



## Seeing Differently, Seeing Anew: The Strategic Use of Young Girl Narrators/Focalisers in Recent Queer African Short Fiction

---

By Leila Hall

---

### Abstract

With a focus on two recent queer-themed short stories from Kenya and South Africa, this article considers how the use of a child focaliser in fictional representations of early experiences of same-sex desire can disrupt and subvert ideals of childhood ‘innocence’ and the problematic conflation of paedophilia with same-sex sexuality. The two stories discussed in this article – Idza Luhumyo’s “Nine Pieces of Desire” (2017) and Kharys Laue’s “Plums” (2018) – importantly narrate childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality that are not associated with paedophilia or sexual abuse, but that rather focus on young protagonists’ experiences of the restrictiveness and violence associated with hetero-patriarchal norms. The article argues that the stories eschew the simplistic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals in two important ways. Firstly, the stories re-frame the notion of same-sex sexuality itself as ‘perverse’ and violent by instead locating violence and repression within the hetero-patriarchal norms that are ostensibly meant to protect children from harm. Secondly, through the use of complex characterisation and the unabashed depiction of childhood sexuality, the stories implicitly challenge the ideal of childhood ‘innocence’: an ideal which is central to discourses and constructs that diametrically oppose ‘innocent children’ with ‘perverse homosexuals’. The article also explores how the use of a child’s perspective can help us to see socially constructed adult norms ‘anew’. In contrast with the delimitations and divisiveness of hetero-patriarchy and its interconnected systems of power, the stories’ young focalisers represent instinct, defiance, and relationality: qualities and alternative points of view that could have wider implications for debates surrounding same-sex sexualities in contemporary African contexts.

## Introduction

This article discusses the innovative use of a young girl narrator/focaliser in two contemporary queer-themed African short stories: “Nine Pieces of Desire” (2017) by Kenyan writer Idza Luhumyo and “Plums” (2018) by South African writer Kharys Laue. Importantly, both of these stories portray childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality which are entirely disentangled from any form of sexual abuse at the hands of an adult. Instead, the stories narrate an early experience of a consensual same-sex encounter with a peer and the severe reprimanding and castigation that follow this. As told through the eyes of a young focaliser, the stories compel us to see socially constructed adult norms in a new and surprising light: an effective means of critiquing heteronormativity and its associated systems of power. In doing this, and in reframing the very concept of childhood ‘innocence’, the stories invert the problematic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals. Rather than representing same-sex sexuality as being forcibly imposed on children, the stories demonstrate how the more real and immediate threats that their young protagonists face are the systems of power and repression into which they are being inculcated. Patriarchy, dogmatic religion, and racism are represented in the stories as intertwined with heteronormativity, and these interconnected systems of power are shown to be overwhelmingly divisive and oppressive: the polar opposites of the possibilities of relationality and defiance that the young girl protagonists represent. By extension, what the stories critique is not the danger or ‘perversity’ of same-sex sexuality, but rather the harmful effects of the socially constructed norms that govern the lives of their young protagonists.

### **Problematic entanglements: The conflation of paedophilia with same-sex sexuality in African public discourses and literary representations**

In politicised queerphobic discourses in many contemporary African contexts, same-sex sexuality and paedophilia are frequently dangerously conflated, with innocent children framed in binary opposition to perverse and predatory homosexuals. This problematic conflation was demonstrated in the parliamentary debates that led to the passing

“

...the stories re-frame the notion of same-sex sexuality itself as ‘perverse’ and violent by instead locating violence and repression within the hetero-patriarchal norms that are ostensibly meant to protect children from harm.

”

of Uganda’s 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act.<sup>1</sup> In these debates, several Ugandan MPs made sweeping statements about the societal dangers posed by ‘homosexuals’ and in doing so notably drew no distinction between the sexual abuse of minors and same-sex relations between consenting adults. In advocating for the need for the Anti-Homosexuality Act, for instance, Ugandan MP Musa Ecweru in March 2023 spoke of his visits to “some hospitals” in the country, where he claimed he had witnessed “children with ripped anuses” who “[had] been molested by homosexuals” (Opio 2023). Rather than campaigning for specific legislation that would protect minors from sexual abuse, however, Ugandan MPs instead voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, which broadly seeks “to prohibit any form of sexual relations between persons of the same sex” (Refworld 2023). In a single Act, consensual adult relations, same-sex marriages, the “promotion of homosexuality”, and “child grooming” (Refworld 2023) are all criminalised in one fell swoop. Throughout the Act, the insinuation that *all* “homosexuals” pose an inherent threat to children is made clear, as seen in

Section 12, for instance, which specifies that anybody convicted of “the offence of homosexuality...shall be disqualified from employment in a child care institution” (Refworld 2023).

Contemporary African literary studies indicate that fictional portrayals of same-sex sexuality in African literature are also often problematically entangled with depictions of paedophilia. Munro, for instance, has written about the centrality of same-sex sexual violence in Nigerian child soldier novels such as Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007). In these novels, boy soldiers are sexually violated by older male military commanders and then go on to become perpetrators of sexual violence themselves. Boy soldier protagonists in these novels are thus frequently represented as “stigmatized subject[s]” and the overwhelming concern of many of the novels’ narrative arcs is “how to absolve, rescue, or normalize this figure” (Munro 2016, p.122). The novels’ portrayals of male same-sex sexuality thus rest on a dangerously simplistic “innocence/perversity axis” (Munro 2016, p.133). Given the relative paucity of positive depictions of male same-sex sexuality in Nigerian cultural production, Munro writes of how the novels risk conflating portrayals of sexual violence against children with consensual male same-sex adult relationships. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s ideas of the “stickiness” of cultural emotions, the notion that particular affects and associations can become “stuck” to certain signs and objects, Munro contends that Iweala’s graphic representation of the sexual violation of boys in *Beasts of No Nation* runs the danger of becoming “particularly ‘sticky,’ in Ahmed’s sense, so that same-sex sexuality is tarred by it” (2016, p.131), configuring “male-male perversity in a manner that potentially ‘sticks’ to the nascent gay Nigerian subject” (2016, p.125).

