

A Pragma-Crafting Study of the Perception of Gayism in Nigeria: A Case Study of *We Don't Live Here Anymore*

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Abstract

Queerism is a well-researched area in gender discourse, literary analysis, sexual discourse, cultural studies, psychology, and film studies. It is the interest of other areas in the humanities. The current rise in Nollywood films that represent male homosexuality signifies the emergence of new type of empirical material that demands analysis. This study analyzes queerism from a linguistic perspective, using the pragma-crafting theory. Dialogues from the Nigerian movie, *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, which borders on the representations of gayism, were purposively selected and analyzed drawing insights from the pragma-crafting features of shared macro-knowledge, shared cultural knowledge, geoimplicature, linguistic implicature, contextual presuppositions and object referred. This study investigates how fixed societal notions about homosexuality are reproduced or challenged in the film. Also, it reveals whether Nollywood films maintain or question societal stereotypes and conceptualizations of nondominant sexual practices. Finally, it explores the role of social variables in nuancing impressions about gayism in Nigerian films. The linguistic choices of the actors inferred that there is a general consensus on the perception of homosexuality in Nigeria, and little or nothing has changed so far in the stance of society on the concept of gayism. It was also revealed that gayism in Nigeria is seen as a shameful, repulsive and deviant act, which is attributed to demonic spirits, youth demeanour, flawed parental care/upbringing and moral ambivalence. Meanwhile, the film ends on a note that shows gayism is still socially unacceptable in the Nigerian context. Although the filmmakers did not take a stance on queerism, the punishment in stock for deviance is clearly stated. Therefore, the representation of gayism in the movie is still the traditional reality of homosexuality in Nigeria, with a soft undertone of the effects of not accepting one's children's sexual preference.

Keywords: queerism, gayism, pragma-crafting theory, movie, film studies

Introduction

Homosexuality, in the 21st century, is still a distasteful concept amongst Africans. Reddy (2002) expounds that according to African stereotypes, homosexuality is attributed to a disease/sickness; a possession by evil or demonic spirits; an occult practice; or simply an unsavory influence from the degenerate West. Lyonga (2014) asseverates that such antigay viewpoints have for donkey's years been repeatedly encouraged in African societies through Church or Muslim doctrine, through strong political hate speech, and in day-to-day dialogue.

The criminalization of homosexuality and the intense societal homophobia associated with it in the majority of African nations have forced most homosexuals in Africa to live closeted lives; hiding their sexuality from their immediate society. Despite its invisibility, homosexuality is made visible through representation in cinema as there is a gradual emergence of sub-Saharan African films that portray homosexuality. Representation in cinema is sometimes “constitutive,” whereby it is neither seen as “outside reality [nor] signifying reality, but as a discursive force that is capable of constituting what some perceive as reality itself” (Lim, 2006, p. 44). Representations of social identities therefore have far-reaching implications in society.

Representations reflect power asymmetries and sociocultural stereotypes, and visual representations in particular depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions” (Gillian, 2001, p. 16). As Dyer (2002, p. 1) notes, “[h]ow we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.” Dyer (1984) opines that cinema is a product for entertainment, which has the capacity to shape and reflect thoughts and feelings; hence intentional changes of filmic representations can play a powerful role in breaking down structures of marginalization and discrimination within society.

The aim of this study is to highlight how language is used to reveal the perceptions of gayism in Nigeria, using the movie *We Don't Live Here Anymore* as a case study. It also investigates how fixed societal notions about homosexuality are reproduced or challenged in the film. Furthermore, this study will reveal whether Nollywood films maintain or question societal stereotypes and conceptualizations of nondominant sexual practices. Finally, it explores the role of social variables in nuancing impressions about gayism in Nigerian films.

Literature Review

Until recently, films that focus on male homosexuality were rare in Nollywood. Representation of homosexuality in Nollywood cinema mainly center on lesbians—a situation that provoked gendered arguments on the “objectification” of women, and also raised questions about whether lesbianism, in comparison to male homosexuality, is considered less of a taboo in Nigerian culture (Azuah, 2008). The recent increase in the number of films that focus on male homosexuality makes it a good basis for analysis. The selected film stands out from among contemporary Nollywood films that dwell on male homosexuality.

Rag Tag is the first Nollywood film on male homosexuality that was set both in Nigeria and in Europe and which included an interracial (multicultural) cast. The film premiered at the 2006 San Francisco International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Film Festival. *Men in Love*, on the other hand, is one of the latest Nollywood films representing male homosexuality which upon re-

lease (in 2010) elicited an impressive number of online reviews and viewer discussions about its stance on same-sex relationships in Africa.

