Sisters at Arms: Female Misogyny and Competition in Sam Ukala's Selected Plays

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Abstract
This paper examines Sam Ukala's depiction of female interactions and relationships in some of his plays. While we commend the playwright for ascribing prominent roles and positions to his female characters, a careful study of the plays under focus reveals that Ukala's women are often caught up in arms against one another. We employed feminist psychologist concept of the Male Gaze and Joyce Benenson's Female Competition Phenomenon to explain the antagonism and rivalry that exists amongst women as the women in question are caught up in competitive relationships, especially within domestic settings, fraught with intrigues at self-promotion, contempt and hatred for one another. From their activities, the reader realises the veiled or sometimes blatant reality of power undercurrents that is the norm in traditional polygynous marriage institutions and which sometimes set off other conflicts at the state level. By evaluating some contexts that generate intra-gender conflicts, we deduce that patriarchal structures, polygyny in particular, engender unhealthy competition and hostile relationships among women and pit them against one another in their bid to gain recognition and retain their relevance within such settings. By dramatising this aspect of women's lives, Ukala draws attention to the need to redress some of the negative factors that seem to promote intra-personal conflicts among women.

Keywords: Female Misogyny, Female Competition, Polygyny, Male Gaze, Intra-gender Conflict
Introduction
Sam Ukala is a renowned African playwright. He has to his credit an impressive number of published plays and won a lot of reputable literary prizes, one of the most recent being the 2014 prestigious NLNG prize for Literature. He is recognised as a proponent of 'folkism', the ingenious art of fusing traditional history and folklore into modern literary drama. Ukala's plays cover a wide range of subjects as they affect his society, with leadership and its attendant challenges a recurrent focus. Critics like John Ebimobowei Yeseibo have accused many Nigerian male playwrights of poorly representing women in their texts (77). Elsewhere, Mabel Evwierhoma believes '…the female characters created by male dramatists are few, weak and mostly display a lack of rights' (240).

But unlike many others of his generation who do not project their female characters through in-depth characterisation, Ukala fits the description of a gynandrist or gynacritic. This is because as a dramatist, he gives voice to women's experiences especially in the course of their interactions with one another and others. He presents females in actions not only capable of causing disaffection and chaos amongst themselves, but also capable of threatening the peaceful co-existence and harmony in the home, community and larger society. But in all of this, he ensures that justice is duly served. By dramatising this aspect of women's lives, he draws attention to the need to redress some of the negative factors stemming from traditional patriarchal constructs that seem to promote intra-personal conflicts among women. The Slave Wife (1982), The Placenta of Death (2007 Reprint), Akpakaland and Break a Boil (both in the 2011 Reprint) are the selected plays for detailed discussion in this paper.

The Male Gaze and Female Competition as Theoretical Substructures
In examining intra-gender conflicts amongst women in Ukala's plays, two theories will be brought to bear. The first is the concept of the Male Gaze as propounded by Laura Mulvey, a scholar and film maker, while Joyce Benenson's idea of Female Competition is the second. Mulvey identifies the male gaze as responsible for the depiction of women as sexual or secondary objects from a masculine or heterosexual perspective in visual arts and literature. The male gaze is believed to empower men while it objectifies women. In other words, women in patriarchal societies have been so conditioned to validate their existence through male attention and approval that they go to great lengths, including scheming and plotting to outwit one another in
sustaining men's interest. Many literary works project female characters as often controlled by, and mostly existing in terms of what they represent to the men in their lives. By this, the woman is made to believe that in herself, she has no importance hence she does all that she can to remain relevant through male recognition or endorsement. Consequently, women's adoption of this male gaze outlook in intra-gender relationships becomes largely responsible for the many causes of hatred, rivalry or competition amongst them.

On her part, Benenson avers that in the bid for survival, women prefer to form allies with other women who are kins or related by blood ties. Unrelated women are therefore viewed with suspicion and regarded as primary competitors. Thus, over the course of time, women have developed strategies to socially reduce the strength of perceived adversaries whom they regard as competitors. However, Benenson does not exclude the fact that occasionally, “…one or two carefully chosen unrelated female friends can provide emotional support; protection from and assistance with competition against rivals” (2). As we shall come to see in the course of our discussion, all of the above factors come to bear upon a closer examination of the relationships among Ukala's female characters.

