian society” (Ikheloa np). Additionally, in the course of the story Kenani removes the pathologised same-sex desires of Charles and his partner from the equally stigmatised toilet, and reconfigures the relationship within home and family, *as love*. In so doing, Kenani’s narrative grants these desires a human dignity that is usually absent in culturally dominant discourses surrounding same-sex practices, and which also tends not to have featured very widely in African fiction, whether short stories or novels. I agree with Ken Junior Lipenga who suggests that Kenani’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” (47). Lipenga explains that Kenani’s narrative technique not only highlights “the fragile bases on which homophobia is constructed”, it also demonstrates “the fact that the homophobic stance is not as unanimous as some would claim” even though “the loudest rhetoric in Malawi is against homosexuality” (47). I also note that, despite the ‘dissident’ views of Charles’ father in supporting his son, the narrative depicts how a hegemonic homophobic discourse more widely is linked to powerful social signifiers such as the reproduction of family, tradition, and the healthy state. Indeed, Thoreson avers that the story illustrates how normative discourses of “familial or social responsibilities” and “the preservation of customary or traditional laws and practices” acquire *bolstered* authority in a socio-political context where the state seems inaccessible to its citizens, and is focused on the “reassertion of national virility and sovereignty vis-a-vis the North” (Thoreson 25).

As I have already mentioned, however, even Kenani’s narrative techniques do not sit well with various reviewers, many of whom disagree with its being categorised as a short story and its subsequent nomination as an exemplar of excellent African writing (Bady n.p). For example, Ikhide R. Ikheloa argues that although the “short story” has always been “a somewhat fluid critical term and literary term”, he proposes that Kenani’s “Love on Trial” be called something different: “an argumentum or a prolix exemplum, or a parable, or perhaps even, a traditional (legal-philosophical) *dialogue*, as much of the ‘narrative’ is in fact a rather straight debate between two characters, notably Charles and a gay-bashing television journalist, Khama Mitengo” (n.p). (I am not sure whether this commentator uses the word ‘straight’ unwittingly, or sardonically to mock what he considers to be the writer’s ‘normative’ style as inapt for the treatment of alternative sexualities.) “‘Love on Trial’”, Ikheloa continues, “reads like a plain disquisition, a presentation and discussion of the issue”

(n.p). Another reviewer calls Kenani's piece "a cringe-worthy tale; preachy social commentary roaring into town wearing the unctuous toga of a short story" (Zunguzungu n.p). Many commentators concur that "Love on Trial" is a heavy-handed, moralising, issue-driven story that reads more like an example of documentary journalism than fiction. They suggest that the reason behind its nomination for the Caine Prize is that "its particular issue is topical, the darling issue of the western middle class" (Ikheloa n.p).

But regardless of such negative criticism, in my view Kenani's style succeeds in giving voice to a misunderstood and marginalised segment of Malawian society, where homosexuals are normally silenced, and punished. Instead, Kenani *deliberately* stages or performs a debate around homosexuality, asking a reader to suspend judgment, and to listen to and weigh up the multiple, contesting voices and arguments in the text. As the story "spreads like oil poured on a sheet of white paper" (12), it stops becoming a source of humorous entertainment for the patrons of Nashoni Village Entertainment Centre and quickly attracts the serious attention of the police. The ludic quality of the story shifts from a rambunctious comedy of manners, as it were, to documenting debates around rights and justice. Charles is arrested under Sections 153 and 156 of the penal code for "unnatural offences" and "indecent practices between males" (13), and his arrest catches the interest of various media outlets - local and international - who hyperbolise the story, and its young male protagonists, into a sensationalist spectacle. Increasingly though, the story turns on the threat, early expressed as a warning in the story, that this is no salacious joking matter, for the consequences of Mr Kachingwe's scandal-mongering is that "the state might send [Charles] to rot in jail" (13).

Insistently infringing his privacy and that of his family, the media "want to talk to Charles, to take his picture, and to ask him a lot of probing questions" (13), treating him like a "specimen" to dissect, something which Charles calmly resists. Pertinent here is the view of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. They argue that it is precisely the continued insistence on sexuality *as* private that denies, in contemporary consumer culture, the constant complicity of the *public* in broadcasting, displaying and vicariously both pathologising and delighting in, supposedly non-normative sexual identities. Charles initially refuses to meet the media and so the reporters want to interview his parents. In this furore, Kenani demonstrates the role that family as "the first and most important source of affection and companionship" (Barry 2) plays in the accommodation of persons with supposedly deviant sexuality in a community which ostracises difference. His "mother completely avoids the

reporters” (13), and in the parameters of the story it is not clear whether this avoidance is due to the constraints of customary female modesty and deference to male authority which would traditionally restrict her from speaking on behalf of ‘the family’; whether it’s her intense shame at her son’s orientation, or whether her silent avoidance implies a fierce maternal instinct to protect her son from prurient eyes. Even here, Kenani successfully implies the possible *range* of motivations for the mother’s behaviour, rather than declaratively fixing her view as either this, or that. In a story which hopes to make space for open dialogue around male same-sex sexualities, this is an appropriate tactic. In comparison with his wife, the young man’s father is overtly depicted as a figure of some authority, not only because of masculinity, but also education. He is a primary school teacher, and speaks confidently but decorously to the press, saying simply that, yes, “he is quite shocked, like everybody else, but he loves his son and wishes him only the best. ‘I stand in solidarity with Charles’” (13). Even here, it is difficult to unpack the father’s response. Is he disquieted because he had not previously known his son’s orientation? Because he had not known he was a practicing homosexual? Because his son was discovered with a man in the school toilet? Readers are left unsure. If the father’s shock is in some sense due to his own beliefs being shaped by prevailing heteronormative assumptions, he nevertheless accepts his son without question, and refuses to be complicit in making an exhibition of him. This, too, is a story strategy which some readers might find surprising, perhaps having expected the patriarch to express uncompromising moral outrage. As in Okparanta’s story, Kenani depicts the family not as a summarily narrow space unremittingly colonised by the negative views of homosexuality which characterise the repressive state, moralising religious bodies, or the traditional community. Instead, it is a space which can enable, even support, dramatic forms of difference rather than disciplining an individual into abiding by hegemonic norms.

If his son’s secret has been disclosed by Mr Kachingwe’s discovery and gossip, the father then advises his son to refuse to compound this secrecy (of the closet?). Instead, he urges his son boldly and strategically to represent his case via broadcasting through the medium of the personal interview on a popular national television show: “[t]he more you talk about it, the faster the public gets used to you and, as a result, might begin to accept you” (15). At first, Charles allows himself to be interviewed only by a BBC correspondent with significant international impact, rejecting interview offers from the local media houses. Eventually, though, he features on the (rather comically-named) Malawian programme “Reach Out and Touch” which gives him an important local audience. It is at moments like this, in bringing together questions of spectacle and ethics, that Kenani’s sly sense of humour

contributes to the effect of the story. In the very the naming of the TV show, for example, he simultaneously creates a supportive vehicle for the father's moral openness, *and* derides the pandering penchant of the media, which presents itself as working altruistically for the public good by airing individual plights.

The narrative implies that creating spaces of informed visibility and discussion for marginalised sexualities is important in countering the fear, hatred, and anger directed towards non-heterosexual people. The narrative also emphasises the important fictional strategy, in changing dominant intolerant views, of personalising the figure of 'the homosexual', instead of relying on the blanket abstraction of a stigmatised other of bad character. On the show, Charles openly declares his sexual orientation, a frankness which is particularly shocking to the conservative Malawian audience because "he sounded unrepentant, even proud of what he called 'having come out in the open'" (14). When asked if he was not afraid of breaking the law, instead of admitting culpability as people seem to expect, he draws attention to the unjust legal system, firmly calling for the repealing of the law against male same-sexuality. In this respect, Kenani also shows his authorial skill in shifting between the appeal of the personalised protagonist, and the necessity for wider systemic change.