In South African literature, portrayals of paedophilia are frequently read as symbolic of the horrors and failures of both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Munro interprets K. Sello Duiker’s post-apartheid novel *Thirteen Cents* (2000), which harrowingly narrates its thirteen-year-old narrator’s precarious survival through male-male sex work in Cape Town, as an “un-coming-out novel and a rebuke to the failures of South African nationalism” (2012, p.198). Stobie, meanwhile, reads Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* (1993) as a complex metaphor

for the hypocrisies and “fissures” of apartheid (2008, p.70). For Stobie, *The Smell of Apples*, told through the eyes of eleven-year-old Erasmus, effectively critiques the “absolute binarism” (2008, p.70) of apartheid through its depiction of the “interstitial, scandalous figure of the bisexual” (2008, p.75), embodied by Marnus’s revered father, who falls from grace in his son’s eyes after the latter witnesses him raping his best friend and classmate. Tellingly, however, Stobie’s analysis frequently fails to make a distinction between “bisexuality” as a sexual orientation and identity which designates (adult, consensual) relations with both men and women, and paedophilia as a quite separate harmful and abusive practice. In Stobie’s reading, and in her eagerness to analyse the novel metaphorically, the two are often conflated, so that Marnus’s father is not interpreted solely as a sexual predator who uses his position of authority to sexually molest a child, but rather is read as “an adult, pedophile, bisexual figure” (2008, p.71): a problematic conglomeration of disparate identities and practices. In African literary criticism, too, then – as in African literary works – we can discern the “stickiness” to which Munro refers: a problematic entanglement between representations of same-sex sexuality, childhood, and the darker spectres of rape and paedophilia.

### **Seeing differently: Inverting the “innocence/perversity axis” and seeing social constructions anew through a young narrator’s eyes**

In focalising their stories through young girl protagonists, Luhumyo and Laue join a rich tradition in African literature in which child narrators have frequently been used as a means of shedding new light on socio-political issues and offering alternative insights and possibilities in the face of the seemingly intractable rigidities of the status quo (Hron 2008; Mann 2012; Wilkinson 2016). The authors also join a small but growing archive of African fiction that focuses on early experiences of mutual and consensual same-sex desire as told through the eyes of young narrators. In the novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), for instance, Chinelo Okparanta narrates the coming-of-age story of her young Igbo protagonist, Ijeoma, who falls in love with a Hausa girl, Amina, during Nigeria’s civil war (1967–70), offering an original “Nigerian lesbian

*Bildungsroman*" (Courtois 2018, p.120). The novel is notable not only for its complex exploration of sexual, ethnic, and national identities in the Nigerian context, but also for its candid and unabashed descriptions of female same-sex sexuality. Similarly, Monica Arac de Nyeko's short story "Jambula Tree" (2008) focuses on an early experience of same-sex desire between two teenage Ugandan girls, Anyango and Sanyu, who are 'caught' during a moment of intimacy and subsequently shamed by their prying neighbour, Mama Atim. Whereas Mama Atim represents the "noisy, gossiping and frightening housewives" that Anyango and Sanyu vow to never "become" (Arac de Nyeko 2013, p.92), the teenage girls' defiant romance is

“

Contemporary African literary studies indicate that fictional portrayals of same-sex sexuality in African literature are also often problematically entangled with depictions of paedophilia.

”

representative of a "hope" that transcends their narrow and delimited hetero-patriarchal context. Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu builds on the affect of hope in her film *Rafiki* (2018), a queer romantic drama that narrates a love story between two Kenyan teenagers that is explicitly inspired by Arac de Nyeko's story (Green-Simms 2019).

Luhumyo's "Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017) and Laue's "Plums" (2018) extend on this existing archive of fictional narrations of young girl protagonists who share an early experience of same-sex desire

in contemporary African contexts. Following Okparanta and Arac de Nyeko's approach, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories notably describe their young protagonists' first experiences of queer desire as guided only by mutual instinct and pleasure, rather than by any form of coercion or 'perversity' at the hands of an adult. To borrow Ahmed's and Munro's terminology, the stories therefore effectively "unstuck" representations of same-sex sexuality and childhood from paedophilia and abuse. In this way, the perspectives that the stories present move away from the "innocence/perversity axis" which Munro writes of and, by extension, from the problematic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals. Rather than representing same-sex sexuality as violent or threatening, the stories instead locate violence and repression within the socially constructed hetero-patriarchal norms that are purportedly meant to shield and protect children.

The stories also invert the simplistic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals through their implicit reframing of the very concept of childhood 'innocence'. As contrasted with Okparanta's protagonists, who are twelve and thirteen when they have their first same-sex encounter, and with Arac de Nyeko's teenage characters, who are both in high school, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories are set more firmly in the realm of *childhood*: Luhumyo's narrator is only ten, and although Laue does not specify her child protagonists' ages, they are both described as small enough to be physically picked up by their mothers in the acts of violent reprimanding that follow the discovery of their transgression. Luhumyo's and Laue's narrators' perspectives are also definitively *childlike*, as I will go on to expand below. This specific focus on queer desire in childhood is important. Rather than narrating the movement from "the innocence of childhood to the experience of adulthood" (Stobie 2008, p.70), as seen in Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, or being concerned with how to "recover" childhood innocence, as in the Nigerian child soldier novels that Munro discusses, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories characterise their child protagonists as complex, contradictory, and not necessarily 'innocent' at all. This narrative choice can be read alongside the work of Kathryn Stockton, who analyses representations of 'queer' children (an adjective

