LOVE, SURVEILLANCE AND VIOLENCE IN RAFIKI (2018): A LESBIAN FEMINIST READING

AMOR, VIGILÂNCIA E VIOLÊNCIA EM RAFIKI (2018): UMA LEITURA FEMINISTA LÉSBICA

AMOR, VIGILANCIA Y VIOLENCIA EN RAFIKI (2018): UNA LECTURA FEMINISTA LÉSBICA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Rafiki (2018) articulates love, surveillance and violence in its representation of lesbian experience. Drawing on a lesbian feminist reading of Wanuri Kahiu's film, inspired by Monica Arac de Nyeko's short story "Jambula Tree," the study argues that the film constructs the bond between Kena and Ziki as a force of mutual recognition while exposing the familial, social, and institutional mechanisms mobilized to discipline dissident desire. Methodologically, the discussion focuses on two sequences, read through the concepts of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, intersectionality, and lesbophobia in dialogue with formal elements of film language such as framing, lighting, color, and point of view. The analysis shows that Rafiki juxtaposes scenes of reciprocity, chromatic warmth, and affective openness with scenes of public exposure, humiliation, and coercion, thereby revealing that violence against lesbian women operates in both physical and symbolic registers. The article concludes that the film performs an aesthetically and politically significant intervention by affirming the legitimacy of desire between women and by making visible the social costs imposed on its existence.

Keywords: Film Analysis. Lesbian Existence. Heteronormativity. Love. Violence.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como Rafiki (2018) articula amor, vigilância e violência em sua representação da experiência lésbica. Com base em uma leitura feminista lésbica do filme de Wanuri Kahiu, inspirado no conto "Jambula Tree", de Monica Arac de Nyeko, o estudo sustenta que o filme constrói o vínculo entre Kena e Ziki como uma força de reconhecimento mútuo, ao mesmo tempo em que expõe os mecanismos familiares, sociais e institucionais mobilizados para disciplinar o desejo dissidente. Metodologicamente, a discussão concentra-se em duas sequências, lidas à luz dos conceitos de heterossexualidade compulsória, heteronormatividade, interseccionalidade e lesbofobia, em diálogo com elementos formais

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da linguagem cinematográfica, como enquadramento, iluminação, cor e ponto de vista. A análise mostra que Rafiki justapõe cenas de reciprocidade, calor cromático e abertura afetiva a cenas de exposição pública, humilhação e coerção, revelando, assim, que a violência contra mulheres lésbicas opera tanto em registros físicos quanto simbólicos. O artigo conclui que o filme realiza uma intervenção estética e politicamente significativa ao afirmar a legitimidade do desejo entre mulheres e ao tornar visíveis os custos sociais impostos à sua existência.

Palavras-chave: Análise Fílmica. Existência Lésbica. Heteronormatividade. Amor. Violência.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo Rafiki (2018) articula el amor, la vigilancia y la violencia en su representación de la experiencia lésbica. A partir de una lectura feminista lésbica de la película de Wanuri Kahiu, inspirada en el cuento “Jambula Tree” de Monica Arac de Nyeko, el estudio sostiene que la película construye el vínculo entre Kena y Ziki como una fuerza de reconocimiento mutuo, al tiempo que expone los mecanismos familiares, sociales e institucionales movilizados para disciplinar el deseo disidente. Metodológicamente, la discusión se centra en dos secuencias, leídas a través de los conceptos de heterosexualidad obligatoria, heteronormatividad, interseccionalidad y lesbofobia, en diálogo con elementos formales del lenguaje cinematográfico, como el encuadre, la iluminación, el color y el punto de vista. El análisis muestra que Rafiki yuxtapone escenas de reciprocidad, calidez cromática y apertura afectiva con escenas de exposición pública, humillación y coerción, revelando así que la violencia contra las mujeres lesbianas opera tanto en registros físicos como simbólicos. El artículo concluye que la película lleva a cabo una intervención estética y políticamente significativa al afirmar la legitimidad del deseo entre mujeres y al visibilizar los costos sociales impuestos a su existencia.

Palabras clave: Análisis Fílmico. Existencia Lésbica. Heteronormatividad. Amor. Violencia.

1 INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of lesbian desire has been in a somewhat marginal position within the landscape of mainstream cinema. For decades, women in cinema have been presented largely as objects of male desire, while same-sex relationships, when represented at all, have tended to privilege male experience or to limit female homoeroticism to fetishized spectacle. Within this context, lesbian subjectivities are pertinent here not simply because the film makes spaces of recognition, visibility, and contestation. They do not merely increase the variety of media representations, they challenge the cultural norms of what desires could be publicly accepted as legitimate.