In the story, the media's treatment of Charles does not begin from a desire for shared conversation or genuine discussion. Instead, the premise is one of prurience. The audience motivation seems not any different. When Charles comes on stage for the "Reach Out and Touch" interview, the audience hurls insults at him - "mad man", "evil man" and "wamathanyula", a local derogatory term for homosexual men derived from *matenyera*, "a chiNyanja word for a painful, smelly diarrhea caused by worms" (Epprecht "Hungochani" 160). (Again, this evokes images of the homosexual body as filth.) The interviewer probes and goads, almost turning Charles into a 'thing', a captive example illustrative of some stereotypical 'homosexual body'. However, Charles manages to re-direct the focus away from narrow assumptions towards sobering concerns, as he is well informed, and articulate. This young man is not merely a straw man to be spoken against by those who are volubly in favour of a normative ideology which treats homosexuality as monstrous, reviled, aberrant. Instead, he has conceptual and expressive agency, and is adept at voicing and affirming the sexual orientation with which he identifies. Some commentators have found this element of the storyline too convenient – how remarkable that your arrested protagonist 'happens' to be a senior law student, so capable of defending himself. Other have also found it dismissive of what are depicted, in contrast, as uneducated African views on homosexuality, which need

not be easily synonymous with homophobia per se, but are mediated by traditional and indigenous beliefs which might have some value.

Various bloggers, for example, while approving of Kenani's stepping up in his representation of Charles to defend a person's rights of sexual orientation and association, found that he unfortunately privileges the views of an educated Malawian elite, depicting the villagers as ignorant, scandal-mongering bumpkins. Earlier in the narrative, when gossip was rife in the village, Mr Kachingiwe's friend, Mr. Kabaifa, asks him to stop encouraging the scandal, as it is in danger of ruining the future of a boy who was "one of only three of us from this village to have made it to the university"(13). Higher education, with all its associations of enlightenment, critical thinking, and open-mindedness, features in the story as a valuable, difficult-to-attain form of knowledge. (The links with colonialism and western world views are never addressed, but it is perhaps this that the story's detractors object to.) Similarly, commentators like Nana Fredua-Agyeman and Stephen Partington have dismissed Kenani's contrivance of having a protagonist who is a law student familiar with legal discourse and method. However, I notice that Charles's arguments are those of an impassioned *student*, and not without dispute, which then gives the story an aptly plausible feel, rather than smacking of an idea already resolved and forced upon the readers. For example, while Charles claims in his interview that "if a law is designed to suppress freedom, then it is a stupid law that must be scrapped" (14), it is a fact that many laws are, precisely, framed to delimit individual freedoms in the service of collective good.

Overall, I maintain that Kenani attempts actively to perform, in the narrative space of the short story, through the dialogic voicing of characters' opinions, a polyvocal response to homosexuality, not some simple, monologic authorial statement. The extent to which he succeeds or fails is of course open to question. For some, perhaps Kenani is simply a poor writer. As I see it, the forceful move towards statements defending male same-sex relations in the story, in the narratively attractive figure of Charles, is itself an appropriate embodiment of the author's efforts to stage a necessary defense of outspoken defenses of homosexuality, in the form of short fiction. The story implies: if a society refuses equal, open-minded debate, then perhaps outright, plain-spoken, highly compressed advocacy is *needed*. And if such moralising sits uncomfortably in 'the short story', where readers might prefer subtle character development and emotional nuance, perhaps that discomfort is imperative so as to trouble prejudiced assumptions and to break the complacent status quo. In my reading, the story works with a sufficient combination of direct certainty and situational compromise to make it an interesting read, rather than merely a neat, issue-based set-piece.

In the context of the homophobia that is widespread in Malawi, Charles's speaking in his own defense – and that of other homosexual 'others' – provokes the outrage of religious bodies, who claim that "Satan is using Charles" (14) to taint the nation. The nation is invoked consensually as "an imagined community", an unproblematically united entity with an apparently singular opinion on homosexuality. (The implied ideological coherence, here, is meant to serve the force of an imperative which carries 'the collective good', against which homosexuals can unquestionably be designated sinful pariahs.) Kenani demonstrates how ideas of sexuality can be linked "to the interests, morality, or tradition of the nation" (Engelke 298–307) in very self-serving ways, providing justification for the state's regulation of sexuality. The interview with Charles by Khama Mitengo, a homophobe, is predictably driven by the rhetoric that "Malawi is a God-fearing nation". But Charles "steady, at about 1.75meters tall" (16) and in "his deep voice" challenges this claim as a fallacy, "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" (Lipenga 51). Kenani's technique here is one of reversal, depicting the *interviewer* and the *nation* as flawed, rather than Charles. Still, it could be said that in presenting a homosexual character who possesses classic manly physical attributes, Kenani falls into the trap of idealising the very norms he critiques. I argue, though, that he uses these conventionally authoritative features of admired masculinity in order to disturb assumptions about homosexuals as effeminate and 'unmanly', in the process simultaneously destabilising the naturalised codes of hegemonic masculinities by bringing them into imaginative and discursive proximity with socially reviled forms of masculinity. As Michael Kimmel argues, homophobia as the by-product of hegemonic masculinity rests on the "repudiation of femininity" (86) in homosexual men, which is perceived to pose a threat to supposedly bona fide 'masculinity'.

Despite Khama Mitengo being an educated journalist, his character reveals the ignorance and lack of information that fuels and refuels the sentiments of homophobia. In his questions, he uncritically regurgitates the rhetoric of anti-homosexuality which regards same-sex activity as "against the order of nature", "'un-African' and an import from the West" (Morgan and Wieringa 11), asking whether Charles learnt homosexuality from western tourists or other non-African influences. It is through the character of Charles, a dignified, calm, rational and intelligent young man, that Kenani's narrative gives a clear voice to a minority that is legally vilified in Malawian society. Charles also refutes the teachings of religious bodies that persecute homosexuality based on the teachings of the Bible.

Let's examine the mantra "Malawi is a God-fearing nation." 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? [...] We're a secular state, by the way, not a theocracy. Only an individual can be regarded as God-fearing, but 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. (20)

Charles' counter-arguments gradually open up spaces of questioning concerning homosexuality, and by the end of the interview, the same audience which had insulted him is clapping hands, "cheering and whistling" (21), impressed with his eloquence. By "the time he walks out, Charles has reclaimed much of his lost respect" (21). The change in the reaction of the audience reflects "a space of hope for tolerance and accommodation of a minority that is reviled simply because it is not understood" (Lipenga 54), a critical view which contrasts with some of the bloggers' criticism of the author's easy use of an educated young man to sway a credulous peasantry. The story is sometimes awkward. But if we accept that Kenani is not attempting to *document* the homophobic reality of *what is*, in Malawi, but rather to offer a risky, tentative, imaginative working through of possibilities for reconciling difference, then the story has interest. The audience 'conversion' is perhaps wishful thinking – a sudden, unexpected moment of epiphanic insight, effected through the merits of a singular young man who is also homosexual. Yet if a reader is willing to accept that the short story has a utopian element that seeks to work *beyond* the confines of the real, implying the power of imaginative projection in performing ethical change, the fiction acquires resonance.

Nor does Kenani avoid the claims of the real. Three days after the excellent interview, Charles appears before the magistrate and is sentenced to the maximum fourteen years. It is as if he has made his case so well that the law must punish him severely. As a result of his arrest and sentencing, "Britain is angry. America is annoyed. Norway is furious. France is outraged. Germany is livid". The rhythm of the accumulated rhetorical flourishes, here, gathers an international assembly of nations, but the simple sentence structures and verb forms implies criticism: all and sundry Western countries must have their obligatory say, each criticism a version of the other.

