

## Sophoclean Echoes in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*

**Oguntuase, Adebayo Adefemi**  
General Studies Department,  
The Federal Polytechnic,  
PMB 5351, Ado Ekiti  
[bayo.oguntuase@yahoo.com](mailto:bayo.oguntuase@yahoo.com)

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### **Abstract**

*This essay attempts to establish a link with and beneficial dependence on Sophocles' dramatic work, King Oedipus ( Oedipus Tyrannus ) by Ola Rotimi's play, The gods Are not to Blame. The latter effort by Rotimi draws from the Greek traditions of fatalism and rites of propitiation which are amply espoused in Sophocles' theatre. Attempts are also made in this work to establish the parallels in the traditions of the Greek and of the Yoruba, a people who speak that same language and inhabit the South Western part of Nigeria. This work is examined based on the psychoanalytical theory as the theoretical scaffolding on which arguments, inferences and conclusions on both texts are based. The paper concludes that it is a healthy and commendable practice in academics to situate cultures and epochs simultaneously and dredge up instances where both positions are mutually beneficial and helpful to each other.*

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### **Introduction**

It has been found that writings, especially of the literary type, are products of the politico-socio-cultural milieu of the authors who produce such works. The two primary texts which are at focus in this essay are not exempt from this general statement. The play, *King Oedipus* or *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles is a product of the religious observances of the Greek, his own people. The sun god, Apollo, is worshipped and revered for its powers to regulate, punish and reward the citizens according to their conduct in society. Ancient Greece also believes in the infallibility of the gods whose pronouncements must be accepted and obeyed without a murmur. Divination is a part of the Greek tradition in that oracular opinions and instructions are sought on very weighty matters such as the birth of a neonate or the cause of social or religious upheaval in their society.

This same scenario holds sway in the Yoruba tradition which Rotimi symbolises with the land of Kutuje. The belief is also rife amongst the Yoruba that divination is a way of life and an age old practice which guides their conduct when it is imperative to decide very crucial matters. These matters include the untimely death of a King, an *Oba*, in un-usual and suspicious circumstances or what the oracles have pronounced as the destiny of an infant, just sired. These cultures, amongst the Greek and the Yoruba, provide a pedestal on which to celebrate these practices to guide society in its daily conduct in social, religious, political, and even, economic matters.

In what looks like a symmetry in the religious beliefs of the Jews as recorded in the Bible, and the cultural practices of the Greek and the Yoruba, it is widely held that a re-enactment of the life of Jesus who laid down his life as propitiation for the redemption of humankind and remission of their sins is worth replication in their religious practices and observances. Specifically, the Holy Scripture says Jesus is the being'' in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches in glory''. (Ephesians 1:7) This is why it becomes imperative for the Theban King, Oedipus, to sacrifice himself so that Thebes may be restored and saved from the pestilential afflictions that threaten to exterminate the entire population.

### **Kutuje and Thebes, a historical assay.**

Thebes, a Greek society, is confronted with the grim reality of possible total elimination of its people on account of a pestilence whose cause is indecipherable. Their erstwhile King, Laius, has recently met horrible death and the land is understandably thrown into mourning, its citizens disoriented and acephalous. Oedipus, fleeing from a curse in his native Corinth, fortuitously saves the bewildered Thebans by solving the riddle of the Sphynx which assails them. For his gallantry and intrepidity, he is installed King in the place of the deceased Laius. As tradition demands, he inherits the palace, powers, influence, authority, the widowed Queen and all. Here, the invincibility of the gods comes to play. Oedipus who flees from Corinth to avoid the pronouncements of the gods invariably fulfils the gory annunciations when he inadvertently kills his Father and inherits his Mother as wife after taking the office of the former liege. Oedipus, by the inscrutable powers of the gods escapes death on Mount Cithareon and fulfils the promulgation of regicide/patricide and incest.

This grisly scenario is replicated in Kutuje, where an ill- fated prince, Odewale, sired by King Adetusa and his Queen, Ojuola is destined by oracular fiat to murder his Father and later marry his Mother. To avoid this fate, he abdicates his filial duties to his ‘parents’ at Ijekun Yemoja and flees, first to Ede and later to Kutuje where he dances to the dreadful tunes dictated by the gods. On his way, in fury and unrestrained anger, he kills his own Father and later marries his Mother after restoring equilibrium in a kingdom torn apart by sporadic bloody attacks after their King’s demise.

