

## Interrogating Radical Theatre and Social Injustice in Sam Ukala's Break a Boil

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### ABSTRACT

The Judicial system in Nigeria, from the local to the federal level, needs to experience radicalism because perverted justice is gradually becoming the new order of the day. Radicalism is one phenomenon that has remained prominent across ages because it continues to take one form or the other in shaping the realities prevalent in any given generation. A radical artist is an aggressive personality because he/she boils with a burning passion for bringing some degree of change to a given society. He/she employs the most viable means available to make this dream come true no matter what it takes. Due to the strong positions artists occupy in our society today, revolutionaries among them activate their role as social critics, commentators, and changers to speak the language of radicalism through art. In its unusual approach, this paper tends to evaluate the role of some of such artists in contemporary African society with emphasis on Nigeria. This qualitative study draws its framework from the radical theatre aesthetics embedded in creative masterpieces with the ideology of motivating contemporary African artists to join in the crusade of using the surest means in bringing the desired change to our immediate society. This study, therefore, limits its scope to Sam Ukala's *Break a Boil* as a revolutionary masterpiece, as it portrays the creative artist as one of the revolutionary artists of our time.

**Keywords:** Radicalism, Theatre, Artist, Injustice, Nigeria

### Preamble

Across disciplines, the term 'radical' is quite relative and controversial, especially in the Social sciences, Humanities, Performing Arts and so on, which denotes the need to interrogate basic or fundamental principles guiding such a school of thought in the academia

and society at large. Revolutionaries tend to be a special kind of people because they identify a threatening issue in society and go further to devise appropriate strategies to tackle such issues. They propose new strategies and create new realities that are more than personal in handling tensions in society and, by so doing, create a new way of life. The radical theatre vision has metamorphosed into 'Popular theatre' and 'Theatre-for-Development' (TfD), as the case may be, because of the similarities in the ideologies amongst scholars and practitioners. African theatre scholars, critics, and practitioners like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Bode Sowande, Sam Ukala, Saint Gbilekaa, and Ojo Bakare believe that revolutionary theatre should not only be seen from the perspective of ensuring rapid and sweeping changes but also effecting such changes at the grass-root level to ensure effective, efficient, and even development of the society. According to Dauda Enna and Victor Anyagu, in "The Nigerian Radical Theatre Movement and the New Democracy", Gbilekaa posits:

The fundamental Marxist sense of going to the roots, the basic and primary causes underlying the situation here, is informed by dialectical methods and refers to the theatre that adopts the principles of socialist realism (82).

The radical tendencies of the theatre here are targeted at the upliftment of the standard of living of the grass-root masses by arousing their social consciousness. This is likened to the type of theatre in Africa, especially Nigeria, during the initial stage when the theatre was aimed at the grassroots. It took up so many forms in order to meet its target, like the theatre of pedagogy, liberation and revolution and so on, underlined by Marxist revolutionary aesthetics. Dramatic texts were not written and produced for entertainment purposes alone; the majority of them were to express certain ideological positions or to condemn threatening socio-political, ethnocultural, religious and economic practices. According to Enna and Anyagu, Gbilekaa further states:

Nigeria's theatre of the 1970s (radical movement) bears a mark of ideological commitment and patriotism. It transcends mere protest as it abandons the esoteric banalities of glorifying tradition. Even where it makes use of them, it is from the subversive perspective, squeezing it to make meaning for contemporary existence (82).

In the wake of this revolution, theatre scholars and practitioners did not just fold their arms and watch. They played an active role in bringing the desired change required in society by writing and producing works that confronted the threatening issues, delving into the grassroots and exposing the key issues' economic, ethnocultural and social heart. Yemi Atanda believes that "dialectics of revolution remains a veritable source for African dramatic criticism in order to understand the inherent values in any given ideology for a better change in society" (259). As a result, a different kind of radical drama and theatre was born, a synthesizing process of transforming a compost mixture of cultural renaissance, post-colonial disillusionment and protest into a revolutionary weapon to confront man with the fundamental consciousness of his existence. Radical aesthetics de-emphasizes the forces of fate and predestination and places the myth-making history of the individuals into the hands of the renaissance man in the society. This movement gave birth to the emergence of great playwrights and practitioners of our time like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Ola Rotimi, and Emeka Nwabueze, Sam Ukala and others.

