



**THE ROLE OF FATE IN TRAGEDY:
A CASE STUDY OF ROTIMI'S *THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME***

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Abstract:

The traditional pagan view of human tragedy which existed several centuries back in the ancient Greek religious myths was transposed not only to Western Europe but also to the African context in the literary representation of reality in tragedy. Common religious metaphysics across cultures occasionally occasion common conception of human tragedy across generations of human history, but such cosmological cross-cultural convergence does not take for granted their dynamic perspectives on the role of fate in human tragedy. To be sure, the audiences of each time, view and appreciate tragedy within their unique geo-political and cultural milieu. In this sense, Erich Auerbach's new historicist reading and post-modern montage of texts and commentaries validly confirms humanity's representation of reality from their religious and traditional customary dispensations across space and time. Coming into the world in the West African Nigerian Yoruba metaphysical universe, the tragic personage holds his fate in his own hands. The gods and supernatural beings in the invisible realms claim foreknowledge of the fate which the tragic hero brings into the world, yet do not influence the fate-holder in the winding trail of life to the fulfillment of tragic fate. The gods in the mythico-religious worldview of the Yoruba natives permit the fulfilment of prehistoric fate based on the fate-holder's individuality, as dictated by his carnal nature. This paper therefore posits that tragedy occurs as a product of the constant working of fate in the tragic hero which fulfills itself in a tragic conflict through the hero's free-will, according to the prophecy of the gods in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*. This is more so in the Aristotelian concept of catharsis in tragedy due to the interplay between prehistoric fate and historic fate, the latter being the product of the former.

Keywords: tragedy, fate, tragic conflict, tragic flaw, catharsis, gods

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1. Introduction

Aristotelian description of ancient Greek tragedy in the *Poetics* has largely influenced its literary representation across western and African societies, even though such representations vary according to the mythico-religious perspectives of the practitioners. Similarly, the notion of sublimity and the aristocratic personage which is a chief bequest of the ancient Greek tragedy has dominated most tragic representations from time to time albeit the doctrine of separation of styles that accompanied it did not meet with the same fervour in the English and African Renaissance. Consequently, critical discourse on the concept of tragedy and its representation has concentrated on humanity's conception of tragedy as shaped by their metaphysical orientations across space and time (Soyinka, 1976; Mathuray, 2009; Chinaka & Anasiudu, 2017; Ifeanyichukwu, 2018). In addition, adaptation of Greek tragedies into European and African contexts has generally attracted scholarly appraisal with particular emphasis on the African worldview on tragedy from the viewpoint of the Nigerian Yoruba culture, vis-à-vis its Greco-Roman prototypes (Lefevere, 1986; Conradie, 1994; Budelmann, 2004; Odom, 2008; Conradie, 2011; Anyoku, 2012; Weyenberg, 2013; Ibitokun, 2014; Mastud, 2017). In the adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Soyinka's theory of Yoruba tragedy "employs Yoruba mythology and cosmology to emphasize the revolutionary potential of ritual sacrifice", (Weyenber, 2013 p. 86), while Ola Rotimi uses Greek tragedy, adapted from Sophocle's play "to provide a model of analysis for the political situation of the civil war of Nigeria" (Wetmore, 2002, p. 144). Thus, the two West African intellectual luminaries, like other African dramatists, transpose ancient Greek myths into the West African socio-political and cultural context for a plethora of artistic and thematic ends: Ola Rotimi for post-colonial discourse and Soyinka for counter-discourse of decolonization. In either case however, the issue of African colonial experience and its baleful consequences is paramount. However, beyond cultural politics and ideology, Greco-African myth transposition also seeks to emphasize the unique metaphysical conception of fate as it pertains to the religious cultures, besides stressing the significance and universality of religious tradition across cultural boundaries. For this reason, *The gods are not to blame* even though investigates a historical conflict of cultures, it is also a "cautionary tale of leadership and fate", more than addressing "interethnic mistrust" (Wetmore, 2002, pp. 103, 104). Beyond the patterns of universality existing, especially with regards to socio-religious metaphysics, and or politico-religious dispensations, there exist divergent conception of humanity's fate and its role in tragic representation, and Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* is, to be sure, a case study for this proposition.

On the wings of the foregoing critical review, this paper seeks to investigate the role of fate in tragedy in the West African Nigerian Yoruba context, focusing on Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*. It does not seek to compare and contrast the Nigerian Yoruba adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* with its prototype even though aspects of the discussion presuppose this comparison. The study proposes that beyond cultural dynamics on tragedy, fate catalyzes the production of tragic situations through the hero's tragic flaw and this is also correct with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis in tragic

representation even though it de-emphasizes tragic flaw. This is important not mainly to accentuate the inadequacy of the ongoing conversations on tragedy and its representation in literature, but to shed further light on it. This in turn demystifies much controversy regarding the role of the gods or the ambivalence between the gods and the tragic hero in the causes that deliver a tragic end. Examining the Yoruba traditional conception of evil from the existentialist perspective, Balogun (2014) maintains that evil is the creation of each individual, and that God cannot be blamed for its existence; being the carrier of evil seed therefore, “*man should be ready to face, with stoic courage, whatever life brings one’s way*” (p. 56). Thus, this study, while seeking to prove the reality of fate in tragedy, simultaneously deconstructs the notion of fate as a spell or doom unleashed on the tragic hero from the realms of the gods. For instance, Timibofa (2005) argues that the gods in *The gods are not to blame* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, have no moral scruples and their unscrupulous nature drives them to oppress their subjects, not allowing the mortals to exercise their right of existence, therefore, “*having arrogated all the powers themselves without giving room for human influence, they the gods are to blame, not the helpless characters*” (pp. 7, 8).