Most female characters are brought into prominence through their roles as wives in the plays under study, although this is often in connection to male protagonists and not necessarily as “seats of consciousness in themselves” (Josephine Donovan cited in Evwierhoma, 24). As a folkist, Ukala places them within traditional settings, yet gives them voice and space in his drama. In fact, we can say that the activities of this particular set of female characters usually generate the conflicts that propel the plots of the plays. Ukala does not shy away from the realities in marital relations prevalent in most African societies as these constitute some of the sub-texts in his plays. Polygamy or a plural marriage is the practice of having more than one spouse. Most polygamous societies in Africa are polygynous: that is to say they allow men to take additional wives but do not permit women to have more than one husband (Gaffney-Rhys, 2). This arrangement is seen as part of patriarchal constructs maintained by men to serve their self-interests while it initiates and perpetuates female competition, oppression and divisiveness.

Olutoyin Jegede regards this type of marriage “…as a way of establishing man's authority over women, constraining the movement of women and ensuring man's easy movement in the harem” (34). Having identified this germane factor, feminist psychology is of the opinion that:

Competition among females is driven primarily not by
biological imperatives but rather by social mechanisms. According to this argument, cutthroat female competition is due mainly to the fact that women, born and raised in male-dominated society, internalise the male perspective (the “male gaze”) and adopt it as their own. The male view of women as primarily sexual objects becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. As women come to consider being prized by men their ultimate source of strength, worth, achievement and identity, they are compelled to battle other women for the prize” (Cited in Noam Shpancer’s “Feminine Foes: New Science Explores Female Competition” in Psychology Today).

Polygyny supports a man and several women living together as a group and going by Benenson's female competition phenomenon, this arrangement is bound to create competition for limited resources which is what the ratio of man to women translates into. Women are therefore compelled to defend their identities as “wives” within such settings in relation to their perceived importance (or not) in the man's life. This breeds misogyny, which within the context of this paper is a hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women by women themselves. This condition is further worsened by the fact that within such plural marriages, women are more appreciated for their reproductive and service roles to men than as individuals in their own right. The consequences of this are both obvious and subtle as the women are now conditioned to jostle among themselves to fulfil these criteria in order to gain relevance and remain so.

We can use the following example to further demonstrate this set-up. Specific statuses and positions are automatically ascribed to women by virtue of their seniority in such marriages. The first wife, irrespective of her social or birth status is regarded as the Head Wife. She starts out as the “favourite” wife who initially enjoys the undivided attention and affection of the man until another wife is added to the harem. While her position as the first and head wife is not in doubt, the same cannot be said of her place in the husband's affections if a new wife takes over being the man's new love interest. This can happen as a result of the former's inability to give birth to (male) children or because the new spouse, who is usually younger, is more physically endowed than the first wife. The perceived displacement is what often triggers female aggression and crises - directly and indirectly - amongst plural wives with the women prepared to do all it takes to outwit the other in maintaining or being restored to the favourite position. The ensuing competition often exposes the brutalities of polygyny to include: insecurity, suspicions, jealousy, and lack of exclusivity. Other concerns include ill-

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will, intrigues, malice, intimidation, oppression, self-promotion tactics, and competitor denigration among many other related concerns. All of these are tools of manipulation women employ to cause disaffection for the perceived rival. Instead of nurturing or collaborative associations, the women are constantly at arms against one another.

Female Misogyny and Competition in Sam Ukala's Selected Plays

The plot of *The Slave Wife* adumbrates the popular traditional folktale of a king and his quest for an heir and ends with the moral lesson that good always triumphs over evil in the long run. The patrilineal nature of many African cultures creates anxiety in women to birth male children, especially within a royal or affluent family as it accords them greater recognition and respect.

King Ogiso of Idu kingdom is compelled to marry more wives in his bid to produce a male successor to the throne. By this arrangement, marriages are contracted not as a result of mutual love or romantic interests, but women are brought in as conduit pipes for ensuring the continuity of the king's linage. At some point in the play, Obu, the diviner on the order of the gods instructs the king to marry a poor slave girl, Igbon. The prophecy from the gods is that she is the one who will give birth to the much sought after heir. In the tradition of the male gaze and throughout the play, Igbon is objectified and treated as a chattel. First, she is a slave in captivity and assigned to serve the oba's wives and then later without consultation, she is chosen as the oba's wife when he was asked to marry a slave girl.

