

FATE IN SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX AND OLA ROTIMI'S *THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME*: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION

By

Sylvanus Onyeachulam, PhD.
Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
sc.onyeachulam@unizik.edu.ng

&

Ikeji, Frank Ikemefuna,
Department of Languages,
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-uku.
frankikeji2@gmail.com

Abstract

Determinism is a philosophical view or theory which postulates that all events in the universe, including human decisions and actions, are casually inevitable. The two plays Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Rotimi's The Gods are not to Blame are based on issues of fate and destiny in human life. The playwrights vividly portray the influences of the supernatural in the affairs of human beings here on earth despite the culture and clime involved. Thus, man in his journey on earth faces serious challenges from both seen and unseen forces that tend to alter the course of events in his earthly journey towards living a purposeful life. In these plays, Sophocles and Rotimi explore the errors of judgment that negatively affect man in his actions, inactions and decisions. This paper, therefore, sets out to establish that these plays are both tragedies, though one is the original text while the other is a mere adaptation and transposition-Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is a classical Greek tragedy adapted into the Nigerian and African cosmology by Ola Rotimi as The Gods are not to Blame. This paper also seeks to establish the fact that despite the social, political and cultural differences in the two plays, there are similarities in the treatment of the theme of fate and destiny, the role of oracles in the affairs of man and the use of characters or heroes from noble background.

Keywords: Fate, Determinism, Destiny, Tragedy, African Cosmology

Introduction

Many people talk of fate and destiny as if they are one and the same thing. It is believed by many that before people are born they make definite choices as what they wish to learn and aim at, and also what they want to fulfil during the coming life. It is a spiritual decision which is rarely remembered once they are born, but in hindsight they often see that events and circumstances have led them unknowingly onwards towards their destiny as a chosen destination. Therefore, their destiny could be classified as their own personal star. It is the spiritual will of the person, a deep inner need, something that drives him to do what seems impossible.

John Mbiti in his book 'African Religion and Philosophy' observes, "The nature of man's destiny and hope in our darkest moment enables us to dream of better things and resides in a place where we are destined to find our fulfilment as destiny in man's life" (75). Fate is what befalls each one of us here on earth. It is the sacred inner star that guides us to our aspiration, our need to go somewhere and make our mark in the world. If we all seriously go about fulfilling our destiny, there will be no need for fate, for our star is the magical gift of our life and it belongs to every single person on this planet.

The problem we are faced with, of course, is our fate and how we go about fulfilling it. And that is where fate has a significant part to play for most of us have little memory of what we have committed to do and are so caught up in material world that we lose sight of our own unique qualities and potentials. So fate could be classified as our own personal guardian. It calls to attention and knocks us back in the path when we stray from our true purpose. It is a friendly nudge

in the right direction. Many feel that fate is unkind and whimsical in approach, but in fact, it is both generous and extremely mindful of the needs of our soul.

But what is fate in the Greek and Yoruba nay African cosmologies and worldview? In Plato's Republic, one sees a semblance of the concept of fate according to Greek worldview. In the myth of Er, the souls who are to be born choose their own destiny, but must have to drink the waters of lethe in order to forget. What this represents is that the soul is given the opportunity to choose its own destiny before birth and so do not know what their fate will be. The people do not remember, as it were, what their allotted fate is on earth.

In ancient Greece, the belief was that many aspects of a person's life were determined by the three mythical women known as fates. These were the three goddesses in Greek mythology believed to have 'spun out' a child's destiny at birth. They determined when life began, when it ended and everything in between. At the birth of each child, these goddesses appeared to be spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of life. However, it is believed that not everything was inflexible or predetermined. A child who is destined to become a great warrior one day could still choose what he wanted to do on a given day. The gods could simply intervene with decisions either helpful or harmful. Simply put, they controlled the metaphorical life of every mortal born.