which she uses in its broadest sense) in a range of twentieth-century literary and cultural texts. Stockton (2009, p.17) argues that fictional works reveal to us “versions of children that both histories and childhood studies have underrecognised, oddly conceptualised, or not even seen”. As opposed to the concept of ‘innocent’ children (an ideal which she reminds us is not universal, but specific to the last few centuries of Western culture), Stockton (2009, p.3) is concerned with illuminating the “pain, closets, emotional labours, sexual motives, and sideways movements that attend all children”. This, as she explains, is important because the ideal of childhood ‘innocence’ is in itself interlinked with violence. Drawing on the work of theorists like James Kincaid, who has shown that the concept of “innocence” in childhood is too often problematically viewed as “titillating”, Stockton (2009, p.12) highlights the “peculiar dangers” that accompany constructions of childhood innocence. She also reminds us that conservative Americans who juxtapose “children” with “homosexuals” inadvertently join the two ideas, making “the concept of homosexuality central to the meaning of the children they embrace” (Stockton 2009, p.3). The same can be said, in inverse, of the discourses and justifications surrounding Uganda’s 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act: in conflating same-sex sexuality with paedophilia, and in insinuating that *all* ‘homosexuals’ pose an inherent threat to children, the concept of ‘innocent’ children becomes fundamental to the construction of dangerous and perverse homosexuals. Through their complex characterisation of their young girl protagonists, Luhumyo and Laue compel us to rethink the concept of childhood ‘innocence’, even as they present the perspectives of their young focalisers as representative of possibilities and points of view which contrast with the divisiveness and repression of adult social norms.

### “Nine Pieces of Desire” (2017)

Idza Luhumyo’s “Nine Pieces of Desire” (2017) is set on the Kenyan coast in a Muslim community. Through the eyes of ten-year-old Mariam, the story shows us how heteronormativity, patriarchal structures, and Islamic dogmatism are inextricably intertwined and equally oppressive for women. As a young and impressionable narrator, Mariam closely observes her mother, “Ma”, and her grandmother,

---

“  
 Mariam’s observations reveal  
 how the lives of the women  
 in her family are constricted,  
 stifled, and relegated largely to  
 domestic spaces.”

---

“Bibi”, who are characterised as restricted in terms of their bodily autonomy and self-expression. Both Ma and Bibi are grappling with grief, as Mariam’s sister, Latifa, died when she was only three years old, while Bibi’s husband and sons have disappeared after going to Dubai in search of work. The women’s expression of their grief, however, is largely silent. As Mariam observes: “Mama doesn’t like tears. She prefers her sorrow dry” (2017, p.266). This emphasis on silence and what is deemed acceptable behaviour for women repeats itself throughout the story and is closely intertwined with what is considered “haram” [forbidden] by Islam. Mariam notes that “everything” is “haram” to her mother, including “[l]aughing loudly” (2017, p.265). In an essay on the interconnections between silence and patriarchal oppression in Kenya, Gatwiri and Mumbi write that:

From a young age, women are socialised to be averse to intellectual or authoritative expressions, especially around men, and are encouraged to stay silent as a show of respect and recognition of male superiority... In many ethnic groups, the term ‘woman’ in vernacular is interpreted to mean ‘the silent one’, referring to one who stays mute in the presence of men but also in respect to any negative goings on around her. (2016, p.14)

The notion of women remaining “mute” in the face of “negative goings on” is depicted throughout the story, as is the key point that this is behaviour that women are “socialised” into. Mariam copies what she observes in her mother and grandmother,

telling the reader that she “has perfected the art of quietly doing things” (2017, p.265): of “cry[ing] quietly” (2017, p.266), of “learn[ing]...how not to lose myself to laughter” (2017, p.263), and of “approach[ing] happiness with the stealth that Ma and Bibi approached it with” (2017, p.264).

What appears to be a “given” in Ma’s and Bibi’s adult world is seen anew through Mariam’s eyes. As Wilkinson writes, child narrators are able “to challenge practices and values that have become accepted features of society... by exposing their constructed nature, and demonstrating the potential for alternate ways of thinking and being” (2016, p.125). Mariam’s observations reveal how the lives of the women in her family are constricted, stifled, and relegated largely to domestic spaces. She notes that “Bibi’s bath is an event in her day. Sometimes I think it is all she looks forward to” (2017, p.268). Bibi’s room, meanwhile, is described as steeped in “darkness”, a space that shuts out the exterior world: “You would not guess that the sun shines in its entire splendour just beyond the curtains” (2017, p.270). Mariam also observes that “Ma barely lives” (2017, p.263) and that she spends her afternoons “reading her Quran until the shadows on the walls have disappeared” (2017, p.266). This religious devoutness, however, is not only depicted as intertwined with patriarchal oppression, but also with the assumption of a moral superiority which is closely interlinked with class divisions. Bibi and Ma are suspicious of the tenants who live in the rooms adjoining their house, tenants who Ma claims “touch, cook, and eat pork all the time” (2017, p.266), and whom she has consequently forbidden Mariam from visiting.

As contrasted with the narrow delimitations and divisions of the adult world, Mariam’s perspective makes room for defiance and possibility. Although Mariam is portrayed as a young narrator who is keen to please her elders and who is learning to copy their behaviour, her small acts of rebellion are also highlighted. As contrasted with Ma and Bibi’s religious devoutness, Mariam admits to the reader that she is sometimes “lazy” and at times “forgets” to say her daily prayers (2017, p.265). Despite Ma’s interdiction, Mariam also frequently “sneak[s] away in the afternoons” to go and visit the tenants, as this is the family of her friend, Grace (2017, p.266). Mariam has deduced for herself that Ma’s claims of Grace’s family eating pork are “a lie”, as Grace

has told her that they “only eat cow meat and even then only on the last Sunday of every month” (2017, p.266). Mariam’s and Grace’s friendship is, therefore, representative of the possibility of relationality and perspectives that differ from the divisiveness and assumptions of moral superiority that can accompany some forms of religious dogmatism.