Rafiki (2018), directed by Wanuri Kahiu and inspired by Monica Arac de Nyeko's award-winning short story "Jambula Tree," is meaningful for that dispute being staged. Set in Nairobi, the film examines two love-struck young women, Kena and Ziki, in a conservative society governed by political competition, familial pressures and public hostility. Not one of the narratives treats their relationship as a private, out-of-touch piece cut off from the rest the society. On the contrary, the film shows how the coming to intimacy of the protagonists is immediately mediated by gender norms, community surveillance, and the threat of punishment.

The relevance of the film is amplified by its circulation history. Rafiki was the first Kenyan feature selected for the Cannes Film Festival's official lineup, yet it was banned in Kenya because of its portrayal of a lesbian relationship. This contrast between international recognition and domestic censorship reveals how representation becomes a political battlefield. The reception of the film reflects one of its central concerns: the conflict between the possibility of queer visibility and the mechanisms that attempt to suppress it.

This article argues that Rafiki establishes love and violence as inseparable facets of lesbian experience within a heteronormative social order, with surveillance as the conduit that units them. Love is not presented as an exclusive private emotion, nor is violence limited to explicit physical aggression. Rather, the film posits that tenderness, desire, fear, secrecy, humiliation, and punishment are intricately linked in contexts where heterosexuality is perceived as mandatory standard. The objective of this study is to examine how the film portrays both the emotional intensity of the protagonists' relationship and the violent responses elicited by that relationship.

For that reason, the discussion focuses on two sequences. The first, which takes place between 19m18s and 21m45s, is examined as an important moment in building closeness and mutual recognition. The second, from 53m50s and 1h00m30s, is looked at as a focused example of violence in public and institutions. By placing these scenes in dialogue with lesbian

and feminist theory as well as with selected elements of film language, this article aims to show that Rafiki transcends the mere narration of a forbidden romance: it reveals the societal repercussions faced by lesbian individuals while affirming their emotional authenticity and cinematic significance.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" is a good place to start when reading Rafiki. Rich argues that heterosexuality should not to be understood simply as a personal inclination or natural destiny, but as a political institution that secures male power and structures women's lives according to gendered norms of marriage, procreation, and servitude. Within this context, lesbian existence is threatening not only because it deviates from sexual normativity, but also because it exposes the non-inevitability and non-neutrality of heterosexuality. It is created by history, enforced by society, and supported by material things.

This debate is closely linked to the concept of heteronormativity. Cathy Cohen (2019) says taht heteronormativity includes social practices and institutions that make heterosexuality the “normal” and “expected” way to live your intimate life. It controls not just desire but also behavior, appearance, family ties, and how people see you in public. In this regard, the issue extends beyond the object of affection, it encompasses the manner of occupying public space, the performance of femininity, and the interpretation of bodies by others. Rafiki dramatizes these pressures by situating Kena and Ziki in a place where family, neighbors, and state all have a say in how close they can get to each other.

Lesbian feminist scholarship has demonstrated that violence against lesbians cannot be entirely encompassed by the broader category of homophobia. The concept of lesbophobia underscores the particularity of violence inflicted upon women whose desires subvert both heterosexuality norms and conventional femininity. Rojas and Mansilla (2021) assert that this violence often seeks to discipline women regarded as rejecting the heterosexual contract. It can be physical, verbal, sexual, or symbolic, but in all cases, it works to bring the norm back by making lesbian desire seem strange, wrong or punishable.

The concept of abjection also helps us understand the social logic behind these reactions. When certain bodies or desires are deemed unacceptable, they become linked with disgust, shame, or moral danger. Silence, ridicule, erasure, and exclusion are not secondary phenomena; they are essential to the construction of social order. Navarro-Swain (2000) asserts that the politics of silence is intricately connected to the politics of forgetting; that which threatens prevailing values is often obliterated, disqualified, or denied discursive validity. This

logic is evident in Rafiki through everyday interactions and in more explicit instances of collective aggression.

It is also crucial to refrain from perceiving lesbian experience as socially uniform. Crenshaw (2002) defines intersectionality as the study of how different systems of oppression work together instead of separately. Gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and nationality intersect to influence vulnerability. This perspective is particularly relevant to Rafiki, as the protagonists are not merely abstract lesbians; they are young Black Kenyan women living in a working-class urban setting. That social location shapes how they feel about being seen, being in danger, and wanting something. Lorde (2019) reminds us that the systems of oppression stay in place when people refuse to see and value differences. An intersectional reading, therefore, inhibits the analysis from reducing the film into a universal narrative divorced from its particular historical and cultural context.

