

**KALU UKA AND THE 'OBSERVER WOMEN':  
TOWARDS A CORRECTIVIST READING OF  
THE HUNT FOR SUGAR BABY AND IKHAMMA.**

by

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Kalu Uka is known as a teacher- total artist and a total theatre artist. In this attempt at re-reading his plays, the focus is on the status he bequeaths his female characters with and the seeming lack of dominance they evince in his plays. *The Hunt for Sugar Baby* is a play that is clearly revisionist and historicizes the attempts made by writers across the Nigerian creative landscape on the Nigerian civil war. Kalu Uka clearly reveals the role of the poet-dramatist as a humorist-chronicler. Specifically, his poetics of war, the major spoilers for war, the casualties and repercussions of war as seen in Clark, Soyinka and Achebe come under focus. The other text *Ikhamma* is a play that addresses the logic of war or inter-ethnic conflict amongst a lay back community. As creative works on the Ohafia people, the playwright's thoughts are clear on his stance on the traditional fishing festival or any festival or traditional ways of life for that matter.

The first scene of *The Hunt for Sugar Baby* has the general, female and male chorus, who sing and comment on the events before us and them. While the female chorus 'despair' and are 'sore', or 'heavy', the general and male chorus respectively are 'full of hope' and 'do not despair'. In the play, Abigail is 'sexploited'. The characters in the play trace the different stages of discerning the theft of a car battery. In *Ikhamma*, the writer discusses the commonality of blackness on the continent and in the Diaspora. According to the writer in the forenotes before the play, the play is a 'revisitation' of the concepts stressed in 'The Black Aesthetic' as a movement, on racial consciousness and the ideology of blackness, the return home to Africa and self knowledge as propounded by great African American thinkers. The African people and their worldview in the

African Diaspora with its strong roots which existed before slavery are employed as bases for self actualization by Joe Glass. The stranger clearly and objectively states his mission to authenticate his African experience.

*The Hunt for Sugar Baby* is a text laden with meanings about war and conflict and how the lives of women are compromised in situations devoid of peace and harmony. The war in the play is the Nigerian Civil war of 1967-1970. In the play we see the characters in their best and the predator instinct at work in them. In their universe, brother does not know sister and vice versa, neither do friends acknowledge the ties that bind through relationships. Just as morals are compromised, spiritual mentors exact their marauder prowess on the gullible and innocent.

*The Hunt*... has about three women in its textual macro and micro worlds. Apart from the women who are in the chorus, Abigail and her mother respectively feature in dominant and passive forms. While we see Abigail, her mother is talked about, showing a level of influence in the play's actions. Abigail, the vengeful lady, takes out her anger about the war on her companion and friend, Sonny, in the play by stealing his car battery christened 'sugar baby' to meet her financial needs. She tells us how 'war threw her out of the university' and caused strange men to penetrate her existence. As a metaphor, Abigail and the battery Sugar Baby are on the same platform of property exploited for use for pecuniary gains. If Abigail symbolizes inanimate property, the battery is onomatopoeic, with human attributes eulogized by its owner and his associates. In the game of war, one is substituted for the other, making life during war assume some comic proportions. War even visits the market, making the vulnerable members of the community its victims. We do not see Abigail's mother, but we see her as a provider of sustenance to the people of Amako epitomized by Sonny and Bona. If 'ako' in Igbo language would mean wisdom, then the village may be a sphere for the inhabitants to undergo self and communal discovery in order to know more, not about the riddles of war, but about the conundrum surrounding the missing battery. The dream Sonny had while he had the wine-induced sleep is one mystery connected to women in the play. As a link to the unconscious, women are the cause of his predicament. In reality, Abigail is the individual who attempts to loot those who exploited her. Neither the dreamer nor the audience he recounts his dream to follow the female connection to Sonny's quandary. This

