

Fate and Predestination in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are not to Blame*

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Abstract

Fate and Predestination have turned out to be one of those things human beings do consider in their lifetime. It is believed that in African cosmology that one is a product of his “chi” who serves as his protector, shield and the writer of his fate. This divine being plays a major role in the life every average African man. Having the divine being as the supernatural force over the affairs of man, yet man is given an opportunity to choose his fate. Once the fate of is chosen, it cannot be altered. This is the reason why when someone faces a kind of misfortune or a mishap, people tend to tell him that his “chi” is not actually with him. This work then helps to bring out the roles of this fate and predestination through the play understudy. At times some people tend to change their fate, but no matter what they do, they must end up fulfilling that their predestined fate and that is what the Igbos call “o mere ma *chi* ekweghi” meaning that the person tried but his personal divine being thwarted his efforts. The theoretical framework used is existentialism which has to do with the absurdity of human life. From the work it is observed that though everyone is created by a Supreme Being, yet we should not overlook the roles of this Supreme Being because whatever it predestines, comes to pass; and failure to abide by its laws might result in disaster.

Keywords: Fate, Predestination, Freewill, Determinism, Fatalism.

Introduction

In African cosmology, it is assumed that whatever an individual is facing in his life has been orchestrated by his “chi” (a divine being). This chi has a big role to play in the life of that individual. That divine being is assumed to be the one that predestines the life of a person. It is believed to be so because the divine being is presumed to be the maker, protector and the shield of that person. It is also believed that whatever the “chi” predestines actually comes to pass. Any average traditional African man believes that it is not right for him to outrun his “chi” because if he does the repercussion will be very disastrous and that whatever that is predestined by one’s “chi” is unalterable. The Yorubas believe that man chooses his destiny while coming into the world. Man kneels down to choose his lot before the presence of God and Orunmila (divinity) and God sanctions it. It is a belief in the African cosmology that every human being born in

this world has been destined to live a certain kind of life and fulfill a certain goal in life. For instance, in the Yoruba mythological cultural belief, the world was believed to have initially consist of only the sky, water, and wild marshlands, all created by the Supreme God, Olorun, the ruler of the sky and creator of the Sun, with the first set of supernaturals residing in the sky.

However, the supernatural, with the name Obatala, who was regarded in the Yoruba myth as Olorun’s favourite, later seek to carry on the work of creation and with Olorun’s permission descended to earth carrying a snail shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, a palm nut and while descending, dumped the sand onto Earth with the white hen spreading it all over through which process he created the first solid land on Earth which he named “Ife.” After descending, however, he planted and cultivated the palm nut which grew into palm trees and kept the cat as company. He,

however, soon got lonely and started making clay figures that look like him which he soon grew tired of assembling and decided he needs refreshment for which he served himself wine tapped from the palm trees. However, he soon got drunk and ended up making clay figures with deformity. Olorun thereon breathes life into Obatala's figures and they became human beings, who soon came together to form the first Yoruba Village in Ife. On realizing the mistake that he made in his drunken state Obatala vows to be the protector of those born with a deformity. He then ascended learning humanity to thrive by itself and Ife soon became his Kingdom. The supernatural, with the name, Olokun, in charge of the sea, felt disrespected or perhaps, belittled that Ife was created without his permission.

Hence, out of anger, he flooded Ife, destroying most of Obatala's kingdom. The remaining humans then pleaded with the supernatural, "Eshu," otherwise known as the

messenger god who then asked Olorun and Obatala for help on their behalf, the outcome of which saw the supernatural, "Orunmila," in charge of divinity, descending to Earth and bringing a stop to the flood. Ever since then humanity thrived depending on the guidance of the gods in a time of need.

