

# Rethinking Women's Empowerment in Cameroon in the Drama of Anne Tanyi-Tang

**Naomi Nkealah**

## Summary

The concept of women's empowerment cannot be dissociated from that of women's disempowerment since the two function as mutually reinforcing processes. This article argues that the drama of Anglophone Cameroonian playwright, Anne Tanyi-Tang, collapses the binary between empowerment and disempowerment, as opposed to dominant thinking which posits the two as mutually exclusive. Her plays project women characters who exhibit visible signs of self-empowerment in certain spheres of life but are simultaneously disempowered in other areas. The two plays analysed in this article, "Arrah" and "My Bundle of Joy", centre on women who are empowered in their education and work, but disempowered in their marriages. As *reformist* feminist texts, the plays project women who seek to reform gender relationships within the limits allowed them by patriarchy. Their agency under the circumstances is instructive.

## Opsomming

Die konsep van die bemagtiging van vroue kan nie van die ontmagtiging van vroue geskei word nie, omdat die twee as onderling wederkerige prosesse funksioneer. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat die dramas van die Engelstalige Kameroense dramaturg, Anne Tanyi-Tang, die binêre verband tussen bemagtiging en ontmagtiging ophef, in teenstelling met die heersende opvattinge waarvolgens bemagtiging en ontmagtiging as onderling uitsluitend geïmponeer word. Tanyi-Tang se toneelstukke beeld vrouekarakters uit wat sigbare tekens van selfbemagtiging in sekere sferes van hulle lewens toon, maar terselfdertyd op ander gebiede ontmagtig is. Die twee toneelstukke wat in hierdie artikel ontleed word, "Arrah" en "My Bundle of Joy", fokus op vroue wat in hulle opvoeding en werk bemagtig is, maar in hulle huwelike ontmagtig is. As reformistiese-feministiese tekste beeld die toneelstukke vroue uit wat probeer om genderverhoudings te hervorm binne die perke wat deur patriargale magstrukture daargestel word. Hulle agentskap binne hierdie omstandighede is insiggewend.

## Introduction

Anne Tanyi-Tang is an Anglophone Cameroonian woman writer whose dramatic texts foreground feminist issues around women's empowerment. Her contribution to the development of Anglophone Cameroonian drama can be *quantified* as immense, owing to the high number of plays she has

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published. These plays include the two collections *Ewa and Other Plays* (2000), which contains four plays set in Cameroon, and *Two Plays: Visiting America and Marienuelle* (2006), which contains two diasporic plays, and the single-text play *Eneta vs Elimo* (2007). From a feminist perspective, Tanyi-Tang's plays can be *qualified* as *reformist* African-feminist texts, to borrow Susan Arndt's categorisation, because they present female protagonists who "want to negotiate with the patriarchal society to gain new scope for women, but accept the fundamental patriarchal orientation of their society as a given fact" (Arndt 2002: 83). The effort of these women characters to create new spaces for themselves within the irredeemably patriarchal systems where they operate rekindles interest in the question of empowerment. The plays enhance theory around gender inequality because their "thematic preoccupations force readers to give more thought to the question of women's empowerment in Cameroon and how patriarchy impacts their lives in employment, education, sexuality, and marriage" (Nkealah 2014: 124). Understanding the complexity of women's empowerment through a literary lens is critical to reframing the women's empowerment project in Cameroon in a manner that will ultimately transform gender relations. Looking at the issue from a literary lens is important, because literary representations expand our understanding of social practices through writers' deployment of literary language and stylistic devices such as allegory, metaphor and irony to disrupt known binaries, provide alternative frameworks of knowledge and challenge dominant ideologies. Literary texts therefore become artistic interventions into the theorisation of social phenomena.

This article argues that Tanyi-Tang's plays collapse the binary between empowerment and disempowerment, as opposed to dominant thinking which posits the two as mutually exclusive. The plays do this by projecting women characters who exhibit visible signs of self-empowerment in certain spheres of life but are equally disempowered in other areas. The analysis of two plays, "Arrah" and "My Bundle of Joy" from the collection *Ewa and Other Plays* (Tanyi-Tang 2000), illustrates that within the context of marriage women experience varying forms of disempowerment, as bride price payment commodifies them while childlessness dehumanises them. Tanyi-Tang's representation of women whose processes of empowerment are multi-layered at most times, superficial in breadth often, and even contradictory in depth indicate that definitions of women's empowerment cannot be simplistic, as underlying the very term is the question of *which* women have the power to do *what*, *when* and *how*.

