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**Sacrificial Women – The Unlikely Heroes of Uwem Akpan’s  
Stories**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines whether the female characters in Fr. Uwem Akpan’s short story collection *Say You’re One of Them* accurately portray the challenges that African women face in the post-colonial era, particularly when faced with challenges of poverty and violence that threaten the lives of their loved ones. It investigates how these women use the limited devices available to them -- including transactional sex, voluntary starvation, and giving their own lives to protect others – to carry out the traditional role of African women in caring for dependents, including younger siblings. It highlights the impact of societal norms, such as preferential treatment of male children and limited access to education for girls. The study finds that Akpan’s characters are accurate representations of their culture and reveals the silent, unsung heroism that African women practice as they sacrifice their own wellbeing to protect and provide for those they love.

**Introduction**

The female characters in Uwem Akpan’s short story collection *Say You’re One of Them* accurately reflect the real-life struggles of women in modern Africa. These women are caught up in a system heavily influenced by the echoes of colonial practices, that places constraints on women’s actions, education and career options, these women find ways

to keep their loved ones safe at an enormous cost to themselves. Though they are heroes in every sense of the term, their sacrifices go unrecognized and often gain them sharp criticism rather than the deep gratitude they deserve.

It is not easy to see a 12-year-old prostitute or a mother who is cold to her daughter as a hero. They are easy to dismiss as unworthy and yet, quietly, with no recognition, they are giving everything they have to keep the ones they love alive and safe. These and other female characters in Nigerian author, Uwem Akpan's short story collection *Say You're One of Them* accurately reflect the real-life struggles of women in modern Africa. Unlike their male counterparts, these African female heroes do not attract attention and garner no praise for their heroic sacrifices. In fact, the impact of their actions, though profound, is easily overlooked and their actions are sometimes condemned by those who misunderstand their real intent.

Thidziambi Phendla explains African societal norms for women using an African expression:

Lufhanga is a knife in the Tshivenda language. I took the word from the African metaphor, 'Musadzi u fara Lufhanga nga hu fhiraho' which translated means 'the woman holds the sharp edges of the knife'... In simple words, a woman has to face life's hardships without complaining... While these defeatist metaphors indicate the suppression and domination of women, they also provide more positive images; women can choose to strive and fight back through their silent resistance... In the real world, women resist oppression, although at times in silence, but they do have a choice to resist (23-24).

In a similar way, Akpan's female characters refrain from openly opposing the system when they know they cannot win, but they don't accept the status quo. Instead, they find ways to achieve their goal – to protect their loved ones – the only way they can: by sacrificing their own interests and, in some cases, their very lives.

### **Maisha: The Heroic Prostitute**

With her family living on the streets of Nairobi, Kenya, and frequently going without food, twelve-year-old Maisha turns to prostitution to fill the monetary gap. On the surface, it seems that this central character of Akpan's story, "An Ex-mas Feast," is focused on her own selfish interests. She has a trunk with designer clothes and cosmetics that she purchased with her earnings, and she keeps it locked so that no other family member can meddle with the contents. In fact, she orders the other family members to leave the family shack whenever she opens the trunk so that they can't see what is inside.

Her mother, who berates and mocks her for being a prostitute, also criticizes her for the way she spends her money. Speaking to her son, Jigana, who is close to Maisha, Mama tells him that Maisha needs to provide more than just the money for Jigana's school uniform. She urges him to talk to Maisha and ask for money for shoes and school fees. "Tell her she must stop buying those funny funny [sic] designer clothes, those clothes smelling of dead white people, and give us the money" (9-10).

But a closer look reveals Maisha's real agenda. Though upset that her parents are not rich enough to send her to school (5), Maisha provides money for her younger brother's education. Her parents have decided that Jigana will be the one to get an education rather than his two older sisters. Yet, Maisha does not resent him. She lets him hang out on the streets with her while she plies her trade and she makes clear that his needs are her paramount interest, "Without you, they won't see my shilling in that house" (17).

Despite what she says about the others, it is clear that Maisha also cares about her other siblings. She takes the two-year-old twins for haircuts and buys them a toy. She also takes Baby – whom the author does not give a name to emphasize that the child is treated as an object, a prop for begging – for a wellness checkup (14, 18). This is a form of rebellion against her parents, a way of saying that she does not approve of the way they spend their meager finances. In fact, Jigana reports to his mother that Maisha says using the baby for panhandling is child abuse (9).