cannot be since the women in the play are 'observers' instead of participants and co-victims in the war games. In the process that leads to the discovery of the battery, women are also spectators. The women who went to their cassava farms would have helped Sonny from being a victim of the spiritual profiteers if only they were listened to! While war is on, the women still farm. Pitted against one another, women give sustenance, food and continue to farm to help protract the community, while the men stroll to the battle lines for news of war joke and 'wine' away the sorrows of war. Joe also believes that wives are good at scratching the itchy backs of their husbands (p. 73). As the play progresses, we discover *The Hunt for Sugar Baby* is a comic relief from the pains of war among brethren. It is also a director's script for the dialogue is as powerful as the visuals and action in it. As a text for the stage, the dramatist provides notes and comments for different sectors of the theatre, perhaps to prevent directorial encumbrances.

For a text in which the writer tags the women as 'villagers observing war' (p. iv) it is evident that from being tagged mere bystanders, the women characters though few in the play, are active and provide an avenue for the amendment of the labeling effected by Uka the dramatist. Any correctivist attempt at re-reading plays from the women's angle is a plan to affirm the position of the women and use them as pointers to strong character deployment. While a host of male characters have names, only one female character in the play has a name. Women sustain life in the play and food is one means of achieving this. In no place in the play are we told food was sold for money or battered for any good or service by the women. For the men, 'nothing goes for nothing'. This tie between women and hospitality is again detected in another play by Uka, *Ikhamma*. In the play, the women declare that as Africans, they cannot deny guests hospitality. However, they must be sanctioned by the gods. In the play, only Attama and Oriji (men) who represent the gods give this permission.

The attempt by the present writer to critique this text though honorific as Professor Kalu Uka turns 70, it also looks at the role of the dramatist in not making the impact of war on women deep enough. The women in the play are tagged bystanders and despite this labeling by the dramatist we see them as active participants in the battle for survival in the play. However, Uka the playwright, should be commended for picking an aspect of war in a remote community and making it into a multi-pronged tale. Apart from the problems which plague the

womenfolk, the men are not without their challenges. They scavenge on one another not for pleasure, but to meet their daily needs. Abigail is made to obtain enough petrol from the 'black market' so her boyfriend can take her to the market and bring her back. The vehicle's fuelling, maintenance and security becomes the joint responsibility of the owner and those who obtain a ride in it. Perhaps this is why Abigail arranges the theft of the battery. At some moments in the play, one is not sure if Abigail is not the close companion of more than one man in the play. This is one of the consequences of war for women, which should have been clearer for the reader to encounter but Abigail may just be a metaphor.

While *The Hunt...* is a director's play, the next play I shall focus on is both an actor's and a director's as well as a designer's play. *Ikhamma*, unlike *The Hunt...*, has more scope of reference though it is set in a community like *The Hunt...* Despite their rural settings, both plays reveal that community strengths can be built through collective action. However, *Ikhamma* highlights a voyage of discovery by an individual and another kind of passage by the group in Ibina. We have in the play Joe Glass, who brittles from his diasporic experiences and longs for a return to the 'source' of his being. Through this expedition, his aspiration for a concrete reunion with Africa is thwarted by the guardian of the shrine. This brings to mind the swindle carried out by the priests in *The Hunt...* In *Ikhamma*, the people never went to the university, neither were they exposed to modernisation. The only link with the outside world is Joe Glass, the returnee, who upturns the stability of the quiet community by his taboo sexual liaison with Ugomma.

The play attracts some focus on women because, just as the war victims in *The Hunt...*, the women in this play are preys of the traditional belief system. Nneugo, Ugomma's mother and Nwanyife are two wives bound together by the traditional role of keeping the communal paths clean so that the men who went to war can return. Both also have negative experiences of nine years running. While Nwanyife has been barren for nine years for spreading rumours, Nneugo though fecund, has lived without her husband and sons for the same number of years. The communal calamity is deepened when Ugomma and the stranger, Joe Glass, get attracted to each other despite the former playing hard get. The rumour machine, Nwanyife, brings the development to her mother but she is

rebuffed. The affection they feel for each other is initially played out at the stream and under the Udala (star apple) tree, which are likely spots for collective convergence in symbolic details. The initiate and the adept become linked in truncated destinies. The play progresses and we see the stranger appeal for admittance into the ways and traditions of the people. In his words,

I have returned ... I will become a new man (p. 26).