### **Problematizing Definitions of Women's Empowerment**

Ange-Marie Hancock (2005: 247) defines empowerment as "a process or mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain autonomy

and mastery over their own affairs". Women's empowerment can therefore be defined as a process by which women – individually and collectively – gain autonomy and mastery over their own affairs. These affairs can be their work, education, income, health or reproduction. Where women lose autonomy or control over these affairs, they are said to be disempowered. In other words, the power to exercise their rights over what happens with these affairs has been taken away from them, tangibly or figuratively. Bhatnagar (2011) notes that to be disempowered is to be denied the ability to make choices and to be empowered is to regain that ability.

These definitions of women's empowerment and disempowerment seem sensible enough. However, a major issue which arises in literary studies is the framing of women's empowerment and disempowerment as binary opposites rather than mutually reinforcing processes. Elizabeth Nyager (2015) in her study of Zainab Alkali's novels constructs women's empowerment as following a linear order where the acquisition of education seemingly puts women on a one-way path to empowerment. She states: "education not only gives women voice, it also empowers them to make life choices" (Nyager 2015: 130). Such a view ignores the "bumps" on the road – the potholes, accidents, and unfavourable weather conditions which may slow down or effectively change the course of this journey. These "bumps" are symbolic of the multivalent institutions, ideologies and practices, which may be of a cultural, religious, economic or political making, that constantly disempower women even as they seek to empower themselves.

In analysing the plays of Tess Onwueme, Mabel Ekwierhoma (2013: 208) similarly ignores the intersection of empowerment and disempowerment as she speaks about "the concept of power/empowerment and its opposite" by which she refers to powerlessness/disempowerment. In her view, "power could be comprehended in terms of ability, capacity or an enablement of some sort". Consequently, powerlessness means the opposite: "this lack of power is manifested in a lack of action, absence of equity between the dominant and the dominated and some levels of inactivity on the part of the controlled" (Ekwierhoma 2013: 208). This juxtaposition of meanings comes to "represent the binary of power and powerlessness" (Ekwierhoma 2013: 210). Ekwierhoma conflates power with empowerment and powerlessness with disempowerment, itself a problematic construction which ignores the fact that power and powerlessness are *states of being* while empowerment and disempowerment are *processes of being*. Consequently, her study of female characters in Onwueme's plays "that buttress the facts of female empowerment and disempowerment" (Ekwierhoma 2013: 211) fails to illuminate the points at which these two concepts intersect.

While acknowledging Nyager and Ekwierhoma's contribution to the development of the women's empowerment discourse in African women's literature, I challenge their restriction of empowerment and disempowerment to binary opposites, thereby ignoring their intersectionality. I argue that

empowerment and disempowerment are not oppositional processes but concurrent processes that intersect at various points to determine women's position in society. Within patriarchal systems, there can never be an absolutely empowered woman; just as there is no absolutely disempowered woman. A wife can be empowered at the work place but disempowered in the home front. A young girl can be empowered at home but disempowered in school by male bullying. An unmarried woman can be empowered within her social circles but may find herself disempowered within a cultural space. Therefore, "the concept of empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment" (Bhatnagar 2011: 4). Fictional representations of African women in contemporary African women's writing illuminate this notion of relative empowerment, as I shall illustrate later.

The interconnectedness between empowerment and disempowerment is a critical matter for scholarly engagement, because constructing empowerment as oppositional to disempowerment ignores subtle nuances in the discourse which account for the mismatch between theory and practice in many contexts. The case of Cameroon is a classic example of this mismatch.

### **The Women's Empowerment Project in Cameroon**

In Cameroon, women's empowerment is pandered about by politicians without much thought being given to what it actually means for the women whose empowerment is at stake. It is exploited by many public figures for selfish gain, and misused by elite men and women to advance their own dubious agendas (Orock 2007). One of the major ironies of nationalist politics in Cameroon is the use of women to enforce the empowerment of men, as Emmanuel Konde (1990) points out in his study of women's societies in the Cameroon Grassfields. There is therefore a tension between the purpose of women's empowerment and the actual use to which it is put.

