

THE PAIN AND SUFFERING OF AFRICAN CHILDREN  
REFLECTED IN UWEM AKPAN'S SHORT STORIES  
*SAY YOU'RE ONE OF THEM*

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ABSTRACT. Nigerian-born priest Uwem Akpan conveys the reader into gruesome chaos and fear in his collection of five long stories set in war-torn Africa. Stories of abused and battered children are legion, but only few cut as close to the bone as the collection of 5 stories by Uwem Akpan. Told from the perspective of young children, Akpan's collection leads the reader into heart-piercing brutality of the children's lives in Africa. Some of them being gritty to the point of causing distress, each story is an account of children awakening to unbelievable horrors and realities of African plight. Evil is dominant in the lives of African children: human society is chaos, and children are sucked down into the heartbreaking scenes just as being sucked down into the maelstrom. When evil comes through the door in the form of human tribal enemies, children become awakened to their plight. The first story, *An Ex-mas Feast*, looks at a poverty-stricken family that must depend on their young daughter's income to survive. In *Luxurious Hearses* Jubril, a teenage Muslim flees the violence in northern Nigeria. The children in *Fattening for Gabon* are being prepared for sale into slavery by their uncle. In *What Language Is That?* two little Ethiopian girls are best friends until parents say they cannot speak to each other anymore because one is Muslim and the other is Christian. The final story, *My Parent's Bedroom*, describes the violence between the Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis as seen through the eyes of a young girl who has mixed parentage. Akpan's prose is beautiful and his stories are insightful and revealing and harrowing because all the horror is seen through the eyes of children. This article attempts to depict gruesome experiences of the children in the stories and their process of getting cognizant for escaping from their plight within horrific African scenes.

KEY WORDS: children suffering, pain, estrangement, human degradation, perils of poverty

**Introduction**

*Say You're One of Them* takes the reader inside Nigeria, Benin, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia displaying in the prose the harsh consequences for children sucked up into war-torn Africa. Christians clash with Muslims, parents succumb to Aids, and gruesome events follow through the "wide-eyed gaze" of the children caught in the middle. Uwem Akpan, a Nigerian Catholic priest is expected to utilize some religious characters in the collection of 5 stories, *Say You're One of Them*. Although Akpan is an experienced priest who knows the dark side of African tragedies, readers find no preach-

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ing in the stories. As a man of faith, which never gets away from a man of common sense, Akpan appears with a difference as it is stated in an interview conducted by New York Times:

Since it is not something I can put away, my faith is important to me. I hope I am able to reveal the compassion of God in the faces of the people I write about. I think fiction has a way of doing this without being doctrinaire about it" (newyorker.com).

Uwem Akpan wrote five stories depicting about African children in different countries suffering major problems. As to the purpose of writing stories, Akpan states that "the people in Nigeria don't know what's going on in Rwanda and the Rwandans don't know what's going on in Nigeria. You can live in Nigeria or Benin and not fully understand the evils of human trafficking." He apparently wrote them not only for the Americans or Europeans but also to enlighten the Africans by making them awakened to their own plight. He also wants to feature how children might react within the social, familial and political turmoil of the African scene, providing the accounts that take no place in newspapers. When asked why he writes only about children, Father Uwem's answer was simple; "I was inspired to write by the people who sit around my village, and shared palm wine after Sunday mass, by the Bible, and by humans and the endurance of the poor" (newyorker.com). He aims at presenting the brutal subject through the bewildered, resolutely chipper voice of children.

#### **"An Ex-mas Feast"**

The first story in the collection, embedded with tension in Kenya where street children are great in number as an increasing problem, features how vital the meaning of family is in the lives of children. Told in the first person narration, the story embodies a child protagonist Jinga who, in the end, feels obligated to abandon his family due to inter-familial relations. Jinga has to raise education money for his schooling. His desire to go to school is very keen as he puts on school uniform many times a day. His older sister Maisha goes out the streets as a prostitute just to earn some money for her brother's education. His younger sister Naema also feels she has to chip in school expenses, so she imitates Maisha. Jinga feels guilty in the employment of his sisters for his sake and contemplates taking revenge on the white tourists so that the exploitation of the sisters in this way should come to an end. Jinga awakens to Maisha's degradation and, thus, outbursts the idea of school however; his father (Baba) expresses his eagerness for his schooling (Akpan, 2009: 13). At this point we realize the dilemma the father lives through as he seems not to do his best to alleviate brutal situation when he is offered opportunity to earn more wages by sweeping the

church. Akpan highlights the sordid condition by featuring father's insistence to manage Jinga and abuse Maisha's service as a prostitute.