Alahin, the king's first wife, like the junior wives has only female children. She feels threatened by the possibility of another woman, a lowly slave wife at that, giving birth to the crown prince and becoming the Queen mother. In her contempt and jealousy of Igbon, she is impervious to the fact that the slave girl already feels cowered and has no intention of entering into any competition with her or the other wives. Yet, Alahin is resolute that 'Igbon will have Ogiso's heir over my corpse' (35). She is afraid of being usurped from her coveted position of authority and other related privileges as the head wife and she connives with the other wives to make life difficult for Igbon.

In this case, women come together to bond because of the fear of what they perceive as a common enemy rather than for a noble cause. Subsequently, the older women succeed in getting rid of the male child the slave wife gives birth to and even go further by threatening to drown her too unless she promises to keep silent about what has happened. Igbon's co-wives, led by Alahin, are depicted as desperate and self-centred as they are insensitive and impervious to the fact that their cruel action is also
an act of betrayal against their husband, the king and a subversion of communal progress. They are too far gone and caught up in the grips of their insecurities to care about the consequences of their nefarious deed if the truth is discovered. While Alahin antagonises Igbon at every opportunity she gets, Igbon, conscious of her poor status remains helpless and at her mercy. Their relationship is akin to that of the oppressor and the oppressed as one set of women intimidates a vulnerable female all in a bid to secure their place in a gender relationship.

The playwright finally resolves the conflict between the women via the introduction of a deus-ex-machina. This happens when over a decade later; a messenger appears in the king's court and requests that the wives should each prepare a special dish on a particular day. He tells the king that the lost heir will then appear and would only eat from the dish prepared by his biological mother. On the appointed day, the crown prince eats only from Igbon's dish thereby signifying that she is his true mother. This is in spite of her poorly prepared dish and unkempt appearance. She is immediately promoted to a position of prestige while Alahin's sins are exposed and appropriate judgement meted on her. Alahin's tragic end is as a result of her transgressions against her co-wife which also pitted her against the customs and tradition of the society which as queen, she should have been a custodian of.

Our dramatist opens the action of _Akpakaland_ during a period the country is passing through some economic crisis. Through the Narrator, we are informed that:

> …the resources steadily dwindled until there was a feeling of insecurity. And as the president was trying to knock out of his bottle of gin how to solve the problem, Fulama said: “Your favourite wife has a tail” (14).

This accusatory statement by the president's first wife against her co-wife is one of the tools of denigration in female competition. It sets in motion the ensuing series of conflict amongst the president's wives and ultimately assumes political consequence as it later snowballs into a violent mass rebellion against the leadership and upper class.

Fulama, Akpaka's first wife, is enraged by his sustained interest in Unata, one of the junior wives. She accuses the president of being partial and reveals her angst thus 'The moment the president married the Beautiful One, I, Fulama, the light of his morning ceased to shine. For weeks, the president slumbered in the arms of the Beautiful One while the joints of my waist grew cold and stiff' (14).

Again, as in _The Slave Wife_, the antagonism between the women here is indirectly connected to the desire to be the man's favourite and the mother to the king's
successor. Fulama is visibly upset by her husband's loss of affection for her even in spite of Enwe's metaphorical re-assurance that '…that should not really be nothing to squabble about. When a man abandons melon soup and begins to eat okro daily, chances are that the okro will cloy in his mouth and he might return to the melon soup he had earlier abandoned (28). Fulama is not pacified by this reasoning and decides to take matters into her own hands by launching an attack against Unata, her perceived enemy. Fulama sees Unata's beauty as a threat even as she concludes it is one of the reasons for her husband's abandonment. While she grudgingly acknowledges her rival's beauty, she dismisses it as of being of no value in helping the president solve his many problems. Derisively, she tells Akpaka, 'You thought that would give her the heir to your throne...Excessive beauty may not beget an heir. It may not solve, overnight, the problems of Akpakaland' (14).