In the Igbo traditional cultural worldview, it was held that heaven, in the beginning, was peaceful under the reign of the great creator, known as "Chineke" with the first set of supernaturals (later, conceived as lesser gods and goddesses) living together in individualism which soon gave rise to jealousy, greed and the fight for more power and authority among the supernaturals. This soon posed a threat to Chineke, who, in a bid to solve the problem, divided the heaven into equal parts for each god and goddess to have as a domain which is referred to in Igbo tradition as Holy homestead. These were the two supernaturals, Igwe and Ala. They were the ones taking charge of the sky and earth

respectively. These two supernatural were believed to have met and created eight humans; four males and females respectively using four kinds of materials namely; sticks from the Ofo tree as bones, clay and chalk for flesh and leaves from the Umune tree for nurturing the five senses and sexuality. These humans were taught about birth and sexual activity, babyhood, childhood, adulthood, parenthood, grandparenthood, great grandparenthood, and ancestor-hood. The supernatural, Igwe was associated with the energy of life that created mankind. The supernatural, Ala, made the laws of the land and rules of moral conduct while the supernatural, Igwe, oversees its enforcement serving as the judge, priest as well as the protector of the warriors; the former is regarded as the authority of “Umene” while the latter held the authority of “Ofor.”

The celebration of life was organized in form of a big festival to which the supernatural, Amadioha,(the god of thunder

and lightning) was invited alongside other supernaturals namely; Anyanwu, (the god of the Sun), Ekwensu (the one with the power of tricks and mysteries) and Onwa (the one in charge of the Moon). Following this, the great creator, Chineke, created the universe and therein using parts of Himself was known to be the God of wealth. He was also believed to have created the Human Spirit, whom he gave a personally chosen fate called a person’s “Chi”. These supernaturals Igwe, Ala, Anyanwu, Amadioha, Ekwensu, and Onwa were said to have been bonded by the great creator, Chineke, with the laws of social equality and personal freedom. They are the ones in charge of human affairs in the Igbo traditional mythological worldview. In essence, Igwe and Ala are regarded as the representation of husband and wife while the first set of humans they created was regarded as their children.

On the other hand, in the African worldview, the supernatural has also

manifested in their belief, in respect to predestination and fatalism. This cuts across almost all African cultures. In the Yoruba traditional cultural worldview, the concept of predestination is associated with one's head otherwise known as the concept of "Ori" and "chi" in the Igbo traditional cultural worldview. The discussion of the significance of this supernatural phenomenon has, for a long time, dominated the literary discussions by scholars in both cultures. However, one fact that is established in both culture's cosmological belief is that every individual is believed to have his own "Ori" or "chi". It is to this end that Chinua Achebe says that it is an individual's other identity in spirit land that is complementing his earthly human being. He went on to stress that nothing stands without another thing standing beside it. This line of thought cannot be displaced as absurd if one is to consider the phenomenon of human shadow and its association with everything earthly;

everything has its own shadow, from human beings to animals, to plants, trees, and just about everything else. However, Achebe's argument tends not to follow this direction. Instead, he argued that the world in which we live has 'its' double and counterpart in the realm of spirits adding that the human being is only a weaker half of a person while his *chi* is the supernatural-other as indicated in his statement; "a man lives here and his chi there" (4). This is not only true in the Igbo and Yoruba cultural cosmology but it is central across a majority of the existing diverse cultural groups in Africa.

According to Chinua Achebe, it is also true that in the cosmological worldview that a man receives his portion in life generally before he comes into the world and there seems to be an element of choice available at that point but his chi, not actually He presides over bargaining. Hence, when a man's misfortune is somehow beyond comprehension, it can only be attributed to an

agreement he himself must have entered into, along with his chi, in the beginning, stressing the existence of fundamental justice in the universe which entails that nothing terrible can befall a person for which he is not somehow responsible.

Following the above stated, there have been scholars in the field of African literature who argue that the connection between the supernatural *ori* and human destiny is analogous to fatalism otherwise known as Fate. In this line of thought, destiny is conceptualized to signify that the totality of man's activities on earth has been fated at the point when his supernatural half, *Ori*, chose his *ipin-ori*, otherwise known as his "life-course portion" (24) before being birthed into the world of the living and therefore, is not alterable no matter what. Fate can also be used interchangeably with destiny. John Calvin in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* says that "to many this [predestination] seems a perplexing subject, because they

deem it most incongruous that of the great body of mankind some should be predestined to salvation and others to destruction." (404).