Akpan reveals the sordid and gruesome condition of the families without "mockery, ridicule or condemnation" (Kearney, 2011: 92). For instance, Mama shockingly consults to the use of glue sniffing to keep the children not hungry before the bed, which is brutal ridicule of the drastic conditions; however, Akpan develops Mama's image within the family by making her read a psalm from the Bible acknowledging the significance of Christmas (Kearney, 2011: 92). In this an awareness of spirituality comes to the foreground as result of degradation of Maisha. Akpan wants to convey the idea that no matter how backward the living conditions may be, innately rooted awareness to human plight exists in inter-familial relations. Illustration of such a forcible awareness brings the glimpses of hope to children's vindication in Africa.

A kind of Christmas feast in the story is a possibility only by the food that Maisha provides through her degradation. When she has to leave 'Ex-mas feast' early without experiencing the celebration, inter-familial awareness arouses. As a result, Jinga resorts to "glue sniffing" (Akpan, 2009: 7) again and destroys the school books, which can be interpreted as an exit from the entanglements of disempowering family conditions. It is ironical however self-sacrificial Maisha is towards education, Jinga gets that amount self-sacrificial of the situation he has caused in the family. In this way, Jinga becomes all the more resolute that his family is breaking up for his insistence to go to school (Akpan, 2009: 22). Symbolically, however, Jinga proudly declares that the street family stayed together until the "Ex-mas season" (Akpan, 2009: 6). Jinga's departure enables him to get the education without imposing his dream on the sister's abuse. Nevertheless, his independent life in the streets doesn't guarantee him to receive the desired education.

#### **"Fattening for Gabon"**

Benin is famous for child-traffickers who approach parents with the promises that their children will make money and they will continue with their education. Children are smuggled into Nigeria and abused for quarry work. Much pressure is exerted on children to stop their fleeing. Although Benin and Nigeria have increased the maximum sentence for child trafficking, it is hard to persuade people to testify against the traffickers.

*Fattening for Gabon*, a novella, takes place in Benin where Kotchikpa and Yewa (aged ten and five) are sent to live with their uncle Fofu Kpee. The children were advised to stay obedient to their uncle (Akpan, 2009: 42), who was already involved in illegal smuggling activities, and who also takes the opportunity to sell the children to be utilized in drug trafficking. Akpan uses Kotchikpa as the first person narrator to emphasize the children's

large scale delusion about the prospects through Fofó's plans and their realization of their actual victimization. In the course of the novella, the children's awareness of the uncle's venality and their vulnerability is underlined by scenes of their being locked up in darkness (Akpan, 2009: 38).

Akpan brilliantly conveys the children's exhilaration at their fancied prospects through the inclusion of skilled facilitators "godparents", who further reinforce the state of deprivation (Akpan, 2009: 59) through engaging the children into appalling and treacherous activities that serve for child trafficking. Akpan is careful to depict the children as in no way stupid; when Fofó tries to justify the need to tell people that the 'godparents' are the children's relatives, Yewa asserts: "You lie, Fofó. You lie" (Akpan, 2009: 55). In the intermediate stage of the story, Akpan convinces us that children's sense of modesty has been attacked when Fofó wants them to touch his genitals, which foreshadows the kind of sexual abuse they will be subjected to later in Gabon. The plan made by the "Big Guy" to transfer the children to Gabon is foiled when Fofó is badly hurt through an assault and dies. The children are locked again in the darkness; subsequently, Kotchikpa manages to escape through the padlocked window (Akpan, 2009: 131). However, Yewa cannot jump out. The story ends with his running away but feeling that he will never escape from the anguished wailing. One cannot be sure that Kotchikpa will find refuge in his parents' village, and Yewa has little chance of escaping enslavement.

#### **"My Parents' Bedroom"**

Akpan's story *My Parents' Bedroom* takes place in Rwanda in 1994 when the genocide between Hutus and Tutsis froze the human blood in gruesome violence. The dilemma of the story is reinforced when family members become the target of genocide as chilling acts of human slaughter and when parents from each family justify the violent actions in the presence of UN soldiers just in the close vicinity. As Richard Halloway states, "the human herd, when collectively aroused, is the most ferocious beast on the planet (Richard Halloway, 2009: 33). Akpan's story justifies this view when husband and wife become ethnic enemies in the same bedroom in front of their own children. The justification is reinforced when immediate relatives of the parents in the story rush into the house to kill the wife and set the house in a fire. The child protagonist of the story, Monique, describes his parents as such:

My mother is a Tutsi woman. She has high cheekbones, a narrow nose, a sweet mouth, slim fingers, big eyes, and a lean frame. Her skin is so light that you can see the blue veins on the back of her hands... I look like Maman, and when I grow up I'll be as tall as she is. Papa looks like most Hutus, very black. He has a round face, a wide nose, and brown eyes. His lips are as full as a banana. He is a

jolly man who can make you laugh till you cry. Jean looks like him (Akpan, 2009: 326).