Competitor derogation or character defamation is one of the tactics women employ during inter-personal conflicts. It is meant to reduce the perceived value of another female rival. Under the guise of needing it to grow back the tail on her cow; Fulama obtains some medicine from Enwe, a traditional doctor which she places in Unata's path, thus making her grow a tail. The idea behind her plan is to make Unata unattractive in order to discredit her in the eyes of the president and others. She also knows that if this becomes public knowledge, the king will be humiliated and no doubt punish the wife with a tail. She accomplishes the first stage of her plan when Unata grows a tail. She then initiates moves to publicly disgrace Unata by teasing the president with a little information so that he is provoked into ordering all his wives to strip in public in order to find out who the culprit is.

Unata on her part enlists the assistance of her father and the same traditional doctor Fulama used to help her solve the dilemma she finds herself. She goes about it in a subtle manner without giving Fulama an inkling of her plans for revenge. Fulama's plan boomerangs as she falls prey of her own evil action when out of greed she eats the piece of roasted plantain Enwe gives Unata to help reverse the affliction. The folktale motif of poetic justice is once again re-enacted in this play as Fulama immediately grows a tail after eating the plantain and Unata is relieved of the burden of being inflicted with one. Both women employ the indirect form of aggression in trying to outwit the other by engaging in circuitous actions in carrying out their plans against the other.

Omon in The Placenta of Death proves to be far from docile in the face of female oppression. King Owodo takes her as his second wife amidst pressure from some members of his cabinet because his first wife, Ibo, comes from a lineage of
slaves. Even though Ibo's family is rich, it would be unacceptable for the king's heir to come from a family of slaves. Omon is a freeborn and is chosen to be the king's second wife and possibly the mother to the future king. Ibo feels threatened by this situation and plans to humiliate Omon and also cause a rift between Omon and the king.

She gets the opportunity when after Omon delivers her son as she cajoles the king into letting her be the one to send his gift items across to her in her parents' home. Ibo delivers a parcel of roasted vulture meat to Omon instead of the assorted food items the king intended to send. Omon and her family eat from this meat before discovering what it actually was. She believes in error that the king had done this deliberately to insult her and her family because they are poor and not influential. She feels worse when she recalls that during her visit to Ibo's family house after the latter gave birth, Ibo gave the impression that the king had constantly sent them enough food and drinks for days unending. Omon feels slighted by the fact that hers was not only a different story when she put to bed, but all she got was a bird of prey not even fit for consumption. She quietly plots to get back at the king.

At this point, Ibo's evil intention is about to materialise as her aim is to cause disastrous problems between Omon and the king and pave a way for her son to become the crown prince later. With careful planning and cunning, Omon succeeds in adding her smoked placenta to the pot of food meant for the king and some slave labourers. Soon, the truth is revealed and Omon also owns up to her guilt but goes on to explain why she did what she did. Ibo is ultimately fingered as the cause of all the confusion and the public's verdict is for her to be put to death. The king tries to circumvent justice when he still insists that Omon should be put to death instead. In the ensuing uproar, most of the principal actors including Owodo are killed. Once again, Ukala has been able to depict how female misogyny and competition can have far reaching consequences.

However, Ukala reverses the trend in Break a Boil by making the younger wife the aggressor. King Gidi covets Uki from a neighbouring king and makes her his second wife. She becomes the king's favourite and Ison, the first wife reveals that: 'All I have suffered here since she came is neglect' (81). But Uki takes advantage of her privileged position and launches the offensive against perceived enemies who are suspicious of her incestuous relationship with King Gidi's elder half-brother, Uwa. Ison has witnessed their clandestine trysts, but is afraid to speak up because according to her, 'I know this court and I know the power of Uki in it…. Whatever I volunteer would be understood as the ranting of a jealous woman' (75).

In order to cover their tracks, Uki wants Uwa to get rid of Ison by killing her in
cold blood, while Uwa opts for making Ison bear false witness against Eririnma before the king. She urges him on thus: 'Cut, Uwa! That woman is very treacherous. She's always schemed to see me out of here' (90). When asked if the sight of blood does not scare her, she retorts 'I see a keg of it monthly. Uwa, kill!' (91). Ukala portrays Uki as an ambitious woman who is out secure power and a comfortable life for herself by all means. That she does not flinch at being an accomplice and a witness to the cold blooded murder of a fellow woman tells how destructive female rivalry can be and does not augur well for female complementarity.

