

A Collection from African Women Writers

African Love Stories

Helen Fallon

African Love Stories: An Anthology, a collection of twenty-one stories, brings together new and established writers, most of whom are from the African continent. In her introduction renowned Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo (reviewed in *Africa*, November 2005) remarks that “Africa, like all other regions of this earth, has been and is full of great love stories.”

Because, traditionally, these stories are not written down, or if written are not in a language or form accessible to a large audience, they aren't as well known as western love stories such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

While each African country has one or many distinct cultures, a common theme across all the stories is the impact loving has; not just on those who love but on the entire society in which they live and love. Across the African continent the extended family is the norm and actions are perceived in relation to their impact on family and society.

LOVE, FAMILY AND SOCIETY

Not surprisingly inter-cultural love and marriage presents challenges. In Nigerian Tomi Adeaga's *Marriage and Other Impediments*, twenty-seven year old Tola, a student in Germany, tells her father that she is going to get married. He asks eagerly, “Whose child is he? Do we know the family?”

Later her uncle asks, “If you couldn't find a Nigerian to marry there, why didn't you come back home to choose a husband? Must you bring such shame to

us?” Eventually the head of Tola's family, an uncle, relents, “I know that once we send our children abroad to study, there is no way we can stop them from making such choices.” Led by his example, the family comes to an acceptance of this step outside of what is perceived as the norm.



Inter-cultural marriage is also the subject of Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela's (*Africa*, September/October 2004), beautifully crafted *Something Old, Something New*. A young Scottish man arrives in Sudan to meet the family of his future bride. While there, he begins to experience himself as the outsider, the one who is different. “He became aware that everyone looked like her, shared her colour, the women were dressed like her and they walked with the same slowness which had seemed to him exotic when he had seen her walking in Edinburgh.”

Forbidden love is the topic of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (*Africa*, June 2005) *Transition to Glory*. Ozioma returns to her mother's house to recover from the blow of the death of the married man she had fallen in love with. Questioned by her mother's friends about her ill-health, Ozioma tells them the man she was engaged to has died.

“ 'Ewooooo,' the women moan, 'your mother did not even tell us you were engaged.' She knows her mother has offered endless Masses for her to find a husband and she knows her mother's friends have given up on her. Now for her to have come so close to being married – she has their sympathy and much more now.”

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG

Uganda is well represented in the collection by Doreen Baingana (*Africa*, January/February 2006), Mildred Kiconco Barya and Monica Arac de Nyeko.

Arac De Nyeko's *Jambula Tree* describes the relationship between two teenage girls, a story set against the backdrop of an urban slum with "over one thousand families on an acre of land" where "second-hand clothes are in vogue...Tommy Hilfiger and Versace labels are the 'in thing' for the young boys and girls who like to hang around the estates at night... Mummy used to say these second-hand clothes were stripped off corpses in London. That is why they had slogans written on them, such as 'You went to London and all you brought me was this lousy T-shirt.'"

Mildred Kiconco Barya's *Scars of Earth* tells of Nama's return to "the place of my first love...My mother was the first person to hug me when I reached home. She felt my flesh, my bones, my heart." Back on the family farm Nama takes consolation in the love of her parents and the familiar landscape. "The sun is setting behind the hills. The sky wraps around herself a beautiful purple hue; it makes me want to weep. In our dreams, that's the colour we had chosen for the wedding clothes."

In Nigerian Chike Unigwe's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* seventeen year old Uju is forced to marry an elderly man by her widowed mother who, on the death of her husband, "had to borrow money from a women's cooperative to start a petty business, selling chewing gum, sachets of milk and Omo detergent. She (Uju) could never forget the day her mother told her she had to quit school as she could no longer pay her school fees."

Helping her mother, Uju knows that "at the back of her mother's mind lurked the hope that, one day, one of their richer clients would notice her daughter and ask for her hand in marriage." To Uju's dismay her mother's dream comes true and Uju is forced to marry an elderly man known as Chief.

The story concludes with her giving birth to a baby boy. "She felt its heartbeat, tat tat tat, like a tam-tam being beaten by a practised hand. She brought her face down to meet the baby's and then she felt something else. It



***African Love Stories* is an inspirational collection of short stories from African authors such as Doreen Baingana from Uganda, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from Nigeria and Leila Aboulela from Sudan (clockwise from top left).**

started from the middle of her stomach like a tiny dot of warmth, and then it fanned out like an angel's wings spread vertically and touched her chest...She closed her eyes and savoured the feeling; of being there, of smelling her baby. And then she knew that this was love."

HEARTBREAKING AND HEART-WARMING

In her introduction to this superb collection Ama Ata Aidoo remarks that if a piece of writing is described as a love story, "readers and audiences begin to look for the frivolous and sentimental." These stories are neither.

Beautifully crafted, the stories are complex; both heartbreaking and heart-warming. Aidoo recommends that the reader takes each story separately to savour the rich writing and "to meet these African women properly and individually." ■

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