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Queering Nollywood: Representations of Gender Non-Conformity and LGBTQ+ Identities in *Ìfẹ́* (2020)

ABSTRACT. This paper explores representations of gender non-conformity and LGBTQ+ identities in the Nigerian film *Ìfẹ́* (2020), directed by Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim. It investigates how the film challenges heteronormative norms prevalent in Nollywood through its narrative, aesthetics, and production strategies. By employing Queer Theory and Postcolonial Queer Theory, the study situates *Ìfẹ́* within the broader context of Nigerian sociopolitical constraints, cinematic traditions, and the politics of queer visibility. In a country where the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 criminalizes queer existence and expression, the film's emergence is both a cultural milestone and a political act of resistance. Through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement, the essay demonstrates how *Ìfẹ́* redefines cinematic language by embracing queer aesthetics-intimacy, softness, and vulnerability, subverting the harsh moralistic tone often used in Nigerian cinema to depict same-sex relationships. This study also interrogates how *Ìfẹ́* resists narrative closure; offering a nuanced portrayal of lesbian intimacy without punishment or moralization, thereby queering Nollywood's storytelling structure. The film's digital release, due to censorship from the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), signals a paradigm shift in distribution and accessibility for queer African cinema. This paper critically examines the film's cultural reception, both locally and internationally, and its implications for future cinematic representations of LGBTQ+ identities in Nigeria. Drawing on authoritative sources, including Butler, Halberstam, Gunkel, and Ekine, it positions *Ìfẹ́* as a case study in the growing body of queer African media that challenges colonial and postcolonial impositions on gender and sexuality. By highlighting how *Ìfẹ́* navigates visibility, censorship, and representation, the paper underscores the transformative power of cinema as a tool for advocacy, resistance, and social change. Ultimately, this study contributes to expanding the discourse on queer African storytelling and the reimagining of Nollywood as a space for inclusive narratives.

KEYWORDS: queer theory, Nollywood, LGBTQ+, gender non-conformity, *Ìfẹ́*, Nigerian cinema, heteronormativity

Introduction

Nollywood, Nigeria's prolific and globally influential film industry, serves as a dominant cultural force reflecting the nation's values, aspira-

tions, and contradictions. As a critical medium of popular culture, it has historically functioned to reinforce societal norms-particularly around gender and sexuality by reproducing patriarchal ideologies and privileging heteronormative identities. In mainstream Nollywood, representations of LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning) individuals have been rare, often reduced to comic relief, criminality, or tragic deviance. In such an environment, the 2020 film *Ìfẹ́*, directed by Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim and produced by Pamela Adie, represents a radical departure from normative cinematic traditions.

Ìfẹ́ is a bold, tender, and unapologetically queer narrative centering on the romantic relationship between two Nigerian women. The film's very existence challenges entrenched cultural taboos and legal prohibitions, making it a seminal text for interrogating the politics of representation in Nollywood. This paper explores how *Ìfẹ́* queers Nollywood by foregrounding queer desire and identity through its narrative strategies, visual aesthetics, and digital dissemination. It also considers the socio-political constraints the film navigates-particularly Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014), to offer insights into the risks and resistances involved in queer storytelling.

Statement of the Problem

Despite global advances in LGBTQ+ representation within media, Nollywood, Nigeria's dominant film industry, continues to exhibit a significant gap in inclusive storytelling due to socio-cultural, religious, and legal constraints. The portrayal of queer identities in Nigerian cinema remains rare, often limited to caricature, erasure, or silence. As Awuyah notes; "homosexuality in Nollywood narratives is either demonized or rendered invisible" (2020, p. 3). This reflects prevailing national ideologies that cast non-heteronormative expressions as morally deviant or criminal.

This systemic invisibility is reinforced by state-sponsored censorship and societal stigma. Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 criminalizes not only same-sex unions but also public expressions and representations of LGBTQ+ identities, thus "institutionalizing homophobia and legitimizing queer erasure in cultural production" (Ekine, 2013, p. 2). Within this context, the 2020 film *Ìfẹ́*, represents a radical departure from normative Nollywood storytelling by centering a queer female relationship in a society where such narratives are politically and culturally suppressed.

The film's release was met with significant resistance from regulatory bodies such as the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), which threatened to ban the film, claiming it "promotes homosexuality, which is against Nigerian law" (Omoniyi, 2020, p. 6). This response underscores the ongoing institutional barriers to LGBTQ+ visibility in Nigeria's media landscape. As queer theorist Judith Butler argues; "regulatory norms not only govern the intelligibility of gender, but also produce and constrain the very terms through which gender and sexuality are lived" (Butler, 1990, p. xxiv). In the case of Nigeria, such norms operate both legally and culturally to render queer existence illegible.