Film analysis also requires attention to form. Meaning in cinema does not just come from the plot or the dialogue. It also comes from the framing, lighting, costume, sound, rhythm, and camera movement. Turner (1999) proposes that images gain social significance through these specific formal choices. Camera angles can set up power dynamics, color can suggest mood, and point-of-view structures can help audience connect with the story. In Rafiki, the difference between scenes of violence and scenes of intimacy is made clear both in the story and in the pictures. Surveillance, distance, and coldness coexist with warmth and color. The film's political power comes from the way it connects representation and form: it shows lesbian desire while also showing the system that tries to control it.

3 METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This is a qualitative and interpretive study based on film analysis and lesbian feminist criticism. Instead of trying to read the whole feature, the article focuses on two sequences that sum up the main conflicts of the story. This method enables the connection of formal choices overarching issues of representation, normativity, and violence.

The analysis integrates two dimensions. The first is theoretical one that mostly uses Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality, talks about heteronormativity and lesbophobia, and looks at the intersectional perspectives that make it hard to read lesbian experience in a universal way. The second is formal, focusing on mise-en-scène, framing, costume, lighting, point of view, and editing. These elements are important to how the film makes sense. The goal of the analysis is to understand how the language of the film itself helps create closeness, surveillance, and punishment.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 LOVE, RECOGNITION, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A SHARED WORLD

The part of the film between 19m18s and 21m45s is important because it presents intimacy not as a spectacle, but as a relationship. Kena and Ziki sit together on a balcony and exchange a brief but significant conversation about not becoming like “them” and about being “something real.” There are no excessive statements or sexual excess in the scene. Instead, it shows love as a fragile but transformative space where each girl can see herself and the other girls in a new way.

The scene’s visual design is decisive. At first, both characters look happy in a frontal shot that puts them in the same frame. After a short time, the editing gives each girl a chance to show how she sees the other by switching between shots. This strategy creates closeness by making people see Kena through Ziki’s eyes and Ziki through Kena’s. The effect is not voyeurism, but mutualism. The scene encourages identification with the act of careful observation instead of an external gaze that objectifies the girls.

The difference is made clearer by the lighting. Ziki is often surrounded by warm light, which can make her look almost overexposed. That gives her presence a bright and expansive quality. Kena, on the other hand, is framed with stronger contrast and a softer tone. The difference does not show a simple opposition between darkness and light; instead, it shows how important Ziki becomes in Kena’s life. If Kena’s social world has put her in a place of restraint, silence, and caution, Ziki seems to be a person of movement, color, and possibility. The costumes also add to the contrast: Kena’s more neutral clothes suggest discretion, while Ziki’s bright colors and bold styling suggest openness and confidence in performance.

These formal choices are crucial because they go against a long-standing trend in films where women are shown being close to each other through heterosexual fantasy. The scene does not fetishize lesbian desire. It puts conversation, facial expressions, pauses, and emotional alignment first. The movie shows that love is growing through friendship, curiosity, and recognition even before the main characters kiss. In this way, Rafiki broadens the idea of erotism beyond just sexual acts. Rich (1980) helps here because her writing shows that the erotic can be seen as a way of relating, being intense and sharing life force, rather than just as a sexual pornographic register.

The scene also gains meaning because of where it fits into film’s larger social landscape. Before Ziki showed up, Kena was always surrounded by comments and attitudes that make non-normative sexuality seem strange or funny. Given this, the conversation on the balcony is a brief break from public hostility. It creates a space where the audience can picture a different

way of living in the world, even if it is for a short time. In this sequence, love is not merely emotional attachment; it signifies the emergence of a possible shared reality.

At the same time, the scene is both tender and fragile. The girls' pact "to be something real" already shows that they know that reality is something that people disagree about. Their connection is meaningful because the world around them tries to make it seem unreal, unspeakable, or illegitimate. The scene foreshadows the film's main point: in a under heteronormative world, closeness between women is politically charged not because it seeks confrontation, but because its challenges the idea that heterosexuality is normal and shows how it is enforced.

4.2 VIOLENCE, EXPOSURE, AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE NORM

The first sequence is based on reciprocity, while the one between 53m50s and 1h00m30s is based on exposure. Ziki's mother first sees the girls kissing. Then they ran to the van that had been their safe haven throughout the film. Finally, they are found, beaten, and taken to a police station. The scene focuses on different levels of coercion and shows how violence spreads through private, public, and institutional spaces when intimacy becomes something that everyone watches.