Another problem is that the term "empowerment" is frequently misunderstood by the same people it is designed for, thereby limiting its potential for positive change. This emerges from Joyce Endeley's study on women's empowerment in the Moghamo and Bafaw societies in Cameroon (2007). The study reveals that Moghamo women understood empowerment differently from developmental definitions of it, where they prioritised certain forms of empowerment over others: "control of assets and freedom to earn income – crucial elements in the 'empowerment' spoken of by gender and development policy-makers and practitioners – seem to be seen as much less desirable in this society than the status accorded by a marital relationship" (Endeley 2007: 38). For these women, acquiring a higher social status through marriage was more empowering than acquiring control over assets or income. The question then is: what does empowerment *really* mean for Cameroonian women?

The answer cannot be a straightforward one, with a mere set of conditions that can be fulfilled for empowerment to be declared. In a country where culture, religion and other social structures effortlessly regulate and control women's behaviour, desires, thinking and actions, where political malfunctioning which escalates unemployment is a normative order, and where access to economic opportunities depend largely on bribery or the possession of a "godfather", women's empowerment becomes a highly complex phenomenon. Its attainment does not depend on the application of a fixed formula. The contradictions and paradoxes around everyday practices are clear indications of the difficulty in applying a single rubric to enforce women's empowerment in Cameroon. On the one hand, where bride price is calculated in monetary terms, it is hard to speak of empowering young girls by ending child marriage because, as Samba (2005: 46) notes, these girls "constitute a source of revenue to their families and a stepping-stone towards poverty alleviation". On the other hand, in cultures such as the Beti where women themselves believe that "wife beating is considered a demonstration of love and ... women are happier if they receive constant beatings from their husbands" (Samba 2005: 47), it is not sensible to speak of women's empowerment through resistance to domestic violence. That the violence is *desired* is already a disruption of the empowerment process. It is therefore imperative to see empowerment more as a dynamic process which is constantly being redefined by new challenges and new ways of meeting these challenges. Cameroonian women's literature offers a critical lens through which one can engage the issue of women's empowerment in Cameroon. The dramatic literature in particular is useful for this purpose, owing to its popular appeal through stage performances in cities such as Yaounde where the University of Yaounde theatre group has been active for many years with the championship of playwrights like Bole Butake and lately Tanyi-Tang.

Tanyi-Tang's plays are significant literary texts because they highlight the complexity of the issue of empowerment for Cameroonian women operating within not only disabling patriarchal cultures but also a politically and economically dysfunctional state. Written primarily for performance in front of mixed audiences (women and men, locals and international visitors, young and old, illiterate and educated, and Anglophone and Francophone) around Yaounde, the plays are presented in simple language, including English, Pidgin English and indigenous Cameroonian languages, which nevertheless highlights the contradictions around social practices in Cameroon. In "Arrah", education empowers the protagonist Arrah to get a good job, but the bride price paid on her head at marriage disempowers her in using her income to care for her extended family. In "My Bundle of Joy", a happy marriage and a good job empower Kechen to be a productive self-sustaining citizen, but childlessness disempowers her in finding acceptance within her husband's family. Within the same context of empowerment in these plays is the impetus for the disempowerment of the female characters. Thus, in Tanyi-Tang's

plays, the dominant conceptualisation of women's empowerment as a linear process falls apart, to borrow Chinua Achebe's words in the title of his epic novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and through the shattering of this false image Tanyi-Tang is able to project the agency of women in self-driving their own processes of social autonomy. In the next two sections, I analyse these two plays, first to demonstrate the intersectionality of women's empowerment and disempowerment, and secondly to illustrate women's agency in driving their own processes of empowerment.

### **Women's Empowerment and Disempowerment as Intersecting Processes in Tanyi-Tang's Plays**

Tanyi-Tang's play "Arrah" demonstrates the intersectionality of empowerment and disempowerment in presenting a female protagonist whose life is simultaneously marked by control over her own affairs owing to an acquired education and loss of control owing to a marriage founded on the commodification of her body. The play opens with a marriage negotiation in which Ettah and his family seek Arrah's hand in marriage. The marriage is celebrated with pomp after Ettah's family pays the agreed bride price of 2.5 million CFA francs (approximately 4500 US dollars in present-day exchange rates).