Despite these challenges, *Ifé* stands as a cinematic intervention that resists heteronormative dominance, offering a counter-narrative that validates queer identity and intimacy. However, there is a notable paucity of scholarly engagement with such groundbreaking works in Nigerian film studies. The problem, therefore, lies in the urgent need to critically examine how *Ifé* represents gender non-conformity and LGBTQ+ identities, and what this representation signifies within the larger discourse of queer visibility, censorship, and resistance in Nollywood. As Okafor notes, "queer cinema in Nigeria is not just about visibility, but about survival, resistance, and the politics of being seen" (2021, p. 14).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically examine the representation of gender non-conformity and LGBTQ+ identities in the Nigerian film *Ifé* (2020), within the broader context of Nollywood's heteronormative narrative traditions and Nigeria's socio-political climate. Nollywood has long been characterized by a "conservative moral framework that privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes or vilifies queer identities" (Awuyah, 2020, p. 4). Within this cinematic environment, *Ifé* emerges as a significant departure, offering what Okafor (2021) calls "a radical intervention in the culture of silence around queer lives in Nigeria" (p. 15). This study seeks to explore how *Ifé* challenges dominant cinematic norms, subverts cultural taboos, and contributes to queer visibility in a national context where "state censorship and religious conservatism conspire to render LGBTQ+ narratives illegitimate" (Ekine, 2013). By analyzing the film's narrative structure, character development, visual aesthetics, and public reception, this study aims to assess the extent to which *Ifé* functions as a form of cultural resis-

tance. As Butler (1993) asserts, “representation is not merely a reflection of reality, but a constitutive act that shapes what is culturally intelligible” (p. 2). In this light, *Ìfẹ̀* is examined not only as a filmic text but as an act of socio-political defiance and a transformative space for articulating queer identity within the constraints of contemporary Nigerian cinema.

Literature Review

Cinema has long functioned as a cultural mirror and ideological battleground, shaping, and reflecting social attitudes toward gender and sexuality. In global contexts, especially in Western media, the emergence of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s paved the way for more radical and authentic representations of LGBTQ+ identities (Rich, 1992). As Benshoff and Griffin (2006) argue, “film can both reflect and help shape public discourse about sexuality” (p. 3), highlighting its potential to reinforce or challenge dominant norms. However, while queer visibility has increased in Western media landscapes, this progress has not been evenly distributed across the globe. In African cinema, and particularly in Nollywood, queer narratives remain largely absent or stigmatized.

Nollywood, Africa’s largest film industry by volume, is shaped by deeply rooted cultural and religious values, which tend to affirm heteronormative ideologies. As Awuyah (2020) observes, “the majority of Nollywood films portray heterosexual relationships as the norm, and any deviation is framed as a threat to social stability” (p. 5). The widespread influence of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria has significantly impacted both the thematic direction and moral framing of film narratives. Characters coded as queer are frequently presented as comic relief, spiritual deviants, or morally corrupt, reinforcing societal prejudices. This omission or vilification contributes to what Stewart (2019) terms the “cinematic closet,” where queer identities are “either hidden, pathologized, or relegated to the margins of the narrative” (p. 22).

The suppression of LGBTQ+ representation in Nollywood is further reinforced by legal frameworks, most notably the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (SSMPA) of 2014. This law criminalizes not only same-sex unions but also “public shows of same-sex amorous relationships,” and by implication, their depiction in media (Nigeria SSMPA, 2014, Section 5). As Ekine (2013) notes, the SSMPA “institutionalizes homophobia and serves as a tool of cultural and political censorship,” making any public represen-

tation of queer identities a legal risk for artists and producers. Film regulatory bodies, such as the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), have upheld this position by threatening to ban any film that promotes LGBTQ+ themes. For instance, in response to *Ìfẹ́*, the NFVCB declared that “any film promoting homosexuality will not be approved for release” (Omoniyi, 2020, p. 6), demonstrating the systemic constraints placed on queer expression in Nigerian media.

Despite these challenges, a small but growing number of African filmmakers are using cinema to challenge the dominant narratives and advocate for LGBTQ+ visibility. As Hoad (2007) suggests, queer African cinema “emerges from a space of radical possibility, using art as a form of resistance against normative violence” (p. 142). In this context, *Ìfẹ́* (2020) functions as both a cinematic and political intervention. The film not only humanizes queer relationships but also resists the moral panic typically associated with LGBTQ+ discourse in Nigerian media. Okafor (2021) emphasizes that *Ìfẹ́* “represents a deliberate effort to reclaim queer narratives from erasure and offer a counter-discourse grounded in visibility, intimacy, and emotional realism” (p. 14).