The story mediates its focus between one power bloc and another, variously for and against the young male lovers and the legal threat to their lives. "Through envoys", the foreign nations "have made their disappointment known to the Malawi government" (23), and as a result donor support is pulled, and this force of international sanction, another form

of governmentality, begins to show in the scarcity of medicine in the hospitals and lack of fuel in the country. Mr. Kachingwe, who happens to be diagnosed with HIV and needs the very ARVs which have historically been donated by one of the international countries which is now attempting to educate Malawi in human rights by withholding aid, becomes a victim of this change in economy, becoming more ill. In prison, Charles is beaten and denied food by the prison warders who have not been paid for three months and thus “vent their anger on Charles” (24) blaming the entire debacle on him and his homosexuality. The twist that the narrative takes illustrates the position of many African countries as post-colonies of the Global North. The fact that aid to the country is cut due to the violation of LGBTI rights “illustrates the nation’s illusion of sovereignty, and the subtle power that the Global North still wrests over developing nations” (Lipenga 54). Tamale also addresses these problematics:

[D]onor sanctions are by their nature coercive and reinforce the disproportionate power dynamics between donor countries and recipients. They are often based on assumptions about African sexualities and the needs of African LGBTI people. They disregard the agency of African civil society movements and political leadership. They also tend, as has been evidenced in Malawi, to exacerbate the environment of intolerance in which political leadership scapegoats LGBTI people for donor sanctions in an attempt to retain and reinforce national state sovereignty. (“Confronting the Politics” 41)

Kenani’s short story seems to parody the illusion that most African states have with regard to their national sovereignty, demonstrating the power which continues to rest in the hands of the metropole. Echoing Tamale’s sentiments in the quotation above, the narrative also points to the problematics of using donor aid as leverage for creating equality for LGBTI people at the expense of the wellbeing of the rest of the country. Not only does it further create a hostile environment for LGBTI people as exemplified through the torturing of Charles in prison, it also paradoxically reinforces the idea that homosexuality is “un-African” and a west-sponsored “idea” and that when western countries’ interests and agendas are threatened, only then will they act – and in self-interested retaliation (Tamale “Confronting the Politics” 41).

As the story draws to a close, it becomes more possible to discern that Kenani’s engagement with the question of homosexuality works via gradual expansion of implication. It begins small and local, with Mr Kachingwe; moving outwards to take issue with the attitudes towards transgressive male sexualities shown by the villagers, local journalists, politicians and religious leaders; and then on to the BBC interviewer, and further onwards to scorn Britain as an international arbiter; and then on and on, to cast satirical glances at many

powerful nations of the world. It could be said that the story's criticism works by percolation, spreading, mimicking the insidious and insistent ways in which 'the news' of the male lovers travels, almost as it were going viral. The author's criticism is the narrative analogue of the reductively appalled attitudes expressed towards homosexuality, whether these are against homosexuality or whether they are manipulated *against* the attitudes that are against homosexuality. My phrasing is purposefully clotted, hinting at the *difficulties* of the ideological orientations with which Kenani is working in writing of maligned sexual orientations. The overarching idea of the story is to embody confused complexity, Kenani struggling to find a balanced position from which to depict a demanding topic. Kenani needs to shape a narrative which is critical of the various prejudiced attitudes articulated both within Malawi, and within foreign countries whose neo-colonial power, albeit well-intended in respect of human rights' arguments for homosexuality, nevertheless impacts on Malawi, constraining its independence.

Clearly, the ethical convolutions, for the author, present something of a quandary. He takes issue with a whole spectrum of reactionary, anti-same-sex policies and opinions *within* Malawi, but also feels angered by reactive, pro-homosexual policies and opinions from *outside* which exert a coercive force on national self-determination. It is the form of the short story which enables him to bring such conflicting positions into the same space, unsettled and unresolved, but nevertheless performing the very complexities of taking a stand. Charles 'takes a stand' in the interview, speaking out, though in the subsequent sham trial he is silenced. Despite the views of Kenani's detractors, who contend that the story is too directly 'issue-based' or proselytising, Kenani seems to appreciate, as author, that Charles cannot, in any singular way, be an unmediated mouthpiece or spokesman for pro-same-sex sexuality. Instead, in order to be persuasive, his own advocacy must, in the story, be located in polyphonic relation to a cacophonous dialogism of competing voices, opinions, and (perhaps also the author's) divided loyalties: to Malawi, against Malawi, somewhere in between and then back again. The circuitries make for a volatile piece of fiction on a contentious topic, where consensus proves elusive.

Disrupting Gendered Identities

I remember clearly when the call for stories reached me for the queer anthology. I passed it around to my writer friends. They ignored it. I wrote a story about a transgender man I watched growing up. I thought, finally I had space where I could write about Martin. (Lamwaka, *Queer Stories* n.p)

Lamwaka's recollection suggests that among African story writers, many are indifferent to (or not especially interested in?) representing queer lives. Perhaps it is the particularity of the queer focus in the anthology she refers to which fails to spark interest. Perhaps it is a socially and even legally entrenched sense of queer subject matters as proscribed, or dangerously off limits or taboo which leads to the writers' avoidance. It is possible, too, that some African writers who are themselves queer are understandably chary. From another angle, it might be the writers' lack of knowledge about queer lives which leads to a quiet failure of imagination, by omission rather than commission, as it were. Writers might find themselves unable to envisage what 'queer' experience might entail, as varied forms of sexual orientation and ways of living in the world, or reluctant to risk such unfamiliar speculation, lest they fall short, or unintentionally offend. Certainly, stories featuring the subject of queerness are scarce. At the same time, small public advocacy projects such as an anthology of short fiction representing stories of queer lives, intending to offer voice and visibility to many kinds of queerness, can offer a striking moment of writerly liberation. This particular intervention is very explicitly titled *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction*. The title suggests the editors' and publisher's strategic decision to flag fictional representations of a variety of different African sexualities under a rebelliously provocative conceptual collective term. While 'queer' is not regarded by some as appropriate terminology in an African context, the word does have the undeniable value of insisting that African sexualities can be and are queer, in the sense of refusing the heterosexual norms that designate certain sexualities inappropriate and deviant, and also in asserting a political identitarian stance which links queer sexuality to disruptive potential in unsettling habits of gender, political obedience, traditional behaviours, and the like. Queerness, in other words, confounds, whether through explicit subversion or by being difficult to categorise.

Lamwaka, in writing the submission for the anthology which becomes "Chief of the Home"⁴², has the advantage of some familiarity with 'queerness'. She draws on the experience of having known a queer man in her childhood, a memory that has stayed with her over the years, but for which she had not found an appropriate place to write about, until *Queer Africa*. Beyond the actual 'Call for Submissions' – the invitation circulated by the editors – Lamwaka imagines the anthology, with its dedicated queer focus, as figuratively extending to her an hospitable invitation, a projection of the possible, legitimating her right to

⁴² Beatrice Lamwaka, "Chief of the Home" in Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba (eds). *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction from Africa*. Braamfontein: MaThoko's Books, 2013: 159-163. All page references in this section are from this edition.

write about a topic still inhospitable in Uganda, as in much of Africa. The anthology becomes a creatively supportive space under the aegis of an advocacy collective, and yet also an unsettling opportunity to think through her memory *as* a queering of ideas and experience, a risking of the unusual, an imaginative representation of a volatile subject, with the possibility of moving from the internalised personal processing of experience to an open, published stand. (Even Lamwaka's phrasing in the above quotation is a little ambiguous: while she probably intends us to understand that *she* watched Martin while *she* was "growing up" – the 'I' of the quotation, there is also a sense in which Martin, too, was growing and changing in this process, in ways which the child's own watching and growing – the child now being the writer - still cannot quite understand. Elements of this puzzling or fugitive quality characterise the story.)