In pursuit of this critical enquiry, the following questions are critical: What is the role of fate in tragic representation? How does prehistoric fate link to historic fate? What is the role of the gods in fulfilling fate? Is the will of fate also the will of the gods? Answers to these questions indicate how tragedy occurs as a result of a tragic situation prepared in advance, pending fulfillment by the tragic hero. In order to put the key concepts in this study (fate, tragic flaw and catharsis) into proper perspectives, the remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first is a review of the concept of catharsis within the Aristotelian definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* for a better understanding of the role of fate in tragedy. This is followed by a review of Auerbach’s reading of Greek and Renaissance representation of fate in tragedy, to give a sense of the methodology used in this study and also as a springboard for understanding fate in the West African Nigerian Yoruba context, which comes next in the caption: “The African Nigeria Yoruba Context”. The penultimate section deals with the analysis of the selected text - *The gods are not to blame*, and the final section is the Conclusion.

2. Aristotle’s Point of View on Tragedy

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the nature of Greek tragedy, laying down its peculiarities as an exemplar of a perfect tragedy. A portion of the *Poetics* dealing with the nature of tragedy is quoted below:

“A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation...for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes,—of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is

brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous..." (The Poetics, Book XIII, p. 12-13).

Aristotle describes the nature of tragedy, as it is represented in the Greek sense. His definition of tragedy above emphasizes the fall of a man with benign evil: one "*who is not eminently good and just*" as the condition for obtaining catharsis in tragedy. On the contrary, a perfect tragedy must not imitate the downfall of a vicious character. This in Aristotle's view inspires neither pity nor fear even though it may satisfy the moral sense.

Catharsis, from its original sense, produces a therapeutic effect on the audience due to its purgation of potentially destructive emotions. It has a thrilling end in which is a sweet swift emotional refinement occasioned by anagnorisis where the mystery surrounding the tragic character's life is unraveled. In tragedy, the tragic hero is constantly on a journey to discover knowledge, self-knowledge which invariably is elusive to him until the lack of such knowledge ruins him. This discovery, known in Aristotelian description as "*epiphany*" is the only panacea that could avert the tragic situation of the tragic hero but such discovery occurs only at the eleventh hour of inexorable fatality. The tragic hero's discovery of himself, even his human nature is indispensable to ensuring catharsis in tragedy. Such discovery assuages assailing emotions latent in each individual which would potentially destroy him/her in trying moments. In the crucible of the tragic conflict therefore are the audiences purged and refined when the tragic hero is engaged in searching for himself unknowingly, until he discovers rather tragically his true nature in fullness. But the realities, in the case of King Oedipus for instance, that occasion pity and fear are also the facts that allay them. This is because the revelation of the mysteries surrounding the King's misfortune is the more vindication of his character, and the more assertion of his ignorance, hence, the occasion of catharsis. Thus, King Oedipus' humanity expressed in his excessive suspicion and accusation against Creon, his insistence on knowing the truth despite Jocasta's persuasions to stop, and his final defiance against the seer - Tiresias all lose their force in the trail of causality. To this end, King Oedipus faces judgment like a prisoner of conscience without the sense of guilt that accompanies a villain.

"Catharsis" which in the above quotation is the result of imitating "*actions which excite pity and fear*" is the main quality of tragic representation, and these actions are defined by "*unmerited misfortune*" and the creation of a man who is "*like ourselves*". 'Unmerited misfortune', as stated here presupposes or denotes suffering out of innocence. The arousal of pity therefore is the result of ignorance-based actions or inactions of the tragic character, and being 'a man like ourselves' denotes the tragic hero's humanity – his carnal and limited frame. He suffers misfortune because of "*an error or frailty*", and since the error of judgment that occasions the change of fortune (peripeteia) is not linked to a conscious act of evil but an error or frailty, it implies that the tragic hero is naturally innocent and does not deserve to bear the brunt for an act committed in error or ignorance. Yet, that is what the tragic hero suffers. The misfortune that happens to him is bound to happen no matter how hard he tries to avert it. The tragic hero has no control over his fate, and under such circumstances, he struggles in vain, dealing with his fate.

This state of suffering evokes pity and fear in the audience due to the prospects of the audience also suffering similar fate. It is on such parameters that the Greek tragedy, as a perfect exemplar, produces catharsis: when the hero's fall is not directly linked to his 'vice or depravity'. Aristotle states that the tragic hero's misfortune is brought about "*not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty*". Why should the tragic hero suffer for a wrong act committed in error? Aristotle seems to suggest. Accordingly, therefore, his principles connote that any tragedy in which the tragic hero's fall is directly linked to his conscious, knowing act of evil is defeated as a perfect tragedy. It passes the test of a perfect tragedy only if it imitates the downfall of an innocent hero.

