

## Canvassing Taboo: African Sexuality as Post-Cultural Discourse in the Kenyan Disconnect 2 and Nafsi Films

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*Submitted 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2024, Accepted 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2024 and Published 18<sup>th</sup> October 2024*

### ABSTRACT

Sexuality narratives in the Kenyan film industry play a crucial role in directly and indirectly shaping narrative interests, addressing stakeholder concerns, and delivering effective messaging. Locally, these narratives are closely monitored, regulated, and classified due to their sensitive nature, compounded by their evolving nature as newer sexuality concepts integrate with traditional paradigms. This study aims to explore the social conceptualization of African Sexuality as a Post-Cultural Discourse in the Kenyan films Disconnect 2 and Nafsi. Utilizing film analysis and key informant interviews with industry professionals, the research reveals that post-cultural sexuality narratives are presented as non-threatening sexual ideals and practices that have the capacity to coexist harmoniously with traditional sexual paradigms. Recommendations include establishing a structured hierarchy for sexual narratives in film production to depict both traditional and post-cultural themes effectively. By incorporating consequences within the post-cultural discourse, audiences can better engage with and understand the complex sexuality ideologies presented in these films.

**Keywords:** *Sexuality, Narratives, Culture, post-cultural*

**How to Cite this Article:** OIYE, F., KAMAU, M., MOKUA, E., & WANGUI, L. (2024). Canvassing Taboo: African Sexuality as Post-Cultural Discourse in the Kenyan Disconnect 2 and Nafsi Films. *Kabarak Journal of Research & Innovation*, 14(3), 276–284.  
<https://doi.org/10.58216/kjri.v14i3.477>

## INTRODUCTION

The interminable film sex morality discourse in Kenya, spans far back to colonial times. A time when the Kenyan audience were simply subjects to externally curated film narratives that emerged as tools of subjugation and misinformation (Headstrong, 2020). From the onset, the existence of sex morality themes in films, informed the emerging desire by the colonizers to maintain a “morally upright” African society, an ideology that triggered the elimination of film scenes considered unpleasant and banned all the films that could instill undesirable ideas in the minds of Africans in colonial Kenya (Hartwell, 1954).

As times changed, the film industry evolved as a landscape of unrestricted competition. Kenyan film creatives joined in the production of films to contend with both foreign films and locally produced film texts that were influenced by foreign crew, ideologies, and resources.

In the ensuing industry scenario, sex and sexuality narratives filtered into the films in different dimensions. Kenyan filmmakers approached the portrayal of sexuality cautiously, as they targeted the post-colonial-era audience, limiting texts and themes through apologetic narratives, foreign filmmakers, who targeted non-Kenyan audiences in their Kenyan-produced films, took a bolder approach, embracing sex and sexual morality narratives more openly in their cinema exports. Owaahh (2017) in an article titled Seeing Vintage Nairobi through, a 1970s Porn Film cites the film *Black Emanuelle* (1975) as such a film where the Italian producers went all out to prime sex, sexuality and sex morality throughout the film in ways that were inappropriate to the Kenyan audience, basing on the colonial and post-colonial film censorship and restriction measures. In this export film, while on assignment in Nairobi, a photojournalist questions her sexual identity when she engages in affairs with her wealthy host, and throughout the film, nudity, sexual intercourse, heterosexuality and homosexuality narratives reoccur.

The social concepts, narratives and scripts of sexuality in Kenyan culture, are influenced by long-standing religious and cultural paradigms that have systematically reclassified sex and sexuality as taboo (Miroslava, 2000; Flaminia:2020; Lewis, 2021 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). Unlike social narratives, in films, the industry is at an intersection of power, art, and identity (Ndanyi, 2021), as the filmmakers embrace the desire to infuse hybridity and syncretism in the post-colonial era to guide their approaches as they navigate the indigenous and post-cultural realities (Ashcroft et al. 1989).

Critics contend with the necessity of narrative appropriation as the film makers author sexuality narratives in the post-colonial era, since it is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity. Article 19 argues that it is the artist’s role to challenge and provoke, sometimes in a way that may offend. Aistic expression is protected as an important aspect of the right to freedom of expression (2015). Sexuality narratives however remain in focus at all levels of production, authorization, classification and broadcasting as the film industry stakeholders attempt to model the ideal sex morality narratives in Kenya. This is a contested film space where film creatives feel socially and legally empowered to explore the sexuality narratives but ethically challenged as they are constantly pointed towards the possibilities of narrative cultural disruptions, a possibility that is pointed by Kim & Jimmyn (2022), who argues that film narratives such as

sexuality narratives which are externally influenced can lead to cultural dominance, a conformed audience, and the dissolution of culture.

## METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the social conceptualization of sexual morality in the Kenyan films *Disconnect 2* and *Nafsi*, focusing on African sexuality as a post-cultural discourse. Employing an explanatory research design, the research examines the interaction between filmic sexual narratives and existing portrayals of sexual morality.

A qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth contextual analysis (Greene, 2000). The films *Nafsi* and *Disconnect 2* serve as instrumental case studies, exploring the construction of sexual morality themes as a means to an end. The study involved purposively sampling these films, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through a film observation guide and analyzed using directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2007) and Neuman's three-stage coding procedure (2007).

Ethically, the case study films adhere to the legal classifications guidelines of the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) and comply with all relevant regulations. Additionally, necessary approvals and clearances were obtained from the University and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), ensuring adherence to institutional and regulatory guidelines.

## RESULTS

The cinematic exploration of identity and fidelity narratives is illustrated through character portrayals in the two films under consideration. Within the cinematic narrative of *Nafsi* film, three couples symbolise the thematic exploration of identity and fidelity. The initial pair, Aisha and Sebastian, symbolize the hurdles of searching for identity and upholding faithfulness in marriage, further complicated by their difficulty in conceiving a child. In contrast, the second couple, Shiko and Clarence, is portrayed in a complex and uncertain relational setting, the relational concept is ambiguous presenting a different viewpoint on the concepts of identity and fidelity in film narrative representation. The last couple, Sebastian and Biko, steer their pursuit of a homosexual relationship amidst Sebastian's inner turmoil with identity formation as he agonizes between his heterosexual formation with Aisha and the homosexual pursuit with Biko.

In the second film *Disconnect 2*, identity and fidelity in sexual narratives is reported through the characters of Otis, TK, Richard and Seline and Judy and Erasmus. In this film, Otis serves as a representation of sexuality and embodies a playboy personality. His separation from Priti, a lady of Asian origin and the mother of his daughter, is rooted in what she perceives as "a risk on everything, including culture and family for a love that never existed." Priti characterizes Otis as a self-centered man, with a worldview revolving exclusively around himself. Despite his contemporary nature and assertion that he does not engage in relationships, Otis ironically pursued marriage with Priti. His ensuing actions however reveal a lack of belief in committed relationships. His romantic affairs and breakups with Dee, Rita, and a couple of other women demonstrate a

post-cultural mindset, challenging conventional expectations and norms regarding love and partnership.

TK is the second character in the Disconnect 2 film narrative that embodies the identity and fidelity in sexual narratives concept. She is defined by her unwavering interest and resilience in her love for Otis. Right from the start, she displays a strong, direct, and transparent approach to expressing her emotions and relational sentiments towards Otis, despite his recurrent missteps and messes with other women. TK even went as far as proposing a Valentine's Day date to Otis, although this opportunity was ultimately squandered by Otis as his past revisits him at the most awkward moment, when his past flings accost him just when Tk places a demand for a valentine date. Further, in a deeply emotional moment near a flower shop, TK nearly kissed Otis, showcasing her intense feelings for him.

The other couple in the identity and the fidelity narratives in this film is Erasmus and Judy. This is a religious couple, ready for a wedding. Judy is dating Erasmus, her father's employee who is having an affair with his soon to be father-in-law's secretary. He is not interested in the marital journey but Judy covers for him. In one instance, Judy excused him when pastor requested his presence during the counselling session "He is just so busy with work at my Dad's company, trying to prove himself" Their social belonging to Christianity informs their social ideals. They are therefore expected to remain pure until marriage but Erasmus is on an Infidelity adventure. Judy finds him kissing the secretary by the corridor, a moment that acts as a turnaround moment for her personal ideals. Judy gets involved in an extra relational affair with her best friend's fiancée Richard, an emotional affair that was triggered under the influence of alcohol, an element that equally violates Judy's ideals.

Still focusing on identity and fidelity, Richard and Celine are recognized as the longest-dating couple in the film. They have progressed through various stages of their relationship, including undergoing therapy to improve their compatibility after they felt no progress in their relationship. Celine has even moved in with Richard as they prepare for marriage. However, their past and recent sexual activities pose a threat to their upcoming marriage. When it is revealed that Celine initially used Richard to make her ex-boyfriend jealous, Richard becomes furious and even threatens to end the relationship. He is however humbled when TK demands from him to confess to their infidelity with Judy. This disclosure surprises everyone, as Richard has always symbolized positive relationship values and faithfulness.