In addition to its narrative focus on lesbian identity, *Ìfẹ́* also disrupts gender norms through its visual and stylistic choices. The film employs what scholars describe as “queer aesthetics”—non-linear storytelling, intimate framing, and emotional nuance—to destabilize conventional gender binaries (Doty, 1993, p. xvi). Characters in *Ìfẹ́* are not defined by stereotypical gender roles or performative femininity; instead, they engage in emotionally layered interactions that reflect the complexity of queer desire and resistance. According to Butler (1990), “gender is a performance that can be repeated, resisted, or reconfigured” (p. 33), and *Ìfẹ́* powerfully illustrates this reconfiguration by presenting characters whose identities defy rigid categorizations.

The emergence of queer-centered films like *Ìfẹ́* poses significant questions for Nollywood’s future. While the film has garnered international support and digital distribution outside Nigeria, its absence from local cinemas underscores the enduring barriers to queer storytelling in Nigeria. As Gunkel (2010) points out, “queer visibility without local accessibility risks reinforcing Western-centric frameworks of representation that may alienate the very communities it seeks to affirm” (p. 43). Thus, while *Ìfẹ́* represents a landmark achievement, it also highlights the need for broader structural and cultural shifts within Nigerian media industries and society.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is anchored in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Queer Theory. Queer theory provides the foundational perspective for this study. It interrogates the stability of gender and sexual categories, challenging heteronormative binaries and essentialist identities. According to Butler (1990), gender is “a performative act” and not a stable identity, but one continually produced and regulated through discourse and cultural norms (p. 33). In this sense, representations of gender non-conformity and queer desire in *Ìfé* can be viewed as disruptions of normative cinematic practices in Nollywood, which predominantly enforce binary gender roles and heterosexuality.

Furthermore, queer theory allows for an analysis of how *Ìfé* creates counter-narratives that destabilize dominant ideologies. Warner (1993) argues that “the politics of queer theory lie in its resistance to normalcy, not merely in the affirmation of difference” (p. xxvi). Thus, this study uses queer theory to explore how *Ìfé* does more than depict lesbian relationships—it actively resists the logic of marginalization and invisibility often imposed on queer subjects in Nigerian media.

Postcolonial Queer Theory interrogates the applicability of Western models of queerness to African contexts, insisting on the need to understand local expressions of same-sex desire within their unique cultural and historical frameworks. Gunkel (2010) argues that “queerness in Africa must be understood within local systems of meaning and power, rather than through Western paradigms” (p. 27). By locating *Ìfé* within Nigeria’s specific socio-cultural milieu while also engaging with global queer aesthetics, this paper examines how the film navigates tensions between local authenticity and transnational solidarity.

Nollywood has traditionally operated within a framework of moral instruction, where deviation from societal norms is punished. LGBTQ+ characters, when present, are often portrayed as corrupting influences or comedic caricatures. Nfah-Abbenyi (2005) notes that “the heterosexual matrix is deeply embedded in African cinematic narratives” (p. 113). This pattern reflects broader societal stigmatization, reinforced by religious dogma and colonial-era laws that continue to criminalize non-heteronormative identities.

Against this backdrop, *Ìfé*’s depiction of a lesbian relationship as legitimate, loving, and emotionally complex is groundbreaking. It resists the usual Nollywood tropes of queer erasure or vilification. Instead, the film

offers a nuanced portrayal of queer intimacy, challenging the cultural notion that same-sex love is un-African or morally corrupt.

Critical Reading of *Ìfẹ*

Ìfẹ, which translates to “love” in Yoruba, tells the story of *Ìfẹ* and Ad-aora, two women who meet, fall in love, and navigate the complexities of queer existence in a conservative society. Their story unfolds over a weekend, capturing the emotional depth, vulnerability, and tension that characterize their relationship. The film deliberately avoids the tropes of tragedy or moral punishment, often used to depict queer relationships, opting instead for a narrative rooted in love, choice, and resistance.

The film’s duration is approximately 37 minutes, classifying it as a short film, yet its impact has resonated globally. Produced by The Equality Hub, a Nigerian NGO advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, the film faced immediate censorship threats. According to Ikpe-Etim (2020), “We were told outright by the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) that our film would not be approved.” In response, the filmmakers chose to release the film digitally, subverting traditional distribution models and enabling access to both local and international audiences.