These bands of radical playwrights, critics, and practitioners developed a deep passion for the art through the production of works that reflect the concerns, needs and aspirations of

their immediate society. Their viewpoints and creative comments encapsulated their proposed solutions for truth, change, and freeing the African man from neo-colonial oppression and policies. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, in classifying radical writers, scholars and practitioners, maintains:

... a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose is one or the other side of the battlefield: the side of the people or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The question is what and whose politics (204).

These Nigerian revolutionary writers of the oppressed people's politics filled the yawning gap for a combative theatre that could confront the ruling class bravely and unmask their knaveries and compradorial nature and collaborative stance with the capitalist bloc, particularly in their dealings with the governed. According to Enna and Anyagu, Boal believes:

Their theatre diminishes, placates, satisfies and eliminates all that can break the balance-all, indicating the revolutionary, transforming impetus which can lead men and women to perceive that the power to change the world rests entirely in their hands and equips them psychologically to rebel against tyrannical situations and find salvation to oppose the forces of dehumanization (83).

## **Methodology**

The study employed the historical methodology of qualitative research in analysing and critically interpreting data used in work. This entails the investigation of documented sources, such as books, journals, reports, films, video and audiotapes, archival materials...as well as oral sources (Ukala, 2006). He explains that this method is used to ascertain facts and occurrences in definite places and times. The methodology is quite necessary and was employed in this study because of its relevance to the topic.

## **Conceptual framework**

The evolution of radical drama and theatre in Nigeria followed the growth and development of the nation socially, religiously, economically, and politically. This movement had a resultant effect on the arts, as reflected in the works of creative artists of the time. The responses of Nigerian creative artists were evident in the varying degree of issues highlighted in their works as they affected their immediate society. According to Achebe:

An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant, like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (54).

Therefore, dynamic radical theatricians found the art not only an effective weapon in raising the consciousness of the people towards effective and efficient nation-building but also as an ideal medium of sharing national visions with the populace. They went all out in seeking viable alternatives to handle, combat, and subdue pressing and threatening issues against society. Through drama and theatre, Theatre Revolutionaries gave such pressing life-threatening issues adequate attention, not only through writing and dramatization but also

through solutions that are proffered as to how much could be solved or eliminated. According to Enna and Anyagu, Gbilekaa posits:

Adopting the socialist vision in their creative works on the Nigerian situation entails a rejection of the animist philosophy and metaphysical profundities that seek to provide answers to man's nature, problems, fate, and social conditions from the metaphysical perspective (84).

The majority of the works of the earliest theatricians, especially playwrights and critics, share a common theme and ideology with regard to oppression and class inequality in Nigerian society. They, therefore, believe that only the oppressed Nigerians can determine to free themselves from being mere spectators and become actors (key players) in issues relating to the progress of the nation. Theatre revolutionaries were bent on freeing the mind of the Nigerian renaissance man, so he could take up a part and play an active role (protagonists) in the policies and decisions of the state as it affects the well-being of the entire populace. Enna and Anyagu further maintain that:

The framework that informed radical drama is that which visualizes artistic vision from the perspective of its practical relevance to the struggle for a more democratic society. This artistic movement's criterion is that it identifies a dialectical relationship between literature and social struggle and relates artistic concepts to the realization of an egalitarian society devoid of acrimonious class struggle. Radical drama preaches revolution, and so did the Nigerian ideologue preach (85).

Nigeria's current democratic environment yearns for new values and national rebirth. The nation is witnessing an upsurge in social disaffection throughout the length and breadth of the nation. The strong united peace-laden nation is unconsciously heading towards disintegration and anarchy in the current wake of insecurity and political jingoism from all the ethnocultural corners of the country. There is a great need to explore the potency of radical drama and theatre in tackling this menace that threatens the unity of Nigeria. This could be achieved by adequately addressing the emergent religious, ethnocultural, socio-political and economic challenges plaguing the nation's unity. Some practitioners of the popular theatre tradition like Gumucio-Dagron believe that such ideologies could be result-oriented if artists can conscientize their audience and,

Transform the passive receiver of messages into a critical, reflective and active participant in the communication process. The educational objectives would not be complete if, in the aftermath, the individual or the community did not have any means to communicate, speak their own thought, appropriate a language and explore the possibilities of developing an expression of their own. The bottom line is that the individuals have become subjects of their own development and not just passive objects (37).