### **Terse Notes on Both Playwrights**

Sophocles was born in 496 BC, in Colonus, a Village near Athens, Greece. Being the son of wealthy parents, he attended an elite school where he trained as an artist. He grew at a time when the theatre was at its apogee in Greece. Plays, usually in trilogies, were written and presented in competitions which attracted large audiences. Sophocles’ plays took the first position in most of the competitions. *CliffNotes on Sophocles Oedipus Trilogy* confirms that the playwright wrote about 120 Plays out of which only seven are documented and preserved till date. These Plays include: *Ajax, Electra, Oedipus the King, The Trachinae, Philoctetes, Antigone, and Oedipus at Colonus*. In his time, Sophocles had contemporaries in Aeschylus, an older playwright and Euripides, a younger colleague. He wrote the play, *King Oedipus*, in 430 BC.

Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, the second playwright is a Nigerian of mixed parentage whose Father was Yoruba and his Mother, Ijaw. He schooled in Boston, USA, where he obtained a degree in Fine Arts in 1965 after which he took a Masters degree in 1966 from Yale University, also in the US. He was a Rockefeller Foundation scholar in play writing and dramatic literature while in Yale. He lectured in Macalester College, St Paul, Minnesota and later at the Universities of Ife and Port Harcourt. He wrote many plays among which are: *Hopes of the living Dead, Our Husband has Gone Mad Again, The gods Are not to Blame, Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* etc.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This essay is undergirded by the psychoanalytical theoretical framework which sees a literary work from the perspective of the major *dramatis personae* in the dramatic texts under examination. The earliest proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud who sees a relationship in man’s physical life and activities and his dreams. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1964), Freud, citing Macrobus and Artemidorus, notes that:

Dreams are divided into two classes: the first class was believed to be influenced by the present (or the past), and was unimportant in respect of the future..... the second class of dreams, on the other hand, was determinate of the future. To this belonged:

1. Direct prophecies received in the dream( chremotismos, oraculum)
2. The foretelling of a future event ( orama, visio)
3. The symbolic dream, which requires interpretation ( oneiros, somnium) p 5

The essential connection between the postulates of Freud and Oedipus is found in the second category of dreams which dwells on ‘the fortelling of a future event’. This is the case in the two plays being examined in this paper. In each case, a scary future reeking with foreboding of nerve wracking occurrences is predicted for the major characters. Ven Der Sterren, in his article, ‘The ‘King Oedipus’ of Sophocles’ states that Freud derives his theory about ‘Oedipus complex’ from the Theban Plays. In the main, Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex is based on the suspicion which a young, growing male child nurses about possible threat from his Father over the love and affection for his (the child’s) Mother. The Mother is torn between two worlds, that of being a wife to her husband and being a mother to her darling son. Freud further establishes that a similar scenario plays out between a female child who must seriously contend with her Mother for the affection, love and attention of her Father. This situation is what Freud calls the ‘Electra complex’. This is why this paper situates the psychoanalytical literary theoretical criticism as the appropriate prism from which to make expatiations and elucidations on the characters in both plays and the circumstances of their origin, growth, maturity, accomplishments and eventual inevitable destruction. On the heels of Freud’s psychoanalytical theory comes Carl Gustav Jung’s archetypal theory which is also considered relevant as dilations on this paper progress. In his work, *Four Archetypes*, Jung submits that there are established patterns which dictate, almost inveterately, how events in the lives of humankind unfold. Jung says, for the Mother archetype:

The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy: the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason: any helpful instinct or impulse: all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. On the negative side, the Mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark: the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that seduces and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate. P 15

### **Echoes and Reverberations in Both Texts**

A convenient point to take off as this paper x-rays the parallels and convergences in the two texts is the concept of predestination, fatalism or, simply fate. The belief in the fate that lies ahead of humankind as unalterable as he grapples with the ups and downs of his/her world is firmly etched in the consciousness of Greeks. This is why at the birth of Oedipus, Laius, his Father and incumbent monarch at Thebes seeks to decipher by oracular prescience what fate the infant brings with him in his earth bound journey. The unsettling revelation of Tiresias, the blind prophet, impels Laius and Jocasta to offer their bundle of joy in sacrifice to the gods. The ill-destined neonate has been fated at some point in his life to kill his Father and in adulthood, marry the same Mother that has given him the breath of life. He is therefore handed to a Messenger in the Theban palace, hands and ankles tied up, to be offered in sacrifice to the gods on Mount Cithaeron. These issues, without the slightest form of modification, re-echo in the Yoruba community of Kutuje where its *Oba* and *Olori*, (King and Queen) bear a son who is fated to eliminate his Father physically and engage his Mother in incestuous copulation. This, amongst the Yoruba, is patently sacrilegious. As Rotimi notes, joy has a slender body that breaks too soon. The tradition and belief in divination, in an abiding faith and unequivocal acceptance of the declarations of prophets, seers and soothsayers and the astonishing willingness of hearers of the words of the seers to do as commanded, without let or hindrance are recurring patterns of life and existence in Rotimi’s Yoruba nation.