The above premise of a perfect tragedy, one that produces catharsis, however, raises the question of the role of fate in tragic representation. This is because, the presumably innocent tragic personage, (at least based on the Greek standard of tragedy) bears his humanity, a carnal condition bedewed with frailty, foibles and shortcomings in his mortal body, and by this channel his downfall is enacted. It becomes thus, impossible to exonerate the tragic hero totally from blame in the trail of events culminating in his downfall without his humanity playing a part. The Aristotelian depiction of a tragic hero who is "*not eminently good and just*" alludes to his humanity. Trying hard to dissociate his action from his fall then seems to make the tragic hero a superhuman, which is contrary to the character of a perfect tragedy in the self-same Aristotelian sense. On the other hand, making the tragic hero solely responsible for his downfall is tantamount to exhibiting the downfall of a bad man or villain, which in Aristotle's view possesses no tragic quality of catharsis. This state of ambivalence between the role of the tragic hero and his fate in tragic representation is chiefly the motivation for investigating the extent to which fate impels or propels the occurrence of tragedy and its representation. This is critical because without striking the right balance between action and consequences on one hand, and the interference of fate in human actions leading to tragic consequences on another hand, the natural tendency is to consider tragic fate (in the context of tragedy) either as a comeuppance or as the arbitrary acts of the gods or supernatural powers. The Greek tragedy, exemplified by the story of King Oedipus, does not attempt to decisively answer the question of fate as a cause or result of tragic situations, but by the 'fog' of the tragic conflict, it emphasizes the misfortune of a tragic hero who is worthy of sympathy for being honestly mistaken. While appearing to de-emphasize the tragic hero's humanity, it implicitly reveals imprints of human prehistoric conditions and foibles that propel the fulfilment of tragic fate, resulting in catharsis. Thus, fate is neither the natural cause of a tragic situation nor the natural result of human limitations but a combination of both -- within the Aristotelian description of tragedy. In the imitation of the downfall of "*a man like ourselves*", it is possible to trace the chain of events that deliver a tragic end to the fate bearer's humanity, either acquired or inherited, or his prehistoric condition perceived as fate. Auerbach's way of reading the two tragedies: Greek and Renaissance establishes the dichotomy between their unique perspectives on fate as an element of tragic representation. This is reviewed below.

3. Prehistoric Versus Historic Fate: Auerbach's Reading of Greek and Renaissance Tragedies

In Auerbach's view, western notions of reality in tragedy typified by Shakespearean or Elizabethan literature, and the ancient Greek notions typified by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles' dramas, represent two separate worldviews on fate and for that matter its representation in tragedy. In spite of the fact that the Greeks are the Renaissance's major source of inspiration in the creation of art, their vision and representation of fate and its place in tragedy differs. Examining the two tragedies, Auerbach notes their differences in relation to fate below:

"The tragedy in the Greek plays is an arranged one in which the characters have no decisive part but to do and die. In antique tragedy it is almost always possible to make a clear distinction between the natural character of a personage and the fate which befalls him at the moment. We learn nothing about his normal existence. The tragedy in the Elizabethan plays on the other hand comes straight from the heart of the people themselves. The hero's individual character plays a much greater part in shaping his destiny. In Elizabethan tragedy and specifically in Shakespeare, the hero's character is depicted in greater and more varied detail than in antique tragedy, and participates more actively in shaping the individual's fate. In Elizabethan tragedy we are in most cases confronted not with purely natural character but with character already formed by birth, situation in life, and prehistory (that is, by fate) - character in which fate has already had a great share before it fulfills itself in the form of a specified tragic conflict." (Mimesis, pp. 318–320).

Apparently, tragedy in the Greek sense places premium on the tragic hero's struggles within the tragic complex but not outside it. Whatever else may have happened to him during his private life, so long as it is not part of the prehistory of the present conflict ('milieu'), it is omitted from the action. The essence of his personality is revealed and evolves exclusively within the particular tragic action. Freedom of movement is much less as compared to the Renaissance tragedy, hence *"we learn nothing of the hero's normal existence"*. The tragic hero's prehistoric condition is back-grounded while his tragic life in the tragic conflict is foregrounded, as the only means to understanding his role in the tragic conflict. Thus, fate is limited to the tragic conflict in the Greek's sense of it. In Renaissance tragedy on the other hand, fate means much more than the given conflict. The course of events on the stage is not rigidly restricted to the course of events of the tragic conflict but covers conversations, scenes, characters etc. which the tragic action as such does not necessarily require. It has a multiplicity of subject-matter, freedom of invention and presentation, making it different from the Greek. We are constantly given the particular atmosphere, the situation, and the prehistory of the characters. In other words, a great deal of supplementary information is offered about the principal characters, and in this process we are enabled to form an idea of their normal lives and particular characters apart from the complication in which they are caught in the tragic conflict. Thus, the hero's character is *"depicted in greater and more varied detail"* making him

"participate more actively" in shaping his own fate. The tandem of human action and fate in tragedy explains why the Renaissance tragedians typically Shakespeare link the tragic hero's fall largely to his flaws. It was the hallmark of Renaissance tragedy to represent tragic actions according to the role of the tragic hero in fulfilling his destiny in the tragic complex. Scot (1954) notes that Cervantes and Shakespearean writers in tragic representation found the clue to human fulfillment to be *"in the fullest actualization of the humanity latent in each individual"* (p. 543).