Ìfẹ employs a visual language that emphasizes emotional authenticity and relational intimacy. The film’s cinematography—characterized by warm lighting, close-ups, and domestic settings, invites the viewer into a private, safe space where queer love can unfold without judgment. Awoyemi (2021) observes that, “*Ìfẹ* presents queer love not as deviance, but as ordinary, human, and tender” (p. 6). The film’s aesthetic strategies contribute to its queering of Nollywood. Unlike traditional depictions that often eroticize or dehumanize LGBTQ+ characters, *Ìfẹ* humanizes them, creating a space where their love can be seen as valid and beautiful. This shift in visual storytelling is significant in challenging the visual regimes that uphold heteronormativity.

Narratively, *Ìfẹ* rejects the deterministic arcs common in Nollywood, where queer characters are punished or reformed. Instead, the film embraces ambiguity, refusing closure that would suggest conformity or redemption. This aligns with Halberstam’s (2005) notion of the “queer art of failure,” which resists traditional success narratives in favor of authenticity and vulnerability: “Failure allows us to escape the punishing norms of success and embrace alternative ways of being” (p. 88). By not resolving

its central conflict in a heteronormative way, *Ìfẹ* leaves space for interpretation, reflection, and identification. It allows queer viewers to see themselves not as victims or villains but as complex individuals capable of love and self-determination.

Adaora's character arc exemplifies Butler's theory of gender performativity. She navigates conflicting pressures from her family, religion, and personal desires, performing heterosexuality to maintain social acceptance. Her internal struggle reflects Butler's (1993) claim that "Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (p. 241). Throughout the film, Adaora struggles to reconcile her authentic desires with the rigid expectations imposed by her religious upbringing and conservative family. To maintain social acceptance, she performs heterosexuality, engaging in relationships with men and concealing her same-sex attraction. This aligns with Butler's (1993) argument that gender is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 33).

Adaora's relationship with *Ìfẹ* serves as a catalyst for her personal awakening. Unlike her past relationships, which were dictated by obligation and performative compliance, her connection with *Ìfẹ* is rooted in emotional truth, desire, and mutual vulnerability. *Ìfẹ* encourages Adaora to confront the dissonance between her inner self and the socially acceptable persona she has curated. This emotional confrontation is reflective of what Butler (1993) terms the "punitive consequences" of non-normative gender performance (p. 241), as Adaora is forced to consider the potential loss of familial support and religious belonging in exchange for self-authentication.

Despite her initial hesitation and internalized fear, Adaora ultimately chooses to embrace her love for *Ìfẹ*, an act that Butler (2004) might describe as "a critical rearticulation of the norms of gender and sexuality" (p. 8). This choice signals a defiant assertion of queer identity in a context that often demands erasure or silence. Her declaration of love is a powerful subversion of heteronormative scripts and a reclamation of agency. However, it also underscores the cost of visibility in a society where queer identities are frequently met with moral condemnation and legal invisibility. Adaora's journey in *Ìfẹ* is emblematic of the lived experiences of many queer Nigerians, for whom love becomes both a refuge and a radical political act. Through its portrayal of Adaora's inner conflict and eventual embrace of her sexuality, *Ìfẹ* contributes to the slow but growing body of Nollywood films that challenge dominant gender ideologies and make space for alternative narratives of love and identity.

Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014) criminalizes LGBTQ+ relationships and restricts advocacy and expression. This legal framework extends to the censorship of films, effectively silencing queer narratives in mainstream media. Ekine (2013) argues that, "digital media offers a lifeline for queer African narratives, allowing them to bypass state censorship" (p. 19). *Ifé*'s online release through YouTube and private screenings illustrates the use of digital tools to circumvent state control. This mode of distribution not only challenges state power but also fosters global solidarity, connecting Nigerian queer voices to a wider audience and affirming their right to representation.

Reception and Cultural Impact

Despite being banned from mainstream Nigerian cinemas due to its explicit depiction of a lesbian relationship, *Ifé* has garnered significant international acclaim and visibility. As BBC Africa (2020) reported, the film is "a landmark in the history of African queer cinema," marking a pivotal moment in Nollywood's engagement with LGBTQ+ themes. The Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) threatened legal action against its producers, citing the country's Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (2014), which criminalizes the promotion or public display of same-sex relationships. In response, the filmmakers strategically premiered the film online, thereby circumventing censorship and asserting their right to queer expression. The controversy surrounding *Ifé* ignited global conversations about artistic freedom, censorship, and the marginalization of queer voices in African media. According to Hassan, the film "has been praised not just for breaking taboos, but for its sensitive and honest portrayal of same-sex love" (2020). This has amplified discussions around the role of film in activism, particularly in contexts where LGBTQ+ rights are under threat. As director Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim explained, the goal was to create a narrative that "normalizes queer love and shows that it can be tender, consensual, and beautiful" (Okunowo, 2020), directly countering the stereotypes and erasure often found in mainstream Nigerian media.

