

**SELF-STYLIZATION IN KENYAN QUEER LIFE WRITING: A STUDY OF KEVIN
MWACHIRO'S *INVISIBLE* AND *STORIES OF OUR LIVES* BY THE NEST
COLLECTIVE.**

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Declaration

This research project report is my own original work and has not been submitted for examination or award of a degree in any other university.

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This research project report has been submitted for examination with our approval as university supervisors.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved mum and dad, Mr. Francis Ong'ondo and Mrs Florence Mbeke. I am grateful for all the sacrifices you have made to see me through this journey. To my second family, Mr. and Mrs. Abuya who have been with me from the beginning of this journey, thank you. To my siblings, Dorothy, Solomon, Chrisperry, Timothy and Wilfrida, thank you so much for your understanding and support. To my late brother Chris, may your spirit live on. And to those individuals whose lives have been the foundation of this research, may you find your true selves.

Contents

Declaration	i
Dedication	ii
Acknowledgement	iv
Abstract	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Background to the Study.....	1
1.1 Problem Statement	6
1.2 Objectives	6
1.3 Hypotheses	7
1.4 Justification	7
1.5 Scope and Limitation	8
1.6 Definition of Terms.....	8
1.7 Literature Review.....	9
1.8 Theoretical Framework.....	15
1.9 Methodology.....	19
CHAPTER TWO: NEGOTIATING QUEER IDENTITIES.....	21
2.0 Introduction.....	21
2.1 Anonymity in Queer Life Writing	22
2.2 Queer Identity and the metaphoric mask	29
2.3 The internet as a space for negotiating Queer Identities.....	34
2.4 The Mask of Dualism.....	36
2.5 Conclusion	40
CHAPTER THREE: STYLE AND MOULDING OF THE QUEER SELF	42
3.0 Introduction.....	42
3.1 Capitalization and the Journey towards Self-discovery.....	43
3.2 Images of queerness/abnormality in Queer life writing.....	46
3.3 The Epigraph as a Literary Caveat.....	57
3.4 Conclusion	59
CHAPTER FOUR.....	60
CONCLUSION.....	60
WORKS CITED	64

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Abstract

Chris Dunton has accused African scholars, especially in the literary field, of maintaining an intentional silence concerning homosexuality on the African continent. There is, however, an emerging field of writing by and about the queer where they tell their own stories. My research has delved into the emerging genre of collective life writing adopted by members of the queer community in Africa with specific focus on Kenya. This research poses the argument that through self-life writing, members of the queer community reclaim the power to create images for themselves in what I refer to as self-stylization. It is based on a comparative study of two anthologies from Kenya: *Stories of our Lives* and *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*. The argument of collective writing is not only supported by these two texts but also by the existence of similar texts from other parts of the continent. The study has also drawn from other works of art such as film especially in Kenya to investigate the developments taking place in African queer studies unlike the claim by scholars like Dunton. While a lot of African literature on queer studies emerges from South Africa and Nigeria, my study has attempted to place queerness on the Kenyan literary scene while at the same time questioning the relevance of collective writing as a form of attaining agency for the queer community in Kenya. With the help of the autobiographical theory and the Gay, Lesbian and Queer theories; I have looked at both the divergence and convergences in the two anthologies to investigate the images of the queer selves and how this helps the subjects to reclaim the power for self-portraiture.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“ Your story is not the kind of story that is told from generation to generation at the fire. But it is a story that must be told.”

(Beatrice Lamwaka)

1.0 Background to the Study

In an interview conducted by Christiane Amanpour of CNN on the April 20, 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta made it clear that Kenya had more important issues to deal with and homosexuality was not one of them. Debates on homosexuality in Kenya have however been raised earlier even with the former Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga, being accused of being gay because of his famous stud. This accusation forced Mutunga to release a statement to publicly deny these claims. Heated debates on the topic have however taken place since 2018 with the release of *Rafiki* Film by Wanuri Kahiu. *Rafiki* is a film that was developed around the idea of the award-winning short story, “Jambulatree”, written by Uganda’s Monica Arac De Nyeko. This is a film that revolves around the lives of two girls, Ziki and Kena, who are daughters of political opponents but have to secretly nurture a love away from the scrutiny of the public eye. When their little secret is discovered, the lives of these two characters take an unprecedented turn of mob violence and separation only to reunite at the end of the film. The film was however banned in Kenya for its portrayal of lesbianism especially due to its “happy ending” which was interpreted as a message of hope for homosexuals in Kenya with Wanuri being requested to change the ending of the film; a request that she never took heed of. A lot of developments have also taken place in 2019 with the death of the most outspoken Kenyan gay activist, Binyavanga Wainaina, on the May 21, 2019. His death happened a few days before the court ruling that illegalized homosexuality in Kenya.

The African literary scene has made little attempts to delve into the issue of homosexuality. Most of these are fictional works which give nuances of homosexuality in Africa with queer characters that are not fully developed. Lola Shoneyin, for instance, in her recent novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*(2010), gives nuances of lesbianism through the character of Mama Segi but she never delves deeply into the potentiality of queerness in this character as we never see it

materialize. Other African writers like Nuruddin Farah in his short story, “The start of the Affair,” (2014) also portray undeveloped queer desires in his characters. Chimamanda Adichie has also made contributions, albeit little, to touch on the issue of homosexuality on the continent. Adichie in her collection of short stories, *The Thing around your Neck*, (2009) dedicates three stories to the budding topic of homosexuality on the continent and its diaspora.

The first of such stories is “On Monday of last week.” The protagonist, Kamara, who works as a babysitter to a biracial child in America falls in love with her African American boss, Tracy. When Tracy first asks Kamara to take off her clothes, the latter assumes that Tracy is sexually attracted to her. Adichie however brings a twist to the story with both Kamara and the readers coming to the realization that Tracy was only interested in Kamara as a subject for her canvas. It is also important to note that while nursing this infatuation for Tracy, Kamara is in a heterosexual marriage to Tobechei, thus, raising the issue of sexual fluidity. In another story entitled “Jumping Monkey Hill”, we are introduced to an unnamed Senegalese lesbian who writes a story for a competition about the death of her girlfriend and the dismissal of her lesbianism by her parents. Their white benefactor, Edward, is however of the idea that homosexual stories are not reflective of the African continent (108). In an almost similar story, Adichie, in “Shivering”, narrates the predicament of a Nigerian man, Chinedu, who is an illegal immigrant in America. Though a very quiet man, Chinedu later opens up to his friend, Ukamaka, about the boyfriend he had in Nigeria who later got married to a woman. In all these stories, it is important to note that the queer narrative is told as part of a bigger story and not as a main narrative. They revolve around unrealized and lost queer love, thus, giving a pessimistic portrayal of homosexuality of Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora. I would however attribute the greatest queer story told by an African fictional writer to Nigeria’s Jude Dibia and his novel, *Walking with Shadows* (2005). Dibia is among the first African writers to base his narrative around a gay protagonist and the way he grapples with his homosexuality in a country where it is considered illegal. The story begins with the revelation of Ebele’s queerness by a colleague. This leads to the end of a six-year marriage that has helped Ebele to guard his queer identity. The protagonist is thus forcefully removed out of the closet obliging him to come out to his wife, family and friends. Dibia also portrays how some queer characters, such as Abdul and his partner Femi, exploit the weaknesses of the law to embrace their gay relationship right

under the nose of the public. The revelation of Ebele's secret also helps his wife, Ada, to come to the realization that there were other women of high society in Nigeria who were married to gay men. I commend Dibia's work for it solely focuses on the queer agenda in Nigeria and its various manifestations. It also gives gay characters space to share their experiences and how they grapple with the challenge of being othered.

Writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina have also attempted to tackle issues about the queer in Africa and Kenya to be specific. In his autobiography *One day I will Write about this Place* (2011) he however intentionally omits the issue of his homosexuality only to reveal it later in the so called "lost chapter" thus showing how difficult it is for queer individuals in Kenya to open up about their sexuality. It is important to acknowledge the great attempts made by South Africa and Nigeria concerning the queer story on the continent. One of the earliest texts from the queer community for instance was *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa* (1993). This is a collection of interviews, accounts, biographies poems and short stories from and about homosexuals in South Africa. Alwyn Diesel has also collected and edited stories by South African lesbians in the anthology, *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa* which was published in 2011. Sappho was a Greek poet who was famous as a symbol of desire and love between women. It is believed that the word lesbian was derived from the name of Sappho's home island, Lesbos. This was followed by the publication of *Queer Africa: new and Collected Fiction* (2013). According to Pumla Dineo, the narratives in *Queer Africa* offer testimony to the universality and multiversality of queer subjects and imaginations as they invite readers to leave no historic, religious, contemporary or geographic landscape untouched (2). It is also a powerful reaction to the dismissal of homosexuality on the continent. This anthology carries stories from different parts of the continent such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda amongst others. The success of *Queer Africa* led to the publication of a second collection *Queer Africa 2* (2017) which like the first was compiled and edited by Xaba Makhosazana and Karen Martin.

Before the publication of *Queer Africa 2*, debates were advanced concerning the dominance of queer stories from English speaking African countries. This raised the need to publish an anthology that would merge all the languages of the continent and with this saw the birth of

Walking the tight Rope (2016). This work is made up of stories and poems by LGBTQI writers from countries such as Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cote D' Ivoire, Namibia and Kenya. Contributors from Kenya included Kagure Mugo, Kari Mugo, Awuor Onyago and Kevin Mwachiro. The title of this collection was viewed both metaphorically and literally as a recognition of the cautious lives that queer people on the continent lead. Nigeria has also made another move to join this debate with the publication of real-life narratives from Nigerian queer women titled *She called me Woman: Nigeria's Queer women speak* (2018). In the introduction of this work, the editors argue that queer lives have been erased on the continent using three strategies: the erasure of queer people from the discussion about their own lives, the rewriting of the rich histories and cultural traditions of diverse sexualities, the state of denial or conscious forgetting that many people engage in of both their experiences and those of people they know. It is this kind of erasure that the anthology attempts to curb through giving Nigerian queer women a space to narrate their stories. The effort by both fictional writers and queer individuals on the continent to give voice to a topic which for a long time has been shunned shows the importance of homosexuality as an area of study especially in Africa. After giving a background on the topic from both spheres of fictional and non-fictional writing, I would like to deviate to life writing as the area of focus for this research.

The genre of life writing, which is considered to have begun with Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, is a branch of literature which deals with the question: who am I? This journey towards self-discovery and definition is an attempt by individuals to raise statues for themselves. Earliest autobiographical writings were dominated by those who were considered famous and influential. With time, however, life writing has transcended the famous to include the marginalized such as prisoners, slaves, illiterates, those struggling with illnesses among others. This genre of writing has proved itself a tool for voicing the concerns of those who have been "othered" by the society. My study intends to delve into the life sketches of members of Kenya's queer community with focus on the two anthologies, *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives*. The presence of the queer community in Kenya is controversial thus forcing most members of this community to live a masked life so as to fit into what the society considers "normal". The life of the queer is characterised by pretence and silence and the same silence regarding this community is evident in works of art. It is on very rare occasions that one would find works written on/about the queer.

With the puritanical ideologies maintained by both the state and religious institutions, the queer in Kenya are obliged to live their lives in the “closet”.

Kevin Mwachiro, a Kenyan poet, journalist, critic and activist, dedicated fifteen months to the work that saw the publication of the book, *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community* which was first published in 2013. This was the first work of its kind in Kenya to collect “confessions” in the form of narratives, poems and sketches from members of the queer community. This was followed by another publication by the Nest collective, *Stories of our lives*; an anthology of narratives from members of the same community which was published in 2015. Unlike *Invisible*, *Stories of our Lives* was first released as a film in 2014, directed by Jim Chuchu. The film is made up of a selection of few of the narratives from the anthology with the titles such as: Ask me nicely, Athman and Duet. The first film is based on the story of two girls, Kate and Faith, who develop a lesbian relationship in a boarding school. Kate is however suspended and reminded by the principal that she was not a man. Duet on the other hand revolves around a white and black male character with heavy connotations of the intersection between race, sexuality and power. In this episode, the white character is paid by the Kenyan man raising the issue of commodification of sex. As viewers we ask ourselves whether the paid character is a homosexual or a heterosexual man passing for gay for financial gain.

The two anthologies which I consider pioneer texts in Kenya concerning the queer issue; are made up of the stories of people from different social backgrounds, races, religions and gender(s). The two works stretch the conventional concept of life writing by using one platform to tell the stories of people who are unfamiliar to each other but bonded by their identity as queer. While the canonical works on life writing focus on the lives of individuals in relation to those close to them either by kinship or socialization; the two anthologies that I have studied break this autobiographical convention to give us a mosaic of selves. These stories give a face to a group which until now is considered non-existent. By writing their stories, these individuals give voice not only to themselves but also to every silenced queer person in Kenya. Through these stories they peel off the mask of “normality” and achieve their journeys towards self-definition and discovery.

1.1 Problem Statement

Having acknowledged the long intentional silence by African writers and scholars concerning homosexuality on the continent: it is important to fathom the recent upsurge and growth of interest by both writers and queer individuals themselves to tell the African queer story. The past decade has seen great developments on the topic especially from the queer community. The question that we ask ourselves as scholars is: why now? With long debates portraying queerness as un-African, this study sets out to investigate the place of queer life writing as a tool for affirming queerness as part of the African identity. Most research on African queer studies has been done from the perspective of fictional writing and its portrayal of queerness and the digital space as a hub for queer identity development. There is however a gap regarding telling the African queer story from the subjects' own mouths as creators, writers, protagonists and narrators of their own stories especially in spaces where this identity is unaccepted. The individual here gives images of the self as experienced and lived unlike the creative imaginations of most African fictional writers and film makers hence giving the African queer story more credibility and authenticity. My study has investigated the genre of life writing as a platform for queer Kenyans to mould their own self-images in what I would refer to as self-stylization. By doing this, they break away from the stereotypical images that have been created by the non-queer public, that is, the church, legal authorities and political leaders. I also advance the idea of queer life writing as a way through which these "othered" individuals write back to the empire which in this case is the heterosexual world thus asserting and re/claiming their space in this world.

1.2 Objectives

1. To examine the development of a collective sub-genre of life writing by the queer community as a platform for telling the queer story;
2. To investigate how members of the queer community exploit this genre of collective life writing to stylize the queer self.

1.3 Hypotheses

1. Members of the queer community have developed a sub-genre of collective life writing which provides them with a platform to share their own stories as queer individuals;
2. As protagonists, narrators and subjects of their own story, this sub-genre allows the queer to mould their own self-images in what I refer to as self-stylization; thus taking over the mantle of the African queer story from fictional writers.