In a nutshell, fate in Greek tragedy is measured by the tragic hero's life within the tragic conflict; it is therefore limited in scope regarding the characters contribution to his fall. But there is more room in the Renaissance tragedy to view and understand the tragic hero's fate in relation to his personal contribution to his tragic end. The humanity of the tragic hero was depicted in terms of the latter's vices superimposed by his prehistoric condition and it is the sense in which his tragic flaw is understood as the basis of his tragic fall. The Greek play on the other hand depicted the hero's humanity in terms of his natural character within the tragic situation unleashed on him from outside, his human weaknesses portrayed as a result of the tragic conflict he is faced with. Both of them, the Greeks and Renaissance tragedies, however recognize the powerlessness of the tragic hero over his humanity which spells his doom or tragic fate in the end. To underscore the inevitability of fate in catharsis in the Greek tragedy, the tragic hero was made to fulfill his fate before discovering it. To this end, the Renaissance seem to emphasize the second of the two major conditions of a perfect tragedy – 'fear', aroused by creating *"a man like ourselves"*, while the Greek emphasize the first – 'pity', aroused by *"unmerited misfortune"*. But both are intertwined in the representation of a hero/heroine who is neither too good nor too evil. In any case, the underlying humanity of the tragic personage is triggered by the tragic complex to prove the perfection of his moral character, as dictated by his freewill and choices. Thus, the interplay between historic and prehistoric fate becomes imperative to understanding the developments in tragedy.

Notwithstanding the dichotomy between Renaissance and Greek views on fate, Aristotle's description of a tragic hero who is *"not eminently good and just"*, and whose misfortune is brought about by *"some error or frailty"* recognizes the humanity of the tragic personage in both plays, although from diverse point of views. The destructive potential of fate over the tragic hero is evident in his futile efforts to override it. Within the tragic complex, the tragic hero is pitted against fate and he faces the world as a hopeless underdog until he recognizes the full nature of his humanity. Born with a limitation, the tragic hero has a penchant for potentially destructive choices, hence, he imperceptibly drives his own fate into fulfillment the harder he tries to escape or overcome it. For this reason, his apparent ignorance is not his apparent innocence in the chain of events that occasion tragedy, as he is bound by a carnal nature that is leaning towards error. In this nature, the tragic hero is egotistically driven, in which state he also becomes aversive to divine council. Overcoming this carnal nature (his humanity or his fate) is the only guarantee of safety in the tragic conflict. The character formed by birth, or the prehistoric nature, is certainly the bane of the tragic hero in the tragic conflict, and de-emphasizing its role in tragic representation reflects a parochial view of tragedy, or to say the least, a

biased attitude against the tragic hero or the gods and supernatural beings in cosmic existence, who demonstrate foreknowledge of the fate surrounding the tragic hero. A fair assessment of the tragic hero's moral freedom and role in the tragic conflict then must recognize the role of his prehistory, which is outside the tragic milieu. The next section looks at this human fate in the African context.

4. The African Nigerian Yoruba Context

The gods are not to blame (1975) is a Nigerian Yoruba play written by Ola Rotimi. It is the Yoruba adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Based on the Oedipus myth of Greek civilization, *The gods are not to blame* has much in common with *Oedipus Rex*, except for their representation of the cause(s) of tragedy. It is hardly different from the Nigerian metaphysical worldview of the Yoruba nation on fate. As noted earlier, both nations, in spite of the big gulf existing between them are very similar in their metaphysical universe. This study is based on the Nigerian Yoruba religious traditions and worldview on tragedy, and its representation is based on the ancient Greek tradition from which it draws inspiration. Tradition, according to Ikyoive (2016), is a distinctive practice and a core component of the Yoruba universe, which "*circumscribes their socio-political and economic life*" (p. 24). These traditional practices are rooted in their strong veneration of the gods and ancestors of the land as their spiritual protective agents. Their perception of tragedy and human suffering is linked to a wrong cause of which the gods and ancestors must be pacified and placated to avert calamity. The Yoruba worldview transcends the locus of mortals in the natural world where the distinctive destinies of men are dramatized; it encompasses the spiritual realms of gods, known as the "*eternal*" the ancestors, known as "*the past*" and the unborn, known as "*the future*" (Ibitokum 2014, p. 21-22). These worlds permeate the native Yoruba metaphysical psyche. The unborn beings of the future are believed to be waiting in the mystical cosmos of the gods, to be born into the stage of the mundane terrestrial habitat of mortals to dramatize their fate, and to return to their souls' origin in the spiritual world of the gods. Wole Soyinka puts it succinctly, this Yoruba traditional African psyche of man's cyclical trajectory when he notes that the natural home of the unseen deities is a resting place for the departed, and a staging-house for the unborn. According to him, the African and for that matter the Nigerian Yoruba exist, like European antiquity within a cosmic totality and possess a double consciousness of self, of his "*earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self*" and "*the entire cosmic phenomenon*" (Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 2, 3). This metaphysical orientation of man and his spiritual link with the invisible world explains why the gods have a foreknowledge of the fate which the tragic hero brings to life, and the reason why the Yoruba divine the cause of death or tragedy from the gods during or after one's departure from earthly existence. These gods generously disclose the fate of the character, and allow the fate-holder to determine its fulfillment or otherwise.