It is also the belief that since these fates do not interfere in human affairs directly but avail themselves of intermediate causes and determine the lot of mortals conditionally, man is allowed to exercise a certain influence upon them. But what is the concept of fate in the African nay Yoruba mythology, cosmology and worldview. The statements of eminent scholars and critics will suffice here.

According to Etherton "... Yorubas traditionally believe that your fate is your own doing; you kneel down and receive it as a gift from Olodumare before being born" (124). Furthermore, it is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology that a person's fate is never irreversible, and it can be changed from evil to good by appropriate sacrifices which the Ifa oracle at Ile-Ife will, in the last resort, always determine.

Bascom describes the Yoruba concept of fate further thus: "Before a child is born (or reborn) the ancestral guardian soul appears before Olorun to receive a new body (shaped by the God of whiteness), a new breath, and its fate or destiny (iwa) during its new life on earth. Kneeling before Olorun, this soul is given the opportunity to choose its own destiny, and it is believed to be able to make any "choice it wishes" (115).

The belief is that this scenario described above happens before birth and the human beings involved do not know what their fate is.

Comparative Analysis of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Rotimi's The Gods Are Not To Blame

The two plays are based on issues of fate and destiny in human life. They vividly portray the influences of the supernatural in the affairs of human beings here on earth despite the culture or clime involved. Thus, man in his journey on earth faces serious challenges from both seen and unseen forces that tend to alter the course of events in his earthly journey towards living a purposeful life. The playwrights, therefore, explore the errors of judgment that negatively affect man in his actions and decisions. The two plays under study are tragedies, though one is an adaptation of the other. By this, the researcher is saying that Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is a classical

Greek tragedy adapted into the Nigerian or African cosmology by Ola Rotimi as *The God's are not to Blame*. Despite the social, political and cultural differences, the playwrights made use of characters or heroes from noble backgrounds.

So, both Oedipus and Odewale are tragic heroes whose future has been destined by the gods, to accomplish tasks considered as taboo in their societies. Of course, one killing one's father is patricide, while marrying one's mother is incest, both of which are immoral and sacrilegious. As leaders in their various societies, they are expected to be role models and shining lights for their people to emulate in actions, intellectual prowess, penchant to solve problems, maintaining peace and peaceful co-existence among the people, dispensing justice, guiding them as counselors and as custodians of moral uprightness, steadfastness, and so on. But unfortunately, their fate has been determined by the gods which made them objects of ridicule and caricature.

Both characters are tragic heroes because they are not aware of their tragic flaws till the end - pride and rash anger, and which eventually cause their pitiable downfall. Of course, the two characters try in their own ways to avert the predictions of the gods; but unfortunately, all their efforts of running away from their assumed biological parents are in vain. Instead, against the counsel of the oracles they consulted, that they should stay where they are: in their human desires not to accomplish the predictions of the gods, they journey towards the fulfilment of the fate destined. In fact, the tragic heroes have flaws all through, and it is these weaknesses in character that ultimately lead to their downfall. So, the aristocratic bearing of both Oedipus and Odewale which imbued in them the sin of hubris leads to their catastrophic and humiliating downfall.

So, the aristocratic bearing of both Oedipus and Odewale which imbued in them the sin of hubris leads to their catastrophic and humiliating downfall. As Sewall in his book, *The Tragic Form*, stresses, "The catastrophic end of such characters due to pride will seem inevitable, as it occurs because of the human limitations of the protagonist who suffers terribly from the consequences of his actions" (164). Therefore, hubris which is excessive pride on the part of the tragic hero undermines his survival as seen in the two plays.

Another distinctive feature of the plays is ignorance. The ignorance of the protagonists as regards their tragic flaws also contribute to their downfalls. This can be vividly seen in the actions and speeches of both Oedipus and Odewale, as they are not aware of their tragic flaws till the end. Are they aware, especially in the search for the murderers of King Lauis and King Adetusa, they would not have made damning condemnation of the unknown killers, nor would they have pronounced painful punishment on the culprits if eventually found. This aspect of the plays indirectly cautions us in our pronouncements when dealing with people and situations. That we should not out of over confidence, pride or rather ignorance condemn ourselves with our own mouths, as Oedipus and Odewale do.