1.4 Justification

Literary writers and critics have made attempts to give voice to the plight of those considered as the “other” by society either because of gender, race, class, religion, age or ethnicity. There is however a lot of reluctance by African scholars to venture into studies on those “othered” by sexuality. There are few works by African writers that focus on the queer community or even refer to them; most of which are fictional writings. *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives* stand out, not only because of their ability to venture into a path that has not been taken by any Kenyan writers, but also due to the works’ ability to stretch the idea of life writing. The two anthologies give us representatives of the queer community of different races, ethnic communities, religions, ages, professions and ideologies. Though the narrators and their stories are different, they all offer a voice for the queer and as readers we see the sameness in their difference. These attempts by the queer community to share their life narratives, I consider, a great contribution not only towards the genre of life writing but also in literary studies in general. These texts are unique due to their deviation from normal autobiographical writing in that; unlike other life narratives which give the story of an individual in relation to those around him/her by familial or professional associations; *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives* cover a massive geography to bring together people who are neither related by blood nor association but rather by their “othered” sexuality. The queer community, I would argue, have invented a new form of life writing which is communal in nature. Their shared identity as queer is what makes them one family due to the shared experiences, pains, joys and a self that is considered abnormal by societal standards. It is important to question the need by queer individuals to write collectively and my argument is that

this is a move to portray the “us” in the “I”. By telling the story of the self, the narrators are able to tell the stories of other individuals who have not found space to voice themselves, thus, attaining agency for the whole community.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

This study has been limited to two anthologies of life writing: *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's queer community* by Kevin Mwachiro and *Stories of our Lives* by the Nest Collective. I have selected specific outstanding narratives from the anthologies which have helped to bring out the concept of identity formation among the queer. The study has been guided by the autobiographical theory with reference to the gay, lesbian and queer theories. This is because these works are sketches of life writing hence autobiographical and the fact that the subjects of these stories are either gay, lesbian or queer. My study has also been guided by secondary texts that tackle the issues of marginalization and identity. Great focus has been paid on the strategies that these individuals use to manoeuvre their way into a world that considers them ‘abnormal’ and the struggles they go through to assume normativity. I have also delved into the genre of life writing as a platform for members of the queer community to re-create images of the self by subverting stereotypical images that had been created before about the queer.

1.6 Definition of Terms

Self-stylization-this term has been used to refer to the manner and images that queer individuals give themselves in the process of telling their own stories. It could be synonymous to self-fashioning or self-making.

LGBTQI- An abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, queer and Intersex

Lesbian- a woman who is sexually attracted to another woman. Scholars such as Adrienne Rich have looked at lesbianism as an identity that goes beyond sexuality to include the social bonds between women.

Gay-a term used to refer to a homosexual man, that is, a man who is sexually attracted to fellow men.

Bisexual-this refers to an individual who is not exclusively attracted to members of one gender but rather attracted to both men and women.

Gender-according to Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, the concept, gender, was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviours and competencies, which are then assigned as either 'masculine' or 'feminine' (2004:56)

Heterosexism-prejudicial treatment of gay and lesbian individuals and the assumption that heterosexuality is the preferred identity.

Queer– this word is an umbrella term that has been used to refer to the LGBTQI community

Closet – this is a metaphorical term used in queer studies to refer to the pretentious and veiled lives led by most queer individuals by not publicly proclaiming their sexuality

To out somebody – to reveal someone's secret queer identity

(the) Other-this term has been used by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir to refer to the subordinate status of women in society with men being "the one" and women "the other". In this study however, the term has been used to refer to the normalization of heterosexuality as the default identity vis-à-vis the castigation of homosexuality as an "abnormal" identity. Like women who she describes as the second sex, my study places homosexuality as a "second sexuality" hence the othering.

1.7 Literature Review

Critical works on homosexuality have been done with much focus paid on fictional works by early to contemporary African writers. Lindsey Green-Simms for instance in *The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century* focuses on the character of Joe Golder in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreter* (1965). She argues that Golder could arguably be viewed as the first recognizable gay character not only in Nigerian but also in Anglophone literature. She goes further to posit that the character of Golder could be used to benchmark a certain era in African writing about homosexuality. This was a moment characterized by silences and obscurity rather than clear-cut homophobia (140). Even though there is a hint towards the existence of homosexuality in Africa, Simms argues that Wole Soyinka does not actually take the readers to the spaces of native homosexuality but rather gestures towards the presence of the queer without actually bringing it into discourse. She borrows from Chris Dunton, who argues in

his article, “Wheyting Be Dat” (1989) that the only conspicuous thing in the writings by Africans on homosexuality is the abstention by these writers from the depiction of fully developed homosexual relationships among Africans. Dunton argues that the area of homosexuality in Africa remains one that has not been granted history by African writers but has rather been greeted with a sustained outburst of silence. The identification of homosexuality with the west, he continues, has helped to defend the silence.

Dunton however does not recognize the changes that have taken place in the literary scene especially with the emergence of both films and life narratives by members of the queer community themselves. The social media has also acted as a platform for the birth of African queer narratives. The publication of *Stories of our lives* and *Invisible* for instance help to break the long silence by African writers concerning homosexuality in Africa. Not only do these texts delve explicitly into the lives of the queer in Kenya, they also transcend the borders of fictional writings such as *The Interpreter* to give us real life narratives of the Kenyan queer community. Unlike fictional writings where the authors give images to their characters, these two texts give individuals an opportunity to fashion and stylize the self by the self. An author who has managed to break this silence by fictional writers is Jude Dibia from Nigeria. Dunton later in his afterword of Dibia’s novel acknowledges the great contribution made by Nigerian writer Jude Dibia in his work, *Walking with Shadows* (2005). He commends Dibia’s courage in tackling a subject that has generally been avoided by other African writers. This however is not enough as Dibia not only delves into an avoided subject matter, but I could argue, that he is among the first African fictional writers to base his work on a gay protagonist. His novel allows the character to grow and as readers we embark on journey with Adrian the protagonist as we experience what it means to be gay in Nigeria.

Lindsey Green-Simms unlike Dunton, argues that there is an emergence of a third generation of writers who delve into topics that were previously viewed as taboo in African literature (141). With new laws in most African countries that criminalize homosexuality, the topic has found its way into popular discourse thus obliging African writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina and Chimamanda Ngozi among others to give voice to homosexuality as an African reality. Chimamanda Ngozi, for instance, probes into the issue of homosexuality in her collection of

short stories *The Thing around your Neck*. Frieda Ekotto however argues that Chimamanda Ngozi portrays homosexuality as nothing more than a sub-plot with queer characters largely derided and ignored.(153) I would however like to commend Adichie for her attempts to give a glimpse into the African queer story as her contribution is a great development compared to what is considered the pioneer fictional work with a queer character, *The Interpreter*, by Wole Soyinka. Green has also commended Nollywood for the attempts to provide an archive for gay-themed narratives. She argues, however that these films cast homosexuality in a negative light with characters portrayed as murderous, prostitutes and threats to heterosexual relationships. The fate of these characters is death, imprisonment or salvation. This association of queerness with tragedy is another fallacy that members of the queer community wish to subvert by telling their own stories. By moving from fictional writings about the queer to real life narratives, the writers attempt not only to give agency to themselves but also to place queerness on African soil thus challenging the long-held fallacy of queerness as un-African. Lindsey Green argues that despite the attempts by African writers to venture into the lives of the queer in Africa, none of these writers provide readers with anything more than a glimpse, a few paragraphs at best into the lives of queer Nigerians (154).I however disagree with Green on this as with the publication of *Walking with Shadows*, we could argue that Jude Dibia qualifies as the pioneer author to give a queer character voice not just in a paragraph but a whole novel.

Xavier Livermon in his article,“Usable Traditions: Creating Sexual Autonomy in Post-apartheid South Africa” (2015),asserts that what haunts the queer of Africa is the idea that same-sex sexuality is un-African. Black queers are thus portrayed as manifestations of cultural loss/taint and as individuals who are alienated from African subjectivity. This article explores that which is considered African culture thus bringing to question the place of queerness on the African continent. His argument is that tradition has been used to reinforce heteropatriarchy (17). During apartheid, aspects of African culture were seen as divisive tools of colonial oppression; post-apartheid South Africa however attempted to re-evaluate the place of culture with the intention of embracing multiculturalism (18). Queerness, thus, occupies a betwixt space in South Africa: on the one hand it is an attempt to celebrate diversity while on the other hand it occupies a space that questions heteronormativity and the rigid formations of what is considered African culture. He looks at homosexuality from the perspectives of culture such as male circumcision, marriage

and spirituality. Some of the questions raised by Livermon are: does culture recognize same-sex relations in Africa, who pays the bride price in such a case, does the individual who pays the bride price automatically become the “wife” in the relationship, in the case of circumcision; does the ritual transform the boy into a man or a woman being that homosexuality in men is associated with effeminacy?

Even though Livermon takes us into the place of the queer in South Africa, his study focuses more on the queer in relation to African culture and tradition. He tries to trace the various attempts made by members of the queer community to push the limits of black cultural identity. Jessica Murray also delves into queer writings in South Africa with focus on two novels; *Cracks* (1999) by Sheila Kohler and *Saracen at the Gates* (2009) by Zinaid Meeran. In her essay, “Stereotypes and Subversions: Reading Queer Representations in two Contemporary South African novels” (2013), she looks at the stereotypical images assigned the lesbian characters in the two novels. These individuals are portrayed as masculine, sexual predators, pedophiles that are mentally unstable.(126) The tendency by fictional writers to portray homosexuality as negative, I argue, could contribute to the desire by the queer to mold their own selves, to tell their own stories and ultimately destabilize the negative images that have been associated with the queer.

The emergence of South Africa’s athlete Caster Semenya also led to the rise in queer concerns in (South) Africa. Zine Magubane, in *Spectacles and scholarship: Caster Semenya, Intersex Studies and the problem of race in Feminist Theory* delves into the issue of what she calls bodies in doubt. She argues that queer theory and poststructuralist feminist scholars turned intersex “into the next great hope for deconstructing sex/gender” (762). The intersex body offered a challenge to both the medical community and feminist theory as it surpassed the sex/gender binary. Leonard Chuene, the then president of Athletics South Africa was quoted saying: “I’m angry. I’m fuming....You cannot say somebody’s child is not a girl” (765). From this utterance, it is clear that the major concern was the attempt to remove Semenya from the gender binary of male/female which is a symbol of normativity. By questioning Semenya’s girlhood, she is being “othered” hence the concern by South Africans. Despite the important insights that this paper raises, it focuses only on one individual: Caster Semenya.

Chantal Zabus, in her analysis of Unoma Azuah's fiction, probes into the issue of male daughters and female husbands in the Igbo culture. Female husbands in this context refer to widows without male offspring who take on younger women as "wives" to produce heirs for their husbands. These "wives" are allowed to take in male lovers and have children who are later handed over to the "female-husband." Families whose lineages were in danger of dying due to the lack a male heir would also encourage their eldest daughters to stay at home and take in a lover with whom they could bear children who would carry on the family name (94). Chantal Zabus argues that this woman-to-woman marriage may have provided a legitimate niche for a postmodern "lesbian couple". Female husbands also exist among the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Sudan. Wairimu Njambi and William O'Brien in *Women to Women Marriage* delve into the issue of female husbands among the Kikuyu. They argue that the desire to seek a marriage partner went beyond what anthropologists had earlier said. It was not just for the acquisition of rights over the woman's ability to bear children, neither was it for the need for property or just to continue the family lineage of a childless widow. According to their interviewees, female husbandry was for companionship; it helped one to be remembered after death through the children left behind and most of all, it helped Kikuyu women to avoid direct male domination in a strong patriarchal society (49).

Even though these scholars have tried to look at female husbandry through the queer lenses, my argument however is that the tradition of female husbands could not be equated to a homosexual relationship as the female husband did not have any intimate sexual relationship with their "wives".

Eddie Ombagi in *Nairobi is a shot of Whisky: Queer (Ob)scenes in the city* asserts that while the Kenyan legal framework denies the existence of the queer, a dynamic lived experience shows the existence of a queer ambivalence that is both at odds with religious and political logic of the country. He delves into the club, tavern and cyber-spaces and how the queer in Kenya morph into these spaces to create a sort of utopia for the queer self. He argues that these spaces offer platforms for the forging of new beings. He follows his subjects into these spaces to see how they navigate the binaries of in/visibility in their search for a queer "sanctuary". Ombagi admits that there is an emergence of queer spaces in Kenya especially in the areas where surveillance

and control fail. He writes, “Queer spaces find redemption in places where the city fails to function- where the city literally breaks down, most famously in abandoned buildings, public parks, urinals, taverns as well as bars. At the very point where the intended use of the spaces collapse, then the queer potential emerge” (12). The need by members of the queer community to form safe havens in places without surveillance points to their invisibility and also shows the precariousness of queer identities in Kenya as the individuals have to learn how to navigate various forms of identity depending on the spaces they occupy. Ombagi’s work gives us great insight into the lives of real Kenyans but only with focus on the city. This however does not imply that the queer in Kenya only occupy the city and this could be proved by the life sketches in both *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives*.

Evan Mwangi in his article, *Queer Agency in Kenya’s Digital Media* looks into the digital spaces in Kenya and how they contribute to the formation of queer identities. He delves into the use of digital media by the Kenyan queer to challenge homophobia as it allows them to respond to homophobic representations of their experiences. He acknowledges that most of the content on the Kenyan digital media is usually homophobic and that most members of the queer community express themselves using aliases. Mwangi asserts that the dominant narrative in Kenya is that same-sex relations are part of the Western construct that it was brought in the country through colonialism. He goes further to look into some of the names used by Kenyans to describe homosexuality in the digital space. Mwangi’s contribution to Kenyan queer studies is quite crucial as he delves into some of the debates that have taken place on the Kenyan online community from the marriage between two Kenyan gay men, Charles Ngegi and Daniel Gichia, in London on the 17th of October, 2009 to the criticisms and accusations lodged against the former Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga. Mutunga was accused of being queer because he wore a stud- an ornament that according to Kenyans- should be worn by women. Mutunga had to release a statement declaring that he was not gay. Both Ombagi and Mwangi approach Kenyan queer studies from the perspective of physical and digital spaces respectively. Their contributions are important as they are based on real life encounters. My study on the other hand looks into the lives of the queer in Kenya from the perspective of life writing as a space for queer identity formation in Kenya. Like Ombagi, I intend to look at how the queer in Kenya navigate their identities in writing.