On the score of the representation of the cause(s) of tragedy and for that matter the cause(s) of tragic hero's downfall however, the Greeks and the African Nigerian Yoruba differ. As discussed earlier tragedy in the Greek sense produces a happy end

rather than a sad end. This occurs upon the discovery of knowledge. But when tragic flaw and fate act a part in the tragic conflict to deliver tragic end of the hero, the impact on an audience is far from happiness. This is the case in *The gods are not to blame*. This implies that notwithstanding the affinity between Greek tragedy and Yoruba tragedy, their perspectives on fate and its contribution to a tragic end differs slightly on account of the tragic hero's tragic flaw. Whereas the change of fortune (peripeteia) hinges on anagnorisis (change from ignorance to knowledge) in Aristotle's perfect tragedy, the tragic hero's flaw is the basis of a change of fortune in the Yoruba context of tragedy. *The gods are not to blame* attempts to represent the whole account of the Oedipus myth while *King Oedipus* only concentrates on one single action: Oedipus' attempt to cure the land of Thebes of its plagues. In *The gods are not to blame*, there is a full enactment of the tragic hero's fugitive life of thirteen years in Ede and eleven years as king in Kutuje, making it twenty four years altogether. In these years, Odewale lives a complex life of many actions including farming, hunting, and reigning as king. Within this space of time, he fulfills a tragic fate foreboding. Thus, his tragic end comes across as the direct result of his flaws and evil doings, of his pride and arrogance, murder and incestuous acts. But in the case of *King Oedipus*, there is a single action, and a single place, and the whole story occurs within a day, even though the two tragedies, Greek and Yoruba presume the innocence of the gods. Consequently this paper posits that catharsis, the chief ingredient in Greek tragedy, produces a counter result in the Yoruba tragedy due to the interplay between fate and tragic flaw. The audiences of each of the two historical periods view and appreciate tragedy within their unique metaphysical orientation on tragic reality.

Odewale, in *The gods are not to blame*, epitomizes the tragic hero whose downfall is directly linked to his fate and flaws. Running away from this ill-fate, he draws closer and closer to it and fulfills it before discovering it. In the trial of the tragic complex, the reality of his fate produces several flaws which culminate in his tragic downfall, but the gods who reveal this tragic fate earlier in his life remain vindicated on account of his death. The tragic hero (Odewale) seeking to avoid his fate turns against the gods and they ignore him to his tragic fate.

In a nutshell, the Yoruba tragedy is similar to the Greek in the representation of reality. The tragic hero is the aristocratic personage. Their tragedies, like the Greeks are steeped in their religious myths and metaphysical universe. The mystical view and knowledge of the gods which their mortal subjects hold in high esteem, impels them to seek the wisdom and intervention of the gods in the vicissitudes of life. Secondly, the Yoruba play emphasizes the centrality of the gods' foreknowledge of the tragic hero's fate but de-emphasizes their responsibility to the hero's tragic fate/end. In this way, the hero's tragedy is a product of his prehistoric fate, fueled by his human nature, which reveals itself through the tragic conflict unleashed on him from outside. The character and role of the tragic hero within the tragic complex confirms the innocence of the gods in the winding trail of events that subject the tragic personage to a fatal end. Thus, fate, no matter how it is perceived, is the overriding cause of tragic situations and the sure condition for the production of tragedy. It executes tragic end in the life of the tragic hero

through the latter's erroneous choices in the tragic conflict. Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* demonstrates the verity of this assertion in the adjoining section.

