



Effectiveness of Satire as a Narrative Tool in Contesting Queer Marginalization in *Stories of Our Lives* and *They Called Me Queer*

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Abstract

This article set out to examine how gay men deploy satire as narrative strategies of challenging the societal-endorsed heteronormativity in two African queer anthologies: Nest Collective's Stories of Our Lives and They Called Me Queer by Kim Windvogel and Kelly-Eve Koopman. The anthologies contain narratives entailing confessions of personal life experiences of characters who self-identify as gays in Kenya and South Africa. The objectives of this essay were to evaluate how satire is deployed by queer men as a contestation tool in religious spheres and to critique the use of satire as an instrument for disapproving marginalization of gays in political spaces. The questions the article sought to answer were: How is satire deployed as contestation tool in religious spaces by gays? To what extent is satire a device for fighting queer exclusion in political spaces by queer men? To situate the area of engagement, the essay majorly used the queer theory for conceptual analysis and interpretation of the texts. It adopted qualitative research methodology and the researcher close read then critically analyzed the anthologies to tease out the authors' challenges to the heteronormative center using Africanist queer theory perspectives. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the two texts as they reflect on the larger African queer experiences and represent two diverse contexts in Africa, yet comparable. The findings demonstrate that gays continue to navigate their marginality by challenging and deconstructing social spaces including the religious and political spaces; hence able to assert their identities and exercise their agential capacity to cope in the predominantly heteronormative society. The findings contribute to the African queer theory studies, to the existing body of knowledge in queer Literature, and may help enhance policy debates on queerness and being queer in Kenya and South Africa, and broadly Africa.

Keywords: Agency, Heteronormativity, Marginalization, Satire, Queer.

Introduction

This article interrogates how satire as a literary style is significant to gays in the selected texts in challenging societal norms encapsulated in political and religious practices that typically relegate gay people to the margins, while they hypocritically condone a myriad of other social ills in society. Some politicians and clerics also practice queerness behind closed doors. Queer men have been pushed to the periphery of the society whereby other members of the society frown at their existence irrespective of their station and situation in life. In the selected narratives, queer men contest this relegation to the margins by ridiculing and exposing the frail side of the idealistic pillars of the society such as the political and religious systems. Contestation entails disapproval or pushing back specific matters that are of concern to people in the society. Satire objects queer relegation in political and religious spaces. It has been efficiently utilized by gays in *Stories of Our Lives* and *They Called Me Queer* to castigate the glaring political homophobia and religious hypocrisy evident in tendencies of making allowances for social vices while painting gayism as the core problem. Satire is important for queer men in unmasking political attacks and religious dishonesty; while irony is a powerful technique in the facilitation of this satire. In the selected queer anthologies, satire comes in handy in foregrounding contradictory practices, dismantling and ridiculing religious intolerance towards queer persons. Satire is also used in expressing the need for genuine debates on whether queerness is what is ailing the African society in light of other social ills. Hence, this article explores the use of satire by gays to lampoon shortcomings in political and religious convictions that privilege heteronormativity and alienate the queerness.

The queer theory helps to critically discuss and guide this article. The queer theories also known as the gay and lesbian theories emerged from the revolutionary movements of the 1960s similar to the feminist and Black criticism theories and not from scholars (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2016). The genesis of the Gay Liberation Movement (GLM) can be traced to the Stonewall Riot in New York in 1969 where the police raided a renowned meeting joint for gays. The Gay Liberation Movement had two main objectives: to counter maltreatment and



prejudice against a sexual minority, and to inspire gay people themselves to be proud of their sexual orientation. The movement employed ‘consciousness-raising’ and ‘coming out’-declaring their gay identity publicly.

Further, the centrality of Queer-African Studies cannot be overlooked. African scholars such as Keguro Macharia, Ombagi, Abbas and Ekine also contribute greatly to Queer-African studies. Stella Nyanzi has also done useful work on the queer subject. Nyanzi (2014), argues that queering Africa surpasses the ideas of major western proponents of the queer theory such as Foucault (1990) and Butler (2013). She posits that their assertions on the tenets of the queer theory strengthen Western hegemony over African Queer Studies. Such marginalization of homosexuality is evident in African continent as represented in the selected anthologies where perceived homosexuality supportive texts are not only criminalized but also limited in circulation and at the margins of academic discourse. Foucault (1990), a major proponent of the queer theory, theorizes sexuality as located within structures and discourses of power by arguing that certain sexual orientations were thought as unnatural and immoral and those with such sexual preferences were to be placed under surveillance.