The interplay of forces, both human and supernatural, is another main feature of the plays. The playwrights, Sophocles and Rotimi vividly portray that in both social contexts: man is at the mercy of the unseen forces that control his life. Thus, man is like a pawn in the hands of the gods who partake in determining his fate and destiny here on earth. Thus all efforts made by Oedipus and Odewale to avert the horrendous crimes fate assign to them are frustrated. This shows that one's fate cannot be easily thwarted.

The plays also show that in both societies, women are docile, passive and unassuming. They live under the shadow of the men, hence the Queens Jocasta and Ojuola cannot take decisions by themselves. They seem to have accepted the roles assigned to them by men and society at large. If not, how can one reconcile their acceptance to be married off to men far younger than them, and also to start bearing children for them. The gap in age, as well as physical appearance did not deter the marriage. This shows that culture, and the pronouncements of the gods are looked upon as supreme and sacred, who use human beings in whatever manner they decide.

In the two plays the parents of the evil children (Oedipus and Odewale) try to avert the prophecy of the gods by killing them but all their efforts are thwarted by the servants who do not follow the instructions given to them. They have compassion on the babies and give them away to foster parents who bring them up, hence the fulfilment of the destiny as decreed by the gods. Even when the two characters - Oedipus and Odewale grew up, they also try to avert the abominable fate assigned to them by the gods. In their curiosity, they go as far as consulting the oracles to ascertain what they have as their destinies on earth. Unfortunately, however, as they run away from their foster parents against the advice of the oracles, they go to their biological parents and thus, to the accomplishment of the prophecies as decreed by the gods.

Meanwhile, all these are the manipulations of the gods to have their prophecies accomplished. If not, the servants would not have had compassion on the children at infancy. All somehow show that no man however great or powerful can be greater than the gods, and that no mortal ever wins judgment against the gods. So, despite all the efforts of man, from the parents of the children to

they themselves, to thwart the plans of the gods, their fates, destined from birth and sealed, could not be changed, but rather lead to the tragic end of the play.

The violent deaths of the two kings - Laius and Adetusa - in the hands of their sons also form another landmark in the plays. The two old men, despite their status and age throw all decorum to the winds to engage the young men in a fight which is against the norm. Even the young men go against divine law to fight elderly men. They lack respect, hence the tragic fights through manipulations from the gods.

The gods also use the women -Jocasta and Ojuola to accomplish the curses on the young men. The customs compell them to marry whoever that replaces their former husbands as kings. Hence, they are blinded such that they could not recognize their own children many years after, even the disparity in ages could not stop the marriages.

To the two social climes in question - Thebes and Kutuje - the gods accomplish their plans to humiliate them through the outbreak of the plagues that necessitate the search for the murderers of the kings. This search throw up complications and conflicts when the Seers, Teiresias and Baba Fakunle, have to be consulted to discern the wills of the gods, that is, to foretell the anger of the supernatural beings. But unfortunately, their coming brings forth more conflicts as the true identities of the new kings become the subject matter. When eventually their true identities are revealed contrary to their expectations, the Queens, Jocasta and Ojuola have to commit suicide by stabbing themselves to death. The women feel humiliated that they bear children for their own sons, the sin of incest which by nature is an abomination. It is a taboo that a son should see the nakedness of his own mother. In the same vein, both Oedipus and Odewale have to gouge out their

own eyes with the same swords the women used to kill themselves. They mete out on themselves, the punishment they pronounced on the supposed murderers of the kings.

Thus, the tragic fate of both Oedipus and Odewale are the masterminds of the gods, announced from the time they were born, which they could not thwart despite their efforts all through the plays.

