Rafiki (2018): Black Joy and Queer Joy as Resistance

Isabella Saracco, Stanford University ’23

Abstract: This paper discusses *Rafiki* (2018)’s use of story and stylistic elements to highlight black and queer joy as an act of resistance. *Rafiki* offers a surprising reversal of tragedy, heightening the audience's sense of hope as their expectations are subverted. The film also makes use of stylistic elements, such as color and music, to emphasize the viewer's sense of joy. Birds appear throughout the film as a symbol of hope. Finally, the gaze in the film is given to a queer black woman, reclaiming the gaze from the heterosexual white male.

Rafiki (2018) is a Kenyan film directed by Wanuri Kahiu and based on the Ugandan short story "Jambula Tree" by Monica Arac de Nyeko (MacArthur, 2020). Despite receiving much critical acclaim, and becoming the first Kenyan film to screen in the Un Certain Regard program at the Cannes Film Festival, the film was banned in Kenya by the Kenya Film Classification Board (Cooper, 2019, p. 21). Ezekiel Mutua, the head of the Kenya Film Classification Board at the time of the ban, stated that his issue with the film was its positive portrayal of same-sex relationships. He had asked Kahiu to change the ending of the film in order to have *Rafiki* shown legally, stating that the ending created by Kahiu "wasn't remorseful enough" (MacArthur, 2020). Obviously, Kahiu did not agree to do so, and the film was banned. The message at the heart of the film — and the reason why the film was banned — was one of black and queer joy. *Rafiki* reinforces this message through its subversion of the Romeo and Juliet story and the viewers' expectations of tragedy, its use of color and music, its refusal to depict the central relationship in a negative light, and its use of a black queer gaze.

Rafiki (2018) follows the story of a young woman living in Nairobi named Kena. Kena Mwaura often spends her free time skate-boarding across the city, playing soccer with her friends, or hanging out with her friend Blacksta at the local soda shop, run by notorious gossip Mama Atim. Kena's father is running in the local election against Mr. Okemi, and is expecting a son with his new wife. Her mother is shown to be a deeply religious woman who attends church religiously. Kena, who is drawn to Mr. Okemi's daughter, Ziki, quickly begins to flirt with the other girl, and the two of them enter into a friendship and eventual romance. As their relationship deepens, they fear discovery due to both their family rivalry and the homophobia of those around them. Upon the discovery of their relationship, Ziki is sent to live in London as the Okemis want to separate the two girls. Years later, Kena works as a doctor in a hospital in Nairobi. Ziki, who has returned to Kenya for the first time since leaving for London, goes to find Kena. Kena greets Ziki with a smile, hopeful music plays, and then the credits roll.

Rafiki sets up an impossible love story, caused in part by the rivalry between the families of Kena and Ziki and in part by the same-sex nature of their love. The feud between the two families is constantly referenced by characters throughout the film, and the viewer cannot help but to be reminded of another famous set of fictional lovers who are kept apart by their families' rivalry — Romeo and Juliet (Cooper, 2019, p. 21). Kena is often asked by the film's other characters, especially the notorious gossip Mama Atim, if her father knows that she is spending time with Mr. Okemi's daughter. The consistent references to her father's inevitable negative reaction create a sense of suspense, as it begins to seem inevitable that Mr. Mwaura will learn the truth. This inevitability primes the viewer to expect a reckoning for the characters, which, given the allusion to Romeo and Juliet's story, seems as if it will be a tragic one.

Of course, the truth eventually comes out; Kena's father responds with anger and confusion when he learns that Kena and Ziki have become 'friends' and are spending time together. It is not, however, the tragic reckoning that the viewer has come to expect. Kena's father simply reacts with an angry lecture, and then drops the issue. The tragedy that seems inherent to Kena and Ziki's love story is deliberately subverted, both here and through the ending

of the film. By alluding to Shakespeare's tragedy but then not replicating it, the film purposefully surprises the viewer and makes the message of the film more powerful. Yet the family feud is only one of the challenges keeping Kena and Ziki apart. The more pressing problem, for the characters and perhaps the audience as well, is the way in which the characters' queerness will affect other characters' understanding of them.

The negative sentiments that other characters hold about homosexuality are constantly brought to the viewer's attention. Kena's friends, led by Blacksta, often ridicule one of the men in their community who is known to be gay. A cut across his check is implied to be the scar of some sort of hate crime, suggesting that the same could happen to the film's two leads if they are discovered (Osinubi, 2019). In the moments leading up to the film's climax, the pastor delivers an impassioned speech on the evils of gay marriage. Kena's mother's views on homosexuality are also implied through her deeply Christian nature and her joy when she first sees Kena, who often dresses masculinely, in a dress. The leading characters themselves feel the impossibility of having their relationship be publicly and safely known; Ziki laments to Kena at several moments in the film about their inability to have something "real" that means anything outside of the two of them. The difficulty of keeping their relationship secret is also emphasized by Mama Atim's watchful eye, who will certainly not hesitate to share any knowledge that she has.

