

**THE CONCEPT OF FATALISM IN AFRICAN DRAMA: A STUDY OF DORIS  
FRED'S *THE WOMAN WAILS!***

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**Abstract**

*Belief in fate is integral to African traditional religion and this, obviously, supplies the background material for many African works; it has become a source material for many African authors: be it the playwright, novelist or poet. The belief in destiny and fate has been discovered in varying degrees in works of African background. The extent to which this is true is the concern of this study on Doris Fred's *The Woman Wails!**

**Keywords;** Blief in faith, African Traditional Religion, African works and Playwright.

**Introduction**

*A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines drama as, “the form of composition designed for performance in the theatre in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated actions and utter the written dialogue. The alternative name for a dramatic composition is a play” (69). By African drama, however, we are talking about such compositions set in Africa and usually composed by Africans and revealing the African milieu, views and polity.

Fatalism, on the other hand, is the belief that all events are subject to fate and happen out of unavoidable necessity. It is also an attitude of the mind which accepts whatever happens as having been decreed to happen. This acceptance is derived from the belief that all events are controlled and fixed prior to the birth of human beings by superior powers and that human beings have no power to change them.

*Merriam Webster Dictionary* on line posits, “Fatalism holds that all events are predetermined in advance for all time and humans are powerless to change them”. *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* further classifies fatalism into: mythological fatalism, theological fatalism and rational fatalism.

Mythological fatalism equates predestination with irrational and unfathomable fate which is a feature of early human culture made manifest in such doctrine as

astrology. Theological fatalism is that in which predestination is regarded as the will of an almighty deity. It holds that men's destiny is divinely pre-ordained with some destined for "salvation" and others for "damnation". This is true of Islam but not totally of Christianity because it negates the idea of God as a merciful God.

Rational fatalism merged with mechanistic determinism which views predestination as the inexorable linking of cause and effect within a close system of casualty. Rational fatalism is modern and easily accepted of the three. This is because the modern man can easily identify with the principles of cause and effect.

As it can be conceived, analysed and interpreted on philosophical and theological planes, fatalism has come to acquire a variety of meanings in different contexts.

In religion, fatalism has become to the Hindus the inevitable result of human actions for which every man is answerable to. To the Moslems, it takes a general form of resignation, a complete submission to divine providence. But among the Christians, belief in fate has crystallized into a doctrine of predestination where all things are believed to be ordained by God, according to his will and human beings are saved or condemned depending on whether they complied with this divine will or not.

Among the heathens in Africa as depicted by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, although the gods decide the fate of a man before birth, he can influence his fate by either accepting it or fighting to change it because when a man says "yes" his chi says "yes" too (100). And this is clearly shown in the life of the protagonist who becomes successful despite all odds.

It is against this backdrop that this study explores the extent to which Doris Fred's *The Woman Wails!* a typical African drama, set among the Igbo tribe of Africa portrayed the belief system

### **Fatalism in *The Woman Wails!***

*The Woman Wails* captures the agony of Lolo Mgborio beginning from the birth of her first female child to the subsequent flee of Ugomma her daughter-cum-daughter-in-law from Ebene in search of elusive peace in fulfillment of the will of the gods. The agony is not just that of Lolo Mgborio but also of her daughter-cum-daughter-in-law who from the time she discovered she had a curse made every effort to avert it but to no avail. Other characters in this play are not left out of agony as they are directly or indirectly affected by the curse placed on Ugomma even before she was born.

The play opens with King Eze Akaji and his Queen Lolo Mgborio at the dedication of their first female child after the birth of five sons. The royal child is a princess and their first female child. So, the child is brought to Ezenwanyi, the river goddess, for blessing and it is believed that she is responsible for the sex of the child and is seen as the goddess of all female children in Atu. As custom demands, whenever a new girl is born, the chief priest of the oracle of Atu land is called in to find out the future of the girl and what she has brought with her before the final blessing from Ezenwanyi is given. However, to the greatest dismay of all present, Ezenmuo declares, "This girl shall marry her own blood and bear children that will die" (3).

Since then, every effort made to avert the evil only aids to the full realization of it. It therefore follows like the case of Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*, who before he was born the gods had willed that he would kill his father and marry his mother, and every effort by Odewale as well as the other people around him to

avert what the gods had willed proved abortive. In fact, all their efforts to thwart what the gods willed rather brought Odewale closer to fulfilling the wills of the gods.

As a result of the revelation, the goddess prepared her to be sold off into slavery as symbolized by wrapping her with an old animal skin. Her father, Eze Akaji, in his determination not to allow the evil prediction to come to pass, unwraps the girl and gives her to Ezenmuo, naked, who wraps her the second time with a red cloth symbolizing a sacrifice to the gods. She was given to Ogundu, the King's special messenger and ordered to go into the thick forest with the little girl and shed her blood where the evil ones will feed on her.

Time rolled on and after twenty-two years, the scene opens with the first son of King Eze Akaji yet to be married though his two younger brothers were already married. As a result, he cannot assume the throne after his father who is late, until he takes a wife. So, the Queen mother, Lolo Mgborio fixes the feasts of "Egwu Umuagbo" on a fortnight to enable the prince choose a bride among the dancing maidens.

On the appointed day, two new maidens joined the dancing maidens. When one of them danced so well as never had seen in Atu, the prince fell in love with her and inquires about her. Ugomma, the best dancer, reveals that she has been wandering from place to place and getting wind of the dance at Atu decided to be a witness and possibly participate. She says: "I am looking for peace and I feel peace. I will dance again if the drums beat" (6).