Kemit and Hendar (2022), argue that satire is used to criticize inhumane government policies, hypocrisy and the cunning means the government employs to gain its power. Satire sensitizes for political change while unmasking absurdity to display a particular human shortcoming or vice, making satire involving and convincing in the modern society. Shittu (2021) argues that satire enables writers to make social and political commentary while subjecting to mockery shortcomings in the social legal systems, wrong and unfair government policies. Through its compelling role, satire arouses social consciousness in the society. Horvat (2022) submits that satire is used to unveil and lampoon actual cases of brutality and negligence buttressed by political actors, governments and justice systems. Adetuyi, Ajibade, & Patrick (2019) assert that satire exposes and criticizes societal ills in religious spheres. Religion is often linked to purity, morality, justice, truth and love. Religious leaders and the adherents of a certain religion are often criticized through religious satire especially when they fail to live up to the standards of their religion. Religion presumably meant to advocate for love and affection especially for the downtrodden and marginalized is satirized for excluding them instead of embracing them as dictated by the tenets of religion. Richter (2021) argues that satire plays a crucial role in challenging non-adherence to religious routineness and norms. Almujaalli (2023) postulates that satire is effective for social criticism and that through deployment of irony, satire capacitates authors to uncover and critique imperfections in religious institutions and individuals. Satire seeks to provoke reflections, spur change while questioning deeply rooted norms in religious spaces.

Wasike (2000) foregrounds that in African Literature, satire is powerful in highlighting social issues and brings to light religious hypocrisy. He posits that “the nature of satire is that it exploits the discrepancy between appearance and reality to expose hypocrisy and pretense and thereby lambast those who do not practice what they preach”. (P.9) This mismatch is what he calls ridiculous. Queer men in their narrations use satire to unmask the mismatch between appearance and reality in religious and political contexts in Kenya and South Africa.

Methodology

This article critically reviewed literature, and stylistically evaluated the two selected queer anthologies. It employed qualitative research design and adopted the corresponding interpretive approach through textual analysis. It is based on a comparative research analysis as a study tool. Further, close reading of the selected texts aided to gather data on how satire functions to depict contestation by queer men. A reading of the selected texts was thus necessary to realize the interpretation and critical analysis of the study’s objective. The data comprised the comparative textual analysis of the selected texts while examining satire. Textual analysis was done, including robust secondary textual reading to offer a critical appreciation of the primary texts, and to interrogate the connotations of the language used explicitly and implicitly in the selected texts. For secondary data, library research involving reading of secondary texts was undertaken. Through library research, a review of other secondary academic literature within the scope of the study such as scholarly journals, articles and research papers to support the arguments helped inform this study. Keywords in the research topic was searched on Google Scholar to systematically review literature on the topic.



Discussion And Findings

Satire exposes the weaknesses of African religious and political spaces in relation to the African LGBTQ community:

Weaponising Satire to castigate marginalization of queer men in religious spaces

Satire, as an artistic form has been conspicuously deployed in the selected texts to censure follies in the religious and political spheres. It makes fun of religious persons for their legalistic demands to live according to the tenets of religion while they are not able to fulfil these requirements. Many religious persons in Africa tend to be homophobic. Wanelisa Xaba's narrative "Dangerous Deities" in *They Called Me Queer* demonstrates the use of satire by queer persons to ridicule religious hypocrisy. The narrator feels that part of the South African faith community has surely failed to practice and live by the dictates of religion. These religious people express aversion towards queer persons and send a powerful message that God hates gays. They feel that this should not be the case as it deeply wounds their identity. Wanelisa voices;

I just can't handle the rejection. How do you live when you are made to feel that God has rejected you, the God who is also your image? I live with disappointment (P. 168)

The narrative reveals that queer persons believe in the notions of godliness; to stretch, love and accommodate what is perceived as queer, and persons viewed as social misfits, just as God. Xaba deploys satire to criticize church people's effort in breaking and bringing down queer men, and ridicules religious persons for misrepresenting God and appearing to be antigod in the society. While insisting on the uses of religious doctrinal rules as a yardstick to daily living and societal interactions, they have failed terribly in keeping to these standards.