On the other hand, Gbilekaa points out that:

Freire's 'culture of silence' describes a process whereby the values of the city or technological West are not only imported and adopted by third world countries but are actually reinforced through the attitude of their ruling elite in their relationship with the ruled. With informal revolutionary education, the individual's mind becomes open to new ideas. The people begin to perceive ... a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the

social situation in which they find themselves, often taking the initiative to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation (207).

### **Advocacy**

The place of revolutionary theatricians in our society today cannot be contested or de-emphasised because they have become the social critic and commentators of our time. In turn, they raise the people's consciousness about impending tensions and draw the attention of the privileged ruling elites to the implications of some thoughtless policies that could hamper the development of the common man and society at large. In our contemporary African society, especially in Nigeria, for the radical effortful tendencies of the theatre scholars and practitioners to succeed, it has to address more pressing realities of the society at that time as well as come out to dialogue with the right 'spect-actors'. It would have to adopt the Theatre-for-Development methodology in its reach out. To efficiently and effectively use this approach, practitioners of radical theatre would go to its target audience, interact, seek understanding and submit themselves to such knowledge in order to eliminate any form of suspicion to enhance a good working partnership spirit between the parties involved. The period of interaction would allow the radical group the opportunity to study the customs and beliefs of the people and enable them to live with them and become active participants in the social and economic life of these people and experience firsthand some of their challenges. This will aid in the comprehensive analysis of the realities peculiar to the target communities and bring some of these tensions to bear on the social structure and the belief system that oppresses them.

The emphasis of the contemporary theatre will shift from illusion to problem-solving. This shows that the emphasis is on analysing societal contradictions that have entrapped them and how their consciousness would be raised so that they could find ways of solving their predicament. Suppose the theatre is used as the weapon of collective struggle and as an instrument of demolishing the squalid institutions that exploit and degrade humanity. In that case, it could involve people who are revolutionaries. This is necessary because it would encourage them to produce works that will challenge the tensions and realities of their immediate society while provoking thought and result-oriented consciousness amongst the people. Let us then state categorically that the essence of revolutionary aesthetics in contemporary African drama and theatre cannot be over-emphasised because these radical perspectives inherent in some contemporary theatre programs could open up the people to the discovery of new realities, which gives and assures them hope and confidence as agents of change in their immediate societies.

### **Synopsis of *Break a Boil***

The play opens with Nkanka, a palace watchdog suffering from yaws, who narrates the story of Gidiland, where Gidi, (Uwa's younger brother), the King, is unaware that his elder brother, Uwa, is having a sensual affair with his most beloved wife, Uki (the wife Gidi forcefully took from another king, an act which none of the Gidi Chiefs is in support of). Only the King's first wife, Ison, Nkanka, and Eririnma, the war minister, know about the affair. When Uwa and Uki notice that Nkanka is trying to tell the King what is going on, Uwa kills him at the prompting of Uki. Ison comes in on them and is forced to swear never to tell the truth. She forcefully licks Nkanka's blood from the machete to prove that she is bound by the oath. Uwa and Uki accuse Eririnma of trying to rape Uki and the king sends for Eririnma. The people of the land assemble and the King summons Ison to corroborate Uwa's tale as a witness.

She testifies it is Eririnma and not Uwa who tries to rape Uki, but immediately Nkanka's ghost appears and she faints. As she regains consciousness, she confesses the truth that it is Uwa who is having an affair with Uki and not Eririnma. Gidi promises to turn the key to Uwa's madness and make him mad again. Uwa exposes that Gidi and his mother inflict him (Uwa) with madness so that Gidi could be King. As a result of Uwa's testimony, a fight erupts and Uwa strikes Gidi with *Ogun* (a staff symbol) and Gidi slumps. Uwa attempts to escape, but Eririnma strikes him to death with the King's spear leaving the fate of Uki in the hands of the King. The King refuses to execute Uki or allow her to go through a ritual process in order to cleanse the land and himself. As a result, Ison takes over Nkanka's role. The people decide to break the old kingship convention by crowning Eririnma (a stranger to Gidiland) the King, a decision the Oracles of Gidiland throw white chalk to (endorse). Eririnma scales through all tests of valour put forth by Gidiland's youth and finally becomes the King of Gidiland.