Since African films representing male homosexuality are relatively few, existing literature on cinematic representations of homosexuality has been Western-centric. Classic publications such as Dyer's *Gays and Film* (1984) and *The Matter of Images* (2002), and Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1987), expound only on representations of homosexuality in Western films. With the exception of Maasilta's "African Carmen" (2007), the few studies that have discussed representations of homosexuality in African films have done so in brief.

Green-Simms (2016) agrees that Nigerians' dominant views on homosexuality are often expressed in Nollywood video films. Since 2003, at least 29 films have been released that feature characters involved in same-sex affairs or relationships. While these films, many of which star A-list Nollywood celebrities, make visible relationships that are most often underground, they do so by casting homosexuality in a negative light and have arguably helped to legitimize laws that criminalize homosexuality. Gay characters are portrayed as murderous and lecherous, often involved in other vices such as prostitution and witchcraft, and they are almost always a direct and clear threat to heterosexual unions. Green-Simms (2016) submits that Nollywood has only three possible endings for these characters: they are killed off, imprisoned, or become born-again Christians, who return to heterosexuality and denounce their sins. In this way, gay characters are erased and denied agency and, at the same time, shown to be appropriately punished.

As Epprecht (2008:13) argues in *Heterosexual Africa?*

[Q]ueer[serves] as a convenient shorthand to describe an antiessentialist approach . . . that is open to the whole range of human sexual diversity; that underscores sexuality as a critical component in the construction of class, race, national, ethnic, and other identities; that analyses language and silences in relation to material conditions and struggles; and that engages with current debates about global economic and other inequalities coming out of African feminist, subaltern, and critical masculinity studies.

Therefore, homosexuality is not a recent development in Nollywood, but has been in existence since the late 1900s. In past times, attention has been on lesbianism, to the exclusion of male homosexuals. This trend is currently changing, although how homosexuals are portrayed in movies still remains the same till date. Homosexuals in these movies are represented as rebellious and morally bankrupt, since their ideal sexuality is at conflict with the dictates of society. Thus, this study explores traditional representations of homosexuals with a more recent movie, investigating the prevalence of these stereotypes in recent times.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Dialogues from *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, written by Noni Salma and directed by Tope Oshin, are purposively selected and analyzed using the pragma-crafting theory, due to the representations of gayism ingrained in the movie.

Acheoah (2015:26) evolve the pragma-crafting theory to underscore the systematic, comprehensible and dynamic nature of human communication. Contending that effective communication is essentially a “pragmatic” process of “crafting” (skilful selection and arrangement of verbal and nonverbal elements of communication), from smaller structures to larger ones towards achieving illocutionary goals, Acheoah presents a scholarly overview of neglected issues in the literature of pragmatics.

Every pragma-crafting (P-crafting) involves illocrafting, uptake and sequel. Therefore, P-crafting is a superordinate pragmatic act which produces linguistic and extralinguistic elements of communication. P-crafting features are instrumental to understanding the interlocutory roles of the interactive participants. The elements include: inference (INFR), indexicals (INDXL), shared macro-knowledge (SMK), shared contextual knowledge (SCK), shared knowledge of emergent context (SKEC), geoimplicatures (G), linguistic implicature (LI), behavioral implicature (BI), contextual presupposition (CP), pragmadeviant (PD), object-referred (OR) and operative language (OL).

1. Inference (INFR) involves making logical deductions from the available linguistic and extralinguistic data.
2. Indexicals (INDXL) are grammatical categories with the tendency of establishing the relationship between language and context.
3. Shared macro-knowledge (SMK) entails what the participants of discourse understand as state-of-affairs in the larger society, rather than in their immediate society.
4. Shared contextual knowledge (SCK) is the available pieces of information which only participants of the present discourse have for the communication to thrive.
5. Any situation that suddenly emerges in an ongoing discourse is emergent. An emergent context becomes shared knowledge of emergent context (SKEC) when it becomes common knowledge to the participants of discourse. An emergent context is a candidate for inferences.
6. The term “geoimplicature” is coined from “geographical” and “implicature” to refer to practices that have geographical restriction in terms of people, and not just in terms of physical boundaries (cf. Acheoah, 2011).
7. Linguistic implicatures (LI) are meanings implied through language.
8. Behavioral implicature (BI) are meanings implied through extralinguistic and psychological acts.
9. Contextual presuppositions (CP) are products of shared contextual knowledge

(SCK); in a specific (micro-context) discourse, participants deduce meanings from verbal and nonverbal data limited to the participants themselves.

10. Pragmadedviants are deviant forms of expressions which participants use as part of illocutionary strategy or creative indulgence.
11. Object-referred (OR) is the referent of an utterance. This referent is either in the remote world or immediate context of speech.
12. Every discourse in natural communication is conveyed through a particular language, whether indigenous or alien to the participants. This is what is labelled operative language (OL).