The work that narrows down on one of the primary texts is Jennifer Muchiri's *Contesting public discourses on Sexuality in Kenya: A reading of Kevin Mwachiro's Invisible*. She argues that the stories in *Invisible* represent the face of Kenya as they present us with members of the queer community from different ethnic, geographical, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.(1) She goes further to posit that the stories help to break the myth that homosexuality is a Western or foreign practice. She also acknowledges the kind of duality/ double lives that the subjects of these narratives lead to fit in the society. Jennifer Muchiri however does not look at these stories from the perspective of life narratives but rather gives a humanistic analysis of the text. Her work is however important as it gives a general review of the text.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

The theory of autobiography is believed to have begun with the scholar Wilhelm Dilthey. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), the autobiography allows its writer to be both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation. It attempts to confront one's life: both the public and the private self. Apart from the biography, the life narrative (autobiography, memoir) must be written during the subject's lifespan even if published posthumously. This is because the narrator/subject is also the protagonist and the author.

Life narratives are usually based on certain historical periods. It should however be acknowledged that life narratives cannot be read as history due to their subjectivity. History helps to justify the narrator's perception, to dispute the accounts by others, for cultural information. The most fundamental part of life writing is autobiographical truth. According to Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (2016), life writing's major purpose must be the search for one's inner standing. It must have a sense of discovery, new self-knowledge and change of attitude. The theory of autobiography will help me in the analysis of the memoirs. Some of the concerns will be: what discovery does the self make in the process of narration, how does each writer grapple with the concept of memory, what are some of the problematic of

identity that each narrator encounters and finally how does storytelling help each narrator come to terms with their true identity.

Life writing has always been seen as a western form of expression. Susanne Gehrman asserts that autobiographical writing in Africa has always been posed as a problem due to the assumed lack of individuality in African societies. Earlier forms of life writing on the continent were aided by either the missionaries or European researchers. These writings were however full of Eurocentric prejudice concerning the African continent and its people. With colonialism and the advent of formal education, there was a rise in life writing especially by early educated male Africans. Most of these auto/biographies focused on the history, memories and legacy of colonialism, education, family, community and careers. One of the famous autobiographies was Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. African writers have also made attempts to take readers into their personal lives with Wole Soyinka's *Ake*, *There was a Country* by Chinua Achebe and *Dreams in a Time of war* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o just to mention a few. Some famous African women like Wangari Maathai and Ellen Sirleaf Johnson have also written their autobiographies, *Unbowed* and *This Child will be Great* respectively. The spread and availability of formal education has however led to the emergence of a new generation of writers that are neither famous nor politically active on the continent. These range from victims of war, prisoners and other members of the marginalized community. With life writing being a genre open to all unlike fictional writing which requires expertise and creativity, life stories are now emerging from all walks of life and *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives* are evidence to this claim.

In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary literary Theory*, the gay, lesbian and queer theory is said to have originated in the 1960s and it can be traced back to the Stonewall riot in New York when occupants of a gay bar resisted a police raid. As Meghan Nappo asserts in her thesis, *Not a Quiet Riot: Stonewall and the Creation of LGBT Community*, this was the most outstanding act of resistance by the gay and lesbian community in the United States of America (24). This happened during a time when police would raid bars and establishments that were suspected to be owned by homosexuals. The Stonewall is thus considered the "myth of origin" for the gay and lesbian community. Other scholars have however argued that there were other riots by the queer community even before the Stonewall riot and that the only problem is that they were only

witnessed by passers-by and were never publicized. The Gay, Lesbian and Queer theories therefore, unlike other theories, did not originate from the field of academia but in the radical movements witnessed in the 1960s such as the feminist and Black movements

In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose quotes Foucault who argues that although same sex acts were abominable in both religion and civil law before the 1870s, they were however regarded as “temptations to which anyone might succumb”(11). It is only after the 1870s that same-sex relations began to be viewed and read as evidence of a particular type of a person and writers began to formulate narratives about such individuals. While sodomy had been viewed as a forbidden act, the homosexual became a species. Foucault saw the late nineteenth century as an era which saw homosexuality to be characterized by certain quality of sexual sensibility. “It is a way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself”(257). Homosexuality, according to Foucault has spoken on its own behalf and hence gained voice and legitimacy unlike sodomy.

Lesbian feminist theory on the other hand emerged as a (counter) response to heterosexism of the mainstream culture and also as a response to the Gay Liberation Movement which they considered sexist and male dominated. For the lesbian feminists such as Alice Walker, heterosexuality was viewed as an institution that was the foundation of patriarchy and the oppression of women. Some of the features that characterised the lesbian feminist theory were: it challenged the normativity of heterosexuality; it made emphasis on woman identification and the creation of an alternative community for women. Adrienne Rich argues that heterosexuality is a powerful institution and the fact of lesbian existence is an evidence of women coming together and bonding and they can never be suppressed. She argues that lesbianism could have originated from the fact that “girl children are of woman born” and therefore acquire that original same-sex attachment to their mothers. Despite the attempt to connect lesbianism to motherhood, it is not self-evident that motherhood is the foundation of lesbianism as this would mean that the lesbian is not a “species” as Foucault calls it but a self-imposed state.

Monique Wittig counters the argument by Rich and she argues that lesbians cannot be considered women. According to Wittig, heterosexuality is a compulsory construct that dictates the

relationship between men and women. For her, one is only considered a woman in view of how she relates to a man and therefore the concept of womanhood is only realized in a heterosexual system of thought. Wittig however does not realize the politics that surround the concept of gender. The question that arises however is that, what makes one a woman? Is a woman born or made/nurtured/ created? This is because Wittig raises the issue of oppositional binaries where the woman can only claim her identity in contrast with the man. Does she therefore mean that lesbians are men or genderless?

The question of queerness in Africa has however aroused sentimental debates from scholars, religious and political leaders. Marc Epprecht argues that the question of sexuality was earlier raised during the colonial era to show the binaries of African brutish sexuality versus civilization of the west. The emergence of HIV/AIDS also later invoked interest in African sexual practices. African nationalists on the other hand wrote to uphold the image of a moral Africa in contrast with the immoral west. The debate has gone so far with arguments emerging that homosexuality is not African but rather one of the immoral constructs brought into the continent from the West. Epprecht argues that Africa tended to place high value on heterosexual marriages and procreation hence the castigation of homosexuality (55). Homosexuality acquired a secondary and invisible space in African studies by western scholars as much focus was paid on heterosexual immoralities such as polygamy, child betrothal, bride price, female genital cutting, widow inheritance among other things.

Keguro Macharia, on the other hand, posits that the 1990s could be seen as the moment when the homosexual debate entered the African political discourse. There were however earlier debates on homosexuality found in African prison narratives. Taiwo Adetunji in *Creaturely lives and Sexual exposure in African Prison Writing* asserts that there was juxtaposition of romanticized heterosexual domestic spaces to the gender perverting space of the prison (41). The prison narratives presented readers with the subjection of bodies and the intersection of power, gender and pleasure in the prison spaces. Taiwo goes further to argue that even though some prison writings may circulate homophobic representations, some African writers have represented the prison as the foundation of homosexual debates on the continent. These range from coerced

same-sex practices, consolidation of specific masculinities, prison “marriages” and the representation of strength versus weakness in prison.

Jason Zingshein and Dustin Bradley agree that dominant discourse in many countries on the continent, Kenya included, portray homosexuality as imported by the British colonizers and thus inherently un-African and un-Kenyan, in particular. They go further to acknowledge that at the national level, too, discourse about homosexuality is a vehicle for expressing political conflicts in the post-colonial period. It shifts from discourses on gender/status to more Western frames of homoerotic behaviour such as perversion, immorality, and blasphemy” (145). Porter illustrates that it is the homophobia and religious ideology that was imported from the colonizers, and thus, these ideological imports should be viewed as un-African and un-Kenyan. Makau Mutua shares the same idea as he argues that rather than seeing Africa as inherently homophobic; it would be appropriate to acknowledge the role of Abrahamic religions towards homophobia (20). Contemporary work on sexual minorities in Africa by scholars from within and outside the continent provide a more complex, if still incomplete and shifting, picture of personal, social, and structural constructions of gender and sexuality. Following South Africa’s recognition of same-sex marriage, the country began receiving much scholarly attention. Mauritius has also been acknowledged as one of the African countries which has portrayed tolerance for homosexual tendencies among its citizens. There are however countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe which have been used to portray homophobic images on the continent. This was evidenced in the mockery of former president Robert Mugabe towards Obama after he endorsed same-sex marriage. Mugabe was reported to have said that he would ask for Obama’s hand in marriage since he was advocating for homosexuals. Despite the efforts being made by scholars to normalize homosexuality on the continent, Africa still has a long way to go before homosexuality is openly embraced.

1.9 Methodology

My research has attempted a closed textual reading of *Invisible: Stories from Kenya’s Queer Community* and *Stories of our Lives*. I have conducted a comparative study of these primary texts and investigated their areas of convergence and divergence. My study has also been guided by

secondary texts written by other scholars on the topics of life writing, identity and the queer community. This study attempts a rhetorical analysis of the primary texts coming from the perspective of life writing as a genre. The research puts forward the assumption that members of the queer community have exploited the resources of literature to “invent” a genre of life writing that is collective in nature. My research therefore delves into the place of this kind of writing as a tool for queer agency. It takes foundation from fictional works on the topic as a centre of the argument with the view of collective non-fictional writing as a way of claiming the African/Kenyan queer story from the hands of fictional writers. This research therefore views this form of writing as a way of not only writing back but also taking over the power to create the queer self through life writing. The research has also used the two Kenyan films, *Rafiki* and *Stories of our Lives* and their status in the country as basis of the research argument. Therefore, this research’s argument is a result of inter-disciplinary approach to literature with the interconnection between fictional writing, filmmaking, law, religion, history and non-fictional writing to investigate the place of queer studies on the continent.

CHAPTER TWO: NEGOTIATING QUEER IDENTITIES

2.0 Introduction

The process of identity formation is one that involves the development of distinct traits by the individual at a particular stage of his/her life. Identity is what sets the self apart from other selves. Our identities are usually determined by our surrounding, our culture, profession and the people we associate with. Members of the queer community in Kenya have to adopt specific strategies of identity formation and to negotiate these identities so as to belong to and/or protect themselves from the heteronormative world. This chapter sets out to dig into the various strategies that the queer community employ to normalize their identities. The discussion will revolve around issues of anonymity, masking, passing and dualism in relation to the two texts: *Invisible* and *Stories of our Lives*. Some of the concerns that I will raise in this section is the need by members of the queer community to hide their true identities behind pseudonyms or anonymous writing; the concept of masking as a strategy of negotiating queer identities; and the need to live double lives which is expounded by the concept of passing. I will attempt an interrogation of the concept of masking in both *Invisible* and *Stories of Our Lives* as a means of negotiating queer identity through veiling the queer self. This veiling of queer identities is mostly achieved by living in the metaphoric closet. I have used the term dualism on the other hand to refer to the two-faced lives led by some members of the queer community as a way of negotiating their identities. I expound on this by borrowing the term “passing” which was used mostly in African-American literature to refer to mulattos who could feign whiteness so as to gain admission into the world of white privilege. In this instance, I’ve used the term passing to refer to the act by which queer individuals attempt to gain admittance into both the heterosexual and the queer world. It is also ironical that in some narratives, we meet heterosexual characters who pass for queer thus raising the issue of performativity and appropriation of sex and sexuality

2.1 Anonymity in Queer Life Writing

In an environment where homosexuality is frowned upon, it calls for much courage for queer individuals to come out and share their experiences even if they do so anonymously. My argument is that the choice for anonymity and/or pseudonymity is an attempt by these writers to draw attention away from themselves as individuals and thus enable the readers to concentrate on the message of the creative pieces. The message is thus more important than the messenger. Anonymity also helps to build up the concept of collective writing that these individuals have chosen to embrace. The story of the self thus becomes a representation of other similar selves whose narratives have not been written, that is, it is not just *my story* but rather *our story*. Attaching a name to each story would individualize the experience yet these are sketches meant to give agency to the whole Kenyan queer community. Anonymity also acts as a veil for the individuals' personal identities as they hide behind the mask of the collective. In this section I will look at the different naming strategies employed by the narrators and the interpretation of each.

In *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*, narrators have used their first names, initials of their names, some are unnamed while others have given their full names. The form of naming that each narrator chooses, I argue, is a symbol of their standing as members of the queer community in Kenya. I'll begin my discussion with the two narrators who have used their proper names to show their disposition vis-à-vis that of the anonymous characters. The first individual is Qat Qamunde who has contributed two poems to the collection; "Inseparable" and "Troubled Thoughts." In the first poem, "Inseparable", she explores her relationship with an unnamed partner. She is able to explore her "othered" relationship despite the jeers and mockeries extended towards them by the crowds. She uses the simile of entwined twins to describe their liaison and due to the hostile environment that surrounds them; they have turned the four walls of their home into a safe space for their "queer" relationship. They however live a precarious life, "for their fate is unknown to them" (43). Even though they acknowledge the dictatorship of conformity that rules their world, they pretend to conform but still remain inseparable. In her second poem, *Troubled Thoughts*, Qat ponders about the plight of the queer

community from silence, uncertainty, rape, wife battery by a partner who attempts to cure the wife's queerness, mob justice faced by the transgender for wearing the "wrong" clothes, the hanging of gay men and fate of the disowned lesbian. These, like the title suggests, are the troubled thoughts that Qat Qamunde muses over. Through this monologue with the self, as readers we are taken into the lives of every member of the queer community. The poem surpasses the place of an individual to tell the story of a community that share a collective identity by the virtue of being "othered". The two poems are transitional as the writer acknowledges the fact that even though as an individual, she embraces her "abnormality" there are those like her who have been punished for going out of the binaries of sexuality that is considered norm. Qat Qamunde is able to identify herself properly for she has come out of the metaphorical closet. This implies that she publicly embraces her identity as queer and as gone through the process of coming out.

According to Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury in *Coming Out and Crossing over: Identity Formation and Proclamation in a transgender Community*, the process of coming out involves self-definition, tolerance and acceptance of the self-defined identity and association with members that share the same identity (480). Qat, by proclaiming and embracing her queer identity shows that she has come out of the closet thus not afraid to give her identity- she has nothing to hide. The only other narrator that gives herself a proper name is Rena Otieno whose narrative is entitled "Darling". She begins the narrative by claiming this identity: "My name is Rena Otieno..." (73) Like Qat Qamunde, Rena admits to having come out to her family over fifteen years ago but she begun by first coming out to those she considered open-minded. Even though researchers and scholars have tried to portray homosexuality as un-African, Rena argues that the only problem is that Africans lack(ed) a name for homosexuality but otherwise it is a universal identity. Like Qat who does not name her partner, Rena also mentions her bisexual American friend without giving the name. Even though they are out, the two narrators protect the identity of others around them who are still probably closeted.

