



THE SEARCH FOR SELF-RELIANCE: WOMEN, EDUCATION, THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In Mundemba city, many parents wanted their daughters to acquire western education beyond primary school level, or learn a skill, such as hairstylist, thus, be financially independent, accompanied with self-esteem. However, poverty prevented these parents from sponsoring their daughters in schools or in workshops. Hence, many girls dropped out from primary and secondary schools. On noticing the problem, some women in Mundemba city who had special skills created 'Women Center' with the intention of training drops out in various skills. After graduation, they were to find jobs. In 1990, the trainers in Women Center, Mundemba, improvised a play titled Emelie, which depicted a teenage, drop out who was married to a Senior Divisional Officer, but realized that she was abandoned because of her level of education. She decided to enroll in Women Center and also attend an evening school with the hope of succeeding in the General certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level. Emelie succeeded in mastering skills and obtaining five papers in GCE. Her goal was to get a job, earn an income and have self-esteem. Spectators who watched the performance applauded and encouraged all drops out to emulate Emelie. The theory of existentialism is used in this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Initially, men believed that western education was solely for the male child. Thus, they sponsored their sons in schools while their daughters were given to marriage at puberty. Atta Amah Aidoo (1951) writes:

Manka: [To herself] I remember the time he [Ato] was preparing to go to the white man's land where he went to take up [indicating Eulalie] this 'wonder'! The money ... This is something which no one should hear anything about. A great part of the land was sold and even that was sufficient for nothing ... Finally, the oldest and most valuable of the family heirlooms, *kentes* and golden ornaments, which none of us younger generation had ever seen before, were all pawned.

They never brought them into day light ... not even to celebrate the puberty or marriage of a single girl in this house. But since our master must buy coats and trousers, they brought them out on this occasion. They were pawned, I say. And have they been redeemed? When, and with what? Ask that again. (35).

This excerpt portrays parents' perceptions of girls' education in the 1950s. Presently, parents, particularly, fathers have become fully aware of the importance of western education to their daughters. However, many parents do not have the means to sponsor their daughters in primary and secondary schools. As a consequence, some drops out resorted to prostitution or lived in streets, and above all, suffer from inferiority complex. Some women in Mundemba city who had acquired special skills were aware of the problem. They created 'Women Center' with the objective of giving drops out a chance to learn skills and eventually earn money after graduation. Some of the

drops out simultaneously enrolled in the Women Center and attended evening schools. Their goal was to acquire skills and succeed in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level. Emelie, the character in the play titled "Emelie" by the trainers in Women Center is an example of such women. The objective of this paper is to analyze the performance of Emelie, which called on drops out to emulate the example of Emelie by improving on their lifestyle. The paper is divided in three parts. The first part briefly discusses the theory, the second analyses the performance alongside audience response, and the last part is the conclusion. The theory of existentialism is used in the analysis.

A Brief Discussion of the Existentialism Theory

Cuddon J.A. and Habib M.A.R. (2014) maintained that:

The term existentialism means 'pertaining to existence'; or, in logic, predicating existence'. Philosophically, it now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship, or lack of one, with God (259).

Furthermore, they said 'it is generally agreed that existentialism derives from the thinking of Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 55), and especially in his books *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and *Sickness Unto Death* (1848). (Ibid. 259 - 260). In these works, Kierkegaard believed that man can only find freedom, peace of mind and spiritual serenity through God and in God. His idea prevailed among Christians for many centuries and he became the pioneer of modern Christian existentialism. Kierkegaard's profound idea of 'existentialism', is that man is created to serve God and can only have salvation by doing so. (Ibid. 259 260). Later, some philosophers, such as Berdyaev, Unamuno, J. de Gautier and B. Fondane wrote works which portray the sources of atheistic existentialism. Again, Cuddon J. A. et al (2014) wrote "for it is held that man fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing, and in the process, and by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence" (Ibid. 260).