Religious hypocrisy in religious spaces continues to be ridiculed in "Memories", *Stories of our Lives* where a different unnamed narrator, who identifies as a gay sex worker confesses to blackmailing a pastor who he had a sexual relationship with. The pastor secretly gives him money for payment while discouraging him from ever making public their affair to maintain his good reputation as a churchman. For a man of cloth to condemn gayness then practice it behind closed doors is insincerity. The narrator discloses;

He was very discreet, this guy. He was very careful to make sure no one in his neighbourhood knew what was going on between us. He needed to be respected by his church congregation. Whenever I'd go to his house, he would ask me to dress formally in a nice shirt and pants so as not TO RAISE

EYEBROWS (P. 145)

Satire mocks and unveils the hypocrisy of religious leaders in passing judgement upon others, yet they are not faultless. The narrator portrays religious leaders as being hypocritical and full of flaws. They gospelize that homosexuality is sin, yet they themselves fail to walk the talk. Indeed, the narrator further derides some religious leaders in the story saying;

I find the church a waste of time. Many of my clients are "godly" men who are supposed to show others the way. Some even preach against homosexuality, then, COME TO ME. (P. 146)

Religious spaces in Kenya are infiltrated by religious hypocrisy and satire exposes this contradiction, while opining that religion does not make sense, as long as there is pretention among religious persons.

One narrator in "Memories", from *Stories of our Lives*, attests that in his religious Muslim community the Sheikhs, including some pastors, live double lives and fail to call for tolerance of homosexuals for fear of backlash from congregants. The narrator deploys satire to unveil and ridicule the rot in these systems that are characterized by heightened hypocrisy and dark dirty secrets. The narrator says;

Yet they are the same ones – those Sheikhs – at night, and in the dark, they call you and flirt with you. During the day, when you meet – he passes you like he doesn't know you and – if he's with his friends – he points you out and says, "That is a fag, catch it!" These religious leaders are neither conforming to their professed convictions nor are they what they appear to be, judging from face value. (P.6)



He also adds;

These sheikhs, these pastors, all of them. They don't want people to know. So they attack those of us who present openly. At night, THEY'RE GAY.

The narrator uses satire to display and ridicule the terrible failings of some clerics as they contravene queerness while at the same time practice it in secrecy. Indeed, appearance can be deceptive because it is what majority perceive or generalize as truth but reality is what actually exists about some religious leaders as seen in the narrative.

Khoir (2020) reveals that while Islamic religion does not condone queerness, it professes to embrace and nurture all humans. As such, majority believe that religion upholds graciousness and goodwill, inclusive of Islam, which inculcates in its followers love for all manner of persons in the universe. Nevertheless, some queer men belonging to the Muslim faith feel crestfallen, because of the contemptuous attitude they get to deal with from their counterparts who are often prejudicial in reality, and not tolerant as taught by the religion. Satire is used to ridicule these persons in these religious spaces for keeping the external part of the commandments and not the true religious values of love and compassion. In "Memories", *Stories of our Lives*, an anonymous narrator who is a Muslim is frustrated that he is seen as a curse by this society. He exploits satire to express that his Muslim brothers have failed terribly in maintaining the lifestyle required by religion, to love all manner of persons in the universe, him included. His brothers, with their strong religious background, disown him because of his queer identity. They subject the narrator to emotional pain and loneliness, by turning their backs on him, and looking at him as the black sheep of the family instead of embracing him. He says, "My brother is actually an *Imam*, but I have never gone TO HIS MOSQUE" (P. 179)

He satirizes his brothers' false show because they pretend that they fully accept him because of religion and reputation, lampooning the pretense expressed by pious people. He further details that if someone visits their home, they would not be able to tell that there exists any conflict, because his family is good at performing togetherness. He recounts that during Muslim religious festivals, they break the fast and celebrate together. Once the visitors leave, his family goes back to their usual silent treatment. Satire unveils their strained relationship as he claims that his elder brother is actually an *Imam*, but the narrator has never been to his Mosque.

Tsavmbu (2021) asserts that the main component of satire is irony and it highlights religious conflicts and intolerance in literary texts. Satire lampoons religious characters who fail to embrace all kinds of people in the community as endorsed by the sensibilities of religion. Adele Adam's story, "Love Thy Neighbor" in *They Called Me Queer* reveals the frailty of religious systems in LGBTQ rejection by the faith community. Adam says;

I endure a lot of emotional and physical abuse because of my gay identity from Christians. I am a Christian. I am who I am, and no one can tell me that being a Christian means that I cannot be queer. (P. 138)

While Adam above asserts his commitment to his Christian belief, the physical and emotional abuse he undergoes demonstrates the internal and external conflict that may arise when one's faith clash with his or her sexual orientation.