With two children a few years later, the marriage begins to fall apart owing to Ettah's resentment of Arrah's parents who are constantly visiting and demanding money for one thing or the other. Ettah threatens Arrah with divorce and requests a refund of his bride price even though Arrah contributed half of the money. In spite of being unable to raise Ettah's half, Arrah moves out of their house with her children, leaving Ettah a note to go ahead and sue for divorce. The play ends with Ettah finding the note and confessing to the housekeeper that the divorce threat was only a joke.

This play projects empowerment and disempowerment as intersecting processes by showing that the acquisition of higher education empowers Arrah to both generate income and have control over that income, and yet her continued use of her financial resources to help her family after marrying Ettah creates tension in her home, because the cultural and colonialist imperative of the bride price paid on her necessarily constitutes her into the property of the Ettahs. African feminist Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994: 211) explains that the bride price "was not a price, until the colonials tried to set prices in order to be able to do their books, making marriage gifts a kind of taxation". This is how the bride price became commercialised, and this "modern corruption promotes the commodification of women" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 211). Like colonialism, African cultures have exploited the bride price as a mechanism for maintaining male power, because paying it inevitably grants a man control over his wife's resources. In "Arrah", the bride price emerges as a double-edged sword which both legitimates a woman's

place within her marital home and constitutes her into a “hen” whose primary function is to produce wealth for her owners. Thus, as long as there exists the “bride price”, understood as monetary value in exchange for a woman, women will remain inherently disempowered even as they seek empowerment through education. Arrah’s case evinces this point.

Arrah’s university education, sponsored by her parents, enables her to secure a permanent job within the civil service, making her a great asset to her family. In the words of her own father, Arrah is “the first graduate in this village” and “the pride of this village” (74). The investment in her education is expected to yield profit, not just for Pa Abunaw’s family but for the entire community as well since the community equally claims to have vested its resources on her. At Arrah’s marriage negotiation, the Spokesman of the village says to Ettah’s family:

Arrah is what she is today due to our blessings and prayers. We did not have much to offer but God heard our prayers. She is the best this village has produced. She has a good character and a strong personality. We are looking forward to seeing our Arrah fulfil our dreams.

(68)

By the Spokesman’s words, Arrah’s education was a communal affair by which the community, through its “blessings and prayers”, sponsored an intelligent young woman of “good character and a strong personality” to be able to develop into a financially resourceful individual who will “fulfil [their] dreams”. Financial exploitation of Arrah is insinuated in this reference to “dreams” which may be anything from sponsoring developmental projects in the village to sponsoring their own children through school. On the part of Pa Abunaw’s family, it is expected that Arrah will take over the financial responsibilities of the family as a return on the investment made on her.

Thus, while Arrah’s university education is itself a positive project which empowers her to become a self-supporting, income-generating citizen, it is equally a commercialised project by which her family and the community hope to exploit the wealth she produces. It is no wonder then that the family, in conspiracy with the community, requests 3 million CFA as Arrah’s bride price when the Ettah family comes for Arrah’s hand in marriage. This huge amount is meant to compensate for the “loss” the family would experience owing to Arrah’s decision to marry Ettah. Uncle Abu, Arrah’s uncle, puts it in undisguised terms in the following quote:

Uncle Abu: (*Pointing at the people*). All of you sitting here are fully aware of the sacrifice we made, particularly the sacrifice my brother and his wife made. They have younger children. Knowing Arrah’s nature, she would have helped her parents. *As it is clear, it will no longer be the same with Ettah in total control. So we decided that our brother Pa Ettah should pay three million CFA.*

(69-70, emphasis added)

As is evident in Uncle Abu's statement, the family perceives Arrah's marriage as a "sacrifice", a great loss of a valuable asset to the family. Thus, the exorbitant bride price is a way of making up for that loss since after marriage things "will no longer be the same with Ettah in total control" of Arrah's money. The commercialism with which Arrah's education is tagged suggests that even as an unmarried woman she has little control over what her resources should be used for since there are dreams of a people to be fulfilled, whatever those dreams are. Marriage exacerbates her disempowerment in this regard in that once traded for cash she becomes the property of the Ettah family, and therefore the ownership of wealth shifts hands – from the Abunaw to the Ettah family. The paradox here is that things *do not* fall apart for Arrah, for how can things fall apart for whom they were never in place in the first instance?