According to John Calvin, Predestination is a doctrine in Calvinism dealing with the question of the control that God exercises over the world. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, God "freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass (2, 3)." The second use of the word "predestination" applies this to salvation, and refers to the belief that God appointed the eternal destiny of some to salvation by grace, while leaving the remainder to receive eternal damnation for all their sins, even their original sin. The former is called "election," and the latter "reprobation." In Calvinism, some people are predestined and effectually called in due time (regenerated/born again) to faith by God, all others are reprobated. Calvinism places more emphasis on election compared to other

branches of Christianity.” (4) For Lisa Raphals, fate is from Latin word “*fatum*” which means destiny. In this sense, it may be conceived as an event that has been determined whether in general or of an individual (537).

The theoretical framework used is Existentialism. This theory is a philosophy propounded and promoted essentially by Jean Paul Satre and Albert Camus. The central areas of probe of existentialism are man and universe. For them the existentialist, man is an isolated or very lonely being. Similarly the world in which man finds himself is a world that possesses no inherent human value or meaning, everything would naturally end in meaninglessness. And so for the existentialist philosopher, a person’s life, as it moves from the nothingness from which it came towards the nothingness where it must end best describes an existence which is both anguished and absurd.

Looking at this theory of Existentialism, it is obvious that it is the one that best suits the research work in the sense that the fate of every man or creature that God created is absurd. Absurd in the sense that no matter the struggles of life, one must one day abandon all those things either by death or by banishment. Considering the play used in this paper Odewale in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not To Blame* faced its own fate through banishment, this shows that man’s fate in this world is already predetermined by his maker and one day he is bound to face it in either of the ways aforementioned.

Fate and Predestination in Ola Rotimi’s

The Gods Are Not To Blame

Fate and Predestination is something that one cannot escape from no matter how hard one tries. In the course of the drama text, the writer presented us with a man, King Adetusa and woman, Queen Ojuola who has been barren for a long time until Obatala-

God of Creation blessed them with a son. Odewale who is like his Greek counterpart is predestined to kill his father and marry his mother as Baba Fakunle tells his oracle “This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his own mother!” (3). In order to avoid the tragedy, the king and the queen decide to kill the boy by giving him to the messenger of the palace, Gbonka, where he is supposed to take the baby into the forest and kill him. Driven by his sympathy, the messenger decides to give the baby to a hunter who lives in a far way village so as to prevent any sort of communication with the baby’s parents. In his new family, Odewale faces his unchangeable fate again. He is told by the foreteller that he is fated to commit parricide and incest as the Ifa priest says “You have a curse on you, son. You cannot run away from it, the gods have willed that you will kill your father and then marry you mother!” (60). Believing that he is with his real parent, Odewale flees the village to avoid the

tragedy “Continue to stay in the house of my father and mother? Oh, no, the toad likes water, but not when the water is boiling” (60).

According to Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah, after leaving his foster parents, Odewale arrives at Ede, a place where he has a farm. One day, he is visited by a group of rude persons. They started to make fun of him mocking his parentage and background. Irritated by their attitudes, he kills their leader who happens to be his real father. (107- 108). Odewale feels guilty for killing the old man even before knowing that he is his real father and this is why he leaves for Kutuje, “The whole world ceased to be. Ogun ... I have used your weapon and I have killed a man. Ogun ... ! With my own hands ... with my own hands I have killed.” (49).