Any understanding of a building tragedy would only be augmented by the viewers previous understanding of films involving same-sex relationships. Media depicting homosexual relationships is certainly disproportionately tragic (Osinubi, 2019). In the context of Kenyan film and life specifically, this sense would have only been exacerbated. The hopeful ending of *Rafiki* can be found in "a very small number of [Kenyan] films" (Johnstone, 2020, p. 44). Furthermore, a homosexual relationship "could mean death… [it] resounds, in Kenya, with danger and the possibility of tragedy" (Cooper, 2019, p. 21). Additionally, *Rafiki* was banned in Kenya specifically for its less-than-tragic ending and refusal to focus on queer suffering. Another unstated reason for its banning was the fact that both characters were African, and that queerness was thus being depicted as something that could be African too. Queer films with happy endings had been legally shown in Kenya before *Rafiki*'s release, but queer films about Africans had not (MacArthur, 2020). For queer Africans in the audience, both the story and the context of its release would have sent the message that a happy ending was possible for people like them.

On the subject of joy and pain in African cinema, Kahiu stated that "There's a friend of mine who says you don't want to wake up in the morning and watch an African film. And what she meant was, African films have been known to be so devastating and so heartbreaking, you're [watching them] almost as if it's tax. And that phrase really stuck with me because it's so curious that we've been linked to a continent of pain given if you look into our traditions, our art, our ways of expression…We need to remember our roots and we need to remember our joy in the way that we depict ourselves. That, to me, has become my life's mission. To make sure that everything that I do has hope and joy in it so that I can show that we are a people of hope and joy." (MacArthur, 2020). The joy in *Rafiki*, as in Kahiu's art more broadly, is a resistance to the idea that African films must be joyless. Kahiu purposefully highlights the joy that can be found

in life and in Africa specifically in her film. Her film is a reminder and celebration of joy which proudly defies previously established narratives, loudly proclaiming the possibility of black queer joy.

Yet this proclamation of joy does not come out of nowhere. *Rafiki* is at its heart a joyous film, something that is made clear through many of the film's stylistic elements, especially in its use of color and music (Osinubi, 2019). The opening sequence of the film sets the tone. The opening credits are interspersed with colorful shots of the city and of Kena skateboarding to visit her friend Blacksta. The credits themselves are colorful as well, full of cheerful shades of pinks, greens, yellows, and blues. They are accompanied by photos of the cast, with equally cheerful doodles of scribbles and lines in happy, bright colors overlaid on top of the photos. Other equally joyous images such as flowers often appear next to the credits. The entire sequence is accompanied by a bright pop song. With this opening sequence, the film is proclaiming its resistance to the popular idea that films about Africa need to be dark (MacArthur, 2020) — something that this film will continuously resist in both darkness' literal and figurative meanings. The tone at the opening of the film creates a world in which the film's happy ending is possible.

This is not the only moment of unapologetic joy to be found in the film. When Kena and Ziki go on their first date, the film shows the sequence as a montage, with soft romantic music playing in the background. The chorus of the song that plays, "Ignited" by Mumbi Kasumba, features the lyrics, "If there is a reason for love / It's you who ignites this heart." This montage is one of only two instances in which there is non-diegetic music in the film, making the use of music here more notable. The romantic tone and lyrics of the song create both a sense of joy, as well as a sense of queer love being a positive occurrence. Additionally, the characters' happiness is made obvious through their mannerisms, and the joy that pervades the scene is made more apparent through the bright colors that surround the characters throughout this sequence, especially the neon colors of the dance that they attend. These elements help build the sense throughout the scene that queer joy is possible and positive.

The positive portrayal of same-sex love can also been seen in the recurring imagery of birds in the film. Throughout the film, there are several shots looking up toward birds in the sky. One notable example of this is the scene in which Kena and Ziki go onto the roof of a building together. The black silhouettes of the birds in the sky contrast sharply against the bright pinks and blues of the sky — the same pinks and blues of Ziki's hair. The birds are appropriately prominent in this scene; Ziki discusses her desire to leave Kenya and live a life elsewhere. Throughout the scene, the camera cuts back to the birds multiple times, forcing the viewer to remember their presence. The similar color of the sky and of Ziki's hair tie her to the birds, highlighting her desire to 'fly away' (i.e. her desire for freedom) and her longing for something more. But the shots of birds throughout the film, and in this scene especially, can also be seen to represent the relationship between Kena and Ziki, and the ways in which Ziki uplifts Kena.