One afternoon, the two girls take a walk, escaping the confinement of the domestic realm, to the place where Mariam usually goes for her “madrassa classes” (2017, p.268): her Islamic religious education. The madrassa compound is deserted except for three boys who are playing marbles, one of whom “is screaming, ‘Haram! Haram!’ incessantly as if he were rehearsing a chant” (2017, p.268). The theme of surveillance and of women’s bodily autonomy being consistently monitored and appraised – a theme which repeats itself throughout the story – is clear in this admonition, and is echoed by Mariam’s hesitance to enter the building for fear of being “seen by the Imam” (2017, p.268). The two girls do enter the madrassa classroom, however, and it is in here that they experience a brief and intense moment of same-sex desire. Luhumyo’s description of this moment provides important insight into the nuances and paradoxes of childhood sexuality: while the girls’ experience is framed as taking place outside of the knowledge and language of the adult world, this experience is simultaneously represented in a way that eschews the concept of childhood sexual ‘innocence’. In line with Stockton’s arguments on the importance of rebutting cultural insistences on childhood innocence, the story suggests some of the “unfathomable, hazy motives” that “drive the motions of [children’s] bodies, motions that can look like sex, seduction, delinquency” (Stockton 2009, p.5). As the girls sit down cross-legged on the madrassa classroom floor, Grace teases Mariam, asking “Is this how you usually sit? ... So that the boys get a little glimpse of your thing?” (2017, p.268). The girls’ awareness of the sexualised male gaze is clear, but so is the way in which they use simple and ‘childish’ language (“your thing”) to reference sexual anatomy. Mariam’s description of their brief same-sex encounter similarly emphasises a child’s language and perspective:

...she brings her bent knee slowly, slowly as far as it can go between my legs... Her gaze holds me captive so that I am both here and not

here... she is now moving her knee further in with the urgency of someone who really needs to pee... I find myself opening my legs further apart, keenly aware of a thrill that is building up in my middle part. I surprise myself by sighing when Grace's knee goes just short of grazing my panty. I move my body slightly nearer her and push my legs further apart. Grace gets up, scans the room quickly, and gets on top of me. (2017, p.269)

Notably, adult language and concepts such as “sex” or “lesbian” are missing in this description, and the urgency of sexual desire is described as “needing to pee”: the most readily available reference in the framework of the young narrator’s perspective. Despite being represented as happening outside of an adult’s language and knowledge base, however, the girls’ mutual feelings of sexual desire and pleasure are clearly emphasised. Mariam also notably describes her own bodily reactions as happening in spite of herself (“I find myself”; “I surprise myself”): as guided by instinct rather than by conscious thought or any form of coercion.

This moment of discovery and pleasure is short-lived, however, and what follows is a swift castigation of the girls’ actions. No sooner has Grace climbed on top of Mariam than they hear “the sound of laughter coming from the windows” and realise that they have been seen (2017, p.269). The girls know enough to sense that what they have done is ‘wrong’ and they walk home in a self-imposed silence. The next day, Mariam finds herself once again confined to the domestic realm, “bored and looking out of the window”, while the Imam stops by to tell Bibi about the girls’ transgression (2017, p.270). Afterwards, Bibi calls Mariam to her room and – at first without directly naming or addressing the offence itself – reprimands her:

If there is one thing I have learnt when bringing up girls, it is to watch them very, very closely... when Allah created humans, he had ten pieces of desire in His hand. He gave nine pieces to women and only one piece to men. My mother’s sister, Aunty Khadijah, once told me something important about girls. She said there is a certain age in a girl’s life when she has to be protected from other girls. At that age, the company of other girls is dangerous. There is a type of madness that moves around in their bodies like blood, and they pass it on to each other like a

disease. (2017, pp.270-271)

Buttressed by religious teachings, Bibi’s admonition reiterates damaging and reductive tropes about African women’s sexualities as “lascivious” (Tamale 2011, p.15) and immoral. Although she eventually names the transgression, Bibi begins by circling around it, using the story about the ten pieces of desire to make her meaning understood through allegory and implication. After the admonition, Bibi “goes silent for a long while” and Mariam “realise[s] that she is using the silence as a weapon” (2017, p.271). This notably points to how silence itself can function as a central aspect of patriarchal oppression. As Marais (2019, p.91) notes, “speaking about sex or sexual pleasure remains culturally taboo” for many African women and this “sexual silence...subsequently supports ideologies of shame and stigma”. Female sexual pleasure in general, including heteronormative sexual pleasure, remains “an unspeakable topic” (Marais 2019, p.91) in numerous African contexts. Same-sex desire between two women, then, constitutes a double transgression, an especially “unspeakable” taboo. In the story that Bibi tells Mariam about the ten pieces of desire, female same-sex sexuality in particular is pathologized as “dangerous”, “a type of madness”, and a “disease” (2017, p.271).

In offering a subtle critique of religious hetero-patriarchal oppression, Luhumyo makes use of the disjuncture between the limitations of her young narrator’s perspective and the details and inferences available to an adult reader. This disjuncture allows “a double reading for the adult to read between the lines and see things that the child sees but may not as yet fully understand” (Mann 2012, p.340). In “Nine Pieces”, there are several moments when Mariam only seems to possess a half-understanding of what is happening around her, so that we as readers are left to deduce what is being implied. Throughout the story, the character of Grace is representative of transgression and of the possibility of thinking and behaving outside of the confines of religious and hetero-patriarchal social norms. Mariam thinks that Grace reminds her of an image she saw on her teacher’s phone, of a “neck” with “three heads sitting on it” (2017, p.267). She asks her teacher if this image represents a “jinni”: a shape-shifting spirit from Arabic mythology. Her teacher replies that “[i]f it is a jinni then we must all be jinnis...We all have many sides to us” (2017, p.267). Revealing her

child's perspective, Mariam thinks that she "[does] not understand" what her teacher means, but to us as readers the implications of this moment are clear (2017, p.267). The teacher's comments gesture towards the fallaciousness of clear-cut good/evil and right/wrong binaries: pointing instead to the multiplicity of human experiences and identities, and thus offering an implicit critique of the rigidity of religious hetero-patriarchal prescriptions.