5. The Role of Fate in Tragedy: Analysis of *The gods are not to blame*

Upon consultation by their subjects, the gods divine the cause of evil and proffer solution. Being the benefactors of their subjects, they are consulted for deliverance when the people of Kutuje are faced with a dreaded diseases sweeping the land of Kutuje, and king Odewale and his elders consult and sacrifice to Soponna—the god of the poxes, Ela—the god of Deliverance, Sango—the god of thunder and rainfall, and Orunmila—the all-seeing god (Act one scene 1, pp. 11, 12). The role of the gods in Odewale's tragedy is limited to pointing out to him what destiny he brings into the world. This foreknowledge of the fate of the tragic character is their mark of omniscience, and the reason for their veneration by their subjects. The Prologue sets the tone for the tragic developments in the life of the tragic hero - Odewale, when the Narrator declares: "*The struggles of man begin at birth, it is meet then that our play begins with birth of a child*" (ibid, p.1). The tragic hero - Odewale, enters the world with his fate already holding his heel, as the priest of Ifa, the blind seer, Baba Fakunle, divines and declares his destiny: "*This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his own mother*" (ibid, p.3). The gods in the Yoruba worldview do not will the fate of the newborn child; it is "*The awesome will of fate*" (ibid, p.4) that the tragic hero comes into the world ill-fated. It was to curtail this ill-fate that the child (Odewale) under the instruction of the Priest of Ogun, is borne by Gbonka, the King's special messenger into the evil grove to die. The gods do not tamper with the baby's life, as they know the fate that brings him into the world. They will have no hand in his death. The gods also believe in the existence of "*Obatala, God of Creation*" in whose infinite wisdom, every child born into the world of the living is allowed to live. Thus, Obatala, God of Creation, who "*has a way of consoling the distressed*" (ibid, p.4), preserves the poor boy's life through Gbonka, Ogundele and Alaka. Even though they can afflict punishments and judgments tantamount to death, the gods do not interfere with the individual's fate.

The preservation of Odewale's infant life sets the stage for him to manage his own fate. Given the opportunity to live, Odewale becomes responsible for his own fate. Moreover, he is given more avenues to discover himself through an old man in Ijekun Yemoja who taunts him saying: "*the butterfly thinks himself a bird*" (Act three scene III, p.59). In his anxiety to understand the old man's words concerning his identity, Odewale consults a priest of Ifa with the inquisition:

"Am I not who I am?"

"You have a curse on you", the priest answered.

"What kind of curse, Old One?" asked Odewale,

"You cannot run away from it, the gods have willed that you will kill your father and then marry your mother", replied the priest.

"Me! Kill my father, and then marry my own mother?"

"It has been willed",

"What must I do then not to carry out this will of the gods?"

"Nothing. To run away would be foolish, just stay where you are.

Stay where you are...stay where you are" (Act three, scene III, p.60).

The gods, as merciful as they may be seen by their subjects, are not without justice; and even if they are considered wicked on account of their stern judgments, they are still not without moral scruples, for such is the element in their nature that makes them punish evil and reward good. The gods would not kill infant Odewale because they know he is innocent; even though he comes into the world ill-fated, he had not yet committed the act, and it was Obatala, God of Creation's wish that he must live until he proves himself unworthy of continuous life. Therefore, Odewale survives by the intervention of Providence to enable him understand the mystery surrounding his existence. If the gods so will the ill-fate of Odewale, as the Ifa oracle confirms above, it is not in their interest to make it happen. Their will is subject to the will of the tragic hero. They wield power over the unknown, and control it as long as they retain exclusive knowledge of it; hence they are responsible for its fulfillment. However, making manifest their prerogative knowledge to the mortals, they also hand over the will power to fulfill it to the selfsame individual. It is for this reason they reveal to the fate-holder—Odewale, his true identity and ill-fate through their oracles. The gods reveal in order to save or avert the occurrence of evil, and the knowledge of the hero's destiny is perhaps the greatest privilege Odewale had to increase his chances of survival. In addition, he is also guided to make no attempt at escaping, no matter how ill-fated his destiny is bound to be. Thus, the gods, while appearing to have 'a will' for the tragic hero, they also make a way of escape for the selfsame person although such a way, on the surface may make no sense. It makes no sense from a human standpoint for Odewale to stay where he is, as the oracle councils, knowing that 'where he is' is the presence of his parents whom he is destined to kill and marry. But it takes compliance with the gods to understand and appreciate their wisdom. On the contrary, disobedience to the gods' good council, leads to fulfilling one's own fate. Odewale's decision to go contrary to the council from the Ifa priest by escaping to Ede marks his first step in the downward slide. In addition, he fails to inform Alaka and his foster father Ogundele, who redeem him from the sacred grove in Ipetu village. At least Alaka, his childhood brother and friend could have disclosed further to him that Ogundele and Mobike are not his biological parents. This additional information could have led him to keep the Ifa oracle's caution not to escape from Ishokum village in Ijekum Yemoja; or better still, he could have been led to see his biological parents in Kutuje. But his disobedience of the oracle opens the door for another error which is his failing to tell anybody anything.

An act of vice committed in ignorance may be pardonable under certain circumstances, but even such presumed act of ignorance may not be deemed ignorance if the perpetrator had a way of knowing the truth but chooses to ignore it. Such is the nature of the grievous crimes committed by Odewale the protagonist. The chain of events that leads to peripeteia in Odewale's tragic life begins with the manifestation of his "*hot temper*", which he brings from birth like a congenital disorder. This he nurtures from his