The history of the problem between the Tutsis and the Hutus goes back to 1956 when the Hutus felt threatened by the fact that the Tutsis, better educated and privileged class, were protected under the administration. When the plane of the president crashed on land in 1990, the attack by the Tutsi rebels triggered the civil war which lasted 3 years. The Hutus were persuaded to exterminate the race of the Tutsis for the egalitarian rights in the administration. In hundred days, eight hundred thousand people from both sides were killed according to UN reports. In the face of this figure, Akpan opens the “Pandora’s Box” and directs the sensitive questions “why does God permit evil to flourish in the world” (Kearney, 2011: 96)? This question becomes all the more intriguing to comprehend how a priest who has always affirmed the existence of benevolent providence can ask the question originating from the accumulated information of hellish tragedies in some African countries and then reflected into the stories. Akpan still asserts that the divine benevolence is possible to affirm on the grounds of its acceptance by various ethnic groups composed around common humanity (Kearney, 2011: 96). Monique is repeatedly advised by her mother to “say you’re one of them” (Akpan, 2009: 327) as if she were trying to encourage the little child to protect herself and her brother Jean from ethnic prejudice. The side of ethnicity doesn’t matter for Maman as long as any ethnicity of the children would satisfy her questioners. Within this dialogue, Akpan encourages the recognition of the common humanity of other ethnic groups not only for escaping the ethnic cleansing but also for promoting the common “humane” way between the ethnicities.

This story, like the other in the collection, can be interpreted as children’s awakening to the realities of the African plight. It is the one in which the explicit use of Catholic images is more predominant. Akpan gives the detailed description of the self-glowing home altar crucifix self-glowing (Akpan, 2009: 327) that draws Monique’s interest to possess upon Maman advice to forsake it and save it for the coming generations. The dialogue between the mother and daughter about the significance of the crucifix short before the bloodthirsty human herd pour into the house and torture Monique for the location of the mother. When the Hutus arrive and the man called Wizard smashes the crucifix on the wall breaking it into pieces, Monique rushes and hides the broken part of the crucifix for her dear life (Akpan, 2009: 353). Akpan uses the broken piece as a symbol of still divine benevolence to stick to as an awakening, the only thing to do in the man slaughter. As Kearney remarks in his article the glowing crucifix can be seen as the only remaining hope in her awakening so that the remaining parts

hint at “possible future for her as a reconciler for the people” (Kearney, 2009: 96).

By the similar token Maman who awaits her death from her husband’s hands is the ironic version of the conventional representation of mother as the Mother of Sorrows. Monique asks her father to forgive Maman for her activities the previous night (Akpan, 2009: 348). This innocent request displays the level of evil to which Papa has been driven through the trap of ethnic genocide. The two children can’t escape witnessing the horrific sight (Akpan, 2009:349), which in the end further consolidates Monique’s resolution to stay awakened and alive in the land of agitations. The ending of the story might pose some optimism for children’s freedom and survival in a hatred ridden adult society. However, “Saying you’re one of them” to the questioners might not well suffice for their security. Monique’s determination “not to be afraid” (Akpan, 2009: 336) as Maman has insisted is needed even if these actual children’s lives are in peril. Through Monique Akpan injects the spirit of divine benevolence at work (Kearney, 2011: 97).

Under the spell of the promise Monique will take care of her brother Jean, and so she escapes into the unreal and the unknown in order to protect her mental sanity against the violent collapse of the family (Knapp, 2009: 9). Monique also gets awakened holding tight onto the translucent crucifix and by doing so onto her family’s values. She is awakened to the plight of the Rwandan gruesome conflicts by staying alive at all costs. “I must be strong, we don’t want to die” (Akpan, 2009: 345), she says as is acknowledging and hoping “that evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still hidden good (Arendt, *On Violence*, 56, quoted in Knapp, 2009: 9).

#### **“What Language Is It?”**

Uwem Akpan’s mind must have been busy with the Ethiopian conflicts, so he included this story about Ethiopian families. The clashes between Christians and Muslims began in October 2006 at Denbi. Orthodox Christians celebrated the annual Meskel festival involving the burning of a giant cross. Not the cross itself but the location of the festival triggered the clashes as Muslims who claimed that the burning took place on Muslim land. The focus of the story is around two young girls: Muslim girl Selam and the unnamed narrator who is Christian and whose name is designated “Best Friend” (Akpan, 2009: 178). The two girls get on well despite religious differences. Akpan includes the scenes where the discussion about eating pork by Muslims is handled between the girls and the Christian family appreciates the “open-mindedness” and “sincerity” of the Muslim family (Akpan, 2009: 178). Akpan works on the ironic point that jealousy can possibly sever the relations, but the religious differences are not likely to.