Discussion

We Don't Live Here Anymore tells the story of two teenage boys in Prominence High School—Tolu Bajulaiye and Chidi Egwuonwu—who fall in love with each other and have to deal with the society after being caught by a teacher during a steamy session.

With an impending expulsion at bay, Tolu's mother, Nike, who is a powerful matriarch, pulls all the strings within her reach and resets the tone into what would become a battle of class, blackmail and a triggering society ready to punish anything besides the status quo. On the other hand, Chidi's mother, a single parent, becomes an outcast. At the end, Chidi commits suicide, which makes Tolu a living corpse. Eventually, he leaves his parent's care and all attempts to find him prove abortive. His parents in turn become miserable because of their futile attempts.

Purposively selected dialogues were analyzed using linguistic tools from pragma-crafting features. They were subclassified into different categories based on the observable representations of gayism inferred, such as: youthful demeanor, possession by demonic spirits, flawed upbringing/parental care, shameful and repulsive act, deviancy and moral ambivalence.

Youthful demeanor

For young adults, there are certain attributes expected of them, which are enhanced by their disposition and in their behaviour towards others. The impression of people towards their character or feeling is usually synchronized with their age, and changes are usually expected as they mature.

Youthful demeanor refers to these behaviours exhibited by the youth, which is usually in passing. Most times, those attributes are out of excitement, deviancy or curiosity. Their sexual preference is not excluded from this list. Therefore, gayism is sometimes attributed to youthful exuberance as explicated in the utterances below. The samples below, labelled utterances one and two, exemplify the claim.

Utterance one

Chidi’s mother: Could it be teenage rebellion? Did I do something wrong? That’s not right, it’s wrong. (She found it difficult to pronounce the word “gay”). How could it be? Why didn’t I know you had this type of feelings? When did it start?

Utterance two

Tolu’s mother: Tolu, you are not gay. I know it in my heart. I know that you are not that way. Sometimes, things happen but they don’t need to stay that way.

The linguistic implicature of the utterances of Chidi and Tolu’s mother shows that both parents see gayism as a temporary feeling, which might be peculiar to the stage in which they are currently. While Chidi’s mom sees it as “teenage rebellion,” Tolu’s mother thinks it is a temporary feeling that will eventually pass. The geoimplicature of these parent’s perspectives reveal that Nigerian parents are capable of attributing homosexuality to youthful exuberance.

Flawed parental care/upbringing

Parents are generally believed to be caregivers and the first teachers of their children. Besides providing for their daily needs, they are expected to teach their children attributes that are socially acceptable or unacceptable in the society. Sexual orientation is one of those gender idiosyncrasies parents are expected to socialize their children on. Although this has not been the case in most homes in Nigeria, until lately (Esuabana, 2017; Esohe & PeterInyang, 2015; Izugbara, 2007).

Utterance one

Tolu’s mother: It’s a lie! Where did you learn it from? I raised you better.

Utterance two

Chidi’s father: The boy is gay? He’s yours, all yours. That boy is not my son.

Utterance three

Tolu’s father: I don’t think it even bothers you that “your” son is gay. You act like it’s no big deal

The shared macro knowledge of what obtains in Nigeria informs one that, most times, the duty of weaning and caring for the child is solely the mother’s responsibility. Meanwhile, there is a proverb prevalent within the Yoruba cultural system that pronounces a well-brought-up child the father’s, while the ill-man-

Utterance three

Tolu's father: Your son is sick . . . I don't have any traces of gay in my family; I wonder where he got that from.

Utterance four

Chidi: Didn't want to fail you.

The utterances of Tolu's parents point to how shameful gayism is perceived. It is perceived to be a dent on the family's image if word gets out on the homosexual preference or trait of their son. Their social standing makes matters worse. Chidi, who is not from a rich background, confesses he did not reveal his sexual trait earlier to his mother so as not to "fail" her. The geomplicature of the utterances above, points to how their immediate social context (Nigeria) abhors homosexuality. This further reveals the extent to which it influences their perception of the subject.

Deviancy

There are generally acceptable patterns of behaviour in the society. One's sexual preference is also one of those formally enacted rules. In the Nigerian context, heterosexuality is the officially recognized sexual preference of its members. Such that, a deviation from this socially acceptable norm comes with a sanction of 14 years imprisonment upon proven guilty (SSMA, 2013). However, Frederick (2014) makes it known that homosexuality is no longer considered a deviant act in the Western world, compared to the Nigerian context.

Utterance one

Principal: The school board is bent on making scapegoats out of your kids . . . Just to prove to everyone their strong stance against homosexuality.

Utterance two

Lawyer: Not judging, helping you. Do you know what is at stake?

Utterance three

Chidi's mother: They were caught misbehaving. They said they had sex. I don't understand it.