Finally, Luhumyo develops an extended metaphor at the end of the story which implies the absurdity of the pathologisation of same-sex desire. Just before she is called to Bibi's room to be reprimanded, Mariam remembers a dog that the family used to own:

There used to be a dog I would play with, a dog Baba had... After a while they said it had rabies and that it had to be killed. Baba said that the dog had bitten one of the tenants and because of that bite the tenant might die. The dog had to go. (2017, p.270)

After Bibi's admonition, Mariam finds herself "[f]or some reason" thinking again about this dog (2017, p.271). She tells us that "[a]fter it was killed, everyone waited for the tenant to die", but ultimately the tenant "never died" and it "seemed that the dog had never had rabies in the first place" (2017, p.271). Although Mariam is unable to articulate why this memory comes to mind at the very instance of Bibi's admonition, we can deduce the implied connections between the incorrect diagnosis of rabies, the dog's needless death, and the ways in which Bibi pathologizes and castigates Mariam's actions. This is emphasised in the ways in which, as already noted, Bibi speaks of female same-sex desire as a "disease" and "type of madness" (2017, p.271). Luhumyo underscores the futility and destructiveness of such pathologisation, which resonates with the story's broader critique of religious hetero-patriarchal power. Notably, in the last paragraph of the story, Luhumyo also implies a *refusal* of silence by her narrator. As contrasted with her mother's silent and silenced grief, Mariam realises that she is "incapable of keeping [her] sorrow dry" and instead "break[s] out into loud sobs", in spite of Bibi's "shocked" reaction (2017, p.271). In the story's final paragraph, then, Luhumyo offers us the subtlest hint of the possibility that Mariam will come to think critically of the religious hetero-patriarchal systems of oppression in which

she is being raised.

### "Plums" (2018)

Whereas "Nine Pieces" is told entirely in the first-person present tense by ten-year-old Mariam, Kharys Laue's "Plums" (2018) is split into two timeframes: the present-tense perspective of the story's adult narrator, Chris, and the past-tense memories of Chris's childhood on a South African farm. The story is therefore at first glance told from the perspective of an adult narrator, but it is important to highlight that this narrator focalises her recollections of the past through the perspective of a young girl, so that we as readers experience the events of Chris's childhood much as a child would have. A childlike point of view also permeates Chris's present-tense adult perspective, which recounts her experience of postpartum depression and her overall inability to adjust to the demands of motherhood and adulthood. Whereas the past-tense narration offers a critique of the overlaps between racism and heteronormativity as seen through a young focaliser's eyes, the present-tense narration critiques these same systems of power through the portrayal of a way of seeing and being that ultimately refuses to conform to prescribed 'adult' norms and behaviours.

In the narration of Chris's childhood past, Laue

“

...but it is important to highlight that this narrator focalises her recollections of the past through the perspective of a young girl, so that we as readers experience the events of Chris's childhood much as a child would have.

”



uses a child's perspective to demonstrate the interconnections between heteronormativity and racism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century South Africa. The timeframe of Chris's memories is not specified, but a reader could reasonably assume – given the overt racism depicted in the story and the timeline of its publication – that the past tense narration of her childhood is set during apartheid. While South Africa's post-apartheid era has been marked by the most progressive legislation of same-sex rights on the continent, it is important to remember that the apartheid era was defined not only by the state's policing of racialised divisions, but also by the “policing of interracial sex, and a strict, indeed militarised regime of heteronormative whiteness” (Munro 2012, p.xii). Although “Plums” gradually reveals the rigidities and violence of these hetero-patriarchal and racist norms, the story begins by portraying a child's perspective that starkly contrasts with these. In the narration of her childhood memories, Chris recounts an afternoon that she spent with Gloria: her friend, agemate, and the daughter of her family's Black domestic worker. In spite of the racialised divisions that defined the society in which she grew up, Chris describes her childhood friendship with Gloria as joyful, carefree, and characterised by understanding and relationality. The two girls have spent their afternoon “plunder[ing]” (2018, p.50) the farm's plum tree orchard and when Chris tells Gloria that she has a “secret” to show her at the house, they run there together, laughing and holding hands. Their childhood perspective is revealed in this easy closeness (Chris nicknames Gloria “Glo”); in their instinctive awareness of and relationship with the natural world (Chris is acutely aware of the “wind” in her face and the “cicada-song” in her ears); and in the emphasis on the immediate and the sensory (“the low lazy sunlight”, “the soft insides of plums”) (2018, pp.50-51).

As in “Nine Pieces”, “Plums” complicates the notion of childhood ‘innocence’ even as it presents a child's perspective that is differentiated from the realms of adult language, knowledge, and social norms. After climbing into the “secret” space that Chris has found, a loft in the ceiling, the girls build a “makeshift tent”: “a semicircle of hay bales” covered with “a red sheet fetched from the room below” (2018, p.52). Their tent represents a reality that is separate from the divisive adult norms that surround them: “This

is *our* place” (2018, p.52) Gloria whispers to Chris, her use of the plural possessive pronoun emphasising a shared space where white and Black coexist easily. The image of an alternate childhood reality is underscored by Laue's descriptions of the tent as resembling a womb: as bathed in an “embryonic light”, “sheathed snug in an envelope of heat”, with the air characterised by a “liquid stillness” and the red sheet described as “a soft skin stretched over us” (2018, p.52). This “embryonic” state, however, is paradoxically not a space of ‘innocence’, as it is in their makeshift tent that Chris and Gloria experience their first same-sex encounter. As with Mariam's account in “Nine Pieces”, it is striking to note here how the description of this encounter, focalised through the eyes of young Chris, highlights instinctive curiosity and bodily pleasure as taking place outside of the adult frameworks of morality, language, or knowledge. Slowly and wordlessly, as if in a “subaqueous dance” (2018, p.53), the girls undress and are drawn to each other:

We lay down facing one another, so close I could smell the round nutty scent of her breath, the sharp fragrance of her sweat...And then suddenly, in that centre place like a half-closed bud over which I had bent time-and-time again and with my fingers opened and pulled apart, something broke open and burst into life. We each took the other's leg in between, scissor-wise, and opened like sunned fruit one another's glowing groins, inhaling the inside-scent of urine, unwashed skin, sweat. With blind intent I searched the lineaments of her and discovered the tip of her hot between and stroked it, smooth and soft as her tongue, and the roof of my mouth ached as if I had tasted something too sweet. (2018, p.53-54).