Without doubt one interesting aspect of the plays is the role of oracle. In *The Gods are not to Blame*, Rotimi begins the play with the lamentations of the towns people who are afflicted by the plague. He employs a number of citizens and women to express their feelings and complain that Odewale does nothing to help them. "Now we cry in pain, and there is silence" (10). Odewale answers them confidently and informs them that he is equally affected by the plague, and the measures taken to alleviate their suffering and afflictions including sending Aderopo to the oracle at Ile-Ife. It is the oracle albeit reluctantly who reveals the cause of the suffering in Kutuje - the murder of King Adetusa and the murderer - Odewale.

In Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*, the play also begins when Thebes is struck by a plague and the people ask King Oedipus to deliver them from its horrors, and the oracle of Apollo reveals that the sickness in the land is the result of injustice - the murder of the previous King Laius while his murderer walks free in Thebes. It is the blind seer Teiresias that tells the disbelieving Oedipus that he is the murderer and that he is living incestuously.

When Odewale is declared the murderer of the previous king and the cause of the afflictions in the land to the utter shock of everyone, he reacts vehemently. He summons the town people and

expresses his mistrust of them. As an Ijekun man, a stranger in Kutuje, he is especially suspicious of his people. He accuses them more directly. He fears Aderopo might have colluded with the oracle to single him out as the murderer of King Adetusa his father. He swears he will find the murderer and punish him severely. No doubt the audience knows there is bitter irony in the proposed punishment, for we know he is invariably making reference to himself.

“... he shall be put into lasting darkness, his eyes tortured in their living sockets until their blood and rheum swell forth to fill the hollow of crushed eyeballs ... the final agony: we shall cut him from his roots” (24)

In the same manner in Sophocles, Oedipus rages at the seer's reluctance to tell the secret until he provokes him to reveal that Oedipus is the murderer of King Laius and the one responsible for Thebes' afflictions and that he is living incestuously with his nearest kin. Oedipus reacts by accusing the old man of being in league with Creon - his brother-in-law whom he suspects of plotting his downfall. He remarks that this is happening because he is from Corinth - a stranger in Thebes. It is also instructive to note the bitter irony in the play when and where Oedipus makes scathing remarks about the would-be fate of the murderer of King Laius;

"For I decree that no one in this land, in which I rule as your own King, shall give that killer shelter or talk to him, the worst of agonies will wear out his wretched life." (276)

One also sees an inter-relatedness of events in the two plays in the incident that leads to the discovery of the true murderers of the two kings. As an aftermath of the quarrel with Aderopo,

Odewale summons his chiefs but while waiting for them a stranger, a friend of his youth Alaka who plays the same role as the Corinthian messenger in Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* arrives. He is fully portrayed as a character in his own right. According to Banham, "Alaka is half clown, half philosopher, a man of rural wisdom, who reveals the true nature of the king's parentage through a performance that is tantalizingly slow, warm with his goodness and innocence, enlivened by his country wit and manners, and finally exploded by his words ""(44).

Alaka inquires why Odewale left Ede and is told by Odewale that in a fit of anger he killed a man who insulted his tribe at a place where three paths meet. Alaka explains the purpose of his visit bringing the news of the death of Ogundele, Odewale's father. Odewale now reveals the reason why he left his native place: an Ifa priest had earlier on told him he would kill his father and marry his mother. Jubilant as Odewale will be at the news, Alaka further reveals that he was not really the son of Ogundele but was found in the Ipetu bush, his arms and feet tied with strings of cowries.

The old Gbonka is summoned to give details about the murderers of King Adetusa, and on arrival reveals the true identity of Odewale's parents. Odewale finds that Ojuola has committed suicide and then plucks out his own eyes. He immediately goes into exile with his children.