Deployment Of Satire To Castigate Marginalization Of Queer Men In Political And Criminal Justice Systems

Satire is seen in *Stories of Our Lives*, where one narrator castigates Kenyan politicians and government officials for insincerity, being selfishly scheming and opportunistic in their hostility towards the Kenyan queer community. They appear bothered by gayism and suddenly show concern about it, particularly during the election period. During campaigns, they make remarks meant to politicize queerness. The narrator, in "Society and Future", *Stories of Our Lives*, opines that most Kenyan citizens in his county interpret this as political hypocrisy and intentionally disregard such rhetoric. These politicians do this for their convenience to avoid losing votes during elections, hence gaining political mileage. He says;



Our Governor said openly that queer people have no place in his county. He hasn't done anything legislative. It might have been for political reasons because it was said during an election period. People did not respond POSITIVELY TO IT. (P. 243)

Satire ridicules political attacks as they are crafty techniques to deceive and distract the gullible masses from major challenges affecting African countries such as inflation, corruptness, and underdevelopment. Satire is deployed by gays in the political space to ridicule politicians for their inadequate leadership skills. Schmitz et.al (2023) propound that the queer theory and politics reveal that the LGBTQ persons have always been the focus in contentious political debates and divisive politicization throughout history. While it is meant to heighten social exclusion of queer persons it also informs and facilitates commentary on faulty government leadership. He further asserts that the queer theory empowers LGBTQ persons to collectively resist divisive politicization and any rhetoric that is individualistic and harmful to their mental wellbeing.

The shortcomings of the South African justice systems are satirized in Carl Collison's, story "Of Names and 'The Blood That Falls'" in *They Called Me Queer*. Collison, a South African queer writer and activist narrates a true life account of his queer friend, Daantjie. He is accosted and brutally assaulted sexually by a heterosexual man, who derogatorily refers to him as "Moffie" (homosexual). Helpless and disabled, he pleads with his attacker to spare him but he violently assaults him physically and sexually, leaving him for the dead. A Good Samaritan takes him to hospital where he discovers that he has to live on diapers because of "the blood that falls" from behind. As Daantjie relieves the horrors of the incident, he expresses his painful memories. Daantjie says;

My sense of humanity is gone. My dignity is gone, and here he is still walking the streets, the criminal. Yet, I am disabled. I have to go to the hospital permanently now (P.59)

As a disabled queer man living with cerebral palsy, he expresses that it breaks his soul that he does not receive justice for the crime committed against him because he is queer, even after reporting his case to various law enforcement agencies. He spots his abuser in the streets walking freely. Satire here ridicules the weaknesses of the South African governance and justice system. It strengthens hate crimes against gays and impunity by allowing such criminals to go scot free. According to Daantjie, many queer men are being raped, killed and no justice is served when it comes to gays. Daantjie counts himself lucky to have survived the ordeal. He recounts the horrors of killings of his queer friends in the Western Cape region. He says, "There are others in that particular rural Western Cape region who have died such as Phoebe Titus, David Olyn and Brendon Hufke" (P.60) Daantjie is surprised that the legal system seems unbothered about offences against gays and no one follows up about the killers of his friends. Satire exposes the failings, castigates negligence and partisanship in law enforcement agencies as they turn a blind eye to offences against gays. He narrates the nasty ordeals that befall South African queer men in the watch of law enforcers. They are knife raped, tortured, dragged and lynched to death. Nadal (2020) observes that the law meant to protect all ends up punishing and discriminating against gays hence does not serve them. This prejudice could also be associated with historical trauma and the established legacies that continues the marginalization at present.

Conclusions And Recommendations

Satire ridicules religion that preaches love and acceptance of all, while hypocritically othering queer identities, yet some religious persons covertly practicing gayism. It exposes the human folly that masks politics by bastardizing queer community yet portraying bad governance that could be worse and vile in nature than queerness. Satire in queer literary studies remains a powerful tool for queer men to establish equality and acceptance of all sexuality forms in Africa.

This study recommends further research through literariness on navigating queerness among the transgender that seem to not have garnered enough attention of the scholarly discourses. It also raises further questions for researchers beyond literary discourses to other disciplines, such as the implication of criminalizing queerness on rights of queer persons.



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