By giving her full name, Rena is able to not only place homosexuality in the Kenyan society but also in a specific community. By basing her story on her life, her American friend, high school experience and mentioning her three queer relatives, she attempts to portray the fact that

homosexuality transcends the personal space, to the family, to a community, a nation and finally a continent hence its universality. By giving their names, these narrators portray a kind of stability lacked by the other anonymous writers. This supports the argument by Adele Reinhartz (1998) who argues that a proper name always carries in itself a meaning, a name acts as a peg on which other traits of the character may hang, a proper name is a convenient way of referring to a character and finally it distinguishes one character from another. We may argue that while the unnamed narrators tell the story of anyone who shares the queer identity, narrators like Qat and Rena have laid claim of their stories thus making them more personal. They have managed to distinguish themselves from the other characters which also shows their movement out of the queer closet thus adding to their visibility.

While the characters named above have been audacious enough to share their identities, there are those who have chosen another form of naming which is, the use of a single name. This is evident in narrators such as Elias, Amo, Barbra, Jackson, Yash and Brizan in *Invisible*. Each narrator has a different story to tell but what they share in common is that they are all still on a journey of self-discovery. The titles of their works show the dilemma that each narrator finds him/herself in. The singular names could be seen as metaphors of ambiguity and instability of the narrators' identity. Elias, in his narrative, "Make me Love Women", grapples with his identity as a "shoga" in an environment where such individuals are mocked and attacked. Although ironical, he admits to feeling uncomfortable attending gay parties and he compares them to the rot of Sodom and Gomorrah. From the title, we could argue that the narrator would rather be straight and "normal" rather than queer. Even though he has come out to some people, he hasn't achieved the whole process as described by Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury.

Amo on the other hand in her story, "A Mother's fear for her Lesbian Daughter", touches on the issue of collective identity and the family as a field of identity formation. Even though the narrator is comfortable with her identity as queer, there are people around her who are undergoing struggles accepting this identity. The narrator therefore feels obliged to protect and respect the feelings of her mother who considers the daughter's sexuality a phase that will fade with time. She says "I had felt perfectly 'normal' until I saw my mother's reaction" (27). Some of the images that lesbianism arouses in her mother are those of poor parentage, psychological

and emotional problems. This story brings into question aspects of femininity and the societal expectation of a woman's destiny. As a mother, there is the hope of seeing the daughter getting married- to a man- and giving birth. In a society where the man is seen as the natural protector of the woman, there is a lot of doubt concerning same-sex marriage. As a woman, an individual is already "othered" and the lesbian therefore carries a triple "curse of being black, a woman and queer. Amo's story is not just an individual's story but an attempt to speak to every mother whose child is queer. It is an encouragement to mothers to believe and support their children despite their 'abnormal' sexualities. It also subverts the long-held definition of womanhood that comprises heterosexual marriage and motherhood. The story therefore shows the fluidity of sexuality despite the "othering" faced by individuals who do not fall into the society's template of sexuality. Mark Chae argues in *Gender and Ethnicity in Identity Formation*, that female identity development revolves around who she can be in relation to others. Specifically, she faces the issue of what it means to be a woman in society and in relation to others. Moreover, a woman's sense of self is contingent upon her successfully resolving issues of connecting with others in ways that satisfy herself as well as those in her communal context (3). Should the woman therefore embrace culture and communal expectations at the expense of her true identity?

While this story may give the assumption that lesbians have a harder time being accepted by their families, the situation is similar with gay men. Jude Dibia's protagonist, Ebele, is an example of the experience of a gay African man. Like Amo's mother, Ebele's mum feels that she has failed as a mother and she asks his son, "We didn't bring any of you up like this. We instilled in you strong Christian values. What do you want people to think of our family?" (182). The mother's main concern is the public image which is similar to Amo's reason for staying closeted. In an environment where collective identity is valued, coming out would be considered a selfish move by the queer individual to taint the image and reputation of all that are related to him/her. It is for this reason that Ebele too chooses to get married and have a family so as to veil his queer identity. Even though the mask holds for six years, his secret is revealed by a colleague bringing Ebele's peaceful marriage to an unprecedented end. This shows that even though queer individuals can protect their queer identities, it is a veil that can be carried away by the wind at the most unexpected time.

Barbra's story, "Boy who feels like Girl", is one of transition and transformation. Born and raised a boy, the narrator is a representative of bodies in doubt. Born a "beautiful" boy and nicknamed "Kasupuu" by his peers, he admits that he was too beautiful to be a boy hence the title: "Boy who Feels like a Girl". By giving the name that he adopted after his transition to womanhood, the narrator shows his/her journey towards self-discovery. This journey begins by him performing femininity before finally transitioning into a woman. This he does by piercing his ears, buying feminine clothes and braiding his hair. This could support Judith Butler's argument that gender is constructed through repetition and recitation (256). The question however that arises is; what makes an individual belong to one gender and not another? Does performing gender admit an individual into that which he/she performs? The name Barbra is however used as a metaphor of this transition from feeling like a girl to being one. To assert this new identity, the narrator uses repetition of the words "I am Barbra" (40). She acknowledges the fluidity of identity by admitting that she is figuring life out and also trying to find herself. She owns up to the fact that she is ever evolving and transitioning. This story challenges the rigidity and stability of identity; it is a narrative that speaks to every individual who finds themselves trapped in the "wrong bodies" and thus provides a ray of hope for these individuals.

The stories of Yash and Brizan are even more captivating as they place queerness in specific spaces where it ought not to exist. The stories "To be Muslim and Gay" and "Turkanas Can't be Gay!" place homosexuality in the perspective of religion and ethnic community, especially those considered conservative. Yash begins by highlighting the queerness of being queer in the Muslim community. The fact that he is forty-six years old and unmarried is in itself queer; the silence by his parents concerning his love for women's cloths as a child is also queer. Because of his religious beliefs, he begins to associate homosexuality with dis-ease that could only be cured by getting into a heterosexual marriage. The marriage, however, only lasts a year and he is forced to get a divorce, another taboo/queer act in the Muslim community. Yash, by only giving one name and by bringing out other queer characters in the Muslim community like the family friend Ashif, acts as a representative of many queer individual in the Muslim community. It is also an attempt to subvert the fallacy that Muslims cannot be gay. Brizan's title on the other hand is ironical and an attempt to satirize the cultural dictates that define and claim the individual's identity. The irony rises from the fact that he entitles his work "Turkanas can't be gay" yet he is

not only from the Turkana community but also gay. Despite this conflicting identity, the story portrays the plight of the individual and the attempt to usurp culture. It shows the fundamental role that culture plays in a person's life and the hurdles that arise in attempting to change this culture.

Born in a community with staunch cultural beliefs and practices, Brizan finds out about his same sex feelings in his final year of primary school. At first, he thinks that all boys are attracted to fellow boys until he is told off by one of his mates. When he comes out to his mother, he is told that being gay is a *western concept*, that it was not good; it was *unacceptable in their community* and also *abnormal*. Brizan, by using his English name tries to veil his identity that a surname would have brought to light. This is because it would be easier to trace him as African names usually serve as symbols of a genealogy. His narrative therefore is a representation of many African men and women who have to struggle with identity in a traditional African society that believes homosexuality is either a curse or a disease that could be cured. Ironically, the narrator discovers that he is still attracted to men even after the cleansing ceremony. It is at this point that he seeks divine intervention by joining the seminary. This shows the kind of web that an African finds him/herself in trying to embrace both the traditional African culture and western beliefs. At the seminary he meets other men who are gay and like Oedipus he finds himself face to face with the fate he was trying to run away from. It is at the seminary that he ironically finds his first gay partner. This narrative shows that homosexuality transcends culture, religion, spaces.

From the named, I will delve into the anonymous to interrogate the drive behind this choice in comparison to the named narrators. "To the father of my sons", for instance, is an anonymously written letter addressed to "whose name that cannot be mentioned". The anonymity is brought about by the fact that the narrator is closeted even to the person that he is writing to, an unnamed friend. The anonymity is also because of the ignorance of the addressed concerning the writer's sexuality and his attractions. The anonymity, I could argue, is driven by the fact that the writer is uncertain of the feelings and reaction that the letter may arouse in the addressed. There is the possibility of rejection and unreciprocated love: to protect himself from this, the writer prefers to write the letter anonymously. The receiver can however tell that the letter is from someone close to him. It is ironical that despite the ignorance of the addressed, the addresser assumes that he

has found a father for his sons and muses over how they'll beget these sons yet both of them are men. Another anonymously written letter is "Dad...", where a son comes out to his deceased father. He claims that his reasons for closeting himself was to protect the father from the thoughts of the community and friends, to protect the father's reputation as a civil servant and to avoid being a disappointment to his father. The letter lacks salutation to show the urgency in this confession and the need for the writer to find closure. Anonymity therefore manifests itself as a tool used to protect both the individual and those around him. The father and son in this situation are kinds of metonymic representations of a conversation between any father with his gay son. With the father in a happy heterosexual relationship, homosexuality makes the son feel less of a man. This letter is almost like the late Binyavanga Wainaina's lost chapter, "I am a homosexual, mum." In both the cases, the narrators imagine confessing their sexuality and coming out to their parents as a way of achieving closure.

Anonymity in *Stories of our Lives* on the other hand has been achieved from different levels. Unlike *Invisible*, some names of narrators and places in *Stories of Our lives* have been deleted. The stories are written in the first-person narrative voice "I" and that is the closest we come to the narrators' identities. An example is:

"I AM A RELIGIOUS PERSON, I even sing in the church choir. I love God, and I have a relationship with Him. What I believe is He made me gay for a reason. I don't question God's love for me; I know HE LOVES ME" (306).

Stories of our Lives has not only protected the identities of its narrators, it has also veiled their places of residence. The only mentioned places are the big cities that are considered cosmopolitan. This is because it is easier to place a story to a specific individual in a small space as compared to cities which contains vast identities. From the title, we could also argue that the stories are written collectively hence not associated to a name. The individual is thus a part of the whole community. It is important to note that apart from the anthologies collected from South Africa where homosexuality is legal and those written by openly queer activists and writers on the continent; the other anthologies have assumed anonymity as a way of writing. An example of this is *She called me 'woman'* from Nigeria. In this new form of collective life writing adopted by

the queer community, I could argue that anonymity is an important element especially for queer subjects from environments where their identity is considered 'abnormal'. Not only does anonymity protect the subjects from possible punishment by the government but it also allows them to exploit the tools of creativity to share their stories in different forms thus giving voice to all queer individuals in Kenya. The communal voice gives the works more prominence as compared to one queer individual writing his/her autobiography. This is because the several voices are affirmations of queer presence in Kenya.

2.2 Queer Identity and the metaphoric mask

The mask has always been associated with the object that one wears during a performance such as masquerading or puppeteering. I, however, adopt the word to refer to the ways in which queer individuals veil their queer selves to avoid suspicion from the public. By adorning a phony self, the homosexual is able to fool the heterosexual society just like a mulatto who passes for white. The mulatto who passes for white could be said to be in a racial closet just like the homosexual who passes for heterosexual is said to be in a closet. It is the societal pressure that pushes the individual into these acts of impersonation. This supports the argument by Wendy Doniger in *Many Masks, Many Selves* where she argues that masking is an act of masquerading. It is an act of self-mockery that actually mocks the mocker(69). She goes further to expound that there are masks that are imposed on the individual by race, gender and other fields of identity. This statement is true for the Kenyan queer who are forced to hide their true selves due to illegality of that self. Members of the queer community live precariously as coming out does not help in an environment which considers them abnormal and societal misfits.

Some of the scholars who have written on this topic include Edward Brown who argues that there are those who are forced to wear masks as a means of survival. He focuses on the lives of African American gay men identities to expound on his point. Brown believes that contemporary African American men willingly wear masks that grins and lies because they carry the curse of a history that is marked by both racism and homophobia. For these individuals, being black is enough a cross to carry and by embracing their sexuality they would be inviting double tragedy. There are instances where these individuals turn into perpetrators of homophobia so as to prove

their normativity. Brown thus places African American gay men into two categories: the first category consists of men who are aware that they are gay but choose not to profess their sexual identity. These individuals are always on a silent journey towards masculinity and therefore reject anything feminine as it is a symbol of weakness in men. The second group consists of men who are convinced that they are heterosexual and that they only have sex with men. He quotes R.W Connell who argues that "To many people, homosexuality is a negation of masculinity and homosexual men must be effeminate. Given that assumption, antagonism towards homosexual men may be used to define masculinity" (30).

Even though Brown argues that African American men wear masks due to the plight of race, the case is different with the narrators whose life I study. The concern therefore is to highlight some of the reasons that push these narrators towards masquerading, race being inconsequential. This is because my study focuses not only on gay men but on the queer community in general. This study also focuses on subjects who have had little or no experience of racism since most of the narratives are told by Kenyans in Kenya.

Members of the queer community, in an attempt to fit into the society, fashion themselves or their identities in a certain way so as to wade off any suspicions from the "normal" world. This self is not only achieved by living double lives but also by concealing one's real identity. The concept of dualism could therefore be said to go hand in hand with masking as the individual achieves this dual identity by revealing one self while concealing the other and vice versa. There are various strategies of identity masking that members of queer community employ and that is the concern of this discussion. In the story "Make me Love women," the narrator, Elias, uses the strategy discussed by Brown to fit into the heterosexual world of his friends. He does this by being homophobic and joining in the satire of calling each other "shoga"- a diminutive name for homosexual. It is very ironical that while the other boys use the name to taunt each other, the narrator struggles with the reality of being a "shoga". When the reality of his identity dawns on him, he begins to hate and even think himself abnormal. To veil this unwanted self, the narrator, like Dorian Gray, decides to hide behind a mask. He does this by avoiding associations with the boys just like the mulatto who has to create distance with his/her black world. This is because one's true identity always pops out while among those of his/ her own in terms of mannerisms and associations. Elias also masks his sexuality by hiding behind church devotions with the hope

that religion might cure him of his “illness.” The church, he assumes, is a safe space where one cannot fall into the temptation of “sin” (homosexuality). The other strategy that Elias uses to mask his identity is by suppressing his feeling and creating a closet for himself that covers up for his vulnerability.

In *Stories of our Lives*, (162), the narrator is given the derogatory name, *wanja kihii*, to refer to her manly behaviours. She is queer from several perspectives: not only is she a “manly” girl but also too dark to be a kikuyu hence the grandmother nicknames her a Luo. Right from childhood, the narrator feels othered in her family and this drives her to run away from home. The streets are however unwelcoming, and the narrator is thus obliged to truly mask her feminine side by performing masculinity as a way of survival. The mask is however portrayed as a short-lived identity as at the age of fifteen, the narrator begins to develop physically and this reveals her true identity- femininity. She says, “I could no longer pass as a boy in the streets because my breasts were developing and I began to have periods” (163). The precariousness of masking is what makes it a short-lived affair and the narrator starts to harbor the fear of being raped which actually befalls her. Getting pregnant after the rape completely peels off the mask of masculinity that the narrator has been wearing from childhood. This therefore implies that masking is a protective armour worn by individuals to cover up for identities that are otherwise fragile.