Arriving at his real birth place, Odewale finds the city in a state of chaos mourning the death of its former king; an event that gave the enemies the opportunity

to invade the city and kill its people. Motivated to help the city, he fights with the strangers helping the city to get rid of them. In the words of P. J Conradie, he, Odeawale triumphed over the attackers; he was rewarded as the king and married to the former king's queen Ojuola who gives birth to his four children. (30) However, by transferring Sophocles' story to unspecified pre-colonial setting dominated by Yoruba traditions, the Nigerian playwright is enabled to create a Nigerian identity independent from the colonial heritage. In doing such, Rotimi makes some changes to the original text. Before the action of the play starts, the audience can notice that the title of the play itself is changed. It signifies the fact that the gods are not responsible for the tragic end of the hero, Odewale whose tragedy can be read in terms of qualities that he himself has.

Peter Larsen avers that he is identified mainly with "stubbornness, his too easily provoked anger ... (and) his ethnically

based suspicion of the people around him." (178-179). In the drama, the individual is expressed as totally responsible for his actions. Odewale is shown as hunted by the fact that he is a foreigner belonging to a different tribe. He finds himself in the position of facing the accusations made against him which he feels as a conspiracy to dethrone him. He is accused of being the curse bringer of the city as Baba Fakunle tells him "You are the murderer!" (27) To whom he chooses to manipulate his answer by deliberately responding "Why, I have not killed you yet ..." (27). For Odewale, the blind foreteller and his half-brother Aderopo are part of the conspiracy and they work for personal interests. He was in a state of bewilderment hanging between his efforts to maintain his crown and the desire to face the Kutuje's false accusations which all have been attributed to his ethnic differences.

In Rotimi's adaptation, the patricide is committed over a tribal quarrel in relation

to a land that supposedly belongs to Odewale. Thus, the act of killing is saturated with “tribal hostilities.” (222) Demonstrating this meaning, Odewale expresses why he has killed the old man, Adetusa, highlighting the ethnic tribal spat:

... I once slew a man ... I could have spared him. But he spat on my tribe. He spat on the tribe I thought was my own tribe. The man laughed ... and I lost my reason. Now I found out that that very man was my ... own father(71).

Within the context of the play, Odewale has murdered his father for his love for his tribe. The former king is killed after he has mocked Odewale’s language and claiming the property of the land. Eneke Ossie, in an interview with the playwright, Rotimi says:

Odewale is used, in the idiom of the play, to dramatize the shocks which ethnic jingoism is capable of paralleling in the relationships of African people. In this sense, Odewale’s tribulations can be seen as drawing attention to that most obtrusive of African national evils: ethnicism.” He goes on to explain that the gods are not to blame for Odewale’s crimes: the fault ... rather lies in Odewale himself, in his ‘free’ choice of tribal jingoism as a natural trait. That choice led him to unwitting parricide, which in turn led to his marrying the woman who was available to match his new status as King. The woman turned out to be his own mother. ... Rather than blaming the gods for letting Odewale perpetrate such heinous crimes, people should look at Odewale’s

experience and learn the lessons from unbridled tribal bigotry. (39).

In a moment of “turbulent time,” Odewale confesses that his tragedy is one of “a man moved easily to the defense of his tribe against other.” (65). Consequently, the adaptation ends with a long-aged African aphorism: “When / the wood-insect / Gathers sticks / On its own head it / Them.” (68). Understandably, Odewale’s assertion of his murder emphasizes Rotimi’s message which according to Rosanna Lauriola:

Condemns the overemphasis upon tribal origin and denounces the fallacy both of tribal identity and of a socio-political system that grants to tribal identity such an importance that it puts at risk the survival of the entire society itself.

Lauriola goes on to maintain that, in the play, Odewale finds out that he does not belong to the tribe that he has always identified himself with, Ijekun, and for the sake of which he has killed. It is only then Odewale discovers that the man he has killed is his father, and the tribe that he considers as his “enemy” is his tribe. As a result, Odewale turns out to be:

a social *hamartia*. People, as he says, must learn from his fall; they must take on their responsibility for the inner conflict that is destroying their nation, rather than blaming each other tribe’s enemy and their western allies, that is, the imperial, neo-colonial ‘gods’ on the international stage. (222-223).