## DISCUSSION

In the sexual narratives of the two films, Sebastian and Aisha are bound by the expectations of fidelity within their marriage as they strive to build a family and realize their life aspirations. Their sexual journey is however subtly implied in an approach typical of a taboo subject, inviting the audience to speculate and imagine as the couple's story unfolds in a veil of silence. Even though the couple is hard pressed to get a baby in their marriage, they are barely presented as romantic through their life journey and their bedroom increasingly emerges as a conflict resolution chamber. The couple thrives in strife and the concepts of romance, sex and sexuality are simply primed for the audience to assume since no narratives, plots or sub-plot are adopted to elevate the portrayal beyond the social taboo status. Nafsi film production designer confirms thus, but argues that

“Sexuality is out there but as a designer, you have to mask that. It's in the small details that will bring out that sexuality issue”.

In the sole bedroom scene depicting a moment of sexuality between the couple, there is the utilization of various production techniques such as multiple shots, camera movements, rapid editing, and music to convey the narratives. Particularly, the camera tilts upward just before the explicit sexual contact occurs, thereby eliminating and minimizing the portrayal of physical intimacy. This deliberate approach mechanizes the sexual interactions that habitually happen between married partners, involving acts like caressing, kissing, fondling, and intercourse. The scriptwriter of *Nafsi* reveals, " You can lead your characters to the point where they're having it, the audience may enjoy it and there is nothing wrong with that, it's just because as a society, our DNA is very traditional.”

In subsequent bedroom scenes, the couple is predominantly portrayed engaging in conflict and issue resolution. They are portrayed confronting complex challenges such as navigating the intricacies of surrogacy, addressing marital uncertainties such as Sebastian's connection with Biko, and confronting issues of infidelity as evidenced by Aisha's discovery of Sebastian's romantic involvement with Biko. Despite the absence of overt displays of romance or intimacy, Aisha conspicuously emerges as pregnant at the end.

In the additional sexuality narrative involving Aisha and Biko, a surprising revelation unfolds as Sebastian engages in infidelity with Biko, straying from the social expectation of male association in heterosexual affairs. Aisha's deep sense of betrayal upon discovering this unfaithfulness is underlined by her distressing inquiry, "A man?". For Aisha, the infidelity extends beyond the mere act itself, it refocuses to the betrayal associated with the departure from the socially acknowledged heterosexual to an encounter involving a same-sex partner. Aisha's shock finding is due to a design strategy that enabled the crew to present the homosexuality narratives subtly and strategically alongside the traditional sexuality narratives. “You can choose to go all out and you can also choose to softly and systematically infer narratives. But the director says, I don't want the audience to feel like this person.” The director of *Nafsi* further explains, stating, "I'm not advocating for it, I'm just saying it's happening," stressing the portrayal of this narrative as a reflection of reality rather than an endorsement.

The identity crisis between Sebastian and Biko becomes evident as they continue pursuing their clandestine relationship. Sebastian's concealment of his heterosexual lifestyle serves as a catalyst for Biko's displeasure upon the revelation of Sebastian's dual orientation. Even though Biko is aggressive, Sebastian remains categorical and protective, “This side of my life is none of your business.” Social norms and expectations are therefore challenged as the sexuality narratives between the couple places the discourse on sexuality at a crossroads.

Sebastian's dual sexual orientation is a key point in the narrative, especially as it clashes with traditional values and beliefs. His portrayal as a married man steeped in tradition, demonstrated by his interaction with his father-in-law and his commitment to honoring customs such as paying dowry, contrasts plainly with his hidden homosexuality. This duality complicates his personal journey and also provokes the audience with the complexities of navigating societal expectations and personal desires. The struggle Sebastian faces with the decision of surrogacy further stresses the clash between tradition and modernity in his life. His firm belief in sexual intercourse as the sole method for procreation highlights his deep-seated adherence to conventional norms, even as

his own sexuality challenges these very norms. “Sebastian struggled even though he was alone in the sample room. He could not read the magazines and could not believe that he was about to masturbate, a struggle that reflects the majority struggle.” The contrast of his outward conformity to traditional marital roles with his hidden truth creates a tension that underlines the dynamics of personal identity and societal pressures.

Clarence and Shiko, another set of characters in *Nafsi*, serve as a representation of the dynamic clash between traditional gender expectations and contemporary cultural norms. Clarence, caught in a traditional marriage imposed by his family, grapples with his marital status. As he navigates relationships in the urban setting, particularly with Shiko, he conceals his marital status as he engaged in secretive sexual affairs with other women, such as his house cleaner and call girls.