This assertion is about free will. God gave man the freedom to take decisions, but faces the consequences of his/her decision. For example, a drop out who refuses to wash dishes in a rich woman's house may spend her entire life begging in the street. Another drop out who accepts to wash the dishes earns money for the services she renders, uses the money to pay for the cost of learning a skill, and eventually gets a job.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent figure of modern existentialism expresses his notion of existentialism in his novels, plays and philosophical writings. According to Sartre:

Man is born into a kind of void ..., a mud ... He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus, lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence ... in a semi-conscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself. However, he may come out of his subjective, passive situation ... become increasingly aware of himself, and conceivably experience *angoisse* (a species of metaphysical and moral anguish). If so, he would then have a sense of absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair. The energy deriving from this awareness would enable him to drag himself out of the

mud', and begin to exist. By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to his existence and the universe. (Ibid. 260).

Like Cuddon J.A. and Habib M.A.R., Jean-Paul Sartre also dwelled on the choices people make. The above quotation is about the choices confronting man. The choice an individual makes leads him/her to live happily and peacefully or live in abject poverty and misery. Laziness is a vice that must be abandoned while hardworking is a virtue that must be appreciated. Jean-Paul Sartre witnessed both the first and second world wars - a period of hopelessness, emptiness and misery. Man found himself "into a kind of void ... a mud" as Sartre says. However, while some people engaged in income generating activities, others remain in the mud. It is therefore not surprising that Jean-Paul Sartre knew how man could drag himself/herself from the mud, and give it meaning. (Qtd in Eds, Groden et al, 2005. 835 -837). This theory is apt in this analysis as it portrays Emelie, a drop out who dragged herself from the mud and gave her life meaning.

Analyses of the Performance Alongside Audience Response

In 1990, the trainers in Women Center, Mundemba town improvised a play titled "Emelie". The play dealt with two prominent themes. The first part dealt with the plight of hunters in Ndiang Division. The second part was concerned with Emelie, a teenage drop out. In this paper, I am concerned with the second part. Emelie was a teenage drop out who was married to a Senior Divisional Officer, but realized that as a drop out, she could not effectively perform her matrimonial duties, such as tidying up her residence and entertaining her guests. Above all, highly educated wives who worked in offices looked down on her. This realization induced her to enroll in Women Center, Mundemba, and also to register in an evening school with the hope of mastering skills and succeeding in GCE Ordinary Level.

Following the content of the play, the trainers in Women Centre, understood the problems of drops out and set out to perform a play which called on drops out to come out of the mud and give meaning to their lives. The trainers were followers of Cuddon J. A. et al (2013) who wrote "for it is held that man fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing, and in the process, and by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence" (Ibid. 260). The trainers were also the disciples of Augusto Boal (1979) who asserted that theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should wield it. (122). Again, Augusto Boal (1987), maintained that it is the oppressed people who understand the roots of their problems, and it is they who know how to liberate themselves from oppression. The entire play was based on the women's experiences, therefore, it was easier for the trainers to create the plot. However, the plot was scanty and skeletal. Thus, during the creation of the improvised play, the trainers discussed the content of the play with the actresses. Each actress was charged with the responsibility of creating her dialogue and adding flesh into her dialogue during the production. Eyoh Hansel Ndumbe had noticed that many Cameroon drama scripts are skeletal. In his "Cameroon Theatre" in Butake, Bole and Doho, Gilbert (1988) (eds), Eyoh wrote:

But many of the plots are slight, even cursory. Judging only by the scripts, one gets the impression that many of these

works are order written, yet this is a stylistic device that has evolved to circumvent censorship and allow for improvisation on the part of the actors. The scripts are thus often skeletal and not fully developed. A script which reads in an hour will turn out to last three hours in production since verbal improvisations, dance and music are later integrated into the production (123 -140).

