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Romance, love and gender in times of crisis: HIV/AIDS in Kenyan popular fiction

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of HIV/AIDS has changed how society perceives and deals with issues of sex, sexuality, and gender. The writers studied in this thesis raise important questions pertaining to HIV/AIDS and gender, love, romance, sex and sexuality in present day Kenya. Their writing demonstrates that HIV/AIDS has changed the ways in which people understand these issues. This thesis sought to explore, through an analysis of fiction, how human social behaviour has been affected by a pandemic disease. The changes in sexual and gender relationships that are reflected in this literature points at "emergent cultures of sexuality". For instance, the literature clearly shows that both men and women in contemporary Kenya are confronted by an urgent need to change their sexual behaviour whether in monogamous or polygamous relationships, hence a change in the power matrix between men and women. Practices to do with pleasure seeking and the satisfaction of desire, male domination of gender relationships, notions of masculinity among other social and cultural practices and beliefs are affected in extreme ways. In some cases, these practices and beliefs are undermined and subverted whilst in other cases they are reinforced. What these social and sexual dynamics suggest is that human society is being revolutionized by the HIV/AIDS phenomenon. Therefore, this study looks at how popular discourses about sexuality, romance and gender have been (re)appropriated and (re)articulated by popular literature in Kenya within the context of HIV/AIDS. The thesis examines how discourses on romance are employed to re-imagine social and sexual behaviour as a means to control and contain the spread of HIV/AIDS. My analysis demonstrates that popular fiction is capable of representing the hidden realities of sex, sexuality, romance and gender that individuals face daily in a way that other forms of expression and media cannot. The examples of HIV/AIDS fiction examined here give readers a better understanding of the effects of the disease on society through the various stories that different characters in the novels tell. These stories also play an important role in the creation of urgently needed and socially relevant meaning with regard to HIV/AIDS. The popular text, in the context of HIV/AIDS, makes an important contribution to cultural production because it comments on and more importantly, offers possibilities of re-imagining and re-creating new forms and practices of social and sexual behaviour in present-day Kenyan society.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

_____ _____

Name of candidate Signature

_____ day of _____ 2005

Dedicated to
Matilda

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