This pattern of behavior mirrors the findings of a 2013 study by a team of researchers led by Yanga Z. Zembe. They found that...

When discussing their transactional sexual exploits, the young women mentioned a wide range of items that were exchanged and/ or purchased with proceeds from transactional sex activities. These items included money, clothing, alcohol, food, cellular telephone recharge vouchers, school fees, electricity for their homes, and family meals. Notably, items were mentioned without any attempts to categorize them into degrees of importance (5).

Though the other family members "work" to contribute to the family income – the father by pickpocketing and the other children by begging according to a schedule dictated by their mother – the family becomes dependent on Maisha's generosity. In fact, on Christmas Eve, when the family has no food, the father says, "Ah, there is hope. Maisha will bring Ex-mas feast for us" (Akpan 20).

Maisha is well aware, however, that this larger income stream comes with a price. As she trains her ten-year-old sister for the sex trade, Maisha warns her to run away from any man who beats her, regardless of how much money he offers and she declares that it is "better to starve to death than go out with any man without a condom" (5). Clearly,

she is aware of the possibility that she may be beaten, become pregnant or contract a sexually transmitted disease.

Though she never says it aloud, Maisha must be aware of the longer-term consequences of her career choice. In her culture, being a prostitute makes it extremely unlikely that she will ever marry, as Deevia Bhana explains in her article, “Virginité and Virtue: African Masculinities and Femininities in the Making of Teenage Sexual Cultures”:

African teenagers’ defence of virginité is grounded in and inspired by deep cultural connections and is an important resource to claim respectability, status and an identity. Both teenage men and women centred on an idealized virginité and respect.

When her family is tossed out onto the streets for non-payment of rent and fails to earn enough money for food, Maisha sacrifices the one and only thing she owns: her body. In essence, she has traded her own future for the hope that her family members will live to have a future.

While Mama thinks Maisha isn’t doing enough for her brother’s schooling, Maisha, in fact, is planning an even more daring move for his sake. One day when Jigana is hanging out on the street with her, Maisha tells her brother that she is thinking of going “full time” – her term for going to work in a brothel. Apparently, this is not a possibility where they live, so she is thinking of going away to a large city, such as Mombasa, India or Dar Es Salam, Tanzania (Akpan 16). She explicitly says, “I’m thinking, full time will allow me to pay your fees and also save for myself.” She goes on to explain her plan for her own future, “I’ll quit the brothel when I save a bit. I don’t want to stand on the road forever. Me myself must go to school one day...” (16). Knowing that she can’t rely on a future husband for financial support, Maisha has at least a vague plan to offset the damage she has voluntarily done to her own life for her family’s sake.

Her body, too, has suffered from the demands of her prostitution career. Jigana notes that she sometimes forgets to eat (14) and he notices the damage from her ill-informed attempts at a beauty routine.

Yesterday, her hair had been low cut, gold, wavy and crisp from a fresh perm. Now it stood up in places and lay flat in others, revealing patches of her scalp, which was bruised from the chemicals. It was hard to distinguish peeling face powder from damaged skin. To rid herself of an early outbreak of adolescent pimples, she had bleached her face into an uneven lightness. Her eyelids and the skin under her eyes had reacted the worst to the assorted creams she was applying, and tonight her fatigue seemed to have seeped under the burns, swelling her eyes (28).

### **Naema: Following in Her Sister’s Footsteps**

Maisha's younger sister, Naema, is only ten years old, but already she is in training to follow her sister in the world of prostitution. Naema spends more time with Maisha than any of other siblings do, and Maisha teaches her the ways of street girls, including how to put on make-up and brush her teeth. She also lets Naema try on her high heels and gives her stern warnings about dangerous things men may try (5), but there is an element of deception in Maisha's big sisterly advice. Jigana observes that Maisha doesn't let Naema hang out with her when she is working, possibly "because she didn't want Naema to see that her big sister wasn't as cool and chic as she made herself out to be" (6).

Naema is torn between two worlds: the outwardly glamorous, more profitable world of the sex trade advocated by her sister and the more conventional path of begging favored by her parents. At the tender and vulnerable age of ten, she simply can't choose between the two sides, which are in open conflict within her household. She is deeply attached to Maisha, but unlike her sister, Naema is obedient to her parents. For example, she goes out on pan-handling duty according to the schedule dictated by her mother (9). Naema's motherly instincts show as she wraps Baby in waterproof bags and puts a sweater on him before taking him out for begging (19), yet she comes back completely soaked by the rain, to the point where her feet are wrinkled from the water even though she was wearing shoes (21). She sees to Baby's well-being to the best of her ability, but risks her own health to gain what little money she can for the family.