That the Ettah family negotiates and brings the bride price down to 2.5 million CFA does not reduce Arrah's status as a commodity for family enrichment. In fact, Ettah believes that even the 2.5 million is excessive and therefore he finds it unacceptable later on that Arrah's parents continue to demand money from his wife. His threatening Arrah with a divorce upon which her family would have to return the bride price is an externalisation of his dissatisfaction with the uninterrupted flow of wealth to the Abunaw family when that wealth should have been redirected to the Ettah family. His sarcastic statement to Arrah that her parents "are not satisfied with the huge bride-price they received" highlights not only his resentment of the Abunaw family in demanding an enormous bride price for their daughter simply because she is educated, but also his anger at them for continuously exerting control over resources which he, presumably, had secured for his own family through the bride price.

Beyond seeking access and control over Arrah's money, Ettah expects Arrah to personally cook his food rather than let her mother do it, because, as he states, "now she is a wife and not a **girlfriend?**" (84). In addition, he needs Arrah to dress in sexually stimulating outfits to be able to "turn a man on" (97). In the words of his friend Tabi, Ettah desires "a wife who flirts with [him]" (97). Ettah's expectations of a fully domesticated wife who is both a good cook and a sex toy are conveyed in the play as part of the package to be enjoyed by him by virtue of the lavish bride price he paid. Thus, the reference to Arrah at the beginning of the play as a hen when the Ettah family comes to request Arrah's hand in marriage becomes a very potent symbol of her disempowerment once conscripted into the cult of marriage. When Uncle Ettah explains their mission to the Abunaw residence, he states: "What brings us here is very important .... Firstly, we have seen a young hen in Pa Abunaw's coop. Secondly, this hen has attracted our young cock. Thirdly, we have come to seek permission to allow our cock to have your beautiful hen" (67). Asked which hen, he responds: "the hen I am referring to is the student in the capital" (67). Although this kind of codified exchange between families is the normal way of negotiating marriage in traditional communities in Cameroon, the very



language is underpinned by a sexist ideology which sees women as wealth producers, not for themselves, but for the families into which they are married.

Ettah's family pays 2.5 million CFA for Arrah on the understanding that theirs was a highly prized hen, educated and therefore potentially highly resourceful. Effectively, the very language with which Arrah's marriage to Ettah is negotiated cements her commodification as a gendered subject. Her disempowerment as a wife is created from the onset, and Ettah becomes the custodian of his family's investment. The play shows that within a marriage cemented through the commodification of women, women's disempowerment is a constant, because when patriarchy demands the benefits of that which it paid for, women inevitably lose control of their own affairs. For Arrah to be denied the right to spend her money on her family is for her to be disempowered. In a similar vein, for her to be educated only to be exploited by her own family is for her to be denied control over the income she generates.

Tanyi-Tang's other play "My Bundle of Joy" also collapses the binary between empowerment and disempowerment through its depiction of a married and working-class woman who is nonetheless childless. The play presents the familiar tale of a woman whose childlessness pushes her to take extreme measures to fall pregnant. Kechen combines medical treatment from her gynaecologist with placatory sacrifices to her ancestors, as well as prayers from different churches, all in her desperation to bear a child and win the affection of her husband's family. She suffers scorn at family gatherings and is often overwhelmed by feelings of guilt that her mother-in-law would not stay permanently with them in the city because there are no grandchildren to keep her busy. Seeking her mother-in-law's benediction, she tells her: "Mama, I am sorry. Perhaps, if I had children you would have stayed to look after them" (45). Despite Mama Wase's reassurance to her that "I visit you more often than those who have children" (45), Kechen continues to be tortured mentally by her childless state. In due course, however, she finds out that she is pregnant. In the true tradition of a *reformist* feminist text which "usually closes with an indulgent happy end" (Arndt 2002: 83), the play ends on a high note of jubilation with Kechen celebrating the impending birth of her child with her husband and colleagues at work.