Beyond its immediate reception, *Ifé* has inspired a wave of creatives, activists, and viewers to engage more boldly with LGBTQ+-affirming content. Its success has contributed to a slow but visible shift in cultural narratives. As Ikpe-Etim notes; "just the fact that this film exists challenges the structures that tell us our love is wrong" (BBC Africa, 2020). The film's

impact lies not only in its storyline but in its very act of resistance; its existence is a declaration that queer Nigerians are here, their stories matter, and their love is deserving of visibility and celebration.

The controversy surrounding *Ifé* ignited global conversations about artistic freedom, censorship, and the marginalization of queer voices in African media. According to Hassan, the film “has been praised not just for breaking taboos, but for its sensitive and honest portrayal of same-sex love” (2020). This has amplified international attention to the systemic erasure of LGBTQ+ narratives in Nigerian cinema and highlighted the urgent need for representational justice. Moreover, *Ifé* has become emblematic of a broader movement advocating for the cultural legitimacy of queer African identities, challenging both local legal frameworks and global assumptions about the invisibility of queerness on the continent.

Recommendation

In light of the findings that *Ifé* (2020) offers a groundbreaking departure from Nollywood’s conventional heteronormative narratives by centering queer voices and affirming gender non-conformity, several key recommendations are proposed:

Institutional Support for Inclusive Storytelling

Cultural and film institutions in Nigeria, including the Nigerian Film Corporation and the National Film and Video Censors Board, should be encouraged to adopt more inclusive frameworks that support the representation of marginalized identities. As queer visibility is a fundamental step toward social equity, regulatory bodies must shift from moralistic censorship to a rights-based approach that recognizes freedom of expression and diversity in storytelling.

Development of Alternative Distribution Channels

Given the barriers faced by LGBTQ+-themed films in traditional Nigerian markets, there is a critical need to strengthen independent and digital distribution networks that can bypass institutional gatekeeping. Online platforms and international film festivals can continue to serve as safe spaces for queer Nigerian cinema, while activists and creatives should col-

laborate to develop community-based screening initiatives that promote accessibility and dialogue within local contexts.

Protection and Empowerment of Queer Creatives

Policy advocates, human rights organizations, and international cultural partners should work to create legal and economic protections for LGBTQ+ filmmakers and actors, who often face violence, surveillance, and exclusion. The production of *Ìfẹ́* demonstrates that queer cinema in Nigeria is not only possible but thriving when supported by intentional advocacy. Creating funding mechanisms and safety networks will enable more creatives to produce without fear of legal retribution or social ostracization.

Further Academic and Cultural Research

Scholars, particularly within African gender and media studies, are encouraged to expand the body of work on queer African cinema. More nuanced, intersectional studies are needed to explore how gender non-conformity and sexuality intersect with class, religion, and ethnicity within Nigerian cinematic representations. As Gunkel (2010) asserts; “the emergence of queer visual cultures in Africa is both a site of contestation and a potential ground for rethinking African modernity” (p. 47).

Conclusion

Ìfẹ́ queers Nollywood by reimagining the representation of LGBTQ+ identities and challenging the visual and narrative conventions that have historically marginalized them. Through its aesthetics, storytelling, and distribution, the film defies the constraints of Nigeria’s legal and cultural environment, asserting a bold new vision for queer African cinema.

This study affirms that *Ìfẹ́* is more than a love story; it is a cultural intervention that opens new possibilities for representation, empathy, and resistance. As more films like *Ìfẹ́* emerge, they contribute to an evolving cinematic language that reflects the diversity of African identities and experiences. In doing so, they challenge the dominant ideologies of exclusion and create space for a more inclusive and just cultural landscape.

The example set by *Ìfẹ́* marks a critical intervention in Nollywood’s trajectory. However, lasting transformation will depend on the sustained

efforts of artists, institutions, educators, and audiences to challenge exclusionary norms and foster a more equitable cinematic landscape where diverse identities, including queer and gender-nonconforming Nigerians, are seen, heard, and celebrated.

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