adolescent age till he crowns it with a crown in the Kutuje palace. The period of his redemption from the evil grove in Kutuje by Ogundele and Alaka several years ago till the thirteen years of his fugitive life in Ede, and eleven years of ruling as king of Kutuje, constitute Odewale's total life within the tragic milieu. Thus, before the episode of his encounter with his unknown father, King Adetusa, at Ede "*where two footpaths meet*" (Act three scene I, p.45), Odewale's carnal condition is chiefly enacted at Ijekum Yemoja, Ishokum village, where he leaves Alaka on the errand of escaping his fate, and finally at Ede where this tragic fate begins to unfold. Odewale's carnal nature has the better part of him. He is damned adamant, proud and quick tempered. This is the frailty, the human nature in him that eventually destroys him, but not the gods. Baba Fakunle, the blind oracle of the gods points it out emphatically to him: "*your hot temper, like a disease from birth is the curse that has brought you trouble*" (Act two scene I, p.29). Odewale's prehistoric fate is his frailty, his weakness, his hot temper. Alaka refers to Odewale's hot temper in Ijekum Yemoja and Ishokum village in metaphorical terms: "*Scorpion? One that must not be vexed*" (Act three scene I, p.43). Odewale has been ruled by his hot temper throughout his stay in Ijekum Yemoja and Ishokum village, and Alaka alludes to this fact severally during his visit to Odewale at Kutuje:

"'Scorpion' I used to call your king because of his hot temper", "I did not teach you hot temper though", "I am glad to see that your youthful, hot temper is still with you, my brother. Scorpion!", "It is well, kill me! This is the reward which you now as King must give to me for picking you up in the bush!" (Act three, scene I and II, pp. 42, 44, 61, 62).

This tragic flaw leads him to commit a series of errors, starting from Ede where he unknowingly kills his own father - King Adetusa.

In Ede, we have neither Alaka nor Odewale's foster parents to witness to the weakness of his character, hence it is the protagonist himself who testifies to his own flaw. For thirteen years in Ede where he seeks refuge from fulfilling his fate, he lives as a successful farmer on the piece of land purchased from a renowned farmer and landowner - cd Kakalu, son of Atiki at five bags of cowries (Act three scene I, p.45). His fate dogs his footsteps all this while according to the prophecy of the Ifa oracle, but he helps the fulfillment of the ill-fate in the exercise of his hot temper, as he himself, denying Aderopo's opinion that his fate is linked to the will of the gods, acknowledges to the chiefs and people of Kutuje:

"No, no! Do not blame the Gods. let no one blame the powers. My people learn from my fall. The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my weakness: the weakness of a man easily moved to the defense of his tribe against others. I once slew a man on my farm in Ede... It was my run from the blood I spilled to calm the hurt of my tribe, that brought me to this land to do more horrors..." (Act three, scene IV, p.71).

The numerous repetition of "I" in the confession above is evident of the protagonist's admission to his own contribution to his tragic end. Odewale here does not

only vindicate the gods, but in fact endorses their innocence in his downfall. The gods are hence not to blame. The *"will of the gods"*, in the sense that the Ifa priest indicates can be logically construed in the sense of Odewale's own wish above, which the innocent gods have been either pleased or displeased to permit. They have in any case no choice to forbid the free moral being and the protagonist, whom Obatala, God of Creation has allowed to live, to exercise his human right and freedom. Even though the gods know Odewale's weakness is his hot temper: *"the weakness of a man easily moved to the defense of his tribe against others"*, they could only help him as much as he helped himself. Odewale knew himself and his weakness, which is the reason he prays to the gods for help, in admiration of Ojuole's humility: *"Gods! What a woman! Give me some of her patience! I pray you. Some...some of her cool heart...let her cool spirit enter my body and cool the hot, hot, hotness in my blood..."* (Act two scene IV, p.39). It is said that he who knows not that he knows not is a fool, but such is not Odewale's caliber, for Odewale knows double, and knows that he knows. This double knowledge of himself: of his fate and his flaw, should have been his safeguard in making choices along the winding trail of life in the tragic conflict. But alas, he who is destined to die, will die anyway, even if persuaded to live. Odewale defies all chances of outliving his fate until he fulfills it; he must hence bear the brunt alone.

To add to the above, there are series of avoidable blunders he commits at Kutuje after the murder of his father which could otherwise have spared him his own tragic death, and these blunders are the result of his pride and arrogance, stirred by hot temper. It is instructive to mention that pride and hot temper are the twain agents of the soul's destruction, and the downfall of the sublime personage, as the Good Book puts it: *"Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall"* (KJV Prov. 16: 18). Odewale's constant resistance to caution and council is the manifestation of his pride and arrogance. The three proverbs given by Aderopo and Alaka to Odewale in answer to the latter's demand for overt and instant answers, as well as the unusual reticence of the Ifa oracle—Baba Fakunle, to declare the cause of the plague in Kutuje were for the good and safety of Odewale, but the latter is cocksure of self-knowledge and self-defense. When he compels Aderopo for details of the report from the Ifa oracle at the shrine of Orunmila, the latter cautions: *"I'd rather tell you those ones in private, my lord, ...It is said that the secrets of a home should be known first to the head of the home... Until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution"*. To this calmly caution, Odewale answers: *"I refuse to listen alone. Speak... Give us the details... My people, I beg of you, plead with him, or I shall lose my temper soon!"* (Act one scene II, pp. 19, 20, 21). Similarly, Alaka discloses that Ogundele and Mobike are not Odewale's biological parents, and that he would give him details of the fact in private since *"Secrets of the owl must not be known in daylight"*. But Odewale proudly responds: *"No! You called me a bastard in the face of the whole world; prove before their eyes that I am indeed without father and mother or give me back my pride"* (Act three scene III, p.62). Ujuola, his own wife advises him concerning Aderopo saying: *"My lord, pray, cool your anger"*, but Odewale rashly responds in his usual hot temper: *"Cool my...the boy cuts me and nobody chides him!"* (Act two scene II, p.35). Finally, when Baba Fakunle arrives upon Odewale's invitation to declare the murderer of the former king - Adetusa, the