Chris's account highlights the life-giving aspects of the moment of the girls' sexual encounter. Far removed from social constructs or notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, Chris poetically compares the girls' “glowing groins” to flower buds and fruit, configuring same-sex sexuality as something indelibly ancient, instinctive, and closely connected to the natural world. The description highlights the sensory and the sensual, with Chris attuned to every smell and taste in the moment. The mentions of “sunned fruit” and the “sweet” taste in the roof of her mouth connect this sexual encounter to the earlier plunder of plums in the orchard: a metaphor

of forbidden fruit which haunts her in her adult life, and which symbolises that which is diametrically opposed to the strictures and demands of adult norms. Laue's use of the metaphor of forbidden fruit here also intertextually connects her story to Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* – in which the udala tree and its fruit serve as multi-layered images of mythology, female fertility, and transgression – and Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree", in which the jambula tree's "unreachable fruit" (2013, p.103) – at times described as indistinguishable from breasts – similarly serve as representative of female same-sex desire and realms of the forbidden in hetero-patriarchal societies.

Chris and Gloria's "embryonic" state of being is disrupted by Chris's mother, who discovers the girls' hideout and pulls away the sheet of their makeshift tent in the moment of their intimacy. In a description that brings to mind the violent rupture of birth, the girls find themselves cringing "naked under the glare of light and the cool rush of air" (2018, p.54). This rupture signifies their exposure to the world of adult social norms, so that their moment of intimacy – which through Chris's child's eyes was seen as wordless and instinctive – is suddenly re-framed through the language and divisions of heteronormativity and racism. Chris's and Grace's mothers both use the colloquial South African exclamation "Sies!" to express their disgust at the girls' actions and both resort to physical violence in their reprimanding (2018, pp.56-58). Chris recounts how Gloria's mother grabbed Gloria by the wrists and pulled her home, "dragging Gloria behind her" even after her "knees collided with the ground" (2018, p.57). Chris's mother, meanwhile, "[drags her] up against the couch" and "[slaps her] across the face three times" (2018, p.58). This physical violence, however, seems to pale in comparison to the linguistic violence that follows, as Chris's mother scathingly reprimands her:

You think you can just go around rubbing fannies with a little kaffir girl, hey? ... She paused, as if waiting for me to reply, and then, without warning, her voice flew up. Sies! What are you? A homosexual! That's what you are. Did you know that? She laughed hysterically. (2018, p.58)

As starkly contrasted with the girls' childhood friendship and perspective, defined by an easy relationality and a wordless and sensory means of interacting with one another and the world around

them, the sharp divisions and prejudices of the adult world are revealed in this admonishment. The crass and pejorative descriptor of women's same-sex sexuality ("rubbing fannies") juxtaposes with the poetic metaphors of fruit and flowers in Chris's recollections, and the violence of this descriptor is further compounded by the way in which Chris's mother enjoins it with the racial slur "kaffir", indicating the intricate overlaps between racism and heteronormativity in apartheid-era South Africa. The admonishment also brusquely defines the girls' previously wordless actions within the frameworks of adult language and knowledge, so that Chris's mother asks if she "know[s]" that she is a "homosexual": a label which, in her telling, is intertwined with shame and derision. What is important to highlight here is how "Plums" inverts the trope of a child's first experience of same-sex sexuality at the hands of an abusive adult: instead of same-sex sexuality being interlinked with violence, the violence against children in this story is instead interlinked with the hetero-patriarchal social norms which the children are being inducted into: the very norms which purport to 'protect' children from harm.

The violence of hetero-patriarchal norms that Chris experiences in her childhood lingers in the narration of her adulthood present. The birth of her child is not portrayed as a moment of celebration, but paradoxically as a moment that is associated with violence and death. She recalls "the midwife holding out the bloodied child like one of the animal trophies my father used to raise up", and she reflects that Brendan, her partner, "does not understand that in the child's beginning I saw my own end" (2018, p.55). Violence – or the nascent possibility of violence – seems to be omnipresent in her adult life, infusing even ordinary moments, seen not only in her description of childbirth, but also in her description of the seemingly mundane: "the serrated horizon" (2018, p.57) and "the skyscrapers" which "glint like knives in the late afternoon light" (2018, p.55). Chris is also overwhelmed by an awareness of the racial and gendered privileges that her baby boy has been born into. Capable of articulating and reflecting on these privileges in a way that her younger self could not, she observes the "red and fleshy" tinge of his lips and the "fearful shade of pink" of his skin, noting that "these colours will serve him well in life, as will, one day,

the tiny shaft nestled inside his nappy” (2018, p.60). She is also fearful of the linguistic violence that he will one day be capable of: “He can’t yet speak, but when he does, what will he say? What words will he pick up and fling like stones, and pick up again to fling again?” (2018, p.60).