Where there have been clashes in town both fathers have seemingly decided over the issues of whether continuing the friendship between the girls (Akpan, 2009: 180). The girls are warned not to go to the same school (Akpan, 2009: 182) and cut off their friendships, which is hard to comprehend for them. Even after the parents take shifts not to let the girls see each other from the balconies (Akpan, 2009: 181), the Christian girl under the effect of her dream can no longer resist going on the balcony and waiting for her friend to appear at the window. Fortunately, on the final afternoon when one appears on her balcony, Selam also shows up and they both start to mime their hugs, “hugzee” (Akpan, 2009: 185). At first they can’t figure out how to find common gestures for the silent distant communication. Selam imitates “Best Friend’s” embracing and kissing an imaginary person. In this way, while the story ends, Akpan celebrates the innocence of friendship between the two children in an environment where hatred for ethnic differences and religious prejudices come to apex. It is through the two girls’ loyalty Akpan can find the medium to glorify fidelity and rejection of artificial discriminates. As Knapp states in his article, “Being free from their parents’ authority the two girls fight the enforced control of their intercultural communication” (Knapp, 2009: 7) by regaining the control of awareness of the strong ties between them and again by awakening to the need to disregard the parental surveillance. Thus, secretly mimicking each other on the balconies, they set up reach awakening that an artificially designed language of mutual understanding can do well even without words.

#### **“Luxurious Hearses”**

Akpan might have taken the context for the story from the clashes that occurred in 2000 over the introduction of Sharia Islamic law in Northern Nigeria. Jubril, the protagonist, was born a Catholic, but left alone at two when his Muslim mother fled North to protect her children from the spreading conflicts. He has been brought up as a Muslim, and his identity is shaped by devotion to Islam. His brother Yusuf has denied to reunion with his Catholic father and later stoned to death for his opposition to Islam. When the religious riots break out, Jubril is forced to flee unsure whether his mother is alive or not.

Jubril takes a bus trip in which the long story becomes a revelation of his attempts to come to terms with the identity he will have to assume in the south. He is not the first person narrator because Akpan includes a variety of different voices to enable us to understand the hysterical context of Jubril’s journey. First of these voices is that of a tribal chief who captures Jubril’s seat without a ticket. We learn that he has been removed by the new government. He insists that there should be no mention of Muslim or Islam on the bus. He keeps trying to assert his authority, and washes his hands of

the boy once Jubril reveals his Muslim identity by showing his amputated hand.

Other voices unfold on the bus ride. Madam Aniema, an ardent Catholic lady, asks Jubril to deny that he is a Muslim. Colonel Usenetok, who is a half-witted soldier, seems to contend with child soldiers. Emela represents the aggressive type of Christian who claims to be filled with the Spirit of God. During all those exchanges, Jubril experiences a reflective process. He remembers the incident in which Muslim friends treated him as a traitor when the riots broke out. He was saved by an older Muslim who gave secret shelter to persecuted Christians (Akpan, 2009: 210). Remembering how he was hidden under Muslim prayer mats with Christians who helped him, Jubril realizes heroic people—the generous Southern Christians, and gives a lesson that his nation would rise above all types of divisiveness (Akpan, 2009: 256).

Akpan's religious awareness is that Jubril considers himself as returning to Islam. However, his psychological suffering becomes a physical torture when he and Usenetok are dragged out of the bus and have their throats slit. Akpan here acknowledges Jubril's total commitment as an achievement of spiritual awareness, maintaining the irony of this story as well.

### **Conclusions**

The children protagonists of the stories are the victims of the “inter/intra-ethnic” (Knapp, 2009: 7) divisions and they strive for survival and recognition in different African countries under diversified pressures. Traumas are connected with forced migrations and escapes lead to a common ground for awakening to the tragedies in the African scenery. As Knapp verifies, “by breaking with and undermining violence and injustice of the present web of relationships”, these children develop a common way out as much as possible in their capacities. They act outside the perceived norms of obligation and break with inherent violence that leads to only sufferings. The protagonists do not escape into forgiveness which may continue the adult way of approaching the gruesome deadlocks of man's slaughter. Further, they open up new possibilities for the future as in Jinga's case, escaping and pressing for the education he desires without turning into “a social parasite feasting on sisters' exploitation, and the Christian and Muslim girls to explore “the sounds of unspoken words”. As in the case of Monique, these protagonists re-establish the trans-cultural bonds within her promises to stay alive at all costs. Children's brevity to explore new horizons in adult war-torn world is actually a search for a new home. By sharing the resilience and genius of children depicted through the eyes of suffering children Akpan leaves adults no alternative but feel guilty about the world they have

created. So, his stories can be interpreted as an opportunity to see the world differently in pristine-eyes and to condemn the violence in the adult world.

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