### **Discourse on *Break a Boil***

Ukala, in *Break a Boil*, responds to some of the realities of contemporary Nigerian society, especially in the implementation of ideas and policies. It is a known fact that the Executive and Judiciary arms of government in Nigeria are always discriminatory in implementing policies or judgments between the ruling class and the proletariats. It is evident that the highly-placed 'pen' robbers in Nigeria are usually not punished when the arm of the law catches up with them. The playwright, through the character of Nkanka says that:

**NKANKA:** Okay. For the sake of loyalty and integrity. For the sake of justice. (*Flogs a fly*). Let us light the oil lamp of truth and tend it. The guilty ought to be punished. If we do nothing, the innocent will be punished, the guilty rewarded. And evil will continue to triumph in this kingdom ... (81).

Like Ukala rightly puts it above, 'If we do nothing ...' that means playing indifferent to sensitive social challenges, our society will continue to suffer in the hands of the privileged few. The masses are sensitized to taking radical actions whenever their fundamental rights are abused or justice perverted. A radical theatre is that type of theatre that is out to cause radical changes in its immediate society, and Ukala as a radical artist, raises this consciousness in *Break a Boil*. The characters of Nkanka, Eririnma, and Ison are radical characters because they represent the symbol of change and also bring about the desired change Gidiland needs. In one of the scenarios, Eririnma states that:

**ERIRINMA:** Tales! I, bear tales? ... Well, this particular tale, I will bear ... I'm already being framed and will be executed if I shut up. Besides, when I am loyal to anyone, I am totally loyal. I must go to tell the king what I saw. (Moves, dragging AKWEKE along and declaiming) I am too big a cockroach to be meat at the reconciliation of the cook and his wayward hen (83).

In Nigeria, the masses like Eririnma 'bear tales' but the problem with the people here is the fear to speak out and one may ask why would that be. Patriotic Nigerians over the years who 'bear tales' and have spoken out about it do end up victims as a result, especially when the tale(s) indicts a highly-placed person in the society. However, Ukala has not relented in mounting a wake-up call to the populace, not to be deterred by the glorification of injustice that has become the order of the day. Through his works like *Akpakaland*, the playwright continuously advocates for a form of radicalism that prompts the people to take a strong position against any form of injustice in our immediate society.



This will, as a result, bring about a radical and dynamic change. The playwright, in the words of Nkanka emphasizes that:

**NKANKA:** (Flogs a fly) These flies won't let me understand deep politics. But I think that the one who knows the truth but tells a lie is the unpatriotic one. Patriotism does not lie in falsehood nor in muzzling the mouth that speaks the truth (88).

Nkanka becomes the rebellious scapegoat in the play as a result of the tale he bears. Nkanka determines to expose Uki's crime with Uwa, but Uki induces Uwa to kill Nkanka, which Uwa does and makes Ison swear not to disclose the truth or face the same fate with Nkanka and Ison concedes. Alex Asigbo in "Skeletons in their Cupboards: Moral and Ethical Issues in Selected plays of Sam Ukala" posits that:

The corruption we all know is the highest form of immorality, and in a nation where falsehood is elevated over truth, the future cannot be anything but bleak since justice is turned on its head most of the time. Standing justice on its head presupposes that the rulers are placing self and class interests over those of the masses most of the time. This is lucidly shown in Gidi's refusal to allow Uki to cleanse the land in *Break a Boil* (236).

The people are encouraged to possess the radical spirit that will help them confront challenging realities when it presents themselves in their immediate society, as it does with Eririnma in *Break a Boil*. As a result of this kind of radical spirit in Eririnma, it purges Gidiland of all the evil and atrocities that hold it captive in the hands of the ruling family. Eririnma, in a scenario, tries to persuade Ison, Gidi's senior wife, to speak up the truth about the abomination she witnesses in the king's palace.

