

Conflicts and Power Politics in Sam Ukala's the Placenta of Death

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Abstract: Drama is a veritable instrument of social mobilization and conscientization. It can be deployed to articulate and interpret the social, political, cultural and economic experiences of a people at any given period. Nigerian dramatists especially in the contemporary era use their creative works to raise the consciousness of the oppressed and less privileged members of the society towards revolutionary ideals. This is the crux of this study. The paper seeks to demonstrate that literary engagements in Nigeria today has shifted from art-for-art-sake slogan, to reckoning on art particularly drama as a relevant instrument of social mobilization. The paper therefore, evaluates Sam Ukala's presentation of the conflict that arises as a result of the dichotomization of the society in *The placenta of Death*. Textual analysis of the play reveals that the causes of conflict are injustice, enslavement, misrule, exploitation and inequality among others. Premised on the Marxist canon, the paper concludes that the way forward is to change the status quo, by resisting these unjust and inhuman situations and making the society embrace the virtues of equity, justice and respect for all, irrespective of one's class, wealth or tribe.

Key words: placenta, social mobilization, conscientization, injustice, enslavement, misrule

1. Introduction

The dramatic literature of any given period at any given stage of development is a reflection and criticism of the societal values prevalent at the time. Nigeria dramatists especially in the contemporary era deploy their artistry towards raising the consciousness of the oppressed and the less privileged members of the society to rise up against their oppressors. Sam Ukala is one of such dramatists who employ the use of drama as an instrument of social change. In *the Placenta of Death*, Ukala encourages the oppressed and exploited people of the world to strive to resist and possibly redress every act of injustice and oppression meted out on them by their oppressors. This is a revolutionary imperative. The seed of such a revolution is sown when man becomes conscious of his rights and for their attainment puts himself body and soul into the struggle. As Mohan (1975, p. 92) rightly argues, "consciousness towards fundamental rights, tendency to struggle and a sense of independence and liberty are the basic ingredients of protest which are liable to come into conflict with the dread power of the establishment".

Sam Ukala believes that conflict is bound to take place when there is misrule, inequality, enslavement, exploitation, oppression, high-handedness and other related human weaknesses. In *The Placenta of Death*, Ukala transmutes a folktale on these themes of human frailties into a powerful parable for characterizing the ill health of the Nigerian Polity (Agho Jude, 1999, p. 9). Thus, this work evaluates Ukala's presentation of the conflicts that arise in *The Placenta of Death* as a result of the dichotomization of society into the privileged and less privileged, the

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rich and the poor, the lower and upper classes, the haves and the have nots.

2. Conceptual Framework

The theory that foregrounds this paper is the Marxist theory propounded by Karl Marx. The theory encourages the oppressed people of the world to rise up in protest against their oppressors. This philosophy emphasizes the place of human relationship in a given society. Marxism is a philosophy of praxis which aims at the radical transformation of human reality based on a dialectical interpretation of history. The aim is to destroy capitalism in order to establish a society in which humanity can give free rein to its essential powers, frustrated, denied, postponed and emasculated for so long. Terry Eagleton in *Saint Gblikaa* (1997, p. 40) summarized Marx's philosophy of the world in the following words.

Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that what the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story.

Indeed, Karl Marx believes that human life and struggle in the world hinges on material acquisition and power control, in all ramifications of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. The Society depicted in Ukala's *the Placenta of Death* is dichotomized on the bases of class relations, class struggles and tribal considerations. There is the depiction of the dialectical opposition between the rich and the poor, the ruler and the ruled, the enslaved and the free-born. There is also a dramatic bonding of the classes of the poor and the enslaved at the end of the play.

The Placenta of Death conveys a revolutionary message. This is revealed early in the playwrights dedication to the play. According to him, the play is dedicated to "the exploited people of the earth, the deliberately desighted..." This, in the words of Agho (1999, p. 10), "is a prefiguration of the playwright's treatment of enslavement, misrule, exploration, inequality and other such related themes in the play". Furthermore, Agho sees *The Placenta of Death* as a dramatic approximation of the dichotomized nature of the relation between the northern and Southern regions of Nigeria, where the nation's wealth is piped from the south where it is generated to the avid north where it is enjoyed (Agho, 1999, p. 9).