From others, messengers. Here I am myself---  
You all know me, the world knows my fame:  
I am Oedipus. p 160

This is a loud attestation to Oedipus' intrepidity and fame which, as his speech shows, clearly precede him. His mien, widely advertised by his cathedral dignity gives momentary reassurance to his people.

An evil in a place wears the same apparel anywhere it is seen. Regicide and incest are two evils that are egregiously reprehensible. They cause incalculable damage in Thebes just as their asinine manifestations wreak havoc amongst the townspeople in Kutuje. It is stranger than fiction that a man who is sane and sober will contemplate, let alone execute the murder of his own Father and proceed to raise children by his biological Mother. These gory and un-nerving details and realities are the thrust of the two tragic dramatic texts considered for this paper. There are echoes, palpable enough to seize with both hands, of the blood-cuddling end of Queen Jocasta upon recognition that the gods have humiliated her in the disastrous death of Queen Ojuola in Kutuje. The manner of death in both cases is so gruesome that its reportage need be taken from an eye witness:

MESSENGER:

Once she had broken in through the gates,  
Dashing past us, frantic, whipped to fury,  
Ripping her hair out with both hands----  
Straight to her room she rushed, flinging herself  
Across the bridal- bed, doors slamming behind her---  
Once inside, she wailed for Laius, dead so long ago,

.....  
And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,  
Cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,  
Swinging back and forth. P 236

Reporting the gruesome and sickening death of Oedipus, the messenger who saw the ghoulis scene right inside the palace has this to say:

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins  
Holding her robes---and lifting them high,  
Looking straight up into the points,  
He digs them down the sockets of his eyes..... p 237

What a terrible way to depart this world of iniquities! For a woman of repute to rip off her entire hairs, which may have become grizzled with age, in protest against a horrible treatment most undeserved, is truly disconcerting. As though that is not enough, she ups the ante by hanging herself. Oedipus adopts the same grisly approach. With the golden brooch from his Mum-wife's dress, he gorges out his eyes from their sockets with a firm promise never to see, in life and death, the dark, putrefactive imperfections that characterise his life. The sordid eructation from his oozing eyes fleck his visage and royal apparel with sickening erubescence. Reverberations of the scenes depicted in the foregoing are exactly what play out in the palace at Kutuje. Although there are mild differences in matters of detail, the *dramatis personae* in the text face humiliating death of the most macabre and lurid description. Queen Ojuola does not end it all with the noose on her neck as does Jocasta, nor does she violently rip off the hairs on her head. The symbolism of forceful hair removal must be accentuated as a depiction of the highest form of dishonour into which a grand old lady can fall. Women who are bereaved of their husbands mourn with clean shaven heads or they wear very low haircuts, a clear departure from the admirable coiffure that they normally go about in. In Ojuola's case, a sharp knife is driven by herself to rip out the very womb which encased her first son, Odewale and later offered gestation to children fathered by Odewale through a most despicable process of

incestuous in-breeding. For his part, Odewale drills a sword into his own sockets until they oozed blood in place of sight.

A combination of untamed anger, pride (technically called *hubris*) and a state of epiphany, also technically known as (*anagnoresis*), culminate in the final, unalterable debacle that distinguishes the lives of the duo of Oedipus and Odewale. It is instructive to note that the nature of tragedy generally is that it operates on the principle of internal cohesion which makes all the parts, from the beginning to the end, a unified whole. The build-ups of subsequent components of the story on previous narrations and actions are always symmetrical. A wholesome experience which is meaningful and intelligible to the audience is the norm. This is why Michelle Zerba, in *Tragedy and Theory, the Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* notes that:

Tragedy must be a unified totality, its parts so closely related that the removal of any of them would topple the whole; it must be perspicuous, designed to conform to the limits of what the mind can grasp; the actions of its characters must be intelligible in terms of a moral purpose that is unitary or at least stable. p 5.

The truth in Zerba's position is amply, convincingly and unambiguously demonstrated by the manner in which the events in both plays unfold from the introduction of the audience to a conflict which reaches a crescendo before its resolution. The audience must take something away from the theatre. In our special case, the audience goes away with the undeniable fact that the invariable precursor to the eventual and certain destruction of the tragic hero, in the cases of Oedipus and Odewale, is a pronounced flaw of character. This single commodity is irretrievably and firmly ingrained in the chemistry of the two ill-fated heroes.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding this essay, it is clear beyond controversy that it has achieved what it set out to achieve; to show that there are echoes and reverberations of the events leading to the actions in old Greece from where Oedipus sourced his material and facsimile events in the Yoruba world of Ola Rotimi. The symmetry in both plays, save for deliberate alterations in matters of fine details, accentuates the verisimilitude of the two dramatic, artistic masterpieces. These alterations and changes are necessary to invest both plays with the unique cultural nuances and cadencies of Greece and Yoruba land.

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