His lover Ugomma supports his bid. Part of the initiation is a dance. In this performative experience, Kalu Uka attempts to strike a primordial gender balance where two male and the same number of female dancers carry out the dance. Thereafter, despite Ugomma's acceptance of the stranger, Oriji still reminds Glass that he came 'home' to nothing. Some Nigerian plays have central to it, the travails of the stranger in an odd environment. One example is Emma, in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. Also is the biblical allusion to characters, just as Emma, in the above play, is made to bear resemblance to Christ, the Lord, Joseph Glass is made to exchange robes like the Biblical Joseph, and Oriji refers to him as such. The major poser evident to me at this stage is this: in a land where husbands and suitors are scarce, and there is an endless wait for the return of sons from war, why do the male 'guardians' not allow the nubile women engagement to the men of their choice? Secondly, are unseen hands of the gods actually responsible for the disappearance and return of the sons? Why are the women immobile in the face of acute patriarchal domination of their lives and destinies? The women had stakes in the ritual worship, but do not affirm themselves, or rightly put, the writer does not locate them within enough conflictual frame of reference to bring their wills to the foreground. This is evident in Nneugo's double roles as mother of the clan and of the shrine. Ugomma, her child, is maiden of the shrine. Both roles are under patriarchal control.

Glass lets us into his experiences on the streets of his erstwhile community to include riots, freedom fights, commitment to sports, and imprisonment all common to most black youths in America. The dramatist, again as he did in *The Hunt...*, provides informatory material before the play. Born out of a drama workshop experience, run by Uka in USA from September to December, 1979, the collective spirit underscores the import of the play. Despite the attractive plot of *Ikhamma*, Kalu Uka makes Nneugo a weak witness of her daughter's dilemma.

She could have controlled Glass' reflective affection for her daughter, and as it is said, 'nipped it in the bud'. She discovers too late that Oriji and Attama have been predators on their corporate memory and collective will. One strong point is the possibility of Ugomma's unborn child to cause mutation in the status quo of Ibina people. Another possibility is that Ugomma may become a single parent like her mother, constantly seeking a return of the man in her young life. Despite the correctivist reading of the play, *Ikhamma*, in line with some measure of honorific input into the impression I have of it, Uka should be commended for the moral balance he creates in the play. Just as the thwarted theft in *The Hunt*..., Ugomma's inopportune sexual contact with Joe Glass is rewarded with sacrificial cleansing. It is not celebrated and may be upheld as a moral index for the youths of today. Traditional Africa does not endorse premarital sex. Glass should have asked her hand in marriage properly. The divergence between tradition and modernity may refer at this point. Nevertheless, I need to emphasize the need for fewer observer women in texts by male dramatists. The excursion I took into the two plays by Kalu Uka was meant to redress the namby-pamby women who otherwise may have experienced more definite and dominant providence from the pens of female dramatists. I conclude this essay by wishing Kalu Uka, prince and professor of professors, teacher of professors, the poet's poet a happy seventy-three birthday anniversary. To a man I encountered first as a poet on the pages of *A Selection of African Poetry*, and later as the humane empathetic External Examiner during my graduating 1985/86 B.A. Theatre Arts set in the University of Ibadan and later as dramatist, I wish him more kilometres on the road of existence. I therefore join other contributors to this collection of commemorative and honorific treatises to 'me be lu mazi Kalu Ogo kwelu ya'. Mazi, I ga di o- ise

### Works Cited

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