In her adulthood present, Chris feels disconnected from her own body, repulsed by her “surplus flesh” and her breasts that “loll huge and strange” (2018, p.55). She longs for the “slender strong limbs of [her] childhood, the tight knitted belly, the unencumbered flat chest” (2018, p.55). This bodily disconnection from adulthood is mirrored in her emotional state, her relations with others, and her seemingly irrational decisions and actions. One day, she takes her baby and drives to the supermarket in search of plums. What follows is a surreal narration of watching another shopper, a woman who mirrors her own actions and who reminds her of Gloria, who carefully picks items from the aisles before replacing all of them and only buying plums. Chris drifts in and out of consciousness and when she returns to consciousness she is back at home with Brendan, who reprimands her (as he would a child) for being “irresponsible”, informing her that she dropped the baby and came home from the shop with nothing but plums (2018, p.55). That night, while Brendan is sleeping, she goes into the kitchen to find the plums and feeds small pieces of the fruit to her baby until they both fall asleep. Brendan, once again distressed in the morning when he finds her, tells her that she has left him with “no choice”: an intimation that he may end the relationship or take the baby away from her (2018, p.62). Either way, the story ends with no suggestion of a resolution or of Chris learning to adjust to the demands of motherhood and adulthood.

In Chris’s seeming inability or unwillingness to leave behind a childlike way of interacting with the world, we can read aspects of Stockton’s (2009, p.11) concept of “growing sideways”, which she proposes as an alternative to the culturally accepted notion of “growing up”, in which childhood and adulthood are diametrically opposed, and in which children are expected to “mature” according to a “vertical, forward-motion”. Growing “sideways”, by contrast, refers to an alternative understanding of “growth” or maturation: a “horizontal” movement that “bring[s] ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (2018, p.11). The notion of ‘growing

“

Luhumyo’s and Laue’s stories present an important and novel addition to the growing body of queer-themed African literature.

”

sideways’ in “Plums” can be discerned in Chris’s inability to ‘grow up’ in the way that she is expected to, and this becomes integral to the story’s critique of hetero-patriarchal societal norms. Through Chris’s unusual perspective, the reader sees these norms in a new light – so that they appear as unwanted, enforced, and violent. This compels us to question what is deemed to be a ‘given’ in hetero-patriarchal societies: the expectation that all girls will ‘grow up’ into women who are happy to be wives and mothers. The unusual and underrepresented perspective presented in “Plums” shows us something different: that some people are unable to fit into these ‘norms’ and that these norms may be experienced as violent and unwanted for many.

Instead of conforming to the expected hetero-patriarchal norms of adulthood, Chris’s postpartum depression seems to return her to a childhood perspective that represents defiance and alternative possibilities. The narration of her adulthood present notably also highlights the immediate, the sensory, and a closeness with the natural world that is very similar to her childhood perspective. She watches “the seasons change from [her] bedroom window” (2018, p.49) and is attuned to the “fragrant light”, the “wind swell[ing] through the trees”, and “the clear tissue of sound that hangs about the night” (2018, p.58). She also frequently seems to be unable to distinguish between the real and the imagined, or the past and the present, as seen in her surreal

account of the woman in the shop who mirrors her by only buying plums, or in her account of Gloria appearing before her in the kitchen of her adulthood present and unknotting the package of plums that she has just bought. As several critics have pointed out, child narrators in African literature frequently highlight a “blur between reality and the imaginary” (Wilkinson 2016, p.130). This blurring of the real and the imagined may sometimes be interpreted as indicative of ‘madness’ but, as Mathias Orhero (2022, p.8) has argued, this “madness” can also be seen as “a form of resistance...a protest against normalcy”. It is this “protest against normalcy” that “Plums” highlights, as Chris’s perspective effectively offers us the possibility of a different way of seeing and being in the world. Throughout the story, plums as a symbol of forbidden fruit – closely interlinked with same-sex sexuality – seem to represent defiance and a relationality which stand in stark contrast to the divisions and strictures of adult norms. Although she does not articulate the reasoning behind her actions, there is certainly the suggestion of rebellion in Chris’s decisions to only buy plums from the supermarket and to feed these to her son: a suggestion, perhaps, of the hope that her son will one day be able to defy the hetero-patriarchal and racial norms and privileges into which he has been born.

## Conclusion

Luhumyo’s and Laue’s stories present an important and novel addition to the growing body of queer-themed African literature. The stories demonstrate how a ‘childlike’ way of relating to others and to the world – guided by instinct, relationality, and defiance – can act as an important counterpoint to the divisiveness and repression of socially constructed norms that include heteronormative ideals. In their rejection of the literary trope of childhood same-sex experiences as entangled with paedophilia, the stories importantly portray how same-sex sexuality is an instinctive and natural component of many people’s sexual development, removed from violence or coercion. This entails a reconsideration of the concept of childhood ‘innocence’ which, by extension, challenges constructions of ‘innocent’ children who require urgent protection from ‘perverse’ homosexuals. Rethinking and inverting constructions of

‘innocence’ and the innocence/perversity binary also carries wider implications for discourses and debates surrounding same-sex sexualities on the continent. In justifying recent anti-homosexuality legislation, African lawmakers and politicians frequently cite the importance of protecting African cultures, traditions, and ‘values’ against the dangers of a ‘corrupting’ Western influence. In a fairly typical statement, for instance, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni defended the passing of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act by stating that “Uganda will not embrace homosexuality and the West should stop seeking to impose its views” (Reid 2023). In statements such as these, Western or global LGBTQI+ human rights are framed as dangerous and unwanted ‘impositions’ on an idealised set of African values and cultures that need to be protected and defended. This discourse bears striking similarities to the notion of ‘innocent’ children who need to be protected from ‘perverse’ homosexuals. In this way, concepts of ‘innocence’ translate into broader queerphobic nationalist discourses, resulting in what Munro terms “fantasies of purity, whether cultural, national, or sexual” (2016, p.123). In texts that re-think and challenge the dangerous simplicity of the innocence/perversity axis, Munro (2016, p.134) suggests that we can read an important “rejection of the politics of wholeness, authenticity, and purity”. Re-thinking concepts of childhood ‘innocence’, therefore, and by association the falsity of the innocence/perversity binary, brings a set of important broader implications. If same-sex desire is understood as innate, a possibility that resides within many people from childhood, and one that can exist as quite separate from any ‘imposition’ or coercion at the hands of a ‘foreign’ culture or a ‘perverse’ adult, then the falsity of the “fantasies of purity” that Munro refers to are revealed. Queerphobic legislation such as Uganda’s 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act relies on constructions of the dangers of ‘perverse’ homosexuals and the ‘imposing’ West. Fictional representations of childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality in African contexts, as told through the eyes of young narrators/focalisers, present vital and underrepresented points of view which directly counter these constructions and discourses.

