

Feeling and Finding: An Exploration of the Self, Sensuality and Sexuality for African Women in Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women*

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Abstract

This review explores the varying experiences of self-discovery, sensuality and sexuality for African women through a reading of Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women*. Drawing on the stories of African women in this book, along with my own lived experiences as a queer, polyamorous and pansexual African woman, I engage the ways that women navigate the constraints of patriarchy and societal expectations while claiming and moulding their own paths to sexual autonomy, pleasure and liberation.

Keywords: African women, sexuality, sensuality, queerness, resistance.

Introduction

Moments before attending Johannesburg Pride, I sat, wine glass in hand, incense burning and Lia Butler's *Imimangaliso* playing in the background. Beside me sat my partner's lover and in front of me, my lover crouched with their hands adorning our knees, basking in the spirituality and poetry of this connection. In this moment, I think about how revolutionary this love I have cultivated is. I ponder how it must look so unfamiliar to external eyes in a growingly conservative South Africa, despite its progressive constitution. I think about the politics and resistance of my own being— a gender queer, polyamorous and pansexual young African woman. I was never going to, nor meant to be orthodox. My existence and that of others like me always occupies a default deviance. This is a realisation strummed in my mind repeatedly in the pages of Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's powerful collection: *The Sex Lives of African Women*.

In this book, Sekyiamah, an award-winning Ghanaian blogger, feminist and queer writer, weaves together interviews conducted with African women from 31 countries, detailing their intimate and individual experiences of sex, sexuality and relationships. These stories powerfully depict the varying ways that African women navigate and negotiate parameters and norms that restrict and confine their sexual autonomy, pleasure and liberation. In this paper, to stay true to the spirit and feel of the text, I scatter glimpses of my own life along with some of the most resonant accounts of the African women captured in the book to provide a snapshot of the politics, resistance, poetry and nuance that Sekyiamah's book encapsulates. The book is divided into three segments titled "Self-discovery," "Freedom" and "Healing," with each segment consisting of several African women's experiences.

The queerness of self-discovery

I thought the first section of the book stayed true to its title by unveiling an incredibly powerful theme regarding the queerness of self-discovery. This book boldly demonstrates that despite the weight of a cisheterosexual and patriarchal world, there are African women who continue to defiantly resist confinement and carve out their own spaces, claiming or reclaiming their [queer] identities. Sekyiamah begins this segment by powerfully stating that:

It is imperative to break out of the boxes circumscribed by society in order to discover one's self and the multitudes we hold within us. This requires practicing an audacious form of bravery, and often requires one to go against the grain of everything that has been presented as the norm (Sekyiamah 2021, 5).

Reflecting on my own queerness, I would say that I did not become queer because I have always been so. Although my first same-sex love was unearthed in high school, I always thought of myself as queer. When I realised that I had fallen in love with my best friend, the disorientation that I felt was not from the realisation of queerness but because of the possibility of complicating a cherished friendship. It would take the peering eyes and the subtle, yet weighty scrunts from other people, including my father, to propel me into the realisation that my queer identity was held in contempt in the larger society. My queerness never sat uncomfortably within me but always felt sacred and innately powerful. Despite the contempt, I always felt compelled to be authentically

queer— to love the women and queer folk I would come to love deeply and passionately regardless of the risk or the disapproval.

The stories in this book tell the tale of women's exploration and discovery of queerness, kink, and polyamory; experiences that are often deemed taboo. What was particularly powerful for me was the vigour and frankness with which these women could speak about their sexual and intimate lives— which is seldom a privilege afforded to African women. Patriarchy, white supremacy, anti-blackness, religious and cultural conservatism, among many other systems of power, often conspire to silence African women's agency and autonomy, particularly when it comes to openly claiming and expressing sexual experiences and desires. This book is a tender and formidable resistance against this. For instance, one of the women, Helen, steps into the world of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission and Sadomasochism), polyamory and queerness after years of devoting herself to motherhood, while another, Keisha— who grew up influenced by Catholicism— gradually comes to explore her attraction to activist women and claim a pansexual identity (Sekyiamah 2021).