Utterance four

Tolu's mother: Tolu, you are not gay. I know it in my heart. I know that you are not that way. Sometimes, things happen but they don't need to stay that way. The society Tolu, they don't forgive boys like you. Remember what is at stake.

Utterance five

Principal: It will serve as a deterrent. This is no place to practice such evil act.

Utterance six

Chidi's mother: Society punishes anyone who violates its order, and what you did was abominable.

There is a shared macro-knowledge in Nigeria that homosexuality is a deviation from the heterosexual norm. The three recognized religions in Nigeria also agree with that. Therefore, a deviation from this norm comes with sanction at the micro and macro level. At the micro level, such person might have to contend with his/her immediate surroundings. While at the macro level, the person might have to contend with social institutions. As reveals this movie, if the deviant is from a high social standing, sanctions from the macro level can be altered to suit one's propagated narrative.

Meanwhile, in all the utterances above, there is a fear being instilled or inhaled as inferred in the utterances of the interlocutors. Also, there seem to be a contextual presupposition of the sanctions that come with the object referred (homosexuality).

Repulsive act

Repulsive acts are loathsome, distasteful, disgusting and repugnant. In essence, such acts are hateful and seen as unworthy of a human. In Nigeria, the concept of homosexuality arouses such feeling in some heterosexuals, as depicted in the utterances below:

Utterance one

Student: Chidi was a faggot

Utterance two

Tolu's mother: Do you know how hard it is for me to wake up every day knowing that he is doing that.

Utterance three

Student 1: God hates fags.

Utterance four

Student 2: Faggot, we should cut your dick right here, right now.

Utterance five

Chidi’s mother: I wish you tried harder to fight this.

The utterances above are clear instances of hate speech. It has resentment written all over it. Linguistic choices like “fags’ and “faggot,” and a stretch of utterance like “God hates faggot” all point to how distasteful the idea of gayism is to the interlocutors. In utterance five, Chidi’s mother wished he had fought “it.” She would not have wished that, if the act was not seen as repugnant.

Moral Ambivalence

Moral ambivalence is the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about someone. The confusion sets in when two supposedly opposing attributes (acceptable and unacceptable) are found in a being. This questions the acceptable attribute of the person.

Utterance one

Tolu’s mother: Tolu is a good Christian.

Utterance two

Chidi’s mother: My son is a good lad. He is diligent. He’s well behaved and he’s easy going.

Utterance three

Chidi’s mother: He always does right by everyone.

The thought of how good Chidi’s character is, and how “bad” being gay has made him appear is the root of the confusion of Chidi’s mother, as revealed in the utterances above. She finds it difficult to believe that such a good boy could be “gay.” Her shared macro-knowledge makes her assume that her child’s sexual choice could be likened to the state of being “good” or “bad.” While his sexual preference as a homosexual paints him as being “bad,” his enviable conduct suggests that he is “good.” Therefore, she cannot seem to fathom why one being has both traits.

Findings

Having examined the dialogues in *We Don’t Live Here Anymore*, the findings are summarized below:

- a. The perceptions of gayism as represented in *We Don’t Live Here Anymore* are youthful demeanour, possession by demonic spirits, lack of home-training, deficient parental guidance and character flaw.
- b. As predicted by Green-Simms (2016) that gay relationships in Nollywood films usually result in death, Chidi commits suicide.

- c. With regards to being a threat to heterosexual marriages, the gay teenagers further strain the relationship of their parents.
- d. Societal stereotypes and conceptualizations on gayism are maintained in the film, as they are both castigated without anyone to empathize with their plight.
- e. The movie reveals that social status dictates the intensity of the effects of the societal stereotypes. The upper class can alter the narrative using their power and affluence, while the lower class is likely to be at the mercy of the rich; especially when their homosexual identity is revealed and there is need for sanction.

Conclusion

The examination of the linguistic choices in *We Don't Live Here Anymore* reveals a general consensus on the perception of homosexuality in Nigeria. Gayism in Nigeria is seen as a shameful, repulsive and deviant act, which is attributed to demonic spirits, youth demeanor, flawed parental care/upbringing and moral ambivalence. The movie ended on a note that gayism is still socially unacceptable in the Nigerian context. Although the filmmakers do not take a stand on queerism, the punishment in store for deviants is clearly stated, with a soft undertone of the effects of not accepting one's child's sexual preference.

This study builds on already existing studies in the field of male homosexuality in African movies. Using a more recent movie, this study reveals the disposition of filmmakers towards the subject at hand. Also, diachronic linguists can surmise the noticeable changes in the language used by the actors to construct and deconstruct queerism. Finally, researchers, students, linguists, critics and individuals can use this study as a guide to be informed on the perception of gayism in the 21st century, as depicted in a Nollywood movie.

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