oracle declines to call names outright, but insists on returning home without speaking a word due to the “*smell*” of the crime, Odewale responds in fury: “*Block that door!... Don't beg him. He will not talk. The murderers have sealed his lips with money... When the elders we esteem so highly can sell their honour for devil's money, then let pigs eat shame and men eat dung*” (Act two scene I, 27). Unable to contain Odewale's spite and scorn, Baba Fakunle lets the cat out of the bag: “*... You are the murderer... you bedsharer!...*” (ibid, p. 27-29).

The gods who have presumably willed Odewale's fate have been unwilling through their oracles to shame him or disclose him as the murderer of his father and bringer of sore suffering upon the natives of Kutuje, but Odewale would not suffer them to protect him. As he chooses the path of pride and arrogance in the exercise of his freewill, so does he choose its dividends without palliating or shirking the responsibility. Had he listened to the numerous councils of the oracles and the kindred who help him to gain knowledge and understanding, he would probably have saved himself the gory suffering and death which he suffers. But when the privileges for survival by knowledge acquisition are spurned, the gods can do nothing more. They don't care about the character who is willingly irreverent and polluted against them and their oracles.

Odewale's persistent demonstration of self-confidence and self-knowledge is ironically his persistent assertion of self-ignorance and lack of knowledge, which dissuades him, and as he has been unwilling for help, he willingly dies the fearful death he himself, under the influence of arrogance and pride, spells upon the murderer of King Adetusa, in which also he seals his own fate:

“Before Ogun the God of Iron, I stand on oath. Witness now all you present that before the feast of Ogun, which starts at sunrise, I, Odewale, the son of Ogundele, shall search and fully lay open before your very eyes the murderer of King Adetusa. And having seized that murderer, I swear by this sacred arm of Ogun, that I shall straight way bring him to the agony of slow death.... May the gods of our fathers - Obatala, Orunmila, Sango, Saponna, Esu-Elagbara Agemo, Ogun - stand by me.” (Act two, scene I, p. 24).

In living his full humanity, Odewale fulfills his own destiny. In swearing an oath to search and find the evil doer in the land, the tragic hero starts on a journey to search for and fully discover himself. The crimes which he so strongly suspects others to be responsible turn out to be his own crimes, and the truth of the facts dawn on him only after declaring his own doom. He calls the gods in oath to be on his side, and they respond according to ‘his will’. Thus, Odewale's fate is his own will, which the gods, on invitation, ratify.

The arguments and accusations herein leveled against Odewale the tragic hero, while appearing fair within the ambiance of the tragic conflict, are nonetheless, more evident of the role of fate in tragedy. The dramatic scenes of Odewale's tragedy, whisking in quick succession across the audiences' imagination, delivers a hushing terror that speaks volumes of lessons. Seeing the tragic protagonist gouging his own eyes and groping in darkness for help when all help is exhausted, in a painful fulfilment of the prophecy of the gods does not only mystify the gods but also life itself and its

uncertainties. These last words of Odewale send cold shivers down the spines of the audience seeing the ruin of a noble man caused by the man's own hot temper, his own patriotic tendencies, his own personality traits, and his lack of knowledge of the mysterious reality surrounding his person which prompts his honest but terrible and self-destructive judgments. This knowledge, attained at the late hour is the hushing goose pimples that teaches the audience to fear for themselves: the potential of their own carnal nature destroying them in unexpected circumstances of life, the fear of each one interminably determining their own destinies with the exercise of their freewill in prying into life's adventures. It is thus not safe to trifle with the unknown as it could be tantamount to tempting one's own doom. The audiences psychologically experience a similar experience because they are akin in humanity to the tragic protagonist: they don't fully know or understand their true carnal nature until such a nature or fate tragically ruins them. These lamentable fearful feelings are not allayed on the Nigerian Yoruba audience the way fear and pity are suspended from Greek audience in the experience of catharsis. This is because in the case of *The gods are not to blame*, the tragic hero's fall is directly linked to his prehistoric fate and flaws.

6. Conclusion

Fate subjects 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 or lack of knowledge, which is manifested ironically in the perpetual confidence of the tragic hero's assertion of self-knowledge. Eventually he, still confident about knowledge becomes foolhardy, and this foolhardiness, becomes the hubristic tendency of his mortal fate which plunges him into deeper turmoil, and he becomes conscious of the truth about himself only at the eleventh hour wherein is inexorable fearful death. 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 fulfilment 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 gods are not to blame* 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 temper 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. Fate is 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 in *The gods are not to blame* 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.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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