Naema's precarious position on the margins of society leads her down a path that is fraught with danger. Though only ten, she has scored dubious luck with a new boyfriend, who has a senior position within the hierarchy of the street gang that rules the neighborhood. It is unclear if she really loves him or if she is using his connections to help her family. For example, he gives her a turkey leg while she is out begging on the streets on Christmas Day and she brings half of it home to share with her family (21).

Naema's dual world comes crashing down on her when Maisha tells her that she will leave the family to go to work full time in a brothel. Naema comes home with eyes swollen from crying and, after breaking the news to her family, collapses into a heap on the floor of their tent (21). By morning, however, she has adjusted to the situation and proudly tells her brother, Jigana, "You must all let Maisha go... I'm big gal now, guy. Breadwinner. If you want school, I pay for you!" (33).

Naema is talkative and teasing as she celebrates her new position as de facto head of household. She is too young to fully understand the price she is about to pay for this decision. Prophetically, Jigana suddenly notices that Maisha's cosmetics are already beginning to lighten Naema's beautiful face (33), foretelling the damage she will do to herself, as her sister did.

Why does a ten-year-old have to step up to become the main source of financial support for the family? With Maisha's departure, Naema is now the oldest daughter and, as Minna Salami explains, she is caught between societal limitations on her career options and the traditional African role of women in caring for their dependents:

It goes without saying that African men, like African women, have to cope with the effects of infrastructural disorder and corrupt institutions. However, women are affected by these predicaments differently. Education is not an option for as many African girls as it is for boys, for instance. Also, issues that are to do with gender such as sex trafficking, gender-based violence and maternal health care affect African women's lives. When it comes to the effects of poverty, "African women", as the revolutionary president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, said, "are the defendants of the dependent (47).

#### **Mama: Willing to Starve the Family for Her Son's Education**

Mama functions as the family's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) by directing the money-making activities of the family. She sets a schedule for the older children to beg and pressures her husband to spend more time on the street picking pockets. She also directs her husband to sweep at St. Joseph church for free so that St. Joseph will provide for the family (Akpan 32). Though tied down with the duties of caring for toddler twins and an infant in addition to three older children, Mama contributes to the family finances by luring pregnant dogs to join the family and then selling their puppies (8).

At the same time, Mama serves as the family's Chief Financial Officer (CFO), collecting and dispersing the earnings of all the family members except the recalcitrant Maisha. On the surface, she seems to be the world's worse CFO because the family is literally starving as Mama uses their paltry resources to procure the required items for Jigana's schooling rather than buying food. Even her husband complains when there is no food on Christmas Day, but her response is cool and firm, "No food, tarling [sic]... Ex-mas is school fees, remember?" (20).

When family members complain of hunger pains, Mama doles out glue, which they sniff to get high so they won't notice the hunger pangs. Although she does treat herself to a helping of glue on Christmas Day, Mama usually saves it for children's use, as her father-in-law taught her (11).

Despite the fact that Mama denies herself and the older family members food, she seems to understand the special vulnerability of the youngest children. While the rest of the family has no dinner on Christmas Day, Mama goes outside the family shack in the rain to the makeshift kitchen to heat up some food for the twins (17-18). At age two, the twins, Otieno and Atieno, are well beyond the point where they should be

breastfeeding, but Mama continues to supplement their meager diet with her own milk and she breastfeeds Baby as well. Jigana describes the physical toll this has taken on his mother:

When Otieno returned to the shack, he sat on Mama's legs and brought out her breast and sucked noisily. With one hand, he grabbed a toy Maisha had bought for him, rattling its maracas on Mama's bony face. She was still looking ragged and underweight, even though she'd stayed in the hospital to have her diet monitored after Baby graduated from the incubator (18).

While Mama's decision to neglect her daughters' education in favor of her son's may seem unfair and even cruel by Western standards, it is consistent with the reality of her society, where men are the predominant breadwinners and a woman's work typically goes unpaid. In her world, spending money on a girl's education would be a waste, as Fredoline Anunobi explains in her article "The Role of Women in Economic and Political Development in Contemporary Africa":

Gender bias is especially pernicious in African nations where most of women's activity takes place in the non-wage economy. Women's work is essential to survival, but because little or no money changes hands, it is not counted as economically productive... Hours worked in producing subsistence goods are rarely offset by a reduction of duties at home (69).