Martin is refigured in "Chief of the Home" into the less westernised, more obviously African-named character 'Lugul', possibly in order to emphasise the transgressiveness, in an African context, of his gender identification. While in her prefatory comments Lamwaka refers to Martin as "a transgender man", in the story he eludes categorisation, and is never explicitly termed 'transgender'. Instead, the author uses more localised words and concepts, and even these have a wavering quality. One could argue, too, that Lamwaka's use of the label "transgender man" is itself precarious, the writer doing her best to phrase 'Martin's' identification in terms with which an audience might be familiar, but understandably some confusion still remains. In the scope of the *story*, though, which creates the character Lugul, with a socially discrepant gender identity but no clear sexual orientation, Lamwaka's possibly 'inaccurate' reference to Martin as a transgender man, rather than a transgender woman, becomes more explicable. It is not that the author is merely refusing inherited categories, but that these are themselves not yet popularly understood, or even agreed upon within various communities, and Lamwaka's story offers a reader access to a somewhat bewildering account of Lugul's unsettled life, and the narrator's often baffled attempts to understand him. At the same time, the story makes it clear that Lugul is also located, by various parts of the community, through forms of gendered distinction which can morph into discrimination, and even violence. As Judith Butler notes, the materiality of the body from the beginning is "already gendered, already constructed" (xi), meaning that the so-called "physical basis of the gender binary is a socially derived construction of reality" (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 433).

Lamwaka's focus on a transgender fictional character is a transgressive decision, addressing a form of fluid *gender* identification that in Africa (and indeed beyond) is less

familiar even than marginalised (but evidently categorised and socially recognisable) homosexual or lesbian *sexual* orientations. Paradoxically, if transgender as an identity has attracted less media attention and outrage in repressive African countries than questions of male or female same-sex sexual orientation, this need not imply that it is less controversial, but that questions of trans identity are still much visible than minority sexualities, and more likely to be misunderstood. In a sense, the transgender person embodies a socially troubling or queering of gender identity that disturbs assumed notions of gender *and* sexual orientation, and could be considered doubly transgressive. The transgender person subverts the conventional performance of male/female gender binaries, *and* presents the difficulty, for others, of knowing or determining sexual orientation. A person may be trans, but are they straight, asexual, bisexual, homosexual ...?

In representing Lugul, Lamwaka's story can be understood through Stella Nyanzi's observation that there is a need for "queering queer Africa", a move which "requires innovation, [and] creativity" and engagement with "the diverse lived realities of local queer Africans" (65). As a small step in taking up this challenge, I comment on "Chief of the Home" so as to explore some related dimensions of being queer and African and transgender. I agree that Lamwaka's story offers a "unique queer space in which to consider the impact of violent conflict on individuals" (Martin and Xaba viii), but I also bring the discussion into the realm of the discursive and behavioural regimes which influence the treatment of Lugul in the village, and the town. My comments are exploratory, and make no claim to address the question of trans identities broadly. I use the story – itself an entangled, and confusing piece of narration - as a way in to a number of complex questions with unresolved answers.

As already said, "Chief of the Home" is inspired by a childhood memory about a transgender individual in Lamwaka's community. Their⁴³ shifting gender expressions and (in Lugul's particular case) indeterminate, non-declarative sexual orientation give readers a poignant fictional angle on to a transgender life in a traditional African society. Readers encounter the paradox of an identification which is clearly transgressive, and yet for much of the narrative is noticed without spectacular remark, being more-or-less accommodated. But the story also draws quiet attention to Lugul's ragged, lonely life on the margins, and his eventual violent death at the hands of soldiers. The story is set in semi-rural Northern

⁴³ Some transgender people prefer to use the gender neutral possessive pronoun 'their' to refer to their non-binary gender identities. I use it here for noting, but (self)consciously revert to the more normative 'his' in my analysis, for the sake of referential clarity.

Uganda, at a time “before... land in Alokolum village became home to thousands of displaced people because of war” (159). The narrator refers to “the time we lived in our home, farmed our land, fetched water from the well, cut and gathered wood, and told stories at the evening fire. [...] When we used the word *omera*, brother, and meant it, although you were from another village” (159). The opening section of the story, through a rhythmical repetition of phrasing and cadence, crafts a space which deliberately conjures the past, configured here as something of a traditional pastoral idyll, a space-time mythologised by the author as one in which communities were homely and accommodating, working by simple modes of subsistence farming, and communal sharing; when boundaries between insider and outsider, us and them, were porous and flexible. If this characterisation risks sounding hollow, its delineation soon acquires deliberate authorial substance when set bluntly against the time that follows, in which the community fractures, allegiances brutally marshalled in the service of violent political rivalries between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Acholiland and Yoweri Museveni’s Ugandan government. (According to Ogenga Otunnu, the horrific, prolonged war in Northern Uganda wrought social destruction. It claimed many civilian lives, displacing over 400,000 people, and licensing rape and abduction [10.] The socio-cultural fabric of Acholi society was destroyed, and villages levelled. Many people were uprooted from supportive village structures to live in “displaced camps”, where fear, vulnerability and curtailed circumstances oblige them to “languish without assistance and protection” (Otunnu 13).

Lamwaka’s story illustrates not only the existence of socially constructed boundaries for gender – male and female spheres of being - but also the sometimes flexible capacity of such boundaries in supportive societal contexts such as the old-style village of Alokolum, although there is not complete tolerance of the person with a divergent gender identity. When this generally hospitable life-world is ravaged by civil war – conflicting bodies of state and counter-state vying violently over political power, the accommodating space and the people within it are subjected with almost casual indifference to destructive fall-out. This may not necessarily be a regime of governmentality against imaginative and bodily freedoms, but it is set on its own will to power, and should difference fall on its path, difference must be negatively construed, and eliminated.

The story concerns Lugul, a biological male who does not subscribe to the gender norms of society, and in his behaviour and dress presents as neither definitively female nor male, thus positioning him in a “third space” of some kind. The story is narrated from the

perspective of an adult who grew up with Lugul, and even though the narrator's gender is not overtly specified, some references in the narrative point to her as female. For example, the narrator expresses admiration of the ease with which Lugul cuts wood, saying that *the other girls* said he was a man and that was why he had more energy. The implication is that the narrator is a young girl who is fascinated by Lugul's crossing of familiar gender distinctions, even while Lugul is also recognisably a man. In deciding that the narrator is female, readers might also be inclined to blur the narrating voice with their knowledge of the author of the story as female. Elsewhere in the story, though, the gender of the narrator seems less certain. This may indicate that the story is not very polished, or controlled, or it may be read as the writer's deliberate attempt to confuse, emphasising the experiential fluidity rather than the social fixity of gender.

The narrator takes it upon herself to tell the story of Lugul because “[his] story deserves to be told because [he] could never tell [his] own story” (161) As Pumla Gqola describes it, the narrative is “a loving tribute...a reclamation of a loved one rejected for being himself” (7). Giving narrative space to a gendered misfit, Lamwaka “tells the story of Lugul with deep appreciation” for what some consider his “‘deviant’ masculinity”, respecting “his freedom as deliberate self-identification” (Gqola 7). With shifts between male and female, whether in respect of the character Lugul, or the identity of the narrating consciousness, the mobile space of the narrative thus can be framed within a transgender theory that aims at “explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experiences” (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 432).

It is in relation to the devastation of the civil war – signalled in Lamwaka's story via strategic reference, rather than extensive detail – that the author's purposeful focus upon the gendered social relations of a particular village of the past needs to be understood. The village is construed as an imaginative and experiential antithetical space in comparison with the casual ruptures and everyday oppressions which would attend the violent social conflict. The community does have norms of gender and related heterosexuality, in terms of which Lugul is eccentric, “a mad man”, one “possessed by *cen*, spirits” (160), but Lamwaka still seems attached to the idea of the village as a place which, while shaped by inherited codes of behaviour, has curious capacities, depending on the various village groupings, to tolerate and even engage Lugul as a gender non-conforming person. But the narrator also laments that the

village is patriarchal, and that the superiority of the man is inculcated in children from a very young age, with gender differences between male and female being “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1067). Men’s power is entrenched in village custom, and via this seemingly immutable force that carries from generation to generation, even women become complicit in their own oppression.