The play is set in Owodoland, where Owodo III, the paramount Oba, oversees the affairs of his people and those of the Dein tribe, an enslaved people whose enslavement dates from the time of Owodo's forebears. The play begins by showing the resentment, which some paramount chiefs of Owodoland express over their Oba's marriage to Ibo, the daughter of Emeni from the Dein tribe. The conflict in the play starts when Owodo rebuffs his chiefs' advice and marries Ibo who is seen as a slave, even though she is from a wealthy family.

Owodo is a king and a first class citizen whereas, Ibo is seen as a slave who has no cultural identity. A minister in Owodoland expresses his feeling about the marriage thus:

... The girl is the daughter of the son of a captive – a nice word that – a slave is a slave. She cannot bear an heir for Owodoland. Our ancestor will not let her. . . the throne of our father will not bear a messy bottom of a slave King (*The Placenta*, p.12).

Ibo, in the eyes of the people is a slave and by the tradition of Owodoland she cannot bear an heir for the land. It is to prevent Ibo from producing an heir to the throne of Owodo land that chief Iyasere and Ihama implore the Oba to marry a second wife, preferably from among the free-born.

However, the fruit of the womb fails Ibo at the initial time.

This triggers the pressure on the Oba to marry a second wife. The Oba succumbs to the pressure and marries Omon, the daughter of Osaze, a poverty stricken free-born.

The coming of Omon as a second wife introduces polygamy and all its attendant myriads of conflicts into Owodo's household. In the words of Ezeugo, (2020, p. 212), "coincidental natural circumstance did not help matters for as soon as Omon enters the palace, Ibo gets pregnant, almost the same time as Omon and both put to bed baby boys, first Ibo, then Omon." The emergence of the two babies instead of ushering peace and joy in Owodoland ushers in conflicts and bitter hostility. The Dein tribe, Ibos people jubilate and rejoice over the triumph of slavery following the birth of the Oba's son by Ibo, their tribe's woman. Ebuzun states:

Ebuzun: perhaps the ancestors of Owodo land have gone to sleep and the messy bottom of a slave is angling up for their throne. Serves them right. Must we the Dein tribe forever be their slaves, never their master (*The Placenta* . . . pp. 9–16).

As the tension from the two opposing camps, the Owodo tribe and the enslaved Dein people rages on, Chief Iyasere opposes the idea of the Oba's first son by the first wife from the slave tribe becoming the heir to the throne. The following heated conversation between the free-born Chief Iyasere, Owodo (the king) and Emeni (the wealthy slave father-in-law of the king), amplifies the tension of the play.

Iyasere: ...The gods forbid it. Owodoland cannot be ruled by a slave.

Owodo: My own son, a slave?

Iyasere: He's also Ibo's son. Ibo is a slave.

Emeni: We are not slaves, Iyasere, and you know it. Our great grandfathers were captives of history, that's all.

Iyasere: Captives are captives, whether of history or of war. And captives and their offspring have always been slaves.

Owodo: Yes, but –

Emeni: What does "yes" mean, my Lord?

Owodo: ...by marriage to Ibo, I've cleansed her of slavery.

Emeni: And Emeni that you didn't marry remains a slave eh?

Owodo: Yes, if you want a categorical statement. . .but for the final time, Iyasere, Ibo is no longer a slave (*The Placenta*... pp. 9, 29–30).

The Dein tribe under servitude sees itself as deprived, humiliated and oppressed and so desires to be liberated. This desire by the oppressed to topple the oppressive forces and become a self, in the words of Kinsley Ehiemua (2020, p. 55), "generates further conflict in the play's internal structure".

From the very beginning, Owodo rules his household unfairly. He tilts favourably without disguise towards Ibo, his first wife. On account of her favouritism, Ibo becomes the paramount queen who also doubles as the ruler of the land. She is not only haughty, impatient and dismissive in her relation with servants; she has no respect for the chiefs either. While talking about her, chief Iyasere remarks:

She is probably a witch, that Ibo. I can't understand what endears her so much to the King ... And what reception does one get at the palace from the queen? She treats one like a mound of shit. Yet she is the one...who's a slave. If her family has money, is money everything? (*The Placenta*, p. 13).