Another form of masking is seen in what Judith Butler calls performativity of gender. Characters are portrayed to attempt to fit into a specific identity by performing acts associated with that particular self. In “Boy who feels like Girl”, the narrator attempts to fit into the world of masculinity by performing it. He says he tried to be masculine by sagging his shorts, playing football and attempting to be macho. Ironically, when he fails to fit in, he decides later in life to transition into a woman. This journey towards self re-definition also begins through performance when he decides to pierce his ears, cross-dress, braid his hair and finally transition into a woman. Performativity, as a form of masking, however, comes with its own disadvantages especially in scenarios where the individual carries physical markers of an identity contrary to that that he/she performs. Barbra, for instance, a boy who gives himself a feminine name cannot hide his masculinity for he could not hide the facial hair that grew by the day. By transitioning into a

woman, however, the narrator attempts to take control of his/her identity through the act of self-definition.

Masking also comes into play in circumstances where individuals attempt to negotiate identity and culture. The society plays a fundamental role as a field of identity formation: as individuals, we feel obliged to fit into the images that define our cultures. Brizan's story "Turkanas Can't be Gay" is a perfect illustration of how cultural expectations might drive an individual into masking his true identity. The narrator is forced to look for a girlfriend even though things do not work out between them. At the Boys' boarding school, he must mask his sexuality and he keeps hoping that the feelings will disappear. Culture however catches up with him when the time comes for his age set to find brides. Due to pressure from the family, he is forced to take part in cattle raiding with his mates in search of bride price as culture dictates. Even though he gets married and tries to mask his sexuality, he gets pressure from the family to perform his roles as a husband. When he comes out to the head teacher, he is expelled and threatened with public revelation of his sexuality. This shows that despite the urge by the members of the Gay Liberation for individuals to come out, they have to acknowledge the fact that coming out does not necessarily mean one would be accepted by the society. It is actually the beginning of the long struggle towards self-acceptance. The narrator for instance is advised to join college where he would be exposed to other types of women who were more mature and modern. He joins a teacher training college and says, "It was funny that I was in college, not because I wanted to become a teacher, but because it was felt that being in such an environment would 'cure' me of my gay feelings" (93).

Through Brizan, we see the burden that a gay man among the Turkana has to carry as he is forced to mask his sexuality. This however does not help because it raises new concerns from his parents who want to see him become a family man. His performance of masculinity is therefore incomplete for it is not enough to be a husband, what makes one a man is fatherhood. Some of the characters in these narratives wear masks for they believe that the continent has a long way to go before it becomes a safe space for members of the queer community. One of the narrators writes a three-sentence narrative and he says, "IN THE FUTURE, I want to get married to a woman. This is Africa, I have to be realistic. So even though I know getting married will not be

easy for me, and being with a woman will not be easy for me, I will go through it. I have to start a family; it is what is expected of me. My parents are very traditional; I FEEL OBLIGATED” (231).

These two narratives are manifestation of how the self intersects with the collective to form a whole. As Spender argues in *Reading Autobiography*, the life narrator does not only confront one life but two. One is the self that others see- “the social, historical person with achievement, personal appearance and social relationships” (5). This is the self as known and seen by the public. There is however another self that is only known to the narrator, the inner self, and it is this self that is most difficult to reveal as it is never observed by the others. It is clear that individuals are always anxious to protect their reputation as members of a family, a society, a culture, a nation and a continent. The narrator makes it clear that his struggle with identity is not only personal but also continental. His story is that of many other voiceless individuals who would rather wear a mask than ruin the image that the public has of them. This narrator for instance denounces his queer identity so as to fit into the African definition of masculinity. The self is obligated to conform to the conventions of the society as anything contrary is considered abnormal.

There is also evidence of queerness existing in the guise of friendship. Wanuri Kahiu’s film *Rafiki* is a good example of how queerness can be masked as friendship. *Rafiki* is a Suaheli word that means ‘friend’. Through the story of the protagonists, Ziki and Kena, it is easy to dismiss their relationship as mere friendship and this helps it to survive until the mask of friendship is peeled off when they are caught in the abandoned car. From the narratives in both anthologies, there are instances where friendship has been used to mask queer love. In the story “Falling for Diane” (48) in *Invisible*, the narrator, Judith, admits that her first relationship was with her best friend. She counts herself fortunate for having her first experience with someone who understood her. This is similar to the unnamed narrator of “Not yet Uhuru” who admits to having been in a relationship with one of his classmates while everyone assumed they were friends. Apart from his partner, he never knew anyone else who was gay. He, however, suffers the pain of the mask when their relationship comes to an end for he didn’t have anyone to open up to or even move on with. Rena Otieno also admits to having gone as far as introduce her girlfriends to her parents.

When in the village, she hosted these partners including lesbian activists and to her parents, these were Rena's friends. This is also the case with Brizan who meets his first gay partner while at the seminary. Even though Brizan is able to keep this relationship secret, they are later transferred to different countries; an indication that their guise of friendship had been discovered. We get similar cases of "friendship" in *Stories of our Lives* (19). After getting married at age of eighteen, the narrator discloses that she would have sleepovers with her girlfriends. She would leave her husband claiming to be checking on her friend only to end up having sex with the "friend" and later return to her husband. She also admits that this went on for the two years that she was married. In another instance we meet a gay narrator who lives with his partner; not being natives of the area they live in, everyone assumes they are related. However, when introducing each other to family members, they hide behind the mask of friendship. The narrator also admits that he had been outed when he was younger when he was with his "friend". The irony however is that they were outed by their mutual friends who started being suspicious of their friendship (249).

2.3 The internet as a space for negotiating Queer Identities

The internet also plays a fundamental role for queer identity formation. Occupying a space where queerness is frowned upon, most individuals opt to hide behind the "safety" of social media. This varies from meeting partners as it is difficult to identify queer individuals in everyday life in an environment where people have mastered the art of performing sexuality. The social media as a virtual space therefore provides a temporary sense of utopia for members of the queer community. From Binyavanga Wainaina to the subjects of these texts, the role of digital media as a space for queer identity formation is evident. Wainaina for instance intentionally maintains great silence about his sexuality in his memoir only to come out on social media. This is proof that members of the queer community use the digital space as a medium for testing waters concerning the reception of queer identity and also to navigate censorship. However, social media is not such a safe space as it also comes with its baggage. In *Stories of our Lives* one of the narrators admits to having used a dating website as the first space to meet a partner. The partner however did not meet the narrator's expectation in terms of physical appearance. In his second attempt, the relationship begins and ends on social media as the partners never get an opportunity to meet (57). While it is easier for queer individuals to hide behind social media, the digital space

has also proved itself unsafe as friends and family could use the same media to spy on the individuals. We see this through the narrator whose aunt sends a friend request. By admitting the aunt to share in this space, the narrator realizes that his secret would not be safe.

Social media has been portrayed as a space that contributes to the journey towards queer self-discovery. For some individuals like Barbra, in *Invisible*, the internet provides a medium through which the queer individual can learn about and name the self. The first time she learns that she is transgender is when she searches the words “boy who feels like a girl” which is also the title of her story. The discovery of the self gives Barbra a sense of stability that she lacked before finding out where she really belonged in the queer community (36). For other people, it is a space where queer individuals can interact with one another. We get this in the example of Elias who uses the website, www.outpersonals.com, to meet a fellow gay man but like our first narrator, he ends up disappointed as the man did not look anything like the person that Elias had seen on the website. Even though the website makes it easier for gay men to interact, there is the concern about deception.

It is also easier for queer people to converse and interact on social media away from the public eye but that does not mean that the digital space lacks a public. It is very ironical that while the social media may be seen as a “safe” space, at some point the individuals have to meet and for some this raises the fear of being outed. An instance occurs to one of the characters when one of the internet partners he meets turns out to be a very effeminate man. He says, “I meet this guy in town and he is in tights, walking like life is a catwalk, touching himself and being really suggestive – it totally freaked me out. I was sure he was going to out me.” (73) This line raises the concern that has been seen in some of the narratives with homosexuality being equated to effeminacy in men and manliness in women. The narrator assumes that his partner’s effeminacy would be enough proof to the public of this man’s homosexuality which would lead to the revelation of his own homosexuality. This however is not the only thing that might lead to a queer individual being outed. The access to one’s social media account by a second party is the worst kind of outing apart from being caught in the act. This is because it acts as evidence of queer person’s “sin”. The narrator for instance confesses that he was forcefully plucked out of the closet when his sister got to see explicit messages on the narrator’s phone. While some characters hide their queer identity on fake social media accounts, there are those, like Rena

Otieno, who have used the social medium as a space for queer activism and a medium for coming out to the public. This, however, aroused anger in some members of her family who viewed her sexuality and move to come out as an embarrassment to their family. While the digital space may help to mask most of the activities of the queer in Kenya; while it may contribute greatly as a learning and social hub; it is a symbol of the precarious lives of the queer as it is not completely veiled from the eyes of the heterosexual world. This is because it is a platform that is open to all and thus queer individuals cannot police the access to these sites.

2.4The Mask of Dualism

This section attempts an interrogation of queer selves and how they bargain identities so as to fit in the society. The focus will be on the dualism portrayed by most queer characters whereby they are “normal” by day and “abnormal” by dusk. Like the Roman god, Janus, members of the queer community find themselves obliged to acquire and maintain two-faced identities. Duality in queer lives involves a state of liminality where the individual is neither here nor there, that is, s/he does not fit into the binaries of femininity/masculinity, hetero/homo. The most outstanding duality in queer studies lies in the transgender and the intersex for they carry the physical markers of liminality. The transgender for instance doubts the body that he/she is in while the intersex carries the symbols/ genitalia of ambiguity. The other two-faced member of the queer community is the bisexual. This section will look into the double lives led by some members of the queer community in attempt to belong to both the worlds of queerness/ heteronormativity.

According to Shubh Singh and Subho Chakrabarti in *A study in dualism: the strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, dualism was derived from the Latin word “duo’ which means two. It therefore refers to the existence of two different and often opposite entities. They posit that dualism is a philosophy that signifies the view of the universe as a space that contains two radically different kinds of being. Raia Prokhovnik on the other hand defines dualism as the assumption that there exist two distinct mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere. These two phenomena, taken together, have incompatible characteristics (25). According to Raia, some of the characteristics include opposition, hierarchy, parts of a whole and transcendence. Under opposition, she argues that this duality always consists of conflicting, antagonistic and competing rivals who are held in rigid

tension. The foundation lies on the “difference” in a sense that things are incompatible. In terms of hierarchy, Raia argues that for duality to be successful, one thing has to be privileged over the other which remains a subordinated, suppressed and negative counterpart. For one aspect to be elevated, the other has to be shunned, excluded and othered. The renowned American scholar W.E.B Dubois, in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, posited that the Negro was faced with the trouble of double consciousness. He had to look at himself with regard to the other (white). The Negro perpetually harbors a feeling of two-ness- “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (5). It is the same plight that faces queer Africans as they cannot reconcile their identities as both African and queer in an environment that disowns queerness as part of the African identity. The queer African just like the African- American occupies the space of an adopted child who has brought with themselves a dis-ease into the pure world of heterosexuality. This is an illness that the queer individual must suppress in order to gain admittance into the world of the “healthy”.

In the story “Boy who feels like Girl”, the narrator does not understand why he lacks masculine qualities and instead carries the beauty of a woman. We see this dilemma when he prays, “God, pick a side for me. I don’t want to be in the middle, where I feel like a girl, but look like a boy” (36). While the duality of the transgender and intersex arouse questions of physical being vis-à-vis what one feels to be the true identity, the bisexual is a dual being who lacks these physical markers. S/he is neither here nor there in the sexuality divide as they operate on the binaries of hetero/homo. The bisexual has thus been portrayed as an undecided and gluttonous individual who wants to inhabit both worlds of the “normal” and the “abnormal”.

Dualism however manifests itself better among the gay and lesbian individuals as they lack overt symbols of “otherness.” It is therefore easier for them to navigate the borders of identities unseen. This could be compared to the concept of racial passing that was/is greatly experienced among African-Americans. According to Gayle Wald in his book, *Crossing the Line*, to pass refers to transgressing the social boundary of race, to cross or thwart the line of racial distinction that has been a basis of racial oppression and exploitation (6). Gerald Horne on the other hand defines passing as "a deception that enables a person to adapt specific roles and identities from which he or she would otherwise be barred by prevailing standards: it requires that a person be

consciously engaged in concealment" (6). My argument, however, is that passing is not only racial but that there is passing of sexuality. This, I could say, are instances where individuals who belong to certain sexuality adapt another identity which gives rise to a public self and a private self. Just like racial passing, the public self is usually a manifestation of the phony identity while the private self is that without the masquerade. The concept of passing expounds on how queer individuals feign heteronormativity when it is convenient and how they go back to their real selves when necessary. While some individuals only pass for a short while, some characters adopt passing as a way of life hoping that they are never discovered.

In *Stories of our Lives*, the narrator castigates the hypocrisy of the society and he says that during the day guys were straight with girlfriends while the same guys were queer at night (32) The irony however is that the same narrator who castigates homosexuals for living a double life admits to having a girlfriend. The narrator also has a boyfriend who has a girlfriend while at the university but also dates him on the side. This brings into question the belief by constructionists that identity is something fluid and that sexual orientation is dependent on culture and therefore not objective. They believe that since same sex relations have different meanings in different cultures and in different historical contexts, they are not identical across time and space. If something is accepted in a certain society in a certain era, it does not mean that it will always be accepted. As time goes by, people interact with new ideas which force them to stretch their cultural boundaries. The constructionists are radical and hence view homosexuality as something that an individual acquires and hence can be corrected. This story of hetero/homo duality also raises the question of the reason behind the dualism. Dualism is an example of Butler's performativity of sexuality and the narrators can perform both homo and heterosexuality. By performing heterosexuality, they consecutively perform homosexuality with the difference being the prominence of one versus the suppression of the other.

Some justification for dualism is found in the story *I WANT A FAMILY* (205-6). The narrator talks about his wish to have children; the dilemma however rises from the fact that he is gay and if he were to marry a fellow man, he would not naturally achieve his dream of fatherhood. However, fatherhood is not the only hindrance the narrator has to face but also the issues of law and culture. With the animosity that is extended towards the queer in Kenya, the narrator prefers

to protect himself by embracing a double life. However, there are other fields of identity formation that trigger his dualism. With the fallacy that homosexuality is un-African, the narrator admits to the possibility of death of the grandmother if she were to find out about his homosexuality. Being a religious leader, he believes that homosexuality would ruin his reputation in the society. He says, “Then I have things to hide inside me, a beast I don’t want to let out, because I’ll disappoint people” (205).