**ERIRINMA:** Ison! (Ison stops) You must stay and confront Uwa and Uki for their crimes. You must do that with me, or the king's eyes, warped with suspicion of the wrong people, may never see the truth (104).

The king (Gidi) gets angry over Eririnma's words and attempts to stab him with a spear; Eririnma continues:

**ERIRINMA:** The king stabbed my calf without proving me guilty of anything. If he now desires to kill me, still without proving me guilty, I open my bare chest to his spear ... The truth swells, my tongue, my lord, not disrespect. I have, in fact, been foolishly loyal to you. And I now regret that. Against my advice, against the advice of Ison and the elders of Gidiland, you seduced Uki, another king's wife. Yet, yesterday morning, I escorted you to Ugbon to intimidate its Cuckold king and to make forced, ritual peace with him. The elders of Gidiland, just as ever, refused to accompany you. Uwa, your brother, also avoided the trip, perhaps, for more than one reason... (104-105).

From Eririnma's statements above, one can infer that he possesses the radical spirit Gidiland needs for a radical change. Eririnma's words are words of fire and are the right words Ison needs as motivation to stand against the lie Uwa and Uki tell the king. All Ison needs is

the ability to stand and speak out the 'naked' truth so that justice can prevail. Ukala uses Eririnma's words and the appearance of Nkanka's ghost as motivation for Ison to stand firm and corroborate Eririnma's tales to reveal the whole truth before the king of the entire Gidiland. Ison, in her lamentation, says:

**ISON:** ... Execute Uki to cleanse yourself and cleanse the land; an *Oba's* wife caught in adultery is executed. Gidi said no. Gidi, let Uki perform the costly and shameful ritual to propitiate the gods. Gidi said no. Uwa's bone was poised to choke him. Nkanka's screams for redress and made him as deaf as a jackal. Uki's strongly alcoholic love had benighted his vision ... (108-109).

Due to the ambition to pervert justice, the king refuses to execute Uki for adultery after the death of Uwa at the hand of Eririnma. This act of refusal induces in the people the radical motivation to take it upon them to act. Unlike in *Akpakaland*, in *Break a Boil*, the people of Gidiland took a radical step in a radical direction to dethrone the *Oba*. Albrecht Classen believes that:

...the pre-modern world witnessed considerable debates about the role of the ruler and the influence of the nobility or even the urban elites on the public affairs to the detriment of the lower social classes both in the cities and in the countryside (1).

The revelation of the truth in the play spurs the people that radical minds to make a dynamic change in their system of government. The oracles of Gidiland assist in the revolution by throwing white chalk on the chest of their plan. As a result, Eririnma, a stranger to Gidiland, becomes the king. Alex Asigbo maintains:

In the midst of all the moral topsy-turvy, the playwright tells us that it is only affirmative action on the part of the people that can arrest the drift towards decadence. If the land must be healed, the people must take their destiny into their own hands. Therefore, positive and populist change is the panacea to immoral acquisition and wielding of illegitimate power. This is why the rooting out of the conventions of hereditary kingship and the choice of Eririnma as the new leader promises a brighter future for the people. This is because the kind of patriotism and moral principles espoused by Eririnma cannot but make a good leader (235).

Also, the use of songs in the propagation of radical theatre is one of its quintessential characteristics. Proper application of songs in radical drama sets the tempo, mood, and tone of the drama, which in turn evokes the motivation that sensitizes the target audience. The playwright employs the potency of a song in the play in order to evoke such radical motivation that brings about social changes in its audience. A song could also be used to advance the theme and revolutionary thrust of a dramatic text.

### **Conclusion**

The radicalism in the contemporary Nigerian theatre practice aims to concretise the grass-root masses and awaken the renaissance man to his right of recognition and opportunities to shape his own destiny. This is done by showing the people that they are the makers of history and masters of their own fate. Let us state categorically that radical theatre strives toward solving the immediate topical and contemporary social problems of its environment. Radical



drama and theatre presented a critical perspective on the current social order. It aims to lay bare the power and privilege structures and show how they permeate everyday life, limiting and curtailing opportunities for self-realization and social change. It also probes the idealizations and rationalization that justify the current order. It challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and pries open the gap between ideological promise and institutional performance.

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