Within the social setting of the play, Kechen is a highly empowered woman, first through marriage and secondly through a highly prestigious job. As Endeley's study shows, marriage is a highly valued mechanism for women's empowerment in Cameroonian societies because it gives a woman social status and respectability, the kind not awarded to her unmarried or divorced peers who are seen as "being unsuccessful" (Endeley 2007: 38). The status of a "married woman" creates in Kechen a sense of "self-esteem" and grants her "social participation" which Hancock (2005: 247) identifies as two key indicators of empowerment. Her self-esteem is further nurtured by her husband's love for her, his respect for her feelings, and his constant

reassurance that their childlessness does not make her less valuable to him. When McOkete tells her “it is our problem, me and you” and “we love each other” (42), Kechen feels better knowing that he shares the burden of their childlessness and will not desert her because of that. This in turn increases her social participation as she gets the encouragement to continue to look after his mother and to participate in family activities.

In addition, Kechen's profession as a lawyer and position as a deputy director in a law firm grant her access to a good salary and other benefits allocated for positions at managerial level. It also places her within a social class that is privileged. With a solid marriage and a prestigious job, Kechen is highly respected within her social circles. Her friend Dedika's reference to her as a young lawyer who is “rich, with a brilliant career and a devoted husband” (53) even carries a trace of envy. Kechen's empowerment can therefore be said to be at its optimal where she has control over her own affairs, with her having scaled up all five levels of empowerment as outlined by Unicef: welfare, access, conscientisation, participation and control (Fonjong 2001). Following Hancock's model, she has equally achieved “self-efficacy, knowledge and skills ... and resources” (Hancock 2005: 247).

Despite this evident empowerment, Kechen is severely disempowered by her inability to produce a child in her marriage. Her predicament is dire, not only because she cannot give McOkete an heir but also because she cannot give her mother-in-law grandchildren. In addition, she cannot claim her place as a wife within McOkete's family, because a wife must have children to earn acceptance from her in-laws. As Dedika puts it, “it was preferable to be a single childless woman than a childless wife” (52). Childlessness disempowers Kechen because it denies her access to the community of celebrated mothers within her husband's family. Not even her social status as an educated, working woman can help her in accessing this community. To Dedika, she laments: “what is the purpose of education without children? I am useless” (54). This blatant declaration of worthlessness from a heartbroken childless woman suggests that within the patriarchal structures of Cameroonian societies, women's empowerment gains are only occasional victorious moments in a cycle of perpetual disempowerment. Here is an educated woman rendered “useless” by a culture which requires women to be “reproductive” in order to be seen as “useful” to their families and society. For Kechen, therefore, it is not possible to “negotiate and navigate patriarchy” (Nyager 2015: 130) without first producing offspring that will keep the patriarchy alive.

The extent of Kechen's degradation is visible when she visits McOkete's village for Mama Wase's funeral. During this time, the women from the village gossip about her, making her childlessness a mockery of her privileged lifestyle:

- 1st Woman (*Pointing at Kechen who is chatting with her two friends*). Is that the much talked about *barren, beautiful, educated wife*?
- 2nd Woman Yes, she is. You see, she does not help in the kitchen.
- 1st Woman And she does not eat food prepared in this house.
- 2nd Woman She and McOkete eat in restaurants.
- (50, emphasis added)

These women make fun of Kechen for not participating in the domestic chores orchestrated by the funeral and for not eating the food everyone eats. Their description of her as the “barren, beautiful, educated wife” is a mockery of the very essence of her beauty and education, as if to say: of what good is beauty and education to you if you are barren? This posits the view that the form of empowerment Kechen enjoys as an educated woman is directly defeated by her status as a “barren” wife. Her childlessness is used to strip her of every trace of human dignity. Her own sister-in-law goes to the extent of declaring publicly that “she is a witch” (51). Effectively, she is demonised and dehumanised on the basis of not having a child. Her life at this point is marked by concurrent experiences of empowered and disempowered womanhood.