There is a corollary to this in Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*. Jocasta, wife of the murdered King Laius tells about the baby son they had to dispose of because the oracle foretold that he would kill his father. She mentions that Laius was killed at Phocis - a place where three roads meet. Oedipus is deeply and visibly disturbed and relates how he consulted the oracle about his parentage and was told he would kill his father and marry his mother. He says while fleeing from his parents in Corinth

as a consequence of the prophecy, he killed an old man at a place where three roads meet. Oedipus now fears that he may be the murderer of his predecessor Laius. It becomes crystal clear to Oedipus when the messenger from Corinth announces that Polybus and his supposed father is dead, that he is the son of Jocasta and therefore, he is the murderer of his father Laius. Though the situation in the plays is basically the same, Rotimi has made a few interesting changes in order to adapt the story to an African milieu. Odewale does not outwit the Sphinx. For it would have been difficult to transplant her to Africa: instead he rescues the people of Kutuje from the enemies (the Ikolus) who have enslaved them, and as a reward they make him King. Zulu Sofola has said that it is unthinkable that the people of Kutuje would make a total stranger their King (135). Rotimi has, however, defended Odewale's succession to the throne by drawing a parallel from Yoruba history: "Yoruba history abounds in heroes venturing to other lands, proving their mettle, and becoming leaders of their lands... Ogunmola became Bashorun (Prime Minister) of Ibadan in the 19th century. But was Ogunmola a son of Ibadan? Of course, not. He hailed from Fesui near Iwu, some sixty miles north of Ibadan" (64). Another noticeable change is that King Adetusa and Queen Ojuola have a second son, Aderopo, who plays the same role in the play as Jocasta's brother Creon. She also mentions the fact that Odewale is given a second wife Aberno, because in the traditional African society or setting, a man of substance is identified Remote by the number of wives and children he can maintain (90).

In transplanting the Oedipus myth to Africa, Rotimi, as would be expected, experienced certain difficulties. An interesting aspect is the role of the oracle. The Yoruba have elaborate system of divination, and in this respect they resemble the ancient Greeks. But there are differences in their use of divination: Sofola maintains that the people of Kutuje would have consulted the oracle before making Odewale their king (135). The real play begins with the lamentation of the

townspeople who are afflicted by the plague. In place of priest in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* Rotimi employs a number of citizens and women to express their feelings. They are much more aggressive than Sophocles' priest and complained that Odewale does nothing to help them: "Now we cry in pain for help, and there is silence" (10). He shows them that he also suffers from the plague for his children are seriously ill. He is very sympathetic towards the suffering of the people, as is evident from his treatment of a deranged woman. He criticizes them for being too passive and doing nothing to combat the plague.

In Sophocles play Creon hesitates for a moment to reveal the oracle before the chorus of elders who represent the people. Aderopo is even more reluctant to speak before the chiefs who form a kind of chorus in Rotimi's play. He even tries to whisper in Odewale's ear and speak vaguely of a curse. The chiefs become impatient and make all kinds of caustic remarks. Odewale too, is on the point of losing his temper and asks questions which are ominous in the light of later developments: "This curse-is it in the body of a man, in the womb of a woman, in the head of some animal, in the air-where?" (19). Aderopo hesitates because he realized that it is a "hard" word that he has to say. When, he finally declares that the murderer of King Adetusa is still living in their midst and is polluting the land, everybody is shocked. The reaction is more vehement than in Sophocles play. Odewale summons the townspeople and expresses his mistrust of them; the murderer of Adetusa may be among them, planning evil against his throne. He believes that they were bribed to commit the murder. This suspicious is also expressed by Oedipus. But Odewale accuses his people more directly. He is especially suspicious because he is an Ijekun man, a "stranger" in the land of Kutuje.

In this way the remark of Oedipus that he is a stranger" in Thebes takes on a new and ominous meaning for tribal rivalries play an important part in the two plays.