Issues of trust and fidelity emerge between Clarence and Shiko, resulting in a breach of commitment and emotional consequences originating from extramarital involvements. The result of their relationship confusion leads Shiko to hastily seek solace in a transitory romantic encounter with a stranger at the coast and also agree to explore surrogacy for her best friend Aisha out of her anguish and disillusionment. Equally, Clarence deals with the emotional outcome of his wife's passing. In his confession, “He hopes, she rests in peace because the villagers believed that she died distressed and bitter with him”.

In the post cultural concepts of sexuality, Clarence's engagement with random ladies besides his wife and Shiko, raises issues of objectification, exploitation, and unequal power dynamics. When Shiko walked out of their relationship after finding out that he was married, he never reached out even once and when she walked back to his house and demanded to know why he never looked for her, he answered “What matters is that you are here”. This presented a picture of a near dependency scenario. When he realized that Shiko was pregnant as a surrogate mother and he could only use a condom during sex intercourse, Clarence went ballistic and physically abused Shiko, sending her away, revealing a devaluation of Shiko as solely a sexual object. “Clarence, defines masculinity by sexuality, and his expression of love is purely sex, because many times when you see Clarence, he just wants to do it” *Nafsi* film scriptwriter as he concurs with the reality that to Clarence, women are objects of sexual exploitation as he uses his charm and other personality attributes to balance the power dynamics to his favor.

In the second film *Disconnect 2*, Despite Otis's contemporary nature and assertion that he does not engage in relationships, he ironically pursued marriage with Priti. His ensuing actions however reveal a lack of belief in committed relationships. His romantic affairs and breakups with Dee, Rita, and a couple of other women demonstrate a post-cultural mindset, challenging conventional expectations and norms regarding love and partnership. Otis' playboy character challenges established social norms regarding commitment, monogamy, and the societal conventions associated with marriage and family dynamics. The separation between Otis and Priti, along with Priti's claim that she risked everything for a love she perceives as insincere, underscores the conflict between personal aspirations and societal expectations, especially within romantic relationships and marriages. Otis' actions, which communicate a disbelief towards relationships despite outwardly adhering to traditional customs like marriage, suggests a social transition.

In regards to TK, is best defined by her unwavering interest and resilience in her love for Otis. The portrayal of TK symbolizes a determination to pursue romantic relationships in defiance of conventional norms that often depict women as passive recipients of male attention. Also, TK exemplifies a critical stance on sexual identity, prioritizing notions of personal emotional fulfillment and advocating for individual rights within relational contexts and through this, questioning the social sexuality narratives such as objectification.

By exploring themes of betrayal, moral conflict, and personal agency, the sexuality narratives between Judy and Erasmus challenges the social notions of identity and fidelity and explores alternative ways in which individuals navigate their desires, identities, and relationships within a changing cultural landscape. In this interpretation, Erasmus and Judy's story serves as a reflection of contemporary struggles and dilemmas in the realm of sexuality and intimacy.

Finally, the romantic relationship between Richard and Celine spotlight's identity and fidelity through the struggles associated with the prolonged dating that defines their romantic existence. Richard, often viewed as a model of positive relationship values, faces an identity crisis when his infidelity with Judy is revealed. Their sexuality narratives invite reflection on how identity and fidelity are constructed and maintained in long-term relationships. It encourages consideration of love's resilience when faced with challenges to these core elements and explores how partners can reconcile and rebuild trust after breaches of fidelity.

## Conclusion

The study, therefore concludes that in *Disconnect 2* and *Nafsi*, post-cultural sexuality narratives such as homosexuality, polyandry and surrogacy are presented as non-threatening sexuality ideals and alternatives that can coexist harmoniously with traditional sexual paradigms. Within the thematic exploration, instances of non-traditional sexual orientations, such as gayism, are observed among married individuals without impacting their marital status, as exemplified by the relationship dynamics of characters like Aisha and Sebastian. The narrative also showcases individuals claiming their autonomy and embracing individualism while concurrently operating within established traditional frameworks, as evidenced by the experiences of characters such as Judy and Erasmus who are dating but are each engaged in different bouts of infidelity, Richard and Seline, who have dated longer but are still seeking comfort in other partners, and Aisha and Sebastian, who are married, struggling with getting a baby but the husband operates in dual identity. These individuals navigate their commitments to marriage or dating while actively seeking fulfillment in alternative forms of sexual expression and identity.

## Recommendation

This study recommends that professionals in the film industry develop a structured hierarchy for sexual narratives to inform the portrayal of traditional and post-cultural sexuality themes. Also, incorporating positive or negative consequences within the post-cultural sexuality discourse, contrasted with established social narratives, can aid audiences in comprehensively engaging with and understanding the underlying sexuality ideologies presented in the films.

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