These and many other stories in the book draw a thread of queering of self-discovery. By queer, I do not mean sexual attraction or sexual orientation, but the forging of a path that goes against the grain of expectations imposed on African women. On this, I think of bell hooks' account of queerness, of which she says:

I identify myself as queer past gay. I came up with this with one of my white colleagues, lesbian colleagues, where we were saying that all of our lives, we've experienced ourselves as queer, as not belonging as the essence of queer. ... Queer not as being about who you are having sex with, that can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live (hooks, 2014).

In this section, Sekyiamah includes the narratives of African women who resist and reject the confines imposed by society that are particularly stringent for African women on the continent and in the diaspora.

Sensuality, sexuality and spirituality

This was my favourite aspect that unfurled throughout the book. There is a particular memory that remains embedded in my mind. When I was younger—in one of the catechism classes I attended on an early Sunday morning—we were explicitly warned about the sinfulness of masturbation. "God is always watching," the catechism teacher emphasised. This rhetoric continued to mar my relationship with self-pleasure and sexuality generally. My own beautifully tumultuous spiritual journey of becoming *igqirha* or a healer according to isiXhosa cultural rites, as well as my forays into decolonial theory and African [spiritual] history, helped facilitate a necessary and wholesome healing from the religious conditioning that had triggered sexual trauma and anxiety within me. Through immersing myself in African spirituality, I learned to embrace sensuality and eroticism. I think about various African spiritual deities in various ethnic and cultural spaces— Mami Wata, Yemaya, Oshun and Hathor, among countless others—who, to me, embody sensuality and eroticism. I think that one of the many ruptures of colonialism and Christian conversion was the demonisation of the sensual and sexual connection that African women had, particularly in the realm of spirituality.

Sekyiamah's book also felt like a resistance to this colonial and patriarchal devaluation of African spiritual sensuality and sexuality. There are stories that reflect my own experience with Christian conditioning and purity culture which oftentimes affects women's ability to experience sexual/sensual pleasure and desire without shame. For instance, Bibi, a Nigerian woman who was a member of an evangelic church, says, "but there were always these voices in my head: this is a moment of no return. Once you have sex it is done. You can go to hell for this. You are now officially a scarlet woman. You have broken one of the laws of God and that's not okay" (Sekyiamah 2021, 51). This account speaks to the sexual anxiety that Christian conditioning injects into the psyches of African women specifically.

These stories show the ways coloniality, patriarchy and Christianity work to reinforce silencing, particularly of African women regarding claiming and expressing sexuality and sensuality. More importantly, they show the resilience of indigenous African spirituality as a framework that allows for the

reclamation and reinvigoration of the sexual and sensual essence of African women, especially in line with African spiritual cosmology.

Queer resistance: Claiming queerness in conservative settings

Several of my lovers have asked why it is that I struggle to comfortably walk hand in hand with them in public settings. The truth is that I live in a perpetual state of alertness, fearing that the simple act of holding my partner's hand risks making my queer lover and me hyper visible to possible queerphobic violation. Although the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution, celebrated as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, explicitly protects the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, I am haunted by the violence that continues to be visited upon queer individuals in the country. The stories of Zoliswa Nkonyane and Eudy Simelane—lesbian women murdered merely for daring to be openly queer—never leave my waking mind. Their memories resurface in my mind especially when I visibly claim queerness and hold my lover's hand as we navigate the busy streets of Johannesburg.

In Sekyiamah's book, *Ebony's* story reflects this fear embedded within me. She recounts,

I've been engaged three times. The first time was to a woman. I was still very young at that time, and although we were in love, it was too hard to fight for our love. On paper, South Africa has one of the most progressive LGBTQI legislations. The reality is different. We were constantly told that we were unAfrican and evil. Lesbian women were being constantly killed and raped (Sekyiamah 2021, 58).