Humiliated by McOkete’s family, Kechen loses her voice – the voice to speak out against unfair treatment. Whereas, with her friend Dedika, Kechen is quite vocal in condemning God for his unfairness in giving “children to people who cannot look after them” and yet withholding children from her and McOkete who “can look after five children ... twelve children” (53), here she finds herself powerless to protest against the village women’s accusation that she is stopping McOkete from taking a second wife. The following incident at Mama Wase’s funeral illustrates this point:

- Sister (*To Kechen*). Let’s go to uncle McOkete’s closet. The women want to talk to you.
- Kechen Talk to me? About what?
- Sister No questions, just follow me. (*Kechen follows*).
- Crowd (*In unison. Pointing at Kechen*). You are preventing our son from remarrying a productive wife. Perhaps you used herbs to charm our late sister. We can’t understand why she loved you. Now, your time is over.
- Kechen Understood. (*Silence*). Can I go? (*McOkete rushes in*).
- (50)

This quotation illustrates the extent to which Kechen’s empowered demeanour has been deflated by the venom of her in-laws for whom she has not fulfilled her wifely mandate. Summoned to a meeting she knows nothing about, she can only follow her sister-in-law sheepishly. Accused of manipulating McOkete to not consent to his family’s wishes of marrying “a productive wife” and for securing Mama Wase’s favour through diabolical means, she can only say “understood”. The silence which follows this single-

word statement is telling, as it suggests not only Kechen's acceptance of her "outsider" status among these women but also her loss of voice and confidence. Her voice and self-esteem have been wrenched away from her owing to her "barrenness", made worse by her "selfishness" and "cunning", and she is totally powerless to do anything about. All she wants to do is leave the scene, and even for this to happen McOkete has to come to her rescue, shouting at the women to "keep away from her" (50). Her disempowerment therefore extends beyond the denial of access into a community of mothers to the loss of her voice as a human being with equal rights to dignified treatment.

While Evwierhoma (2013) and Nyager (2015) construct women's empowerment as a vacuumed, linear process, Tanyi-Tang configures it as operating vis-a-vis women's disempowerment, where education, marriage and a prestigious career grant women control over their own lives but where such control is usurped by society in the event of women's failure to bear children for the continuation of their husbands' lineages. The play "My Bundle of Joy" therefore adopts a utopian ending as a way of acknowledging the inescapability of degraded womanhood in the face of childlessness, that not even the adoption of a child can redeem women from this situation. It is perhaps a pessimistic view, but it conveys the notion of childlessness as a severe tragedy in patriarchal societies where womanhood and wifehood are inseparable from motherhood. As a *reformist* feminist text, the play presents, not women who seek to dismantle patriarchy, but women who seek to reform gender relationships within the limits allowed them by patriarchy. Their agency under the circumstances is nevertheless instructive.

### **Women's Agency in the Face of Disempowerment**

The two women characters, in the plays analysed, demonstrate varying levels of agency in dealing with their disempowerment. Arrah counters her disempowerment by exiting her marriage. Since marriage is what constituted her into a disempowered wife, abandoning the role of wife catapults her back into an empowered humanity. From the perspective of Bhatnagar (2011), she regains the power of choice. On leaving her home with her two children, she leaves Ettah a note which states:

Ettah, I have discovered lately that we have become very incompatible and the breakdown of constructive communication put our marriage in jeopardy. Don't hesitate to sue for a divorce when you want it. I am psychologically, emotionally and physically prepared for it. The children will be fine.

(98)

Arrah's agency is transmitted by both what she says and what she does not say. Acknowledging that the breakdown in communication puts their marriage in jeopardy, projects her as a thinking woman who is honest to

herself in accepting a failed marriage. Thus, she is *proactive* in wanting to end the marriage and move on with her life. By also stating unreservedly that she is prepared for the psychological, emotional and physical trauma that a divorce procedure may cause, Arrah endears herself to feminist readers as a strong woman with a clear sense of purpose. She insinuates that being a single mother would be better for her than being an abused wife. Thus, she is willing to venture into single-parenthood, in spite of the stereotypical attitudes associated with it. This conjures bravery and a heightened sense of ownership of her life, a regaining of an empowered mind.