As Eyoh points out, many Cameroon playwrights have resorted to writing skeletal plays with the intention of avoiding censorship. In doing so, playwrights are inadvertently teaching playwriting to amateur troupes. The women also added traditional songs and dances in the play. It should be noted that some of the components of African theatre are traditional songs, dances, choreographies and drumbeats.. For example, in Wole Soyinka (1983) *The Lion and the Jewel*, the playwright added traditional songs, dances and games in the drama script. Bate Besong (2003) also added popular songs and dances in his play titled *Beasts of No Nation*. Actresses who acted the roles of a men endeavored vigorously to emulate men's voices, actions, mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, attitudes and behaviors. As earlier mentioned, it was easy for actresses to create their respective dialogues due to the fact that they were in effect recreating their own experiences. During the Greek period, young men acted the roles of women as women were not allowed to act on stage. Lefkowitz, Mary and Romm, James (2016) (eds) wrote:

Women's prominence and eloquence onstage contrast notably with the more limited roles played by women in real life by women in Athens, who could not own property, had no training in rhetoric and played no role in public life. We do not even know whether they were allowed to watch the performances of the dramas in the theatre of Dionysus. (xxii).

Prior to the twentieth Century women were admitted in the domain of theater. Thus, women write, produce and direct plays. They also act in theatrical performances. Besides, women have acted in African Traditional Theatre, such as engaging in story telling sessions, enacting rituals and participating in rites of passages. It was therefore not surprising that the trainees in Women Centre were involved in all the stages of creating and performing their own play. The women divided the play in three scenes. The first scene dealt with Emile's excitement as the wife of a Senior Divisional Officer, the second scene dwelled on the realization of her shortcomings and her determination to improve on her lifestyle. The third scene dealt with her success in acquiring skills and succeeding in GCE Ordinary level. After the creation of the play, a day was set aside for the performance and the community was invited to watch the play.

Given the fact that Mundemba city is landlocked, coupled with the fact that the inhabitants of Mundemba city had few recreational facilities and did not receive Cameroon Radio and Television, the hall which had a capacity of fifty people was full on the first day of the performance. This first scene began with Emelie in her matrimonial home. She was excited in her new position as the wife of a Senior Divisional Officer, particularly as she had given birth to two sons. She wore a beautiful African dress, allowed her hair to fall on her shoulders, walked majestically to the stage, turned to the audience, smiled, walked to where the children were playing, and walked back to her bedroom. It was a mime that attracted

the entire audience. Her attitude was a portrayal of how rich women behaved. Due to her excitement, she did not study the role of a housewife. The house was in disorder, the children were dirty and her appearance irritated her husband who eventually found a mistress. Dirtiness is a messenger to illness, and illness leads to death. Kenjo Jumbam (1980) rebukes people who love dirt. He says God expects cleanliness, thus, people who call themselves children of God must cling to cleanliness.

Although there were house helpers, Emelie could not supervised them for the simple reason that she was a drop out and consequently, was ignorant of her duties. Emelie realized that her husband was abandoning her, their children and his home. He spent several hours with his mistress. Emelie eventually became aware of her inadequacies. This awareness led to her determination to enroll in Women's Center with the aim of learning few skills to enable her perform her matrimonial duties effectively. She says:

Emelie: Waiti aa do wai ma massa ee nodi stay for house? Ee nobi be so. Ee dee stay now na for that woman yee house ... Na for sika sey house and pikim dem dirty or na because I nor finish school? Okay, aa go go for dat woman center learn how for sew good style, fix my hair, cook and make bedsheets and other tins. Aa go fix dis house.

Translation

Emelie: What is stopping my husband from spending time in the house? He was not like this. He is practically living in his mistress' house. Is it because the house and the children are dirty, or it is because I am a drop out? Okay, I will enroll in the Women Center and learn some designing, hairdressing, catering and embroidering. This house will change.