Fate and Predestination subject the tragic character to potentially destructive choices which drive him closer and closer to

self-destruction. It strengthens him in the strange ego of self-delusion, making him commit a series of faux pas which hasten his cup of sacrilegious vices to fill and spill over. Thus, the key to the tragic character's downfall in this tragic representation is ignorance, which is manifested ironically in the perpetual confidence of the tragic hero's assertion of self-knowledge. Eventually his confidence about knowledge becomes foolhardy, and this foolhardiness becomes the hubristic tendency of his mortal fate which plunges him into deeper turmoil. When he becomes conscious of the truth about himself, it was only at the eleventh hour wherein inexorable fearful death is. But this misfortune is the result of coming into the stage of life in the carnality of mortal beings.

Ill-fate is the archenemy of the tragic protagonist, and all other characters, internal and external including the gods who become causative factors in the chain of events that lead to the hero's fall can only be deemed, at

worse, 'unintentional accomplices' to the tragic hero. In other words, to be born with tragic fate is equal to a tragic situation prepared in advance for the tragic hero, pending fulfillment by him in the exercise of freewill. The gods, while demonstrating knowledge of the prehistoric condition of the tragic personage, offer him the privilege of knowing that fate and allow the fate-holder to exercise his freewill in fulfilling or altering it. An attitude of disregard and irreverence towards the gods transforms the ill-fate of the tragic hero into the will of the gods. In this sense, the will of fate also becomes the will of the fate-holder and the will of the gods.

The audiences of *The Gods Are Not To Blame* undergo a kind of fear and pity contrary to the catharsis experienced by the Greek audience whose fear and pity are allayed in tragedy. Being a man like ourselves, the tragic hero's ignominious sufferings and inexorable death afflict the audiences of the drama who are touched with

the feeling of the tragic hero's infirmities. The enactment of the tragic hero's flaws and foibles resulting from underlying potentially destructive emotions of hot temperament and arrogance towards the gods have been witnessed fully over the story time of twenty four years, confirming the tragic hero's responsibility for his own demise.

Conclusion

Fate and Predestination are constantly at work in the life of Odewale. It is the natural tendencies inherent in him that govern his moral choices and eventually catapult into his tragic fate in his tragic demise. To this end, although the Yoruba metaphysical universe portrays their belief in the supernatural existence of the gods and oracles of the land who oversee the lives of the individuals from birth to death, the dramatist implicitly reveals by the title and the tragic development of the plot that these gods have no hand in the determination of the character's fate. On the contrary, it is the prehistoric condition

manifested in the weakness and frailty of hot temper in his historic life that brings doom to the tragic hero. Odewale is neither hypnotized nor mesmerized within the tragic milieu to choose or act according to the dictates of the invisible gods. The tragic hero comes into life with his own fate and lives it fully by himself, despite the god's foreknowledge of it. Whether we believe it or not, there are certain forces behind the scene that we are not directly in control of. These are the forces of fate or destiny that determine what direction our lives swing. Our lives are pre-programmed and we cannot do anything to reschedule them. As for king Odewale, what had been foretold about him becomes reality. This story of Odewale has also proven the futility of one's life; a life full of meaninglessness, a life of nothingness. Odewale despite all his strength, braveness, wisdom, love and sympathy towards his people, later ended up as nobody. This story of Odewale's life also goes ahead to prove to

mankind that we are nothing but a pencil in the hand of our maker. We do not have control over our lives but we are being given an opportunity to choose our fate just like Odewale. It is also worthy to note that at times, the choices we make can either save us or kill us. This is the reason why we should be careful in taking some certain decisions in life. The world is just a stage where people come and perform and go. There is no need for scouting for fame, wealth, or even properties because empty handed you came and so will you go back to your maker. This is where the theoretical framework came into play. Odewale despite having everything that makes life comfortable, he left his kingdom empty-handed and was even banished from the same land he so much loved and cherished.

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