I frequently hold space and solidarity for queer individuals in other African countries, recognising that the fears I experience in a country with legal protection and same-sex marriage are likely magnified for queer folk in countries without such protections and legal frameworks. Despite the fear that persists, there is also bravery and resistance. What I am particularly appreciative of about Sekyiamah's book is its celebration of the boldness from African women who claim and embrace queerness even within conservative and often queerphobic settings. I think it is necessary for us to see glimpses of queer resistance around the continent rather than always strife, violence and

death. On this, I am reminded of Audre Lorde's poem, *A Litany for Survival*, in which she says:

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So, it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive. (Lorde 2020, 407)

Sekyiamah aptly titles the segment that speaks most to queer resistance and courage to live authentically queer— *Freedom*, declaring,

The women featured in this segment show that there are many ways to be free in sexual relationships. It's no accident that the vast majority of women featured are from the lesbian, bisexual and trans community; and/or practice polyamory. These are women who have resisted societal norms of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy and have searched both within and without for other ways of practising love (Sekyiamah 2021, 121).

The healing capacity of sexuality and sensuality for African women

The final section of Sekyiamah's book is aptly titled "Healing." This was perhaps the most bittersweet aspect of the book—doing the work of confronting and healing from trauma. Different forms of trauma—parental trauma, sexual trauma, romantic trauma and grief—have compounded within my body, creating what I feel is a stiffness. One of the hardest lessons that I have had to learn is that trauma cannot be swiftly bypassed. It has come up in my most intimate moments in ways that have caused a disconnect between my body and mind. To begin confronting and healing these traumas that emerge in my own sexual and sensual experiences, I have had to immerse myself in various self-care practices that allow me to reconnect with my own body and help me move beyond the trauma-induced stiffness. Beyond self-care, I have had to be particularly selective about whom I trust enough to be vulnerable

with in intimate settings. This exercise of agency, which Sekyiamah captures beautifully, has been a healing mechanism in itself.

The book contains several stories that delve into the various traumas that African women experience, such as sexual, emotional and physical abuse. These accounts were often difficult to read, yet the ways that the women articulated overcoming them felt so beautifully poignant. One of the stories that moved me to tears was that of Mariam Gebre, an Ethiopian woman. She details how she was only able to reckon with being sexually abused as a child when she began working with migrant women in the USA. She says,

The first time I began to acknowledge that I was molested as a child was at my first job working in a women's centre in the US. A lot of the women who came there were refugees, or students from other countries. They shared stories of molestation and rape. I used to sit there, listen and weep. I was crying for myself (Sekyiamah 2021, 219-220).

Through these stories, Sekyiamah captures the deeply layered journeys of African women in their bid to reclaim their bodies after traumatic experiences. From these narratives, I have gained the valuable insight that perhaps healing is not meant to be about completely erasing or ignoring the scars and afflictions of any kind of trauma or violence, nor is it about exacting revenge. Instead, a necessary part of healing requires the facilitation of ways to return to yourself and value and cherish your own body, mind and spirit. Healing is also about holding this self-worth as a standard when engaging others romantically, sexually and sensually. Healing, as Sekyiamah's book indicates, is a complex and ongoing journey towards reclaiming wholeness as African women.

Conclusion

Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women* is not simply a collection of personal stories, but a powerful testament to the complexities in the experiences of black and African women across the continent and the globe. Various stories in the book speak to myriad aspects of these experiences. The most central aspects in my life that these accounts spoke to have been self-discovery, sensuality and spirituality, queerness, non-monogamy, resistance and healing from trauma. This book underscores the importance of allowing African women spaces to openly and honestly confront desire and distress in a

world that often marginalises and silences black and African women. I am incredibly grateful to have stumbled upon it in the tender whirlwind of navigating young adulthood.

References

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