The audience was happy with this change of attitude. Some men said it was a good decision. Others overtly agreed that they abandon their homes and look for mistresses because their wives neglect their domestic duties. Some spectators maintained that cleanliness was important and women should not neglect it. Emelie was determined to learn skills which were to enable her transform her home from a dirty and repulsive residence to an attractive and beautiful residence, and also provide delicious meals to her quests and visitors. In fact, Emelie was buried in the mud, and was gradually dragging herself from the mud and giving meaning to her life. Emelie was a disciple of Jean-Paul Sartre who believed that:

Man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become engaged; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and part in social and political life. Through commitment man provides a reason and structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate [into] the society. (Qtd in Cuddon et al. 260).

Emelie also noticed that the wives of some top administrators ignored her for the simple reason that she only spoke Pidgin English. She quickly remembered that there was an evening school and decided to register in the evening school which prepared students for the GCE Examination with the hope of succeeding in the GCE examination:

Emelie: Yee friend yee woman them just de look me some kind. Na because sey aa nodi work for office? ... Okay, I go go for evening school learn book. If aa pass aa go work get money. People go respect me.

Translation

Emelie: His friends' wives ignore me. Is it because I am not working in an office? Okay! I will register in Evening School and try the GCE Ordinary level. If I pass in four papers, I will work in an office. I will have my own money and people will respect me.

The acquisition of English language in Cameroon is achieved through British system of Education. Pidgin English is a lingua-franca and serves as the down-to-earth means of communication between educated people and uneducated people. Therefore, Emelie, the drop out only expressed herself in Pidgin English. Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o (1986) maintains that "Because the play [*I Will Marry When I Want*] was written in a language [Gikuyu] they [Kenyans] could understand, the people could participate in all the subsequent discussions on the script. They discussed its content, its language and even the form" (5). This implies that uneducated people express themselves effectively in the language they understand.

Emelie was complying with the assertion of Jean-Paul Sartre that "In brief, the human being is obliged to make himself what he is, and has to be what he is" (Ibid. 260). The audience appreciated her determination. With her burning determination to move from the lowest class to the working class, Emelie was hoping to have a new identity and personality. She wanted to be known as a working class woman, and not just as the wife of a Senior Divisional Officer.

The last scene portrayed Emelie's success. She had mastered a few skills and passed in five papers in GCE Ordinary Level. She jubilated over her success:

Emelie: I have passed in five papers. Now, I will become a civil servant. I will wear elegant dresses especially as I have learned some skills. I will no longer be considered a primitive drop out from the village. My husband will pay attention to me.

Emelie's intention was to transform her own personality. Her enrollment in the evening school gave her a chance to learn English Language. The audience was impressed with Emelie's advancement. The audience joined her to rejoice over her success and called on other drops out to emulate Emelie's example. Emelie successfully pulled herself from the mud, improved on her personality, and was ready to work in an office, earn an income and have self-esteem. Emelie has similar views with feminists in other parts of the world, such as, Bennet et al (1981) who wrote "Feminists have begun to realize that until the ideology of male breadwinner ... has been challenged, no real advances will be made towards transforming women's status". (85).

Given the fact that this play was produced by the trainers and trainees in the Women Centre, it was not surprising that they performed a play which called on female drops out to acquire skills which were to enable them earn income and have self-esteem. This concurs with the assertion Jean-Paul Sartre. He says:

... The energy deriving from this awareness [of being in the mud] would enable him to drag himself out of the mud', and begin to exist. By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to his existence and the universe. (Ibid. 260).

Emelie actually dragged herself from the mud and gave it meaning. She fully understood that she was living in a patriarchal society where some men were misogynists, hence, had no intention of helping women to progress.

Conclusion

This paper set out to analyze the performance of Emelie by trainers and trainees in Women Center Mundemba, which portrayed a teenage, drop out who married a Senior Divisional Officer but realized that her level of education was a hindrance to the lifestyle she desired, thus, set out to improve on her personality. At the end of the play, Emelie, the drop out from a village spoke English language, learnt skills and succeeded in GCE Ordinary Level. At the end of the performance, Emelie was only waiting to work in an office, earn money and have self-esteem. Her achievements suggests that drops out who have a burning desire to succeed in life do so. Another lesson from the performance was that women should improve on their lifestyles since men would rarely help women to advance

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