I wished that the men in Alokolum would cut the wood and that we would carry it, something that the men shunned because they had been taught that cutting and carrying firewood is a woman’s work. My mother never asked Okello, my elder brother, to fetch water. It was also a woman’s job so I never expected that of him. [...] Like her mother, she had been told to provide whatever her husband needed. (160)

Butler speaks of the power of “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign,” arguing that through the act of performance, we continuously enact sexual conventions making them appear natural and necessary (270). In these terms, gender is an act “which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again” (Butler 272). In line with Butler’s theory of performativity, Lamwaka’s transgender character exposes the fictive nature of gender binaries. In spite of the traditional village insistence on gender roles as stable, Lugul’s identity is ductile. He is difficult to place, and yet members of the community ‘must’ (given their own attachment to gender regimes) repeatedly try to situate him, in order to understand him. Unlike other men, he cuts wood, a task meant for the village women, and yet the girls consider that he cuts it like a man. (Such a belief, in the very absence of the habit of men cutting wood, very neatly figures gender roles as constructed.) Lugul is also, unlike other men, familiar with the path to the well because he carries water in a jerry can every day. He has an affinity for more female roles, a transgression in the community, but the narrator maintains that “You didn’t have your own home but everybody welcomed you into their homes. You became part of everyone’s home. My mother’s hut is where you had most of your meals” (160). Here, the apparently generous memory of a supportive extension of hospitality cannot quite offset my feeling of Lugul’s homelessness and his wandering, which are both material, and also signs of his gender fluidity and thus social marginality. (Later, when the war erupts, we also find Lugul associated with environments of waste, and dirt.)

The narrative is very equivocal in the representation of the relationship between Lugul and the community. Lugul’s difference is a source of amusement – and *bemusement* – for

many people, but the community members do not ostracise him or use physical violence to punish his unorthodox, anomalous identifications. He is considered odd (sometimes even mad, as I have said) but he is still called ‘*omera*’ (160) by all the villagers, even though no one really knows where he comes from, or who his family is. Lugul, in his gender non-conformism, is truly the stranger in the villagers’ midst, troubling their traditional practices and in his very presence and difference testing the limits of belonging and inclusion.

However, Lamwaka does not solely depict the village community as a site of benevolent tolerance. Perhaps the point is that the community *itself* is uncertain, vacillating, unsure about how to respond to and understand Lugul. For despite the brotherly designation, Lugul is still at times verbally insulted by men who think his version of masculinity inferior to theirs. Also, boys are jokingly warned not to venture close to him because “[he] will teach them how to cook”, an implied feminising slur. Lugul, the men jest, apparently didn’t understand “that being near the cooking fire will burn [his] penis” (160). The blurred gender behaviours he exhibits also prompt curiosity and indeed uncertainty about his physiological sexual features. Readers are never told. Lamwaka keeps this private, not because of taboo, but so as not to pander to prurience, and rather to focus on Lugul’s whole personhood. Some people speculate that he “only had a penis” but that it still “wasn’t enough to make [him] a man” (160). Since possessing a penis is invested with more social meanings than just the physical organ itself (Ratele 421), Lugul’s willing performance of female tasks, and his apparent failure to prove his heterosexual male prowess and virility by having sexual relationships with women, divests him of a masculine identity. (In a terrible catch-22, this would also be the case were he to favour *homosexual* relations.) Overall, Lugul’s compromised masculinity does not qualify him to be addressed as “*rwot gang*”, or ‘chief of the home’.

Despite the innuendos and casual aspersions, Lugul persists in choosing to self-identify as he wishes, most often with a female identity. “[W]hatever anyone said didn’t deter you from doing what you enjoyed most” (160). Lamwaka plays with the notion of ‘calling’ as not merely a form of naming, and stigmatised name-calling, but of interpellation, “a constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognising themselves as subjects” (Althusser 168). Lugul responds to the call of that which is culturally designated female, inhabiting a preferred subject position rather than heeding the men’s invitation to join them in their drinking, a camaraderie whose *fellowship* represents the preferred form of masculinity:

You didn't join like other men did when they arrived later. You were more interested in what the women were talking about. Even though the men called you, '*Lugul bin imat arege ii kin coo*, Lugul come and drink alcohol with your fellow men', you ignored their call. [...] You seemed not to mind whatever people called you. You never answered the men when they insulted you. (162)

Lugul consciously responds to the calls of women. For example, the narrator says: "My mother called you to our home every day when we were about to eat...She called you her assistant because you helped when she needed something done" (161). Moreover, "whenever there was a fight between the husband and wife you came to help the woman" (161). By accepting the hailing from the women, he identifies with that subject position since, as Althusser posits, "in the act of acknowledging that it is indeed he who is addressed, the individual thus recognises his subjecthood" (168). In their gratitude to him, the women are accommodating and accepting of him even though they can be somewhat baffled by his difference. Lugul is an apt reminder of the awkward (mis)alignments between gender and sexuality. 'Sexuality' is not merely about the act of sex (in whatever forms), which is never a feature of "Chief of the Home", but rather "a host of different biological and mental possibilities, and cultural forms – gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires, fantasies, erotic practices, institutions and values" (Weeks 7). In all of this, Lamwaka also seems to be attempting to trouble the very binaries through which gender is so narrowly determined, and functions as a regulatory regime. Lugul is a liminal figure who troubles "the politics of stable gender identities" and stable gender hierarchies, the story of his experience questioning whether polarities of male and female should remain intact (Halberstam 560). Perhaps Lugul can be understood through the "reverse discourse" that "takes shape around definitions of transsexual and transgender" which Jack Halberstam develops via Foucault. Halberstam argues for a "feminised masculinity" through "which one empowers a category that might have been used to oppress", transforming "a debased position into a challenging presence" (555). If the issue of Lugul is undecided in the narrative, this seems appropriate. As Halberstam says, "it is extremely important to recognise the queerness of these categories, their instability, and their interpretability" (555).

The child narrator recalls asking her mother why Lugul is not "chief of the home" and being scolded for "asking too many questions" (161). The mother cannot or will not explain why Lugul is not a typical man, head of a family and a household, given the traditional respectful title. I suspect that the mother does not want to encourage any discussion about fluid gender identities, which the young narrator is clearly already curious about, in case she influences the child. Even without being given an answer, the child decides to follow Lugul

around: “You never once stopped and asked why I followed you around. You only turned and looked at me, and then I saw a smile appear on your lips. I knew that was our connection. You were my friend and I would be yours” (162). The narrative is vague about the nature of this ‘connection’. The implication is that Lugul and the narrator are similar in spirit, somehow alike, the closeness of the second person address (‘you’) materialising gradually in the narrative as an intuited bond. Lugul’s smile; the child’s ‘following’...these seem to be subtle markers of an affective affinity which also signifies a euphemistic ‘understanding’ between the two. If Lugul does not fit the community’s definition of ‘rwot gang’, Lamwaka does not figure this as his lack. Rather, again a tactic redolent of a Foucauldian ‘reverse discourse’, she uses Lugul’s unsettled and unsettling identity (and his unknown sexual orientation) to critique the deficiencies of the term ‘chief of the home’, and the supposedly proper patriarchal masculinity the term describes. This is a creative resistance – emphasised by the title of the story, which thwarts a reader’s expectation – that uses the marginal to destabilise the problematic male hegemony entrenched in the village. The men are treated like royals and the wives as subjects, or servants. Women do most of the work, and the men consider this merely customary. The narrator says of the discrepant roles of her parents:

I watched her toil each day as my father drank lacoyi, home brew, with other men in the evening. At the end of the day he complained he was exhausted and my mother never said a word. [...] My father never said thank you to my mother and it was funny to hear you appreciate my mother’s cooking. My father always complained about the salt or the odii, groundnut paste, but you never did. (161)

As I have been discussing, Lugul is differentiated from this male norm, and his feminised masculinity troubles custom. The story resonates with many questions about his gender and orientation, but leaves them unanswered, deliberately queering a reader’s own desire to know for certain. Is he/she, is he/she not? Lamwaka’s gentle emphasis falls more simply on the fact that ‘Lugul is’. The very character of Lugul is depicted so as to render simple polarities impossible. Lamwaka “invites her readers to engage...with that which is not contained within the culture – whether of... [queer] activism or of conventional heterosexual morality” (Yorke 86).