The arrival of the soothsayer Baba Fakunle, the African counterpart of the Greek Teiresias at the scene, takes the same course as in Sophocles play. Odewale lavishly praises him, and then becomes very angry when he refuses to say anything about the identity of the murderer of Adetusa. When he is provoked Baba Fakunle finally declares that Odewale himself is the cursed murderer. Odewale accuses him of being bribed and sends him away. Instead of the riddling speech in which Teiresias hints at Oedipus' incestuous marriage, Baba Fakunle only hurls one reproach at Odewale, namely "bed sharer" After this confrontation with the soothsayer, Rotimi adds a scene in which Odewale's reaction to the accusation is shown. He accuses Aderopo of plotting against him, and expresses the opinion that people are jealous of him because he is an Ijekun man. The reproach "bedsharer" rankles him and he suspects Aderopo of being behind it. Again Odewale words are ironic: "So, let him come and marry his own mother. And not stopping them, let him bear children by her" (31). This is immediately followed by a scene in which the Royal Bard sings a praise song in honour of Odewale and Ojuola. This seems to be the same as that of a choral ode in Sophocles' play. At an earlier stage just after Teiresias accusations, the chorus sings a song in which they show that they are deeply disturbed, but that they still remain loyal to Oedipus. In the same way the Bard expresses his support for Odewale in a time of crisis.

Conclusion

One can say that the concepts and role of fate and destiny in Greek and African plays as seen in Oedipus Rex and The Gods are not to Blame, show that Greek and African beliefs in

destiny and fate lead to the actions of an individual that one must act according to the wills of his gods and also believe in destiny, predestination and man's subservience to the gods. It also indicates that the Greek and African concepts of destiny are quite different from Roman concept of destiny. One also observes that the idea of sacrifice is an age-long tradition and it is being practiced in some areas in Africa. Very strong men believe in the efficacy of sacrifices, fate and destiny, as reflected in the plays on which this research is based and other related literature from which references are taken. The evaluations attempted in this paper reveal that the plays do not all have the same degree of intensity and profundity of tragic vision. This is to be expected because their subject matter, techniques and depth of artistic exploration do in fact differ and vary; but within this spectrum of diversity, a vision of tragedy as fate is founded on fundamental African values, ideas and beliefs, seems to unite all of them. Perhaps, it is also to the credit of the vision of tragedy that differences reveal its resilience rather than portray its lack of originality. It is also safe to say that from the study of these two great plays that the concept of fate is a universal phenomenon – that is the role of fate in the affairs of men in Greece is the same as the role of fate in Africa.

Works Cited

Ademola, Da-Sylva. *Studies in Drama*. Ibadan: Stirling Horden Publishers, 1997. Print.

Banham, M. & Walce, C. *African Theatre Today* London: Pitman, 1976 Print.

Bascom. William. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and men in West Africa*
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969. Print.

ESTAGA: JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (EJELLS)
VOL. 1. NO. 2 (2024)

- Elegbeleyo O.S. and Adeoti Gbemisola. "Reflections on the Dominant Affective Personality of Ola Rotimi as Exemplified in his Tragic Hero Characterization" Reading in Language and Literature. Ile-Ife: OAU Press, 2003. 22-23. Print
- Etherton, M. The Development of Africa Drama London: Hutchinson, 1982. Print
- Gurr, A. "Third-World Drama: Soyinka and Tragedy" in: Gibbs, J. (ed.), Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka. London: Heinemann, 1981. 139-146. Print
- Idowu, Bolaji. God in Yoruba Belief. Ibadan: Longman, 1962. Print.
- Ifejirika, Echezona. Studies in Drama, Oedipus The King. Awka: Macbom Systems, 2009. Print.
- Mbiti, John. African Religion and Philosophy. London: 1975 Preferred Publisher, 1975. Print.
- Nasiru, A. "Ola Rotimi's Search for a Technique" in Ogungbesan, K. (ed), New West African Literature. London: Heinemann, 1979. 21-30. Print,
- Ola, Rotimi. The Gods are not to Blame. London: Oxford University Press, 1971. Print.
- Sewall, R. The Tragic Form. New York: Yale Up, 1954 Print
- Sofola, Zulu "The Theatre in search for African Authenticity in Appiah-Kubi, K & Torress, S. (Ed) African Theology
- Sophocles. Oedipus Rex (Trans) Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Darbury Conn, 1949 print
- Titiloye, M. O. Notes on The Gods are not to Blame. Ibadan: Fatiregum Press, 1983. Print.