As the Royal bard says the praise of the new princess, she says, "there are princesses and there are princesses. A princess is greater than a princess. It is not wearing the cloak of a queen that is hard, it is becoming the queen" (10). By these words, the Royal bard is unwittingly saying that Ugomma is counterfeit because in the long run, she will not be the Queen. The bard goes on: "Ugomma, princess, daughter of Uzodinma, may you be fruitful, you will live long to inherit the crown from the queen" (10 -11). This prediction is not to be realized because by the time the truth about Ugomma's identity is revealed, things fell apart as she did not inherit any crown.

Dramatic irony pervades the song of the Royal bard. She wished Ugomma fruitfulness when she has been destined to bear children that will die. After fifteen years of fruitful and peaceful marriage to Ikedineze the King of Atu with nine sons to show for it, calamity rolled in. Her two sons died of convulsion the same day and their perennial enemies, the people of Uto resumed their attack on Atu. Sudden sickness in spite of war bequeathed the land and three sons of Ugomma died in quick succession along with many villagers. These calamities compelled the people to demand from their king why it should be so, for as the people rightly said, things do not just happen. They blamed him as it were, and question his authenticity as a true son of his father. Sequel to this, the King invites Dibia Walaka, a renowned soothsayer who declares that there is a curse in the land which must be cleansed before Atu can be free. He reveals that the curse lives in a woman's blood and that she lives among the people and that her blood smells.

The King in his zeal to fish out the cursed woman and kill her invites Ezenmuo to make more clarifications. Ezenmuo as it were, compounds the issues by pointing accusing fingers at the King himself, and saying, that he is the bearer of the curse and should stop looking for another person. He reveals that King Ikedineze killed his father, the late King and his two younger brothers. This infuriates King Ikedineze who threatens to behead Ezenmuo, and, in his rage pushes him down. Ezenmuo declares:

Temper! Hot! Hot temper like that of a dangerous snake. It attacks when no one is ready to attack him. Deadly temper, which made you to strike the man you called father dead because you wanted to take up his throne while he was still alive. You feared you would never be a king! This same fear made you to put the next king, Ezeka, in the warfront that he may be killed by your enemies. The same way you slaughtered Ajjeze when you suspected, he noticed you when you killed your father- fear gripped you that the boy would one day revenge his father's death... As the King cursed you before he died, you shall never find peace in any Atu woman! And your kingdom shall not know peace until you are separated from you own blood (32-33).

The fatalism revealed in this play is multi-faceted. First, Ugomma is destined to marry her own blood and bear children that must die. As if to reinforce this, Ikedineze is cursed by his father not to find peace in any Atu woman and not to have peace in his kingdom until he loses his life. This is because of the cruel way he killed his father. There is an underlying network working to realize the will of the supernatural over mortal man.

Tacitly speaking, the curse is basically on Atu as a people. For the then prince, late King Eze Akaji to have married a maiden just raped by their enemies, an Ato hunter, and made pregnant by him and which has resulted in introducing strange blood into the Royal Family is a curse in itself. This is why the first son of his marriage to Lolo Mgborio does not carry royal blood and when he overheard this from his father, he sought for a way of eliminate him so that he could inherit the throne. The curse on King Ikedineze is invariably a curse on Atu for when the calamity began to roll in, the whole community was devastated. The people died in their numbers. For an Igbo adage has it that when one finger touches oil it spreads to other fingers.

Yet, the major symbol of doom in the play is Ugomma who has been destined to marry her own blood and bear children that will die and despite her father's effort to kill her at birth as well as her own effort at the discovery of the fate, to run away from it, she eventually ends up marrying Ikedineze, her own sibling who also shoulders a curse, as though, the Atu Kingdom operates under a double curse of which they cannot escape from.

The entire play reeks with fatalistic innuendoes. To ensure that Ugomma fulfills the wishes of the gods, she has this strange desire for strong and powerful men. This quality is evident in King Ikedineze and lacking in the Akamba people, the first tribe she settled in after fleeing Ebene. But for this strange desire for strong and powerful men, perhaps, she would have married someone there, thereby averting the curse that follows her. As it were, the forces that desired her destruction lured her back to Atu and gave her a feeling of false peace and joy which was only but a mirage.

Considering the rhetorical question from her childhood friend Ebereugo, "And you find peace of mind?" (57), which seems like mockery for the peace which she thinks she has is never to be, it becomes clear that the gods predetermines what happens to men and there is nothing they can do about it but to accept the wills of the gods.

As Lolo Mgborio reveals, the doom Ezenmuo predicted for her family thirty-seven years ago is realized (59). In spite of every effort to avert this doom, it was rather intensified. Tacitly speaking, doom envelopes the Atu kingdom when the king married a

lady that was pregnant from an incident of rape by an enemy. The product of that rape was not to be a king in Atu but by the design of some supernatural forces that wanted the downfall of Atu people; the bastard assumes the throne thereby bringing disaster on the people and the land. As one of the chiefs declares when Ikedineze stabbed himself, “I do not pity him; he is of the bloody tribe” (77). At the end of the play, Ugomma leaves Atu with her four remaining sons, still in search of elusive peace.

### **Conclusion**

This study cannot be concluded without pointing at the structural and thematic similarities between Doris Fred’s *The Woman Wails!* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are not to Blame*. Though in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are not to Blame*, fatalism is centered only on Odawele who is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Similarly, in *The Woman Wails!*, fatalism revolves around more than one character: the protagonist Ugomma, who has been destined to marry her own blood and bear children that will die, Ikedineze a man who has been cursed not to find peace in any Atu woman and ultimately, Atu land which has been cursed not to have peace under Ikedineze’s reign until his death.

The archetypal image of the fatal man is common to both plays. This supports Frye’s proposition that “the totality of literary works constitute a “self-contained literary universe” which has been created over the ages by the human imagination so as to assimilate the alien and indifferent world of nature into archetypal forms that serve to satisfy ending human desires and needs” (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 14).

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