The villagers’ un/easy familiarity towards Lugul is terminated when “the new government took power” (162), and began to assert militarised control. War disrupts habitual social patterns, and many people in the villages flee, “carr[ying] their luggage on their heads to safety” (162). Lugul disappears from Alokolum, re-appearing in the neighbouring town of Gulu where he is spotted by one of the displaced villagers: “helping, cleaning around...You

swept the streets, picked up rubbish as you did in Alokolum” (162). In the precarious situation of war, with many lives displaced and old boundaries thrown into question, Lugul remains the most marginal of people. Making do.

And out of nowhere he is shot dead by soldiers. This is depicted in the story as an outrageously exaggerated overkill, using “six bullets because they suspected that you were a spy” (163). The story implies the base falsity of the retrospective allegation levelled against Lugul. It is merely a pretext for extermination. He is not a spy, serving either the national interest or its rebel counterpoints. Instead, his presence as “a woman man” (162) is a transgressive embodiment that is an affront to the hyper-masculinity which the state requires, and through which it is secured. Militarisation mobilises men into exaggeratedly aggressive expressions of maleness, often marked by displays of random, casual violence. Such violence tends to be expressed as dominance over subordinates, including women and non-normative men. Lugul’s aberrance, paradoxically, renders him both easy to dispense as some ‘thing’ alien, and essential to be dispensed with. The story shows: were he left alone, unmolested, to live his in-between identity and unexpressed sexual orientation, he would constantly make visible the fragile foundations on which difference and patriarchal domination are based. Lugul, left to live, is a socio-political risk; people might become accustomed to him and his non-conforming ways as unexceptional. Regimes of established behaviour would be disrupted. And rebellion to governmental regimes might follow...

In being killed, Lugul is discarded just like the filthy rubbish that he had been helping to clean up, and in being so ejected, his abjection highlights the injustice of the prevailing norms, queering *them* as callous and unnatural. Lugul’s honor is restored when the narrator’s father decides to give him a final resting place on his own land when nobody wanted his corpse buried at the home. (This is a decision oddly unmotivated in the plot, but it seems Lamwaka wishes to push the story towards an ameliorative resolution, in which change of heart is possible, even in the typical patriarch.) The ending of the story exclaims the brave personhood of Lugul: “Nobody wanted to call you a man because you fetched water from the well, carried firewood on your head. Today, I will call you my hero because you did what you wanted to do. You were *rwot gang*” (163). In an act of love and respect for Lugul, the narrator explicitly reconfigures the meaning of ‘*rwot gang*’, expanding the honorific term into a more generous and just term, able to revere ambiguous forms of gender identification beyond the conventional binary. The narrator recognises that those gender-fluid qualities which relegated Lugul to the margins are precisely those differences that made Lugul valuable as a person.

In discussing the challenges associated with representing, in examples of African short fiction, sexualities which challenge the normative, the chapter has shown the value of efforts by writers to make forms of queer identity their subject matter. The chapter has also commented on the possibilities and limitations of short fiction for representing non-conforming sexualities within the space of the short story. At times, we have seen that the writers veer towards advocacy message over narrative interest, and that the stories are marked by tensions between seeking to express what has been unviable or unsayable, and finding interesting modes in which to achieve this. Unevenness is a feature of many of the stories, as are odd plot movements and expedient resolutions.

For my part, though, if these story writers' treatment of their gendered and/or sexually transgressive subject matter is a little disorienting, there is some value in our agreeing to remain, as readers, *with* the disconcerting experience of uncertainty and contingency. (In using the term 'disorienting, I filter my thoughts through Sara Ahmed's idea of 'queering' our understanding of orientation, arguing for a slanting or skewing of the body's orientation towards objects and ideas.) If we as readers agree to remain, for the space-time frame of the story, with not knowing whether the stories are going to 'work out', with not knowing whether the generic instability is successful (sermon/story; critical/stereotypical), or the register an apt mix of hackneyed and inventive...if we stay with these tensions, rather than quickly seeking to settle the differences into good/bad, either/or, yes/no...then we might find in this uneasy state of difficult accommodation a form of generous, self-expansive engagement which allays our initial confusion or discomfort or impatience.

As Ahmed might say, such 'staying' then becomes a form of dwelling *in* the story instead of being outright determined to refuse the story its tentative, uncertain shape, or to stop its discordances by insisting on defending view X against view Y. This willingness to accommodate lines of difference, in these stories, to accept the writer's hopeful bid for resolution via the familiarity of cliché, might in turn become informative modes for attitudes towards non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations. In such a 'queer' reading, for instance, Kenani's narrative treatment of homosexuality can be considered a *necessarily* incoherent mix of differences. And it might even be appropriate as a model for understanding the challenges which face a story writer who tries to fictionalise same-sex desire in a context where the conflicting intra- and inter- facts of a particular national situation and a wider international concern threaten to dictate the directions his narrative 'should' take. However uneven the stories on which I have focused, then however marked by gap and contradiction,

the stories – to extend Chris Dunton’s claims, help to liberate the subject of queer sexuality, “in the special sense that whether or not it is treated sympathetically, it is granted a greater capacity to disturb, to call questions, than in texts where it merely forms part of the data of a social typology” (Dunton 423).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In her editorial introduction to *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Tamale problematises the use of the singular term “sexuality” and instead insists on the need to shift towards plurality when it comes to discourses of sexuality on a continent where so many African nations narrowly prescribe heterosexuality and its related gender norms. She argues that “(t)he notion of a homogeneous, unchanging sexuality for all Africans is out of touch...with the realities of lives, experiences, identities and relationships”, and “also with current activism and scholarship. Ideas about and experiences of African sexualities are shaped and defined by issues such as colonialism, globalisation, patriarchy, gender, class, religion, age, law and culture” (Tamale “Introduction” 2). My study, in examining representations of sexualities in selected fictional texts from repressive African contexts, has made a case against the common assumption of a monolithic “African sexuality” that authoritarian states and cultural regimes seek to assert. The dissertation also draws on the recognition, well-expressed by Zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi, that “in African contexts vulnerability, risk, loss, violence and suffering still overshadow pleasure and desire in relation to sexuality”, and that while it is crucial “to highlight and advocate on these issues, often narratives of pleasure and desire disappear”(4).

Working via an open-minded engagement with examples of contemporary African fiction, and using an aptly wide range of scholarly reference, I have hoped to suggest something of the possibilities for narrative as a creative, exploratory space through which authors, readers and critics might begin to think critically and imaginatively about African sexualities. The texts on which I have focused, as a young African scholar, depict African sexualities as forms of being in the world which both obliquely and sometimes more directly intersect with social and political pressures. The dissertation might contribute to contemporary literary research that aims to shift “accepted assumptions” about “literary practices in Africa” (Azodo and Eke 2), showing how writers are beginning to offer challenging depictions of interrelated subjects such as sexuality and desire (persistently considered taboo), as well as tracing their uneven relation to forms of power, instead of mistakenly thinking that sexuality is merely a marginal, or secondary, issue. In addressing questions of sexuality as represented in fiction from authoritarian African contexts, my approach is purposefully intersectional in impulse, and characterised by what Joseph Boone terms “interimplication”, an intellectual framework whose elements and practices are not neatly congruent. This range is an attempt to avoid a confining, even ‘dictatorial’ form of

critical commentary, a fluid reach which then becomes a meta-commentary on the scope of fiction and literary analysis to disturb repressive norms. The study is also broadly ‘queer’ in that it “submits the various social codes and rhetorics of sexuality to a close reading and rigorous analysis that reveal their incoherence, instability, and artificiality”, with the result “that sexual pleasure or desire, popularly conceived as a force of nature that transcends any cultural framework, becomes instead a performative effect of language, politics, ...symbolic,...historical and cultural meaning” (Hanson 4).