The decision to favor the eldest son's education over feeding the family might seem misguided, but Mama is holding onto the hope of a better future for the next generation. As demanding and cruel as she may seem in driving the family members out onto the streets to acquire money in questionable ways, Mama holds the family together in working towards a common goal: Jigana's education. As noted above, even the older daughters support this goal (though Maisha objects to some of Mama's methods). Thus, in a strange way, the sacrifice that Mama demands of herself and her family is the glue that holds them together – a unity that is unusual for a street family, as Jigana explains, "Yet our *machokosh* family was lucky. Unlike most, our street family had stayed together – at least until that Ex-mas season (Akpan 6).

### **Maman: The Unseen Sacrifices beneath the Ultimate Sacrifice**

Another mother, called by the French nickname "Maman," in Akpan's story set in Rwanda, "My Parents' Bedroom," seems to display a similar preference for her younger son over her older daughter. This family is much better off financially, so it's not education that the mother withholds. Rather, Maman outwardly displays more affection for her toddler son, Jean, than her nine-year-old daughter, Monique.

On the surface, at least, there are cultural reasons for this preference. Monique understands and seems to accept this. “Papa likes to tell me that he wanted to go against his people and wed Maman in our church when I was born, even though she hadn’t given him a son yet. Maman wouldn’t hear of it, he says. She wanted to give him a male child before they had the sacrament of matrimony (339).” The reason why this was so important to Maman is that in her society, “married women who have given birth to sons wear *urugoli* crowns” (340).

Somehow, Monique knows her mother does love her, but she senses that it is a different kind of love than Maman shows to her son. Monique describes it this way, “Maman’s love for me is different. Sometimes she looks at me and becomes sad. She never likes going out in public with me, as she does with Jean. She is always tense, as if a lion will leap out and eat us” (338). At just nine years of age, Monique does not understand the real issue at heart: She looks too much like her mother, who is from the “wrong tribe,” the Tutsis. They are living in a predominantly Hutu village during a time when tensions between the two tribes are escalating. Papa is Hutu and for a time, he is able to protect them, but then things spiral out of control. Jean is safer than Monique because he looks like his father (326).

Some of Maman’s actions toward her daughter seem almost cruel, but become understandable in the context of the threat of inter-tribal violence. For example, one night when Maman is preparing to go out and has dressed up in her finest, Monique brings over the expensive perfume that her father regularly buys for his wife. Rather than spray it on herself, Maman playfully spritzes it on Jean. Delighted at this new game, Monique asks Maman to spray it on her as well, but Maman refuses (327). Monique is hurt by this apparent rejection, but the reason behind it is clear. Speaking of this scent, Monique notes that “Everybody in the neighborhood knows her by its sweet smell” (327). Given rising tribal tensions, Maman does not want to risk accenting her daughter’s connection to her Tutsi lineage. In fact, the reason that Maman does not spray it on herself is that she is about to go into hiding.

Even more shocking, when left alone with her brother later that night, Monique innocently opens the door to her uncle, who enters the house with a gang and demands to know her absent parents’ whereabouts. During the invaders’ frenetic search for her parents, which is accompanied by an extreme level of physical destruction, Monique narrowly escapes being raped by one member of the uncle’s gang. In the course of the assault, the man beats her and slams her head against the floor. After the uncle and his gang have left and Monique’s parents have returned, Monique tries to tell her mother what happened, but Maman simply says, “Don’t tell me now” (340). Monique then raises her nightgown to show her bruised, swollen thigh and ripped underwear. Maman slaps the night dress down and brusquely tells her daughter, “You’ll get a new pair of underpants. Your face will be beautiful again” (340).

Maman seems not only dismissive, but cold and emotionally cruel to her daughter, who is clearly asking for help and comfort after a traumatic event that no child should have to endure. What Monique does not understand is that Maman is trying to toughen her for what she knows lies ahead. She is keenly aware that Monique will face more violence and pain and Maman will neither be able to protect her from it nor console her after it takes place. In Maman's view, Monique must learn to push past the pain and focus on the hope that one day things will be right again.

It is clear that Monique, though a young child herself, has been trained to take care of her little brother. She pulls him away when it looks like he might destroy something (327), dresses him for bed and sings him to sleep (329). As tribal tensions mount, Maman says to Monique, "You have to learn to take care of Jean, Monique. You just have to, huh?" (327). Maman knows that her death is inevitable and she is preparing her daughter to take her place.