The homosexual is thus, portrayed to possess the duality of Jekyll and Hyde, who is both human and animal and thus has to hide his savage side. According to the narrator, being normal means going to school, finishing college and graduating, getting a wife, getting kids and dying old. The space which the narrator inhabits therefore is a hindrance as he cannot unleash the wolf in him. He is not the only narrator who has these sentiments as one of the narrators admits that he would have to marry a woman because he is in Africa. Unlike the West, Africa is portrayed as a dystopian environment for the queer. What, however, should be considered normal? One anonymous narrator argues that abnormal could refer to anything that cannot be shaped right. He satirizes the society’s understanding of normal in relation to queer and for him, a hermit is abnormal hence queer. He redefines queer to range from those who give up on their dreams and settle for mundane things so that they don’t have to dream; there are the queers who have never left their parents’ houses in their forties; River Road for him is queer for it provides a bigger spectrum of possibility.

In another one sentence confession, a narrator says, “I USED TO BE GAY but I am bisexual AT THE MOMENT” (201). This raises the concerns put forward by the constructionists who view homosexuality as something that an individual acquires and hence can be corrected unlike the essentialists who regard identity as innate, natural and fixed (9).

From the above sketch however we wonder whether identity is indeed innate or if individuals have the freedom to define themselves. The other assumption would be that the narrator attempts to show the fluidity of identity. The transition from being gay to bisexual, I could argue, is a type of masking employed by narrator. By embracing duality, the narrator portrays a betwixt identity as he is neither here nor there. He falls into both identity binaries of homo/hetero or normal/abnormal and through this he enjoys the privileges of both worlds. The narrator could

therefore be seen to possess an “exotic” identity as he is a chameleon that can fit in any identity as circumstances dictate.

There is also evidence of heterosexual men cruising onto the queer ship when unwatched. This is represented first in terms of the commodification of sex where heterosexual men pass for queer in return for money. On the first story in *Stories of our Lives*, the narrator confesses to have lived in what he calls a “whorehouse” where many men would come and sleep; sometimes they came with women. He also admits that they never talked about the men sleeping with other men but there were nuances of this and for them it was purely business (3). There are controversies when it comes to the trading of sex; there are instances where queer individuals engage in prostitution with the clients being both hetero and homosexual, while in other instances, heterosexual men engage in homosexuality for money. This complicates the definition of what makes one a homosexual and the existence of a true/pure queer identity. There is also proof of curiosity that drives married heterosexual men into the arms of queer subjects. One of the transgender characters narrates that he was once chased out of a club because married men tried to fight over him making the female prostitutes gang up on him. Later, he gets into a relationship with a married man. (8) In another instance, the narrator castigates the hypocrisy of religious leaders using the example of sheikhs he interacted with who were religious during the day but would wait upon the darkness to unleash their queer desires. Dualism in the stories is thus portrayed through characters who are heterosexual by day and queer by night, those who are actually heterosexual but engage in “queer sex” when unwatched, those who get into heterosexual marriages but keep homosexual relationships by the side. The queer individual therefore chops the self into two in order to belong to the world that surrounds him/her while the heterosexually ironically wears the queer cloak out of curiosity or financial benefit.

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2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has posed the argument that in an attempt to fit into the “normal” world of heteronormativity, members of the queer community develop some strategies of identity formation. These strategies range from wearing different masks or leading pretentious lives which vary from friendship, hiding in heterosexual marriages, leading two contradictory lives, hiding in the church and denial of their queer identity just to mention a few. The digital space has also been portrayed as a “safe” but precarious space for queer identity formation. It is, however, important to note that members of the queer community are driven to such desperate pretensions by a society that views queerness as queer and/or abnormal. It is therefore a strategy to belong even when there are attempts to marginalize the queer individual.

CHAPTER THREE: STYLE AND MOULDING OF THE QUEER SELF

3.0 Introduction

Language and its usage are always seen as marker of one's identity. Language or our way of manipulating language always helps to give hints of who we are or what we think of ourselves. It is usually easy to tell an individual's place in the society through the language they use and this is a technique that has been employed by most literary writers to expound on their characters' identity and place in the spaces they occupy. There are specific ways in which individuals fashion language as a way of creating the image of the self- either the self as it is or the imagined or desired self. The genre of life writing has enabled the queer individual to be both a character and a narrator in his/her own story. In this chapter, I attempt to investigate the use of style (as a component of language) by members of the queer community in Kenya as a way of self-stylization. Self-stylization in this instance refers to creation, construction or the molding of the image of the self through the use of style. The questions that I raise in this section are: how have members of the queer community manipulated the faculties of style to create the image of the self? What does this style portray about queer identity and their place in the Kenyan society? How has it been used to expound on/ suppress some concerns of the queer community?

This investigation will begin right from the titles of the two anthologies to individual narratives by members of the queer community. Kevin Mwachiro for instance gives his anthology the title *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*. Invisible is a term that denotes the inability to be seen either due to something being hidden or too small to be perceived by the eye. It is very ironical that Kevin Mwachiro would choose such a title for an anthology by individuals whose main aim is to achieve visibility and agency. The title could thus be seen as a mockery to the society which has blocked its eyes to the presence of the queer. It is an assertion by the author that despite the lack of acknowledgement by the society, the queer actually exists. Through writing and sharing their stories, these individuals are able to claim visibility in the hetero-normative world. The term *invisible* also has connotations of masking and pretense that characterizes queer lives. This is to imply that these individuals are invisible since the lives they lead and the identities they embrace are not their true selves. They are obliged to "perform" the selves that are acceptable to the society thus making their true/queer selves invisible.

Stories of our Lives by the Nest Collective on the other hand gives an image of collective action towards achieving agency for the queer. Despite the fact that each individual gives their own personal narrative, there is a sense of the collective to show the shared plight. There is therefore double attempt towards receiving agency: for the queer self and the queer community. It is only after finding one's individual identity that the queer community can fight for voice for the whole community. The title is not just an indicator of shared identity but also shared experiences, ambitions, pains, joys and the predicament of exclusion from society. Through these shared experiences, the individual's claim of experience is validated. Kevin Mwachiro achieves the same credibility for his subjects through the sub-title: *Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*. This shows that it is not just an individual's claim to being 'othered' from and by the mainstream society but that it is a group's cry towards acknowledgement and acceptance.

3.1 Capitalization and the Journey towards Self-discovery

In an attempt to fashion the self, the narrators have employed different strategies of style. Just like African writers who used the postcolonial struggle to write back to the empire, I argue that the move by members of the queer community in Kenya to narrate their own stories is an attempt to write back to the heterosexual world itself and that of fictional writing. They reclaim the power to shape their own identities by subverting some of the stereotypical identities they have been given mostly by fictional writers. Through these life sketches, we see the portrayal of victims rather than perpetrators of violence, we see seclusion, and pretense but also meet individuals who are able to embrace their true identities. The narrators are able to question their own identities, take us through their struggles and the crises of acknowledging one's identity in spaces where it is unacceptable.

In the voyage towards self-discovery and definition, the stories in *Stories of our Lives* have deviated from the normal way of writing by foregrounding the first and last few words of each narrative. In a way, the foregrounded words act as images of the narrators' journeys towards discovering the self. The first words give images of self-definition when the narrators come to the realization of what they are and are able to name the identities. The last words on the other hand are resolutions of the narrators whether through acceptance or denial and rejection of the queer identity. An example of how the foregrounding acts as a marker of the phase in which the

narrator is in could be seen in the sketch below: I IDENTIFY AS STRAIGHT right now. I don't really know what's happening right now, so I call myself straight. I am not completely out there. I think I am confused, I'm NOT YET SURE WHAT'S HAPPENING (208).

This sketch shows a narrator who finds him/herself in a liminal state and she/he cannot actually tell or identify the space they occupy in society in terms of sexual identity. By saying that he/she is not completely out there, the narrator admits queerness by making reference to the metaphorical closet that queer individuals have to get out of in order to embrace their true selves. I would also argue that the narrator decides to sit on the fence by citing confusion and claiming straightness for it is easy to embrace false hetero-normativity than to be queer. By acknowledging that he/she only identifies as straight right now, the narrator shows the betwixt lives that most queer individuals lead in a society where they are castigated.

In an almost similar sketch, the narrator says, "IN THE FUTURE, I want to get married to a woman. This is Africa, I have to be realistic. So even though I know getting married will not be easy for me, and being with a woman will not be easy for me, I will still go through it. I have to start a family; it is what is expected of me. My parents are very traditional; I FEEL OBLIGATED" (231). This narrative shows an individual who has chosen to remain "in the closet" because of the belief that Africa does not offer a safe space for queerness. The narrator is therefore ready to forever wear a mask just to fit into the definition of true African masculinity. He acknowledges the fact that it would not be easy for him to be with a woman but he has to meet the familial and cultural expectations of an African man. This narrative raises the issues discussed by Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro and Vasu Reddy in *Queer in Africa*. They argue that while identity seems to be an ever-changing component of self-definition, African queer identities are fundamentally under construction and they usually reflect the tensions between the oppressive powers of social structures and the personal. This is because queerness is perceived as un-African and has connotations of promiscuity to many African people (2). Senayon Olaoluwa extends the same argument in *The Human and the Non-human* by positing that the un-Africanness of homosexuality in Africa is supported by those who contend that the practice and its manifestations are not traceable in African history (20).

It is, therefore, a battle between the binaries of normality versus abnormality, privilege versus marginalization and safety versus insecurity. The questioning of queerness on the African continent could also be seen through one of the narrators who admits that “IN THE COURSE of my work I have to keep coming out to different people. Some of them say, “Huh? What do you mean? We have lesbians IN THIS COUNTRY?” (241). The credibility of homosexuality as an African phenomenon has therefore transcended the continental identity to come down to individual African countries. There are connotations in these questions that homosexuals may be somewhere in Africa but not in Kenya. Through the capitalization and foregrounding of certain words, the narrators give us (in summary) the plight of the queer in Kenya from confusion/liminality, to pretense, to cultural imprisonment and the othering of the queer.

Some of the narrators have chosen to give one- sentence sketches to confide in the readers what their journeys as queer have been like. Even though a sentence may look too simple, they carry too much weight- the yoke that a queer individual has to carry in Kenya and the futility of sharing one’s queer identity with others. For instance, “I WAS ONCE BISEXUAL, but for the last six months I’VE BEEN GAY” (202). This sentence is a metaphor of the instability that characterises queer lives. It takes us back to the debate between constructionists and essentialists of whether queer identity is innate or acquired. The sentence might look simple but very pregnant with meaning: especially the capitalized words. The state of bisexuality as seen in the previous chapter is one characterised by dualism. The individual is thus neither fully homosexual nor heterosexual. I consider bisexuality a safe identity for both the queer and those who consider themselves curious heterosexuals. For this sketch therefore, there is a sense of growth in the narrator from being in the safe space of bisexuality to identifying as gay. This is because by proclaiming the gay identity, the individual has discovered the self and that acquired the true identity. This shows that despite the difficulties faced by most queer individuals in Kenya, there are those who are able to successfully go through the journey of self-discovery and (re)definition.

In another sketch the narrator proclaims that “FAMILY–to me–is that person you look forward to GOING HOME TO” (251). This narrator attempts to re-define the idea of the family. With the predominance of the heterosexual family, most queer individuals are either forced to stay

unmarried or hide in heterosexual marriages. The 'normal' family in the heterosexual world is made up of a man, a woman/ women, and/or children. The African society for instance insists on procreation as a fundamental part/ aim of the family unit. Homosexual relationships are however seen as attempts to subvert the family unit. Not only do they question the traditional male/female relationship but also the idea of childbearing. This is due to the fact that same-sex marriages cannot naturally lead to procreation. The option that the queer have towards acquisition of a family is either through adoption and artificial insemination for women. For the narrator however, the important thing is not the gender of the person that you build the family with but rather the fact that the person is one (regardless of gender) you are able to have a familial relationship and bond with. The narrator also acknowledges the fact that not everybody could agree with his/her definition of a family and thus specifies through the words- for me. In the last one sentence sketch, the narrator informs the readers "WHEN I CAME OUT to my mother, she told me I was A DEVIL WORSHIPPER."(260).

This statement raises the role of religion in the formation of queer identity. With both Christianity and Islam castigating queerness as ungodly, there are attempts to associate it with sin, illness and curses. It is for this reason that the narrator is accused of being the devil's agent. Apart from the foregrounding, there are specific words and metaphors of illness that some of the narrators have used to show the feeling of difference and otherness. This comes from what the society thinks of the queer leading to the belief by the queer self that they are actually ill.

3.2 Images of queerness/abnormality in Queer life writing

With the earlier debates by African scholars disputing the Africanness of homosexuality and the denial from both religious and political leaders, the homosexual has been made to believe that s/he is a problem or has one. The fact that homosexuality is not openly embraced in most African countries has made it "closeted" as a form of African identity. As human beings, we define ourselves based on the spaces that we inhabit. This is quite common in Africa where the 'I' is realized through the 'we', that is, we identify ourselves through others and the communal definitions of one's identity. The individual identity does not therefore belong to the self but to the community. With the queer in Kenya inhabiting a space where queerness is a marginalized form of identity, they end up questioning their own normality. This is because homosexuality is

represented as poisonous, a disease and a form of abnormality both by the society and in creative works. Jeffrey Ringer in his analysis of queer representation in European adolescent literature also asserts that the homosexual was seen as a sinner who had chosen his sin. By being portrayed as unwell, the homosexual begins to doubt the self and feel a sense of inadequacy and need for help. Ringer goes further to argue that by describing and defining the homosexual as ill, the society can see itself as healthy and in contrast to the assertion by the queer community of a distinct identity, the society can see itself as ill through the presence of these "ill" individuals within it and thus look for all necessary avenues to cure itself of this illness and regain its health which is heteronormativity (206).

In *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*, we see the narrators employ different terminologies to refer to the "abnormality" associated with queerness. Amo for instance in, *A mother's fears for her Lesbian Daughter*, says that for mothers of lesbian daughters, they always give their children time to come back to their senses. Queerness is associated with psychological and emotional problems that one is expected to get over with time. With such an assumption, most queer individuals grow up thinking they are abnormal and that their queer identity is a phase that could be cured with medicine, religion or heterosexual relationships and/or marriages. By equating homosexuality to illness, the issues raised by Senayon Olaoluwa are made evident such that the homo/hetero binaries go hand in hand with the binaries of normality versus abnormality: abnormality on the other hand is synonymous to insecurity and the queer individual is thus seen as a threat to the "normal" society.

