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Mfone Nde-Zama

Just Another Woman: A Play with an Introduction by Peter Suh Tangie

Cameroon (2008)

TAGS: African Traditions



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General information	
Title of the work	Just Another Woman: A Play with an Introduction by Peter Suh Tangie
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Mfone Nde-Zama, *Just Another Woman*. Bamenda: African Educational Press, 2008, 60 pp. (soft cover)
ISBN	9956330515
Genre	Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Play*, Problem plays
Target Audience	Young adults (Especially female)
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Creators



Mfone Nde-Zama , b. 1967
(Author)

Mfone Nde-Zama is a native of Mankon, Mezam Division in the North-West region of Cameroon. He holds a B.A. Degree in English languages studies and a Minor in Theatre Arts from the University of Buea, Cameroon. In his long career as a language teacher in secondary schools, he has taught English Literature, English Language and Religious Studies. He also loves creative writing, and has directed the performance of this present play in several places in Cameroon. His creative writings center on the problems that children and young adults face with tradition as they grow up to face the challenges of urban life.

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Additional information

Summary

Just Another Woman is a play about children's rights – a topic which frightens most traditional parents in Cameroon/Africa who think that the modern child is stubborn, bad and rotten with no hope for redemption. The fears of such parents (and they are many of them in the traditional communities in Cameroon) stem from the fact that they think old customs and traditions that they hold dear and see as the best way of life are threatened. The author challenges this old-fashion mentality because he believes that forced and early marriages, practised in Cameroonian rural communities, damage young girls physically and psychologically. These girls rather need education so that they can contribute positively to society.

The play revolves around a beautiful and hardworking young girl called Engwari*, who grows up in a village community with her parents (peasant farmers) and twin brother, called Ngoh. As both children go to school, Engwari does not realize that her parents had "pledged" her for marriage since the day when she was born. She comes to know about this when she gets a scholarship of 50,000 Franc CFA (approximately $100) that will buy her books and pay her fees, money that her parents can never afford to pay. When she comes back from school and informs her parents about this piece of good news, she is surprised that the latter is very unhappy about it. She is very sad about this and cannot understand her parents' reaction. As she inquires further, she realizes that she had been a betrothed child from birth to the family of Pah Mbah**. Therefore, all along, she was seen by her own parents as a future wife to one of Pah Mbah's numerous sons – his next of kin to the throne***.

According to the tradition of this village, when a girl child is born, she is "pledged" for marriage to another family as a future bride. The groom-to-be-family can already start giving gifts to the girl"s parents, taking part in any activities marking sad events such as funerals, as well as good events such as harvesting and farming. This is what had been happening since Engwari was born – her parents had received several gifts in cash and kind over the years, of course with the understanding that their daughter is going to get married to this family when she grows up.

Engwari is naturally a very strong-willed person. When she comes to know about this, she flees from home, plunging the whole family into

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sadness and disgrace. Her father, Tanyi, is particularly sad because as a very poor peasant farmer he had hoped to be rich upon receiving a bride prize for her daughter from Pah Mbah's family. In the meantime, Pah Mbah dies and his successor is chosen. The matter is taken to the traditional palace court and Mr Tanyi is faced with two choices: either to bring back Engwari to give to the young successor of Pah Mbah as a wife, or to pay back to this young successor the money equivalent to a bundle of corrugated iron sheets that had been given to him in the past, including other gifts. Mr Tanyi has no money to pay back any debt. A day is fixed by the palace chief on which the sacred society – the kwifon – will come to evict Mr Tanyi from his house, if he fails to pay back this heavy debt.

At the peak of anguish for Tanyi and his family, Engwari, who had fled the family returns. Tanyi is very pleased, but his happiness is short-lived when Engwari introduces Ngwa – a medical doctor she has chosen as a husband. Dr Ngwa represents modernity and the aspiration of Engwari. To add to the displeasure of Tanyi and his family, Engwari had even had a child with Dr Ngwa. Initially, there is serious opposition. Not only is Dr Ngwa a foreigner to the village of Engwari's parents, he is also not very interested in respecting any traditional arrangements that are usually followed in the village in matters of marriages. However, he is a very nice man, who wants to help the family of Engwari out financially. The play closes with Tanyi and the village elders settling out to pay back the debt he owes the family of late Pah Mbah, with the money Dr Ngwa brings. Engwari's choice has prevailed. The old custom has been rejected. The necessity to uphold the human right of the girl child is upheld. This is the message of the play.

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* Although the exact age of the girl is not given in the play, it is common for girls of less than 15 years to be given for marriage in this part of Cameroon.

** Pa Mbah is the father of Engwari's future husband. This is another family in the same village. In this practice of given young girls to marriage in Cameroon, arrangements are made between families immediately after a female child is born. Generally, the family that desires to have the newborn female child as a future bride presents a gift to the family of the girl. Acceptance of such a symbolic gift paves the way for further assistance as the girl grows up. The assistance

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may be in the form of labour, i.e. assisting in farming, fixing a fallen roof, the offer of salts, meat etc. to the family. All these are counted as part of the bride price for their future wife.

*** An important cultural value for most rural polygamous people in Cameroon is the requirement to designate one's next of kin. Generally, a next of kin is designated from one of the most favourite wives of the man, and he is often known from birth. Once he is known, care is taken to initiate him gradually into the culture and traditions, including choosing a future wife for him.

Analysis

Just Another Woman is a play written within the background of a culture that sees the girl child as an "object" and a "commodity" for sale. By using such an age-old tradition as a subject of a play, the playwright dramatizes the fight of the women against an outdated local culture that does not give an opportunity for girls to choose whom they want for husband. The rebellion of the main character, Engwari, epitomizes the plight of female children in most rural communities in Cameroon, and some other places in Africa, where the education of girls is still not considered at the same level with that of boys.

The elopement of the main character, Engwari, with a man she considers her chosen husband brings sadness to her father's heart. When Engwari reappears suddenly, her father is happy, but this happiness is short-lived as he soon learns that Engwari will not get married to the family of the man she had been betrothed to from birth.

Other themes and motifs of the play include the right of the girl child in traditional African society, equality of the sexes, the education of the female child, conflict between young adults and parents, emancipation of the girl child, early marriages, human rights, freedom, tradition versus modernity.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

African Traditions

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Conflict Family Freedom Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Girls Parents (and children) Society Teenagers Values

Further Reading	Koski, Alissa, Shelley Clark, and Arijit Nandi, "Has Child Marriage Declined in Sub-Saharan Africa? An Analysis of Trends in 31 Countries", *Population and Development Review* 43 (2017): 7–29. Accessed August 30, 2021. Walker, Judith-Ann, "Early Marriage in Africa — Trends, Harmful Effects and Interventions", *African Journal of Reproductive Health / La Revue Africaine De La Santé Reproductive* 16 (2012): 231–240. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Addenda	We were unable to reach the owner of the copyright to the cover. We invite those who could facilitate such contact to communicate with the author of the entry Daniel A. Nkemleke at nkemlekedan@yahoo.com African Press Limited is not a very popular publisher of books in Cameroon, although they may be a number of books for children and young adults that have been printed here. Genre: *Just another Woman* is a play which challenges an age-old traditional custom of pledging the girl child for marriage when she is born.

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