Meanwhile as the rivalry between the two wives of Owodo brews, Ibo started conceiving her child's role as an heir in dangerous terms. She says to the sucking child:

The whole of this courtyard is yours. From here, you'll sneeze and the whole of Owodoland will quiver. Here you'll sit to make the captor the captive, the enslaver the slave. King-from-the-sky, come. Come sit on your throne ...The tough

maize that teeth cannot crack. Soon your head will tower up and can look directly into the centre of the greyhairs in council with you ... (*The Placenta*, p. 34).

As a result of this grand design for her son, Ibo sets out to frustrate Omon's son whenever the baby is born, as she does not wish for another prince to compete with her own son. Thus, she sees her son as an instrument for unsettling the power equation that puts the Owodo tribe at an advantage over the Dein tribe and also as a means of revenging their enslavement (Agho, 1999, p. 13). The announcement of the birth of Omon's son provides Ibo the opportunity to set in motion her evil plan. Against the Oba's instruction that items such as "seven tubers of yam, a he-goat and a pot of wine" be sent to Omon's parents to entertain their guests who would come to celebrate with them at the birth of the young prince, Ibo commanded Izagodo, her tale-bearing servant to substitute the items with a roasted vulture. So a roasted vulture was sent to Osaze, Omon's father against the Oba's order. With the help of Izagodo, Ibo appropriated the he-goat and other items to herself and even wonders why the same gift given to her should be extended to Omon. She chastises Owodo thus:

You do not know? My son entered this world before hers. You do not see a difference in their age? My son is an Oba. You do not see the difference? You merely pretend not to. But you are doing a dangerous thing. You're putting my son and Omon's son on the same footing and encouraging them to scramble for the throne. You mean to put my son in wicked rivalry, have him killed, so that I, the captive shoot, may grow no root in your palace, so that my people will forever remain in bondage in Owodo land (*The Placenta*, p. 38).

Omon and her people soon discover that the gift from the king is a vulture after eating part of it. Omon becomes very angry and sad. Her anger is directed wrongly though, against Owodo thinking that it is Owodo's plot to disgrace her people by treating them with disdain not knowing that it is the handwork of her co-wife. Grieved by this evil act against her people, Omon begins to scheme for vengeance. She devises a plan which is supported by Chief Iyasere who is also not happy with the ill treatment meted out to Omon. Omon's mother Izuegbe foresees liberation and turns to her daughter to console her thus:

Izuegbe: But the rich knows only how to look after themselves. Don't worry, our time will come. My grandson will rule Owodoland. He is the weapon by which we will make the rich eat sand (*The Placenta*, p. 44).

Izuegbe's intention of making the "rich to eat sand" in the words of Ezeugo (2020, p. 215), increases the likelihood of conflict and gives insight into the ugly relationship between the rich and the less-privileged."

The occasion for Omon to carry out her vengeance plan presents itself when Omon supervises a meal cooked for volunteers who went to work in the Oba's farm. Although Ebuzun is the Oba's chief cook, who prepares his meals, Omon unsuspectingly adds the dried placenta, the after-birth of her son in lieu of meat which is used to serve the king and his guests in revenge. When discovered, the Oba summons a gathering of the chiefs and other people with the intention of punishing the culprit publicly. But then, he discovers belatedly that it is Ibo who is really at the centre of the whole imbroglio which led Omon to feed him with a placenta not only to spite him, but also to avenge her father who also was sent a gift of vulture.

However, instead of vindicating Omon on the basis of the available facts, and punishing Ibo who actually orchestrated the whole plan, Owodo's sense of injustice and high-handedness overshadows his sense of reasoning. He perverts the course of justice and pronounces that Omon must die for poisoning the Oba and his guests. Omon reacts against this verdict supported by Iyasere and her people who unite against Owodo. And because Iyasere supported Omon's course and also acted as advocate during the trial, Owodo also awards death sentence on Iyasere. This rash and despotic judgement is challenged by Iyasere and in fact by the entire citizens of Owodoland. Thus,

Iyasere raises objection to the verdict of death sentence pronounced on him and queries the king's partial judgment:

Iyasere: go ahead, what does his Royal Majesty pronounce against himself, the sacred one, who committed the initial conspiracy and connivance? What does he pronounce against his diabolical queen, who misrules Owodo land on his behalf? Against his unscrupulous, disloyal servant, who for the sake of food served poison to a new free-born prince of Owodo land, what does the Oba pronounce? Citizens of Owodo land are those not truly guilty ones (*The Placenta*, p. 73).