Elias, the narrator in "Make me Love Women" also admits to the same feeling of abnormality when he says "I began to think something was wrong with me, that the feelings I had were wicked." (18) Here, he equates homosexuality with wickedness. This shows that by the society privileging heterosexuality, the queer individual is automatically made to feel inadequate. The narrator for instance sees himself as a traitor to manhood, masculinity, nature and religion. For this reason he blames all his misfortunes on the fact that God could be punishing him for his homosexuality. The question of religion plays a very fundamental role in most of these queer narratives with most narrators trying to find solace in religion. Makau Mutua however argues that instead of portraying Africa as historically homophobic, it would be more appropriate if

scholars attempted to look into the role of religion and its contributions towards homophobia. He goes further to assert that the two greatest religions, Islam and Christianity, have homophobia in their doctrinal teachings (20). I therefore find it quite ironical for individuals to run to the same religion to find healing from their homosexuality.

Another instance where a narrator admits difference/ otherness is seen in the story of Yash, “To be Muslim and Gay.”(58) From the title, we see the association of religion with identity. It implies that queerness and Islam are two parallel identities that can never be merged. The narrator therefore automatically becomes the “other” due to the fact that he harbors these two identities. He says that he felt that his attraction to men was a **sickness** that would be cured. For Yash, the cure could only be achieved in getting married to a woman. The narrator named K on the other hand has to prove his sanity to his mother which he does through a letter. He writes “we’ve never really spoken about my sexuality.....You called it my illness. I just say I’m gay. I’m not ill” (101). He goes further to assert his wellness through repetition of the words: “ I wasn’t ill”. This same “dis-ease” is referred to by one of the narrators as the thorn in his flesh. It is very ironical how society also goes out of its way to contain homosexuality by throwing the queer into the basket of heterosexual marriages. One of the narrators is informed by the priest that his “runaway hormones would verily be contained by having sex as God intended: in wedlock”. We see the sarcasm in the narrator’s voice when he says “.....and that is how a gay man ended up in ‘holy’ matrimony” (62). The word holy is put in quotation marks to show the narrators spite for this kind of holiness. His words satirize the hypocrisy that characterizes the church through the pretence and disregard for his homosexuality. The forced marriage to a woman through the priest also portrays the church as tyrannical. All these male characters however end up mocking these attempts towards healing as they all end up divorcing their female partners. This symbolizes a move to embrace their true identities. By freeing themselves from the snares of fake heterosexuality, the narrators are able to prove that their queer identities are not illnesses but rather who they are. They also subvert the belief that queerness is a temporary identity that one gets over with time. Through this, they give homosexuality a space as part of the African identities.

The association of homosexuality with metaphors of illness is not the only form of stereotypical identity that the queer have to subvert. There is a lot of violence that envelopes queer lives. With homosexuality being viewed as a vice brought into Africa by the west to ruin African values; the lives of the members of the queer community are characterized by different forms of punishments from the heterosexual world. Even though there are countries such as South Africa that have attempted to accept the queer, members of this community still have a long way to go before they could really belong into the society. In an attempt to investigate the use of language and style to portray the plight of Kenya's queer community, images of violence are seen to run across the life sketches in both *Invisible* and *Stories of our lives*. Apart from being "othered", I will try to look into violence and its different manifestations as part of an experience that the queer are subjected to due to their "queerness". Violence manifests itself in various ways; there is physical violence, which is seen through mob justice and beatings, verbal violence that is portrayed through insults and emotional/psychological violence. Before I delve into the violence experienced by the queer in the hands of the "other", I would begin by looking at the wars within the community itself.

From the narratives, it is clear that there exist tensions between members of the queer community themselves. This war is quite apparent especially between the gay, the bisexual, and the transgender. The bi-sexual is accused by the homosexual of being undecided hence wanting to belong in both the queer and the heterosexual world. Jackson, for instance, in the story, *Bi, Bye or Buy?*, says that gay men have told him to decide what it wants. From the title -which is in the form of questions- I could argue that we see debates of whether the bisexual is really dual(bi); whether s/he should be bid farewell from either worlds(bye); whether s/he is embracing a fake/bought identity. Jackson shows his disappointment at the disunity that exists among the queer. The place of the bisexual in the queer community has been tackled by other scholars such as Cheryl Stobie in her analysis of the film *Karmen Gei* directed by the Senegalese, Joseph Gai Ramaka. The bisexual is actually portrayed as a double threat to the heterosexual world as portrayed by the women who chant praise to the protagonist, Karmen. They say "Karmen there's no one like you. You attract men and you make women undo their robes.....Be careful! Hide your women, hide your men. Karmen has come. She who creates havoc is here."

Bisexuality is thus portrayed as an unstable identity as it not only brings havoc to the status quo of the heterosexual world but the homosexual world as well. Cheryl Stobie actually argues that female bisexuality challenges heterosexuality, patriarchy and feminine gender roles of marriage, motherhood and sexual submission (70). She goes further to argue that bisexuality could be seen as a passing stage rather than a permanent identity. It is portrayed as predatory element as it may lure or provoke others to explore their own potentialities. A bisexual man such as Jackson is therefore a vexation to gay men as he is seen as one sitting on the fence. Like Karmen, he could cause havoc both in the gay and the heterosexual world as he can have relationships with both men and women. I however think bisexuality a mask that permits the individual to embrace an identity that suits his/her situation. In case of danger of violence from the heterosexual public, it is easier for a bisexual to reclaim his/her place in the same world. It could also be seen as an identity that the individual claims in the journey of identifying the true self. The bisexual body could be seen as a true metaphor of the fluidity and performativity of identity as the individual chooses when to be what.

The tension is also seen between homosexuals and the transgender. Barbara, for instance in “Boy who feels like a Girl” asserts that s/he was not a homo. S/he goes further to refute any relationship with homosexuals and admits to being uncomfortable around these gay men with effeminate behaviours. It is ironical that the narrator criticizes the effeminacy of some gay men yet his own situation is almost similar for he tries to perform femininity because he feels that he was born in the wrong body. Barbara alludes to Audrey, a fellow transsexual who has also criticized homosexuals in her article “Transsexual’s Nightmare: Activism of Subjugation.” Audrey Mbugua argues that homosexuals marginalize the transgender due to jealousy and the fear of being “outed” if they were to associate with them. She goes further to accuse homosexuals of “gaynising” and “transjacking” the lives of transgender individuals. Gaynising, she defines, as the process by which homosexuals turn transgender people into homosexuals. That is clumping the transgender into the homosexual bandwagon. Gayjacking on the other hand refers to the process of “using transsexual issues and struggles to pimp up the gay/homosexual agenda” (130). With the verbal violence that is evidence among members of the queer community themselves, it is therefore not surprising that there would be war from outside that

this divided “family” has to experience. While members fight over labels and superiority, there are individuals out there who carry a heavy yolk because of the identification as queer.

In *Stories of our Lives*, we meet a narrator whose main wish is that a day would come when he would walk down the streets without being insulted or having a stone thrown at him (233). One of the stories however that take us into the pain and violence endured by some members of the queer could be seen in “Boy who feels like Girl.” Due to his effeminate character and physical appearance, the narrator is named Kasupuu, meaning beautiful. The Ka- however stands for something small, therefore, the narrator is not only beautiful but also small in body size. Through this name, we see how the narrator has been feminized by being given the attributes of feminine beauty, physical weakness and vulnerability due to her size. The narrator becomes a victim of bullying and sexual assault. He is continually molested by one of his classmates who literally turn him into a “wife”. The perpetrator is defined as bigger and taller thus fitting the expectation of true masculinity which is portrayed through physical might unlike the small and weak narrator. The narrator goes further to say that those who were caught openly portraying homosexual tendencies in school were beaten up and expelled.

One of the unnamed narrators in *Stories of our Lives* retells about the beating he had to endure while coming from the club. At the beginning – as readers- we would assume that it was an attack like any other. He is beaten and kicked but ironically other people look on without offering any help. We only realize that the attack was homophobic when the attackers refer to the narrator as ‘shoga’. Shoga is a Swahili word that was previously used to refer to friendship/friend/confidant. The word has, however, acquired a new meaning and is today used to refer to gay men, especially those who portray effeminate behavior. The narrator is told by one of the attackers that they would shove a pipe up his ass and it is at this moment that he decides to save himself. It is however very ironical that this specific attack is what makes the narrator’s family acknowledge his queerness. Instead of telling them what happened to him, he chooses to tell his mother the name that the attackers called him. He concludes by saying that ‘THIS TIME SHE UNDERSTOOD’ (29). Such punishments are aimed at driving the queer back into the closet. These are attempts by members of society to police sexuality and contain homosexuality. By punishing queer individuals, the society is able to insert fear into the self; this fear drives the

homosexual self back into the life of pretense and thus violence could be interpreted as a strategy for inculcating queer invisibility. Like the African American who always carried around the fear of being lynched, some gay characters have been threatened with lynching. One of the narrators admits to having been insulted and threatened by the public. This creates fear in the individual to the extent that he becomes more of a “night-walker”. He says: “I couldn’t leave the house during the day. I’d leave at night, and even then I covered myself. If I walked openly, people would recognize me and follow me” (6).

The threat to the life of the queer is not only a representation of violence but could also be seen as the desire by the heterosexual society to push queerness into extinction. By covering the self, the narrator gives the image of a veil. The cover not only hides his physical body but also his queer identity. By veiling this part of the self, the queer individual is pushed into invisibility. Violence is also evident in learning institutions, especially the boarding schools. Most of the narrators in the anthologies admit to having begun experimenting on their queer desires in boarding schools. This is due to the fact that most boarding schools are gendered, that is, boys or girls only with very few mixed schools. This kind of environment presents the queer individual with a platform for the budding of his/her identity, albeit secretly. Homosexuality is however punishable with most schools expelling individuals who portray such tendencies. We see such in the narrative, “I’VE NEVER REALLY BEEN THE NORMAL KID” (21). The narrator, having witnessed the homophobia and violence extended towards his fellow queer schoolmates, decides to forever live in the closet. He uses the experience of two guys who were caught and forced to expose their girlfriends. By referring to the other gay students as girlfriends shows the equation of homosexuality among men with effeminacy. The world of heteropatriarchy is one that is controlled by gender hierarchies with the man at the top of the ladder and the woman below him thus inferior. Homosexuality however subverts this hierarchy as it involves people of the same sex. To maintain the hierarchy, the partners are subjected to the roles of man and woman in both gay and lesbian relationships. In most cases, the man who portrays feminine behaviours is assumed as the “woman” while the woman who portrays masculine behaviour becomes the “man” in the homosexual relationship. This ideology however undermines the fact that not all masculine women are lesbians and not all effeminate men are gay.

Even though most of the queer narrators admit developing friendships and taking part in activities with members of the opposite sex, it has to be acknowledged that the subverted gender roles and practices do not define one as queer. This could be expounded using Chinua Achebe's , *Things fall Apart*, the fact that Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, preferred to sit in the kitchen and take part in feminine activities did not however make him a girl just as Ezinma's boldness did not qualify her as a man. In the above narrative, the students end up outing ten "girlfriends" and the twelve of them are beaten in the presence of the principal and teachers and later expelled. Expulsion here is a strategy used by the administration to separate the wheat from the chaff. The queer are seen as rotten individuals and by letting them interact with the "normal" people, they are likely to infect them with their rottenness. For this reason, the heterosexual world has to come up with strategies of protecting its normality by castigating the queer other. This kind of punishment serves as a warning to those who might be contemplating the same. It is therefore also aimed at fear which leads to the need by the queer to lead invisible lives.

Being queer in Kenya has been summed by one of the narrators as 'HELL' and it includes stigma in both family and public institutions. He says, "Every day I hear someone's been beaten, someone's been thrown out by their family. Even yesterday, some kid was beaten so badly by his family..... I've been kicked out so many times, and I always go back" (249). The portrayal of the family as "enemy" to the individual's queer identity shows the shame that is attached to it. This shame is not only faced by the self but by everyone related to this self hence it is communal shame. Punishment by the family is an attempt to drive the individual into rejecting their queer identities thus saving the family from this "curse" and shame.

Qat Qamunde lists some of the violence that characterize queer lives in her poem, 'Troubled Thoughts'. Some like 'Kasupuu' endure rape at the hands of their attackers; some women are beaten by their husbands who assume that beating would cure these women of their queer tendencies; some transgender individuals are victims of mob justice for wearing the wrong clothes that do not signify their sexuality; gay men are hanged while lesbian children are disowned. It is quite ironical that the homosexual has always been portrayed as a violent pervert, rapist and disease spreading individual. The absurdity of punishment however is that it can subdue the individual's queer identity but it can never get rid of it completely. These narratives

and the genre of life writing, however, enable the queer subject to draw his/her own portrait of the self thus subverting stereotypes that were previously held about the queer. By fashioning the self, the queer individual is able to write back, either for or against, some of the images drawn by earlier writers concerning the queer.

While self-writing allows the queer to fashion their own identities, it is evident that these identities are characterized by certain contradictions. In an attempt to confide in the readers, the narrators also bring to the surface the idea of the enemy within. Even though identities on the African continent have always been portrayed as communal; there is certain power that reigns in the individual to choose what to embrace. While most of the queer individuals show the desire to embrace their true identities, the privileging of homosexuality by the societies they live in push the queer in a betwixt state of identity crisis. This is evident in their desire to achieve their true identities as queer vis-à-vis the desire not to be queer. In most of the narratives, we see the subjects' wish to be 'normal'. In the heterosexual world, normality involves the stages of birth, growth into manhood, heterosexual marriage and fatherhood for men while for women it involves the transition from childhood to womanhood, marriage and motherhood. For the individuals to fit into this template of normality, they are obliged to embrace heterosexual lives. The web of heteronormativity is so intact that even those who do not identify as queer but do not embrace it at a certain age are viewed with suspicion. This could be seen in the desire by most queer individuals to have children either acquired naturally or by adoption. We see this in the sketch below:

“I WANT A GAY FAMILY. I want to marry a man. I usually tell myself that if I have to marry a lady, I'll have to struggle to stop being gay. Living a double life is expensive. I want children, IF I CAN ADOPT THEM” (225).

This narrative shows an individual who wants to embrace a family that subverts the “normal” heterosexual family but at the same time contemplating having the “normal” family. He is also an individual who believes that his queer identity is constructed and he can therefore stop being gay. I consider the fact that most gay individuals contemplate having children as ironical. This is

because I view procreation and the desire to have descendants a heterosexual creation. The use of the word “want” does not also assert that the narrator might meet these wants.

