

FILM REVIEW

OLIVIER JOURDAIN (director), *Sacred Water*, Nameless Productions 2017.

Sacred Water, a film directed by Olivier Jourdain, examines female sexuality in Rwanda, particularly focusing on the coveted and mysterious ‘water’ that is sometimes released during female ejaculation and the role this has on traditional culture in this country. The film presents a fascinating perspective on sexuality, the female body and gender roles in Rwanda. The central personality of *Sacred Water* is Vestine, a woman who talks on a radio show and promotes dialogue surrounding this topic over the radio, in rural villages and in schools. Her exuberant screen presence gives the film a light-hearted atmosphere that renders more accessible what, in other situations, might be regarded as material difficult to present to a wide audience.

An important aspect of this film is how it promotes dialogue about the female body and sexuality. It celebrates the production of water as a way for women to experience pleasure and enjoyment from their bodies. This has important implications when examined in light of issues of sex and gender. Simone de Beauvoir is credited with developing the idea that one is not born a woman but becomes one (Butler 1986). This was taken further by other philosophers and anthropologists like Butler (ibid.), who emphasized that biology does not equal destiny, and Moore (1999), who described the role of performance in the generation of both identity and gender. *Sacred Water* incorporates these ideas by suggesting that the production of water contributes to a person becoming a woman. It is a part of their identity, something that young girls aspire to by incorporating traditional practices into their lives, such as lengthening their labia, in order to increase the amount of water they can produce. This reflects how body modification can be regarded as a type of performance that contributes to gender identity (Moore ibid.). Thus, this film is an interesting representation of how gender and biology can intersect and influence one another. With regard to gender roles, this film both pushes the boundaries of traditional gender norms and reinforces others. Despite its overall focus on the female body, much of the discussion of the production of water focuses on how it gives pleasure to men. In interviews during the movie, it is described how being able to elicit this form of orgasm is thought of as a way of expressing one’s masculinity and sexual prowess. Women discuss the importance of producing water, not just for their own pleasure, but for the pleasure of their husband or partner. Yet, on the other hand, it encourages men to take an active role in ensuring that a women orgasms and

produces water, thus putting the responsibility for a woman's pleasure in their own hands. Portraying these different perspectives is a strength of Jordain's film, for it emphasizes the complexity of sexuality, especially as these topics come to be more talked about, rather than regarded as taboo subjects.

The focus on the female orgasm can be examined in stark contrast to the more usual topics relating to women and sexuality in Africa, such as female genital mutilation. Bringing to the forefront a different sexual perspective is vital to understanding the heterogeneity that exists throughout the vast continent of Africa. However, the film may also run the risk of over-sexualizing its subjects, emphasizing physicality in a way that has the potential to add to existing stereotypes regarding the body of the African woman. This is perhaps especially apparent during scenes where there is an emphasis on sound and movement, scenes that feature traditional dancers and the movements of people's mouths as they create rhythmic noises which make it impossible not to focus on the physical element of the subjects. This is combined with images of running water in the native Rwandan landscape that integrate the environment with the culture while also drawing attention to the base biological function being discussed. However, being aware of the stereotypes that might be strengthened by this film does not detract from its value but instead emphasizes the need for more dialogue and discussion about female sexuality and the woman's body in society.

In *Sacred Water*, Olivier Jourdain has taken a complex and deeply personal topic and made it accessible. He has opened the door to discussion about what being a woman, and what being a man, entails in Rwandan society. It represents a fascinating foray into sexuality, showing in particular how traditional customs and beliefs are affected by twenty-first century views and ideals.

REFERENCES

- Butler, J. 1986. Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, *Yale French Studies*, 72, 35-49.
- Moore, H.L. 1999. Whatever happened to men and women? Gender and other crises in anthropology, in H.L. Moore (ed.), *Anthropological theory today*, Oxford: Polity Press, 151-171.

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