This eloquent and well articulated speech stirs up dangerous conflict against the privileged. The speech also presents Iyasere as a better candidate for the position of the Oba. What follows next is a bloody fight between Iyasere and the king as well as their loyalists. In the process, Owodo, Iyasere, Ibo and Emeni are destroyed. The two less-privileged- the proletariat unite. Oloto from Dein (slave side) tells Osaze from the impoverished side of Owodo that "the slave and the poor are one". With this understanding, the upper class, the rich, and the caste are destroyed while the proletariat emerge victorious. This is the playwright's way of empathizing with the oppressed class, which is now in control of power and set to reform Owodoland.

Thus, with this, Sam Ukala has enunciated his vision for the future of Nigeria. It is a call for a change in the approach to governance and leadership in Nigeria, where in the words of Chukwudi Okoye (2019, p. 155), "some wealthy but poorly educated individuals assume positions as godfathers and then use the "weapons" of affluence and intimidation to impose their stooges on the masses" there by creating a cycle of antagonism and tyranny. In *The placenta of Death*, there is the power tussle between Owodoland and Deinland personified by the antagonism between Owodo and Emeni who is desirous of freeing the Dein tribe from the clutches of the Owodo tribe. Ibo, his daughter marries Owodo just to perfect this plan. She uses her son, the heir to the throne to prosecute the goal of achieving freedom for the Dein tribe.

At the level of classes, Owodo's maltreatment of Omon, his second wife, is mainly because of poor background. This also explains why Omon's parents, Owodo's in-laws could not be invited to the trial scene as the Oba's in-laws as Emeni does. The implication of this is that the issue of class affiliations cuts across tribes and it is a true reflection of whether one is wealthy or poor. Only this can explain the rationale behind the relegation of free-born and the acceptance of wealthy slaves. This is revealed in the following discussion between Osaze and Iyasere:

Osaze: The world is really uneven. Could the Oba have done this to Emeni? You and I were in Umolua's army with Emeni. Didn't I use to wrestle with him and break his chest on the ground?

Iyasere: It amazes me that the Oba should prefer a slave of the Dein tribe to a son of the same blood and tongue as he.

Osaze: The rich speak the same tongue, Iyasere, regardless of their bloods... (*The Phacenta*, pp. 40-41). This means that the rich slaves belong to the bourgeois class as does the Oba himself. This fact further explains why Emeni and his daughter Ibo have consistently displayed arrogance and haughty dispositions throughout the entire play.

Power politics also manifests at the level of character presentation in the play. The urge to show off one's power at the expense of another person manifested clearly in the relationship between Izagodo, who is Ibo's preferred servant and Ebuzun. It is also found in the relationship between the young Owodo and his elderly chiefs, especially Ihama and Iyasere. It is also there in the conflict between Ibo and Omon as well as between Emeni and Osaze.

Indeed, the level of power display in the governance of Nigeria as portrayed in *The Placenta of Death* is encapsulated thus:

The narrator of the play and some characters reflect through their statements some of the sorry episodes of our national history: The continued dominance enjoyed by a section of the country; the inequity reflected in the sharing of the national cake, the continued hardship faced by the poor in the society, the lure of money and power etc. (Agho, 1999, pp. 19–20).

The identification of the Dein tribe in the play with the South shows the level of the marginalization and inequity the Southerners have suffered over the years. They have been relegation to the background, politically speaking, by the Northerners who have in most cases provided the leadership for Nigerian polity since independence in 1960. This does not speak well of Nigeria's fledgling democracy.

3. Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have seen that conflicts are bound to take place when there is misrule, oppression, exploitation, injustice and enslavement, and drama is usually deployed to mirror the situation. In this paper, we have attempted to evaluate Ukala's presentation of the conflicts that arise as a result of the dichotomization of society into the privileged and less-privileged, the rich and the poor, the enslaved and the free-born. The playwright believes that the way forward to change the status quo is to resist the unjust situations by making the society embrace the virtues of equity, justice and respect for all irrespective of class, wealth or tribe.

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