Nowhere in Arrah's note does she mention a refund of the bride price which Ettah so desires. This suggests, on the one hand, that she is prepared to refund it upon the divorce since that is the condition Ettah gave her, and, on the other hand, that it is not up for discussion since she literally paid her own bride price. At this point, Arrah has effectively regained control over her life. Since transactional marriage is what constituted her into a disempowered wife, it makes sense that to reconstitute herself into an empowered human being she has to end the marriage. This is where her agency lies. In addition, signing off the note with the initials "A.A." (98) which stand for Arrah Abunaw is a rejection of her marital name Arrah Ettah and a reclamation of her identity as a woman not defined by marriage.

In "My Bundle of Joy", Kechen's agency is couched within the different approaches, sometimes contradictory ones, she adopts to find a solution to her childlessness. Believing in medical science but not relying entirely on it because gynaecologists "make promises which they can't fulfil" (53), she seeks help from a traditional doctor, believing equally in the power of traditional medicine to increase her fertility. On top of these two, she seeks help from different pastors and prays fervently for a child, motivated by her faith in divine power: "I believe in God" (49). Kechen's combination of medical science, traditional medicine and religious devotion in finding a solution to her "barrenness" suggests an open-mindedness to see the western and the indigenous as complementary rather than oppositional. In addition, she follows her mother-in-law's advice to open her home to many children, because as Mama Wase says, "children follow children", meaning that the joyous laughter of children in her home will attract her unborn children to want to be born. This is an indigenous belief transmitted from an older woman to a younger one which offers great potential for resolving the problem at hand. Kechen does not only follow this advice; she goes beyond that to propose adoption as an option. She tells her friend: "I want to adopt my niece whom I can bring up as my own child" (51). This plan is however stilted by McOkete's objection to it.

In her open-ended quest for a solution, Kechen does not fail to consider the possibility that McOkete might be the cause of their childlessness, in which case she also thinks up a possible way of meeting this challenge: "I do not understand any longer. My husband is fertile. But perhaps his snake does not

reach where the egg stops. If this is the case, I can have an affair” (54). Thus, she considers an extramarital relationship as a possibility, a means of getting pregnant in the face of her husband's weak sexuality. Although the play does not reveal that she pursues this idea, the very thought of it projects her as a woman conscious of the complexity of the problem she is facing, one which requires an equally complex solution. The issue of morality here is mute, because it is equally a moral issue for her to save her husband's image in the community by giving him a child. It reminds readers of the rationalised infidelities of Baba Segi's wives in Lola Shoneyin's novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2011) and forces them to reflect critically on the hard choices women have to make in the context of a culturally disempowered womanhood.

In the end, it is not predictable which of Kechen's strategies of self-empowerment through motherhood yields the desired results: whether it is the western approaches (medical science and Christian religion) or the indigenous methods (herbal medicine and the mothering of children) or even the clandestine approach. What is clear in the play is the agency of the female character in finding a way to experience motherhood and thereby empower herself as a married woman.

## Conclusion

It is evident from the two plays analysed in this article that within the patriarchal cultures of Cameroon, women experience multiple forms of disempowerment simultaneously as they experience empowerment socially and economically. In “Arrah”, women's disempowerment is culturally sanctioned through commercialised marriage practices which inevitably puncture their empowerment as educated and career women. It emerges in “My Bundle of Joy” that where womanhood can only be validated through motherhood, a childless woman remains culturally disempowered in spite of being socially and economically empowered. The intersectionality of empowerment and disempowerment conveys the enormity of the challenge facing Cameroonian women seeking self-empowerment. Until such times when bride price will be reversed from a cash payment to a giving of gifts – the aim of which is to unite two families, as it once was, and bearing children will no longer be a *compulsory* expectation for married women, women's empowerment journeys will continue to be punctuated by patriarchy's disempowering mechanisms.

While Tanyi-Tang's plays call for critical transformation in the area of marriage and projects married women who employ varied strategies to negotiate new freedoms for themselves, they nevertheless point to the unchanging patriarchal cultures of Cameroon as severe limitations to women's empowerment. Such a holistic representation of social realities is

reflective of the playwright's *reformist* feminist agenda, as she posits, not simple solutions to complex issues, but possible ways of dealing with them which can ultimately extend the elasticity of patriarchy's control of women.

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**Naomi Nkealah**  
University of the Witwatersrand  
naonkealah@yahoo.com