One of the most striking aspects of the sequence is the breakdown of personal safety. The van had been a liminal space before, where the main characters could briefly escape surveillance. Once that safe space is breached, violence escalates rapidly. Mama Atim's public condemnation turns the girls from victims into a spectacle of community anger. The words used to call others make them seem dirty and disgusting, setting the stage for physical violence. What follows is not just one act of cruelty, but a group effort to enforce the norm. The mob thinks that punishing visibility is a way of bring back moral order.

In this case, lesbophobia seems to be more than just personal bias; it also seems to be a form of social education. The beating is meant to punish, shame, and "fix" the girls by making their bodies pay for being seen. The violence is public, gendered, and exemplary: it shows the rest of the community what could happen to people who do not follow the heterosexual mandate. The scene thus confirms that coercion does not initiate with physical assault; rather it culminates there, after having been facilitated by gossip, derision, moral condemnation, and surveillance.

Instead of stopping this line of thought, the police station makes it stronger. Institutional authority which should signify the shift from violence to protection, instead perpetuates the same contempt that characterized the assault. The officers' mockery – particularly the inquiry

regarding the identity of “the man” in the relationship - exposes the inadequacy of heteronormative discourse to understand lesbian intimacy beyond masculine-feminine dichotomies. The question is not innocent; it forces the relationship back into the grammar of heterosexual roles and thereby denies its own terms of existence.

Family reactions make the situation even more difficult. Ziki’s father responds with a slap, while Kena’s father tries to manage the situation by talking to the police chief. These gestures may look different, but they both come from patriarchal control. Ziki’s mother’s comment, “Haven’t you hurt her enough?” is especially revealing because it draws attention to how often victims are blamed for the violence that is done to them. People do not think of the girls as people who need care; instead, they think of them as the people who cause trouble in the community.

The sequence shows rupture and desolation in a cinematic way. The police station scene is colder, with harsher light and a more static frontal framing than the earlier balcony scene, which was warmer. The camera often makes the girls look small and weak in a setting that does not feel personal. The distance between them in a frame shows how the attack affected them emotionally. The film shows how trauma can have different but connected effects: one person reaches out, while the other pulls back to protect themselves. This is shown when Kena looks at Ziki while Ziki looks away.

The change in point of view is also significant. Earlier, the alternating shots had helped the main characters get along with each other. Here, frontal compositions and the lack of a long-lasting mutual perspective create estrangement. The viewer is no longer part of the intimate exchange of gazes; instead, they see the aftermath of violence and the girls being forced to be apart. The change in form makes the broader thematic movement from possibility to punishment stand out even more.

Yet the scene should not be about being a victim. Its strength lies in showing how heteronormative society protects itself. Public assault, institutional derision, and familial discipline collectively serve to regulate women’s bodies and desires. In this regard, the violence portrayed in Rafiki is not exceptional; it is systemic. The film shows how everyday people, rumors in the community, police talk, and parental authority all help to keep norms going. Love becomes dangerous not due to its intrinsic transgressiveness, but because the social order is committed to denying the humanity of lesbian and normalizing surveillance as a standard mechanism of control.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rafiki portrays love and violence not as opposing and isolated forces, but as experiences that intertwine within heteronormative contexts. The relationship between Kena and Ziki is characterized by tenderness, reciprocity, and emotional depth, however, it is precisely these attributes that render the relationship vulnerable to surveillance and punishment. The film's success is that it does not turn lesbian desire into either a spectacle or a disease. Instead, it shows lesbian intimacy as normal, important and very human.

The analysis of the two chosen sequences illustrates that the film articulates this argument both narratively and structurally. Rafiki uses color, framing, lighting, and point of view to show the difference between spaces of emotional possibility and spaces of coercion. Moments of warmth and recognition are juxtaposed with communal animosity, public scrutiny, and institutional degradation. The film shows that violence against lesbian women is not just physical; it is also supported by symbolic, discursive, and social practices that try to make their existence seem illegitimate.

From a lesbian feminist point of view, the film is politically important because it shows how personal relationships are connected to larger systems of power. Kena and Ziki's story is not just about desire; it is also about who can show up, love, and picture a future. Rafiki challenges the normalization of compulsory heterosexuality and expands the scope of cinematic representation by affirming the protagonists' emotional bond in the face of censorship and hostility. So, its intervention is both aesthetic and political; it says that lesbian lives should not be shown on screen as cautionary tales, but as lives that deserve complexity, dignity, and visibility.

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