The distance that Maman has created between herself and her daughter is for Monique's protection and yet it comes at a cost. The text hints that Maman does love Monique. For example, knowing that a gang is coming to demand her death, Maman hugs Monique and tells her that her father is a good man (348). She also calls Monique "bright daughter (325)," demonstrating that she is proud of and values her. Maman has purposefully sacrificed the closeness she could have had with her daughter for the sake of Monique's safety and to help her in her upcoming role as surrogate mother to her infant brother.

When the fateful night approaches, it becomes clear that Maman is taking a serious risk in order to be with her children. The parents talk over the events of the previous night, when Maman was hiding in a space above the drop ceiling of their house, along with members of her Tutsi family. Papa scolds her and wants to know why she came back. Maman says, "We needed to be with the children" (341). Monique remarks to herself, "I don't understand why Maman is saying she wants to be with me when she won't even look my way" (341). Again, Maman has affection, but is refraining from showing it. She knows the Hutus will soon come for her, but she doesn't want to telegraph her fear to Monique and thus add to her suffering. Turning her face away from her daughter is a way to hide the fear and dread that must plainly show in her facial expression.

Maman takes risks not only for her children, but also for others who have come to the family to seek safe haven. Knowing that her husband will be desperate to save her life by any means possible, Maman seeks to ensure that he will not try to trade their lives for hers. "'By this, your Shenge's crucifix,' Maman says... 'Promise me you won't betray the people who've run to us for safety'" (347).

Even after the family is barricaded in the house, hiding with the lights out, Maman takes the risk of opening the door when Monique's friend H el ene, who is a member of the neutral Twa tribe, shows up on the doorstep with her foot bloody and dangling.

Papa disapproves, making disparaging remarks to the effect that the Twa are not involved or in danger in the ongoing events. When H  l  ne faints from blood loss, “‘No, Saint Jude Thad  e, no!’ Maman exclaims, gathering H  l  ne’s limp body in a hug” (348). She then tells Monique (lying, of course), that her friend will be fine. They hide H  l  ne in the ceiling and it becomes obvious that there are lots of people – Maman’s extended family and other Tutsi tribal members – hiding up there.

Maman is stoic as the end approaches. She gives her wedding ring to Papa, telling him to sell it to take care of himself and their children. She already gave him a wad of money she had hidden under her dress (346). When he refuses, she gives the ring and the money to Monique (347), again signaling that she expects her young daughter to step up and fill her role.

When the angry mob, led by Papa’s brother, Andr  , shows up at the house as expected, the snatches of earlier, secretive conversation between the two parents begin to make sense, like when Papa told Maman, “I can’t bear it” (341) or when he begged her to leave and return to where she had been the previous night (341). Papa’s great uncle, called “The Wizard” because of his voodoo practices, tells Papa that he must kill his own wife. The Wizard explains that if they have to do it for him, they will also kill him and the children (349-350). Maman undoubtedly knew this was what they would demand.

Andr   is not satisfied with just Maman’s blood, he tries to trick her into revealing the number of Tutsis they have hidden in the house, Maman interrupts twice to draw attention away by telling Papa to kill her. She says, “My husband, be a man.” And then “My husband, you promised me.” After some hesitation, he whacks her with the machete as promised and then departs with the mob, which leaves Monique alone to care for Jean (350-351).

Monique takes her brother and leaves the house because the ceiling is collapsing. Ironically, other members of Maman’s Tutsi tribe come to burn the house to avenge her death and, unknowingly, kill their own fellow tribespeople who are hiding there. As Monique looks back and watches the remnants of all she has known and loved dissolve in the flames, she suddenly realizes just how much her mother loved her and how Maman’s sometimes cold and brusque behavior had a single purpose: to protect her daughter.

All the things that Maman used to tell me come at me at once and yet separately – in play, in anger in fear. There is a command, a lullaby, the sound of her kiss on my cheek. Perhaps she is still trying to protect me from what is to come. She’s capable of doing that, I know, just as she stopped Papa from telling me that he was going to smash her head (352).

### Conclusion

Each of these women and girls faced a situation forced on her by society. Victims of poverty or ethnic intolerance, their options were limited by their gender. Society denied them access to education, jobs or the ability to defend themselves physically. At the same time, each character assumed the role of mother – whether biological or surrogate – and sacrificed her own wellbeing for the sake of the ones she loved. Akpan's female characters are believable because they reflect the reality of the societies in which he places them. They compel the reader to take a closer look at a silent, unsung form of heroism that African women practice.

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