## Notes

---

1. It is important to note that Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act and the framing of 'homosexuals' as inherently threatening to children echoes far-right and anti-LGBTQI+ discourses and legislation in many other parts of the world. Phillip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl (2024), for instance, write of Hungary's 2021 anti-LGBTQI+ legislation as "an example of state-sponsored homophobia" which "calculatedly conflated homosexuality and pedophilia". I am also aware that my discussion of Ugandan queerphobic public discourse alongside short stories from Kenya and South Africa (i.e. three very disparate contexts) may be interpreted as a careless homogenisation of 'African public discourses' or 'African literature'. This is not my intention. I am aware that I am discussing very different contexts, but am similarly aware that the recent rise of politicised queerphobia in Uganda is not dissimilar to the intensification of queerphobic discourses and the introduction of stringent anti-LGBTQI+ legislation in other contexts on the continent in recent years, including in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya (Amnesty International 2024). My discussion of Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act is meant to serve as a very recent and specific example of the calculated and politicised conflation between homosexuality and paedophilia, but it is important to remember that this discourse reverberates elsewhere on the continent. Similarly, I argue that my comparative analysis of two stories from different parts of the continent could have reverberations and implications for other African contexts. As I elaborate in the article and in my conclusion, 'seeing anew' through a child focaliser's eyes could compel readers to reconsider the social constructedness and violence of hetero-patriarchal norms, as well as the constructions of 'innocence' and 'purity' which undergird politicised and nationalist queerphobic discourses in numerous contemporary African countries.

## References

- Amnesty International. (2024). Africa: Barrage of Discriminatory Laws Stoking Hate Against LGBTI persons. *Amnesty International* [online], 9 January. Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/01/africa-barrage-of-discriminatory-laws-stoking-hate-against-lgbti-persons/> [accessed 02/05/2024].
- Arac de Nyeko, M. (2008). Jambula Tree. In: Martin, K. and Xaba, M., eds. *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction*. Braamfontein, Johannesburg: MaThoko's Books/GALA, pp.91-105.
- Ayoub, P. and Stoeckl, K. (2024). The Global Resistance to LGBTIQ Rights. *Journal of Democracy* [online], January. Available from: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-global-resistance-to-lgbtiq-rights/> [accessed 13/06/2024].
- Courtois, C. (2018). 'Thou Shalt Not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It is Abomination!': Lesbian (Body-)Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 40(2), pp.119-133.
- Gatwiri, G.J. and Mumbi, K.A. (2016). Silence as Power: Women Bargaining with Patriarchy in Kenya. *Social Alternatives*, 35(1), pp.13-18.
- Green-Simms, L. (2019). Will Kenya's Courts Let Gay People Live? *OkayAfrica* [online]. Available from: <https://africasacountry.com/2019/02/will-kenyas-government-unban-a-lesbian-love-story> [accessed 22/05/2024].
- Hron, M. (2008). *Ora Na-azu Nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels*. *Research in African Literatures*, 39(2), pp.27-48.
- Laue, K. (2018). Plums. In: Moffett, H., Abdulmelik, N., and Owino, O., eds. *ID Identity: New Short Fiction from Africa*. Oxford: New Internationalist, pp.49-62.
- Luhomyo, I. (2017). Nine Pieces of Desire. In: Xaba, M. and K. Martin, K., eds. *Queer Africa 2: New Stories*. Johannesburg: MaThoko's Books, pp.263-271.
- Mann, S. (2012). Out of the Mouths: Voices of Children in Contemporary South African Literature. In: Mengel, E., and Borzaga, M., eds. *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel: Essays*. Rodopi: Amsterdam/New York.
- Marais, K. (2019). Calls for Pleasure: How African Feminists are Challenging and Unsilencing Women's Sexualities. *Agenda*, 33(3), pp.87-95.
- Munro, B. (2012). *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Munro, B. (2016). Locating 'Queer' in Contemporary Writing of Love and War in Nigeria. *Research in African Literatures*, 47(2), pp.121-138.
- Okparanta, C. (2015). *Under the Udala Trees*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Opio, M. (2023). How Parliament Unanimously Passed Anti-Homosexuality Bill. *The Kampala Report* [online]. Available from: <https://www.thekampalareport.com/latest/2023032124565/how-parliament-unanimously-passed-anti-homosexuality-bill.html> [accessed 13/06/2024].
- Orhero, M.I. (2022). Child Narrators, Conceptions of Reality, and Minority Identity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. *Postcolonial Text*, 17(4), pp.1-17.
- Refworld. (2023). Uganda: The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023. *Refworld* [online], 30 May. Available from: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2023/en/147976> [accessed 30/05/2024].
- Reid, G. (2023). It is Vital for South Africa to Oppose Uganda's Dangerous Anti-Gay Bill. *Human Rights Watch* [online]. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/31/it-vital-south-africa-oppose-ugandas-dangerous-anti-gay-bill> [accessed 20/06/2024].
- Stobie, C. (2008). Fissures in Apartheid's 'Eden': Representations of Bisexuality in *The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr. *Research in African Literatures*, 39(1), pp.70-86.
- Stockton, K.B. (2009). *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Tamale, S. (2011). Researching and Theorising Sexualities in Africa. In: Tamale, S., ed. *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Wilkinson, R. (2016). Broaching 'Themes Too Large for Adult Fiction': The Child Narrator in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *English Academy Review*, 33(1), pp.123-132.