In discussing ten fictional texts by African writers from Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Malawi, African nation-states characterised historically by forms of authoritarian rule, I have argued that these authors depict the ambiguities, tensions, conformities and contradictions in understandings of sexualities, both showing how regimes of sexual knowledge are negotiated *and* pointing to the contribution of a fictional space to such negotiation. If, as Terry Eagleton argues, “every literary text in some sense internalises its social relations of production” (48), the novels and short stories I have discussed cannot entirely be separated from the dominant ideologies which hold sway in the societies from which they come, or engage with. At the same time though, literary representation is no mere reflection of the status quo; through character and voice, for example, authors can hypothesise and speculate, critique current practices and celebrate the possibility of alternative orders of politics, knowledge and being. In this vein, Margaret Sönsler Breen points out that “sometimes literature needs to divorce itself from conventional definitions of morality and justice and from social and literary tradition in order to offer readers an imaginative space apart from repressive, demeaning forces” (39). This is especially complex in the representation of a taboo subject such as sexualities. It is evident in the difficulties that the authors studied in this research face for as much as their representations of sexualities at times subvert hegemonic sexual norms, there are moments of slippage when they invoke stereotypes about male and female sexualities, or fall back on habituated assumptions.

I was initially drawn to work on examples of contemporary African novels, since this genre seemed well-suited to the task of ‘storying’ people’s sexualities in and in relation to oppressive political rule. Long form fictional prose struck me as offering an author both a broad, expansive social canvas and an intimate angle on individual lives, bringing together power and desire, the social body and personal bodies. As my research developed, however, I also thought that if my focus extended a little beyond the novel per se, the study could more appropriately embody something of the varied and even fugitive nature of African sexualities and their representations in fiction; the ways in which authors inconsistently trace boundaries,

blur them, and break their categorical hold. I therefore decided to draw not only on novels but also short stories, aiming to buttress the point of overcoming normative binaries.

If, in focusing on examples of narrative from two literary genres, the novel, and the short story, the dissertation has found intriguing capacity in imaginative writing for the nuanced representation of African sexualities, it is also likely that other genres might offer their own particular advantages when tackling sexuality. Drama might have the generic strength of embodied voicing, dialogism, and scene as illustrative instance. Lyric poetry might enable African sexualities to feature as compressed yet resonant image, capable of eluding social demands, while the narrative poem would have potential to ‘story’ sexualities as poignantly immediate or filtered through more dispassionate voice. Similarly, autobiography and life writing might have the persuasive rhetorical leverage of lived testimony and material witness. I would therefore recommend broadening research into the literary depiction of sexualities as shaped by explicit political authoritarianism, as well as by internalised regimes of knowledge, and discursive power. It seems relevant to extrapolate Cheryl Stobie’s remarks specifically to African contexts of knowledge: in the field of literary study, there is an urgent need for creative and scholarly interest in “representing a more varied spectrum of sexuality” (321). Here, sexuality is imagined as a relational “marker of identity” entangled in “awareness of gender issues; a consciousness of postcolonialism and an innovative experimentation with form in the fictional narration which also visualises a future that can countenance new forms of gender performance and sexuality” (Stobie 321).

Focusing on sexualities expressed within contexts of socio-political repression, Chapter Two’s examination of male sexualities and their implication for masculinities exemplifies the potential of literature in providing excellent critical opportunity to learn about nuances surrounding masculinities and sexualities. The chapter addressed Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, Moses Isegawa’s *Abyssinian Chronicles* and Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*. The authors’ representations of male sexualities from varied angles within particular African contexts of coercive nationalism emphasise the ineffectiveness of restricting masculinities and male sexualities within a narrow heterosexual and normative framework. My analysis preferred to re-examine them as mobile, rather than fixed notions. In the chapter, I explored the implications of various forms of institutional control in the shaping of the naturalised regime of knowledge and experience which has commonly been constituted as ‘African sexuality’ and how these coercive regimes are evaded, resisted and negotiated. I examined how gender and sexual identities, as constructs, are subject to shift and reshaping,

not only fulfilling but also resisting and eluding the various modes of control exerted over them. The authors' representations of male sexualities in their texts attest to the notion that "ideas about sexuality are linked to forms of power and other hegemonic categories of identity and subjectivity like class, gender and nationality" (Gwynn and Poon xii), and yet at the same time this hegemony is not simply achieved or superimposed, but comprises an ongoing site of struggle. We see this in the character of Lomba in *Waiting for an Angel*, whose understanding of his own male sexual power is implicated in Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha's state control and the privileging of militarised masculinity. In the same vein, we observe the role of religion and its close connection with the family institution in its governance of the male child's sexuality in Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*. The boy Mugezi subverts and resists, asserting a tabooed childhood sexuality. In Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, we see the interdiscursive authorities of law, religion and nationality in creating a powerfully normative male sexuality – but also, as in the other narratives of this sub-section, power is a Foucauldian multiplicity of force relations which paradoxically creates opportunities for reverse discourse. In order to claim spaces in which to express their sexual desire and desired sexuality, Mugezi, Dumisani and Lomba all negotiate the various political and gendered discourses which seek to regiment their masculinities, in the process demonstrating the volatility of norms, their vulnerability as well as violence. Even the autocratic regime is not consistently able to govern sexualities; instead, sexualities are multifarious bodies of knowledge, experience, hope and ideas which are differentially internalised. In the case of fictional depictions of homosexuality, as in the Huchu novel, "it must be seen that since homosexual desire is illicit in law and stigmatised in daily life" in the countries in question, "the representation of it in literature is *de facto* a transgression, the breaking of a silence. Yet texts that deal with it must of necessity constantly restage the traversal of the taboo, whether in the process of contesting it, attempting to naturalise it, or destabilising the assumptions on which it rests" (De Waal 234).

Chapter Three examined how three female writers – Sefi Atta, Doreen Baingana and Lola Shoneyin – engage with facets of female sexuality in conservative national contexts, among them desire, violation, the erotic, motherhood and polygynous marriage. I consider how these aspects of female sexuality are materially mediated by patriarchal, state and social institutions such as family and religion, as well as libidinal impulses and individualised longings. The chapter demonstrated how the notion of respectability mediates socially-desired shaping of decent female sexual behaviour in particular Nigerian and Ugandan families and communities, and what in comparison is considered undesirable, even illicit.

Part of my purpose, in examining these texts, has been to “map out the relations between the presence of shame and the absences of feeling and of joy and the wider fields of power in which sex and sexuality come into play” (Donnell 193). In Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good will Come*, respectability proves slippery, variously asserted and reconfigured through the inter-generational dyad of a mother and daughter (and indeed father-daughter), as well as through female friendship, in the changing relationship of Enitan and Sheri. The girls’ divergent privilege and disadvantage in Lagosian society sees their sexualities differently construed and realised, even though the society’s entrenched patriarchy affects their shared experience of female embodiment. The section noted how perceived sexual transgressions of the boundaries for girls and women are negatively judged, met with punitive measures of shame and rebuke, but also how female sexuality repeatedly seeks to subvert attempts to keep it contained, and in its supposedly rightful place. In the novelised stories of Doreen Baingana, for example, the author particularly depicts the gendered ambiguities of female sexual agency via related, sister characters such as Christine and Rosa, exploring their sexual fascination and ambivalent affinity with their sexual desire and longing for combinations of romance, power, and pleasure. Baingana does not shy away from representing either the contingent political and class-based lineations of supposedly personal desire in a postcolonial Uganda, or the devastating paradox, for women, of claiming a free-spirited agentive desire which results in the ravages of disease, and death. In this author’s work (as in that of several others in this study), the body is assertively situated *as* the site of sexuality, both viscerally and psychologically, a lived conjunction which is well-suited to representing the mobile intersection of power understood as external physical force and as inconsistently internalised regime. The last text considered in this section is Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, a novel which cannily plays out the possibilities of the plurality of sexual identities and orientations which characterise even the male-ordinate social structure of customary polygynous marriage. The wives, bearing the gendered social pressure to harness their sexuality towards achieving the ‘desired’ status of motherhood – but faced with the heavy-handed and sexually-unsatisfying ministrations of an egotistical, infertile patriarch – devise clandestine extra-marital strategies which at once enable pregnancy and the opportunity to explore their own sexual desires, and orientation. The household’s secret habituated practices are however challenged by the arrival of Bolanle, a new, young, educated wife, whose own strategising highlights the politically competitive and divergent nature of women’s socio-sexual longing in the polygynous family. These wives’ narrative lines are variously treated by Shoneyin, sometimes with a frankness that some critics find

shocking, and at other times with an intriguing reticence that speaks to the continued hold, upon narrative expression as much as upon sexual exploration and orientation, of taboos upon women's desire.

