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Purple Violet of Oshaantu (review)

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Callaloo

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Andreas, Neshani. *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu, Neshani Andreas' first novel, is an ambitious effort. This novel seeks to expose the patriarchal violence and injustices of traditional Namibian beliefs and practices as well as counter the devastating effects of misogyny through critiques of the social institution of marriage. The novel appears to suggest positive female friendships can change in a patriarchal society. Unfortunately, the narrative's principal characters, Kauna and her elder friend and guide Mee Ali, do not carry these burdens successfully.

The novel opens with Mee Ali, a married mother in the rural farming village of Oshaantu, tending to the business of her homestead. As is the case with most of the women in this village, she tends the homestead alone because her husband, Michael, is away most of the year as a migrant worker. Her next-door neighbor, Kauna (sometimes known as **[End Page 693]** Meme Kauna), is a young housewife and mother, physically abused by her miner husband Shange. Neither woman is originally from Oshaantu. Mee Ali, as Kauna's neighbor and elder, is traditionally viewed as her "little mother" (the novel supplies a glossary of most of the local Namibian Oshiwambo words; although "Mee" is not listed, it appears to be a title of respect reserved for older, usually married women).

One morning, Shange returns home after a rendezvous with his mistress and unexpectedly dies. Mee Ali is one of the first in the village to respond to Kauna's shocked outcry. From this point, the novel is temporally organized around Kauna's burial of her husband, a days-long process. Kauna's transition into widowhood is used as the catalyst for stories which highlight the subordinate role of women in the novel's rural setting. The author's decision to tell these stories against the backdrops of Mee Ali and Kauna's friendship *and* Kauna's story of widowhood unfortunately results in narrative underdevelopment of the characters Mee Ali and Kauna, and also of their relationship. Several of the stories, told by Mee Ali, are recounted by way of flashbacks that ultimately disrupt the flow of the primary, chronological narrative of

Shange's burial and Kauna's widowhood. Additionally, the fact that many of the reflections are either about Kauna or are triggered by Kauna's situation, but not directly related to Kauna herself, is confusing and undermines the purported strength of Mee Ali and Kauna's friendship. In other words, the novel's peripheral stories contextualize Kauna's story by introducing the larger social dynamics at play, but they also de-center the primary characters and the primary plot. Neither woman is fully present in a text "inspired" by one woman (Kauna) and narrated by the other (Mee Ali). *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* never fully develops either as a novel about friendship or as a sustained polemic against traditional patriarchy.

Feminist critics of African literature have long noted that women characters typically function as mythologized domestic complements for male protagonists (see, e.g., Carole Boyce Davies and Ann Adams Graves, *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* Africa World Press, 1986). As black African female characters grow in complexity, diverse portrayals of women and their social networks displace romanticized portrayals of holy mothers, virtuous wives, and village whores. *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* clearly builds on the creative space that this critical scholarship opens up for alternative depictions of women, evident in the following exchange in which Mee Ali and Kauna discuss their mutual admiration for Sustera, the local nurse:

"I thought all nurses were witches and bitches until I met Sustera."
[Mee Ali] "I didn't think they were very nice either. Very few are as kind as she is. Usually they are so high and mighty—as if they somehow want to make you feel small or ignorant because you don't always understand modern medicine." [Kauna]

(46)

Mee Ali and Kauna's interaction with Sustera helps dispel their belief in the widespread stereotypes about educated professional women and their reputed condescension toward rural women. Sustera and the two Oshaantu women's conversation about...

Trumpet is progressively recursive, facilitated by language that is both languorous and urgent. Imbued with a blues and jazz idiom, the chapters speak to and among each other in the call and response pattern endemic to the music. Some characters speak only once, others many times, sometimes contradicting or revising the selves. Sometimes paratactic leaps occur, beautifully incorporating a jazz modality to establish a character's stream of consciousness, as in the following example, in which Millie mourns Joss' death:

The Lair bus stops and a man gets on who looks the double of Joss. I feel myself go weak. For a split second, I tell myself my nightmare is over. Joss is back. Joss is alive. I follow him around the corner. He turns for a moment and looks through me. He has the wrong nose. I feel sick with disappointment . . . If Joss hadn't died, I had died first. The bus for Kepper arrives and I consider getting on it, then getting on another bus, and another till I am finally someplace I never heard of. I summon every bit of strength in me and make myself go and get my vegetables . . . I don't know why I am still alive. If I had died first I wouldn't be going through all this. What does Joss care? The dead don't care, do they? I hate Joss. (90)

When the syntax is linear, the lines are usually troubled, revised, riffed on, because this story is "familiar the way a memory is familiar, and changed each time like a memory too" (92).

A forward-thinking book, *Trumpet* ultimately aspires to do what we in real life have yet to do: envision and live in a world in which people can be who they want to be, love whom they want to love, and be remembered for the gifts they gave. In this context, we listen to Joss: "All jazz men are fantasies of themselves, reinventing the Counts and Dukes and Armstrongs, imitating them. Music was the one way of keeping the past alive . . . There's more future in the past than there is in the future" (190).

— *Alcum Hairston*

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