While most parents try to shield their children from environments that may incite queer desires, it is ironical that some of the narrators admit having first had queer encounters with relatives and family friends. In *Invisible*, Yash confides in the reader that his first sexual encounter was with an older family friend whom he shared a room with. While homosexuality is castigated in the Muslim community, it is ironical how Yash’s queer identity is able to take root right under his parents’ noses. The most absurd queer experience are those that have taken place between relatives, this is very ironical especially in the case where one has just undergone the circumcision ritual. (36) We see one of the unnamed narrators confessing that he realised he was gay during his healing period. He has a sexual experience with a cousin with whom they were sharing a room. The experience repeats itself with another cousin and he later says that he is only out to these two cousins. This experience is ironical as the ritual of circumcision is supposed to transform the individual from boyhood to manhood and similarly prepare the individual for marriage- heterosexual marriage. It is therefore ironical that instead of the ritual making the individual realize and embrace his masculinity; it does the contrary by making him discover his homosexuality- an identity equated with effeminacy in the heterosexual world.

Some of the queer life sketches also use explicit language. In the realm of communication, human beings always attempt to be polite in order to avoid offending others. Vulgarism is, however, a type of language use that is usually considered crude, rude, uncultured and taboo. In the process of confiding in readers, most writers usually choose to mask taboo words and topics using euphemisms or polite words. The way an individual uses language always reveals something about the individual’s identity. In some of the queer narratives there are evidences of extensive use of vulgar language by the narrators and the images that this kind of language portray about the queer identity. The word ‘sex’ for instance has been mentioned explicitly and numerous in these life sketches. In the story “Bi, Bye or Buy” for instance, the word has been used eleven times consecutively. The repetition of the word by the narrator peels off the pretence that surrounds gender identities. The repetition could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to offend the heterosexual society by repeatedly mentioning a word considered taboo. Jackson, the

narrator, criticizes the African society for its tyrannical nature in dictating with whom, when and how one is to engage in sexual relationships. This brings up the argument raised by Sigmund Freud who argues that it was neither factual nor self-evident that men were to find sexual interest in women. In his attempt to question the normativity of heterosexuality, Freud goes further to argue that sexual life's main or primary concern was the realization of pleasure from the body whether with a male or a female as this pleasure should go beyond reproduction. The fact that these life sketches revolve around identity from the perspective of sexuality could be reason behind the calling of the act by its name. The narrator, Elias, also uses the term sex in his story, "Make me love Women." His friends, however, use the word "fucked" to refer to the experience that Elias had. The term fucked sounds more profane than sex itself and depending on how it is used, we could argue that it portrays the disdain that the characters associate with homosexuality.

This extends to the derogatory terms used by the heterosexual society to refer to the queer. In most instances, these insults appear in the Suaheli words of *shoga* and *msenge* which mean faggot. One of the narrators is called out: "Ile ni shoga ishikeni." (6) In this sentence, the queer individual is objectified by using the Swahili "I" which is used to refer to objects. The self is therefore denied a human identity. The extensive use of Swahili in these sketches brings the confessions into their natural environment. In each sketch, the reader gets the feeling of directly interacting and having a conversation with the narrators who in turn open themselves up to confide in their listeners. The sentence also has implications of impending violence as the speaker unleashes the mob onto the narrator whose only sin is his queerness. It is also ironical that the speaker in this instance is a sheikh, a Muslim leader. In other instances, we see the narrators retaliating when attacked. One responds by saying "Eeeh, mimi ni shoga, nadate baba yako." (Yes, I'm a fag and I'm dating your dad) (37). This kind of response arouses the worst kind of humiliation is the individual being addressed as it locates queerness close to the attacker. At a deeper level, we could argue that the narrator's response an attempt to show that anyone could be queer. This takes us back to the argument by Michel Foucault that homosexuality was like a temptation to which anyone could succumb.

3.3 The Epigraph as a Literary Caveat

Kevin Mwachiro has however employed the use of epigraphs to show the place of queer identity in Kenya. An epigraph is a short phrase at the beginning of a book or part of a book. These are usually quotations from famous people, excerpts from texts, phrases or definitions. Epigraphs give hints of what is to come by setting the mood and tone of a piece of work. *In Invisible: Stories from Kenya's queer community*, the author has selected a series of quotes that have been taken from members of Kenya's queer community. Even though the quotes are not directly linked to the stories, they are metaphors of the place of the queer in Kenya. It is however very ironical that the first quote "I was out, I had a partner and I had a life. I had found a family" (11), is one that is full of hope. It presents the image of freedom that every queer individuals' hopes for. We could also argue that it illuminates on the story that follows it as we see the narrator moving from a point of denial towards self-discovery and acceptance. The first story actually ends with the narrator admitting to creating a home with his male partner.

The second epigraph, "I wish, I wish I had someone who was 18 to tell me that I was ok. That I was no freak", however shatters the hope that was represented at the beginning. The age eighteen is a metaphor for adulthood and one where individuals delve into the journey of self-discovery. The word freak however is a metaphor of abnormality or queerness. The individual whom the quote was taken from is thus a metaphor of a queer person struggling with an identity that is considered abnormal by the society. The epigraph shows the need for re-assurance of the persona's identity as normal. This quote is strategically placed in the middle of the first story as the narrator struggles with his identity amidst blackmail and his commodification by a colleague who takes the narrator's "abnormality" as an opportunity for extending his own personal desires. By using two contradictory epigraphs within a single story, Kevin Mwachiro is able to show the precarious life that the queer have to face.

"They could not understand what it meant to be gay, African and Christian" (23), on the other hand, is an epigraph that brings into question the idea of intersectionality of the self. With both Christianity and homosexuality considered un-African, the only identity that the individual has is that of being African. Ironically, the same Christianity that is considered un-African has been used to castigate the queer with individual using Adam and Eve as the epitome of a Christian

relationship. This epigraph has the implication that one cannot be African and gay, that is, homosexuality is foreign to the African continent. The second implication is that a Christian cannot be gay and one wonders whether it is okay for an African Muslim to be queer. This epigraph is a metaphor of hybridity of the self as it shows how different identities intertwine to form the whole; and that an individual cannot renounce oneself and embrace the other. It is for this reason that most individuals prefer to pass for that which the society considers norm by trying to fit into this center.

The next epigraph conjoins two stories of individuals who have chosen to embrace their true identities amidst the chaos. “ Being unhappy is hardship and by not being who I am is hardship” (41), is a quote that comes between the story of a transgender boy who transitions into a woman and that of a lesbian couple who are able to embrace their sexuality and/or identity despite the mockery they get from strangers. This quote is an image of sacrifice and symbolizes the struggle that one has to go through in order to gain self-discovery. It is proof that wearing a mask is not the solution to happiness and that it can only be achieved by peeling off the mask and embracing one’s true self.

The most interesting epigraph is: “Browser history is the downfall of many men” (45). Browser history refers to a list of pages that an individual has recently visited on a website. It includes the information that the individual searched and the time and is meant to help users trace their searches. The browser history therefore carries the evidence of everything including dirty secrets that an individual can access on the internet. In relation to queer studies, it is possible for an individual’s mask to be unveiled just by accessing the browser history. The most vulnerable victims are those who have masked their identities in heterosexual relationships. The browser history could therefore be seen as an image or representation of light that illuminates the false life that some members of the queer community lead. The quote also implies that men are the likely victims of these browser history revelations.

Another epigraph, “I became studious because I knew, if I was a struggling homo, things will be much harder” (49), is a quote that symbolizes the double tragedy of the homosexual. The individual could be using studies as a means of escape from the realities of his/her life- hence a

mask. The other implication would be that it is better to be queer but stable (especially financially) than being poor and queer. Studies have always been associated with a bright future and the individual therefore focuses on studies as a means of compensating for his/her “inadequacy” as queer. “The crisis of acceptance was forcing them to make bad choices” (67), is an epigraph that is an echo and a metaphor of all the steps that members of the queer community have to take in order to belong to the world of heteronormativity. The bad choices are the masks that they wear in order to be seen as “normal”. These range from denial, self-hate, heterosexual marriages, change of environment, exclusion, suppression among other things. Some of the quotes are examples of the bad choices made by members of the queer community, for instance, “I believed I would myself through faith” (91). This epigraph shows an individual who has chosen to submerge him/herself in religion so as to veil his true identity. The other bad choice is the belief that his/her sexuality is an “illness” that could be cured through faith.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the different literary style employed by members of the queer community in writing the story of the self. They have localized literary style to foreground the different images associated with queerness and their own definition of queerness. These vary from the ambiguities and word play employed in the titles which connote both individual and group identity. In the capitalization of the first and last words of the narratives, I argue that the narrators are able to foreground their various stages of self-discovery. I have also delved into images of illness and abnormality associated with the queer self not only by the society but also by the subjects themselves. Finally, I have looked at the intention behind the use of epigraphs and the symbols they stand for in the different narratives. The premise of this section is that literary style employed by the narrators intersects with the question of queer identity in Kenya. The style gives us a glimpse into the experiences, predicaments and absurdities that surround queer identity in Kenya. Through this, we see the queer self as portrayed by the non-queer community, the stereotypical images attached to queerness, and the real queer identity as portrayed by the narrators themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In as far as understanding men, boyhood and gender equity with issues of queer in the African setting, we are made to understand that issues of gender and sexuality are perceived to be either static or un-African if it goes against the socio- religious standing of the culture. Queer and masculinity/femininity are understood from opposite positionalities and these equated positions are understood as unnatural as far as the traditional understanding of sex and procreation is concerned.

The life writing and the voicing of the characters and the author looks at the question that borders on the romanticisation of heterosexuality. These voices thus assume the stance to understand what it means to be queer and African. They seek to examine and understand not just the environment and the geographical spaces that they exist in but rather how they can in turn create safe spaces within the geographical spaces that they are persecuted in. Questions about oppression and narrative creation as far as the continuities of colonialism and imperialism is concerned, patriarchal and power abuses, labelling and identification of others work in a morphing stance to not only silence African identities but also African Queer identities.

These voices are therefore important in the demonstration of cultural understanding of Africa both within the traditional collective and contemporary individual settings. They ,thus, delve into the understanding that culture , sexualities and identities are important in the expansion of the regions Bill of Rights as far as Human Sexual rights are concerned. By telling their own stories, the queer are letting us into their life experiences and opening spaces for the application of sexual and reproductive rights that are restrictive and shifting our models of understanding of what queer means in the African context and the global south positioning.

The need for an inter textual understanding and close reading of the text has enabled this research to examine African identities, modernities and futures with the positioning of individual sexual identities in opposition to the West. By writing their life stories and experiences in Africa, they posit that the West need not be the only centre for reference for the study of African Identities but rather they could forge alliances for the betterment and continual of queer studies and life writing in the African context.

The model of theoretical framework in the examination, analysis and understanding of life writing as far as identity and sexualidentity formation and reformation is concerned points to a continuity and revisit of the study in Queer as far as African understanding of it is concerned.

This research began from the basis of the place of queer studies in African literature. With the arguments by scholars such as Chris Dunton concerning the intentional silence by African scholars to delve into queer studies on the continent; I have started this research by acknowledging African writers who have taken part in the queer debate either by writing stories, critical works or making films. From this, the work has deviated from fictional creations to delve into the genre of life writing. I recognize the contributions by members of the queer community from different parts of the African continent before narrowing down on the pioneer texts by Kenya's queer community. This work has posed the argument that members of the queer community in Kenya have been "othered". Therefore, in order to 'fit' into the society as 'normal' individuals, some queer Kenyans are forced to form 'phony' identities that would save them from the wrath of the "normal" world. I have, thus, delved into issues of anonymity, dualism and masking as some of the strategies used by these narrators to re-claim the identities that are considered normal by the society. I have also dealt briefly with the various forms of style used in the queer life sketches in both *Stories of our Lives* and *Invisible: stories from Kenya's Queer community*. The work has driven its foundation from the concept of self-stylization which I have defined as a manner of self-representation that the subjects use to create a specific way of not only using language but also (re)fashioning images of the self. My main concern is the need by members of the queer community to tell their stories and how this helps them to claim the power to raise their own statues. I have looked at self-stylization from two perspectives: the strategies of existence that the queer acquire so as to fit into the world of heteronormativity and the stylistic patterns used by these subjects in an effort to mould the self. In the process, my research's findings are that members of the queer community, through masking, anonymity and dualism are able to create "utopian" lives for themselves. In the last chapter, I have looked into the use of stylistic faculties such as capitalization as a form of foregrounding the journey towards self-discovery: the use of epigraphs as a foreshadow of the stories that they precede; and the images of illness and abnormality that dominate most of the queer narratives.

Despite the assumption by many, concerning the silence about homosexuality on the continent, I have acknowledged the little but stable developments made by members of the queer community

to give agency to queer bodies and to also prove the possibility of being both African and queer. Even though the continent is still reluctant towards accepting queer individuals, the little attempts made by scholars, artists and the queer subjects create a foundational space towards creating knowledge for a group that has/is othered from all spheres. Even though my study has majorly focused on life writing in Kenya, it is evident that there are efforts by African scholars to tell the African queer story. The success of the two anthologies of short stories *Queer Africa* and *Queer Africa 2* is proof of the promising future for queer studies on the continent. There are also a lot of queer narratives being produced on social media and the formation of queer communities on different social media platforms which act as safe spaces for the queer community to meet and interact. Recently, there has been an upsurge of short films and episodes with queer storylines portraying the fate and space of queer individuals in different parts of the world. While delving into this topic, one of the most crucial issues was the inexistence of theories that approach queer studies from the African perspective. A lot of secondary material on queer studies have also been written by, about and from a Eurocentric perspective. I believe that though the queer identity may be a universal phenomenon, the experiences of the queer vary from space to space. There is an intersection between queerness, race and social class that cannot be ignored. Research about homosexuality on the continent has come a long way. The earliest debates were about whether homosexuality was a form of sexuality and thus an identity on its own. For a long time, queerness was associated with sickness but with its existence arose the debates not just about the credibility of homosexuality as an identity but its place as a representation of African bodies. Most scholars criticized homosexuality as un-African and as a vice carried and learned from the West. With most African countries illegalizing homosexuality; the topic, like a forbidden treasure, has gained an upsurge of interest with some scholars daring into the “unwanted” field. There are however gaps on the field of queer studies as little research has been done even on the fictional works such as novel by Nigeria’s, Jude Idibia. There is need for scholars to conduct critical analysis of the material produced both by creative writers and queer individuals to continue the old debate about the place of queerness on the continent. Having acknowledged the great production of literature on the continent by members of the queer community themselves; there is need for scholars to answer the questions; why this form of writing and why now? While I have delved into self-life writing as a platform for creating images of the self, there are gaps concerning the viability of collective writing as a sub-genre of

life writing. Through this, there could be the possibility of investigating the characteristics that make up collective life writing- the divergences and convergences that arise in the individual story versus the collective. There exist different anthologies written by members of the queer community from all over the continent, therefore, one could investigate how the different spaces that the subjects inhabit define the stories and the convergence with the general African queer story.

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