Throughout the section of the study which addresses the fictional representation of female sexualities in repressive social contexts, I note the challenges the writers face in trying to envisage 'liberated' female sexualities: patriarchal cultures persist, often further narrowing into militarised forms of rule and/or legal repression over individual sexual freedom; binary gender roles can seem so naturalised as not to be oppressive; contemporary culture dangles the evanescent allure of consumer freedoms to many African women, even in economically constrained climates; assertions for women's freedom of sexual experience and expression are claimed in contexts of increased violence against women, whether of rape, or HIV/Aids infection. Among such antagonisms, I notice how difficult it is for these female writers to imagine horizons of possibility for African female sexualities which don't show transgressive female sexualities ending up raped or dead, or married and en route to motherhood.

Furthering my questions about the possibilities and limitations of African sexualities as normative and resistant, Chapter Four examined how queer sexualities are represented in short fiction, a genre which, in a sense echoing the social and political denigration of minority, non-conforming sexualities, has been considered by some literary commentators a less consequential genre than the novel. In commenting on short stories from Nigeria, Uganda and Malawi, I suggested that short fiction, as a compressed narrative form, provides the writer with an opportunity to engage extremely intensely with questions of sexuality. In the context of repressive African political climates, this compression can distil a potent form of critique. At the same time, I discovered that the contractions of the short story heighten a reader's recognition of the contradictions which mark an authors' approach to portraying African sexualities, whether in terms of character development, plotting and resolution, or overall discourse. My inclination was not to dismiss such contradictions as flaws, or failures, but to imagine creative correspondences between the very subject matter of queer sexualities and the necessary queering of neat form as a method of provisional questioning, rather than conclusive assertion. This foregrounds the difficulties for the African story writer of imagining new horizons for sexualities – especially in conservative or even repressive African socio-political contexts which work to determine the illegality and undesirability of non-conforming sexualities, and in doing so perpetuate the claims of heteronormativity. Paradoxically, then, the very unevenness of the short stories I have studied draws necessary

attention to the challenges of trying to represent a contentious issue. The stories become powerful studies of difficulty, illustrating the volatile claims and counter-claims that shape (mis)understandings of forbidden issues such as same-sex desire. The short story becomes an analogue for the difficult lived materiality of African sexualities – accepted, refuted, accommodated – with varieties of awkwardness, perplexity, advocacy and desire. In the stories, the narrative arcs, plotting, and characters bring together into the small, brief space, wide-ranging and disjunctive horizons, ideas from traditional culture and consumer culture, from religious groups and from global repertoires which all shape how sexualities are understood.

The scope of this thesis is limited to four countries which have historically experienced forms of authoritarian rule. However, there are many more African countries marked by such oppressive and normative political climates, and other writers who have been prompted to recast such regimes and their associated governance of sexualities in the form of stories which spark questioning. My research points to the need for further literary-cultural investigation on the intersections (and misalliances) between fiction, sexuality and forms of socio-political repression. Clearly, in this respect notions of power are crucial: for by “power I do not mean merely physical and legislative force in the mundane sense but also those discursive forces which assign a name of their own choosing to every creature in the garden, that presume they know what sex is or ought to be, what pleasure is or ought to be, and what role sexuality might play...in social relations more generally” (Hanson 4-5). Overall, the texts studied in this dissertation are excellent reminders to us that even with the powers of political and legal repression, and the normative everyday rhetorics which percolate ideas and practices of preferred sexual behaviour, ‘African sexualities’ are likely to be as varied as the individuals who inhabit the diverse continent itself. The study illustrates that “sexuality” is messily imbricated in institutional forces and individualised desire. “My interest in the narrative[s] lies in the intersection” that they “stage [] between...intimate relations...and the political and cultural pressures that govern these intimacies” (Donnell 193). I suggest that even in repressive situations, where coercive forces subtly or bluntly attempt to fix heterosexual sexualities and non-normative sexualities as polarised monoliths, sexualities are agentive spaces which provide room for negotiation and subversion, pleasures as well as coercions. The same applies with even the heterosexual expression of sexuality which is subject to differentially gendered discourses of respectability and entitlement, whereby

female power is often supposedly located in reproducing culture and male potency in controlling it.

POSTSCRIPT

In the spirit of Tamale's edited collection on African sexualities, the three years I have spent working on this project have been insightful, transformative, adventurously scary and exhilarating. There has been much learning, but also moments of unlearning about issues that I once took for granted. There have been moments when I have had to confront my own prejudices derived from the received 'truths' about sexuality that I had grown up with. Without a doubt, too, there remains much learning for me to do, and I intend to build on the working knowledge developed while completing the dissertation. In the years of the PhD, undertaken during a scholarship sabbatical from the University of Malawi, on a professional level I have had various people look at me like I am a naughty child when I explain to them the focus of my project. I remember once being half-jokingly asked by an elderly professor at a major conference on African literature why, out of all the topics in the world, I had chosen to focus on sex. *Why?* Why on earth? The perplexed implication was that there were far more serious, necessary, scholarly areas of literary-critical study which I as a young African academic could investigate. Or *should*. I felt challenged to defend my focus, and also myself as a young female academic. For it was my femaleness that this professor was also censuring, in its transgressive interest in the undesirable subject of sexuality. Needless to say, if the topic has raised eyebrows in the more conservative corridors of some academia, there have also been many moments in my PhD journey when I have had to explain (and patiently explain again!), to friends and family, that my project was not pornographic, not 'examining how people have sex', and how this appears in African fiction. The duty to explain and legitimate constantly brought me back to the first time I taught Doreen Baingana's short story "Tropical Fish" to my second year English studies students at the University of Malawi a year before I embarked on this dissertation. The students were abuzz: to be discussing 'sex', a forbidden topic, in the intellectual space of the classroom! After their initial excitement at the transgression, the students became fascinated to discover that studying depictions of sexuality could be quite a serious business, since sexuality was a socially constructed space in ways similar to their ideas of how to be a man or how to be a woman, how to live as male, or female. They even began to see that such binaries were part of the problem.

Very sustaining to me has been the keen scholarly interest that both undergraduate and postgraduate students back home in Malawi have shown in studying representations of sexualities in their essays and dissertations. Such intellectual passion has helped clear a space for my own work. The social landscape in Malawi is still repressive. It still restricts

sexualities to the explicit control of normative patriarchal authority. But at least more opportunities for questioning are opening up in academic spheres, and through the various NGOs that advocate bold discussion on the complex phenomenon that is human sexuality. As I write this conclusion, colleagues in the English department where I teach have submitted curriculum reviews to the Senate, revisions which motivate for new courses on sexualities and gender studies. This is a path-breaking development in the history of the department, and indeed the university, and I would like to think that my own research can contribute to this intellectual change, so that questions of diverse sexualities in Africa, and their depiction in fiction, become less transgressive subjects and part of broad-minded, informed, everyday discussion.

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