The playwright artistically crafts incidents of intra-gender conflict amongst women to resonate at the state level. Fulama upon her declaration that one of the president's wives has a tail refuses to accept Akpaka's attempt to dismiss her claim. To his question: 'Aren't you bothered about the hunger in this land, the squalor and the disease? The empty treasury, the empty armoury?' she retorts 'This (her accusation) is also an important state matter' (14). And in trying to solve the puzzle, indeed, all other pressing state issues are suspended and the general public made to witness the striptease to find out who among the king's wife has a tail. The whole affair degenerates into a public outcry and mass rebellion when the king tries to subvert justice in favour of the guilty one, Fulama.

In *The Placenta of Death*, King Owodo's family and kingdom is nearly torn apart by his women's domestic wrangling. Ibo's strong influence over the king and his inability to punish her for the atrocious action she committed against the junior wife, Omon gives the play its tragic end. Similarly, in *Break a Boil*, the people are finally able to break existing tradition and overthrow oppressive systems through some issues triggered by intra-gender conflicts.

An aspect of intra-gender conflict among women in Ukala's plays explores the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Cases of discrimination and oppression among women are obviously still rampant as depicted by the nature of female relationships in Ukala's plays. This is an indication that the feminist agitation for gender parity between men and women because of socio-cultural imbalances is a far cry from what obtains in intra-gender relationships among women. To this effect, the playwright portrays his female characters operating along parallel lines. On one side are those like Alahin, Fulama, Uki and Ibo who wield some measure of influence over other woman or their co-wives. They display and expect a sense of entitlement because of this advantage and engage in intrigues and subterfuges to maintain their strongholds.

On the other side of the divide are women like Igbon, Unata, Omon and Ison,
who with the exception of Ison, are junior wives at the mercy of manipulative senior wives. Ukala also places his women into distinctive social classes which in turn determine their actions and attitudes towards their fellow women. Those like Fulama and Ibo from wealthy backgrounds flaunt this even in their husband's houses and display authoritarian behaviours in intimidating the other wives. They do not disguise their contempt for the other group, their co-wives, who come from poor backgrounds. Alahin contemptuously refers to Igbon as '…this one of the swine family. Oba's wife. Osalobua laho!' (13). However, they are resentful over the fact that in spite of their affluent statuses, their poor rivals are effortlessly able to achieve what they themselves long for. They therefore develop a sense of hatred and ill-will for this latter set of women. This behaviour has been identified as the Queen Bee Syndrome which is a situation where a woman in a position of authority treats other female subordinates more critically. The conspiracy is to frustrate these other woman in a bid to get rid of them to maintain or regain their own coveted positions.

**Conclusion**

In examining Ukala's portrayal of women in some of his plays, we identified that female characters are placed in very visible positions and roles. Their relationships and interactions with one another in plural marriages are defined mostly by bickering, intrigues and subterfuges as they compete over what L. Tanenbaum quoted by Anna Campbell refers to as “what they think men value” the outcome of which is that “girls and women disparage themselves and dissociate from other females” (16). But this is not to say that there are no cases of female bonding or sorority in the texts treated. There are examples of women lending physical and moral support to each other even against another female adversary as in the case of Iyebi and Unata against Fulama in *Akapakaland*. However, these are few instances compared with incidents of intra-female misogyny and competition.

Apart from the physical rumbles caused by females in conflict, there are also mental and emotional implications associated with female relationships in polygynous marriages. From the manner which the plays come to an end, the dramatist wants his reader and the larger audience to realise that the power to national equilibrium also lies with women. This is because conflicts among them also translate to a troubled or restive centre. The men and general citizenry are directly or tangentially affected by the women's activities. It means that conflicts among women, if not nipped in the bud or properly managed can degenerate into national crises and violence. Even the principal male actors get consumed by the crises generated by the
women's inter-personal competitions. By extension, this means that those patriarchal constructs that pit women against themselves should be revisited and redressed for individual and communal progress and development. Ukala is adept at creating female characters in parallels in order to show his readers this.

**Works Cited**


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