In the scene immediately following this one, Kena's mother confronts her about the 'friendship' between the two girls. Her mother is thrilled that Kena is spending time with someone like Ziki, who has the privilege and power attached to the Okemi name, and encourages

her to keep spending time with the other girl as "people like the Okemis will lift you up." Ziki does "lift [Kena] up", though not in the way Kena's mother expects. Later in the film, when Kena appears to her mother wearing a dress, her mother comments that the only thing that would make her happier would be if Kena found a rich doctor to marry. Kena's mother expects her daughter to find success only by attaching herself to someone else successful, rather than by her own accomplishments.

During the scene on the roof, Kena, who starts the film with the goal of becoming a nurse after graduating, is told by Ziki to dream bigger and to consider becoming a doctor. At the end of the film, we see that this new dream has come true — Kena works as a doctor in a Kenyan hospital. A handheld shot of the birds in the sky that then cuts back to Kena looking out towards them informs the viewers that these birds are meaningful to her specifically. In this way, the birds, which appear flying surrounded by pinks and blues — colors heavily associated with Ziki — are symbolic of the ways in which Kena's dreams are encouraged by Ziki. In this way, queer love is also portrayed to be something positive, which changed Kena and her life for the better. It is something triumphant, something that is ultimately worth the struggles the characters have to endure throughout the course of the story.

This beauty of queer love is also found in the stylistic elements of the scene where Kena and Ziki talk on the roof. This scene, like the rest of the film, is told from Kena's perspective. The opening sequence of *Rafiki* indicates that it is Kena who holds the gaze, as the viewer follows her through the city and sees the sites she sees on her journey. Kena's gaze is perhaps more present in the scene upon the roof than any other in the movie, due to the emotions that pervade it which could only belong to her. The scene features intimate close-ups of Ziki's face, which is partially obscured by the bright sunlight at her back, halolike. The audio and visuals that play throughout the scene do not always occur contemporaneously, giving the scene a dreamlike quality. The overall effect is to give the scene, as well as the romance presented within it, an element of divinity. In portrayals of queer love, this element of divinity is radical, and helps to support the film's overall presentation of queer love as positive and joyous.

The importance of Kena's possession of the gaze throughout the film should not be ignored. This 'power of looking' has often been given to a heterosexual white male, distorting the 'world' of these films through this lens. The pleasure of looking is something that is given to those who hold the gaze and can subject others to their desire, and is something that has traditionally excluded women, especially black women (hooks, 1992, p. 116). As a result, black women develop an "oppositional gaze" that removes issues of race and gender from the viewing experience in order to make filmgoing a palatable and even pleasurable experience (hooks, 1992, p. 122). The oppositional gaze is a power that is reclaimed from a society which views black bodies as object, not subject, that dictates that the power of looking must be 'taken' as an act of resistance. *Rafiki*'s use of Kena's gaze instead gives black queer women the pleasure of looking (Johnstone, 2020, p. 46), therefore removing the need for this oppositional gaze. *Rafiki* makes black womanhood subject, not object, therefore freely gives the power of looking to these individuals. Queer women are both looked at as objects of desire and given the power to do the

looking. In a world in which Kena and Ziki feel that they are unable to freely express their longing for one another, much of the characters' desire for each other is communicated through their gaze. The use of gaze empowers both the characters and the idea of queerness throughout the film, creating a world that is told from a queer black point of view.

Rafiki earns the message of joy for which it was banned through its understanding of audience expectations and use of color, music, and character. By using the audience's expectations to subvert a sense of impending tragedy, the idea of joy becomes shocking and gains greater power. The continuous use of bright color and music throughout the film helps to reinforce and prime the idea of joy. The ways in which the characters are allowed to grow as a byproduct of their love for each other, notably the ways in which Ziki's belief in Kena helps bring Kena to success, reinforces visions of queer love as positive. The use of Kena's gaze helps the viewer see their love as something divine. When asked about the role of joy in the film, Kahiu spoke of her understanding of joy as something with political power, stating that minorities "have to see ourselves as people of joy" in order to resist popular narratives that constantly place minorities in positions of suffering (MacArthur, 2020). *Rafiki* is a love letter to the resistance of joy, an embrace of black queer joy that thoroughly permeates its being.

References

hooks, bell. “The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992): 115-31.

Cooper, R. R. (2019) ‘Hope’s High Stakes “RAFIKI”’, *Commonweal*, 1 June, p. 21-22.

Johnstone, Lyn. 2020. “Queer Worldmaking in Wanuri Kahiu’s Film Rafiki.” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 33 (September): 39–50. DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1816931.

Kahiu, Wanuri. *Rafiki*. 2018.

MacArthur, Julie. “Utopias, joy, and the law: an Interview with Wanuri Kahiu.” August 31, 2020. https://africasacountry.com/2020/08/banned-utopias-joy-and-the-law.

Osinubi, Taiwo Adetunji. 2019. “Queer Subjects in Kenyan Cinema: Reflections on Rafiki.” *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 5 (1): 70–77. DOI: 10.1080/23277408.2019.1586311.