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Recapturing Reality as an Influence of the Supernatural in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Waiting for Master"

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Abstract

The existence of the supernatural is an age long African reality. They are seen as beings, forces, and phenomena such as God, angels or miracles which interact with the physical universe in remarkable and unique ways. In an attempt to establish this argument, the research explores Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's short story "Waiting for Master" (2019). This fiction depicts and explores the idea of the supernatural in various manifestations ranging from its mystical appearances, interferences all-knowing attributes and as an arbitrator. This research aims at re-emphasizing the concept of the supernatural in the affairs of humans, which has become an inseparable part of most of the works written by Africans, by exposing the relationship it has with the human world and how both have exerted their influence on each other.

Keywords: Supernatural, mystery, post-colonialism, reality, mankind

Introduction

The idea of the supernatural is core to the experiences explored by African writers which therefore necessitates a scholarly research such as this on its significance in the African society. According to Toyin, the notion of the supernatural is embedded in the "religious and moral belief system" of Africans (2018:5). The supernatural is a controversial concept. There has always been an argument as to what really translates to the supernatural in the African context. This argument stems from the

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African's deep sense of religion. The deities that constitute what is referred to as the supernatural in the African context are understood by their human mediators who in some cases have some supernatural abilities. The possession of these perceived supernatural abilities by the human mediators raises the question of the existence of an absolute supernatural being. The efficacy of the supernatural revolves around the African belief system. These beliefs include; belief in the one Supreme God who controls the affairs of the entire universe including the activities of the gods, ancestors, seers, shrine priests and all other human mediators between man and the supernatural realm. There is also the belief in moral and spiritual or religious laws designed to ensure decorum in the human society and also to maintain a balance in the cosmic order. The violation of these moral codes of conduct is believed to bring about an imbalance in nature and incurs the wrath of the Supreme Being who administers justice through the agents referred to as small gods, in charge of the faculty of human existence. Abanuka in *Myth and the African Universe* posits that "the gods are the direct representatives of the Supreme Being on earth, supervising more important events like war, and guiding man in his profession and the tools he needs for it" (1999:30). The gods have their mortal representatives who are believed to possess some supernatural abilities. These abilities however are either inherent or acquired by understudying established seers, diviners, native doctors and other established eyes of the gods. According to Abanuka, "… Achebe skillfully employed the concept of Chi, the prevalent motif of Igbo ontology which depicts the individual's essence or reality as a portion of the great Chi, the Supreme Being, and which must be realized through one's achievements and social relationships" (1999:50-51). From this excerpt, it can be understood that while man may have some supernatural abilities, this aspect of his being is harnessed by him alone. It is realized through one's achievement and social relationships. Thus if an individual has the responsibility to explore the supernatural aspect of his being, then the characters, especially the tragic figures in most literary texts, can be held responsible for their actions and inactions. Abanuka argues that: "the challenge of *Things Fall Apart* may not be grasped without a proper understanding of the idea of Chi. The fortunes and misfortunes of Okonkwo in the novel are seen in the significant way in which he challenges his Chi to battle" (1999:51).

The varied manifestation of the Supreme Being is what Campbell in *The Power of Myth* refers to as "the mask of eternity" (1988:10). These manifestations are not peculiar to the African continent alone. These masks are the supernatural forces such as the gods and religious deities, ancestors, spirits, etc. These agents serve as mediators between man and the Supreme Being. These supernatural agents however have mortal representatives who mediate between them and the human communities. These human mediators include; priests, priestesses, diviners, seers, fortune tellers, and rainmakers. These deities that constitute the supernatural world order play definite roles in the human society. They function as guardians of the people, and

intercessors or mediators between man and the Supreme Being. They also function as arbitrators; punishing defaulters to ensure decorum in the society. The belief in the supernatural has its origin in myth which is man's attempt to interpret and assign meaning to the happenings within his environment. Belief in fate and predestination also forms part of the African belief system. The African universe falls into two sections – the tangible or physical world and the supernatural world. Both world orders have hierarchies. At the zenith of the supernatural realm is the Supreme Being or God who controls the activities of the gods and humanity. Beneath the Supreme Being are the supernatural agents – gods, demigods, spirits and subordinate to these supernatural agents are human mediators. Each mediator has a specific role to play in the society. The more powerful a god is, the higher the respect accorded its human mediator and shrine.

The belief in religion is a recurring motif in African literature. African traditional religion is an avenue for interaction between man and the supernatural. This interaction occurs through religious rituals such as prayer, worship, and sacrificial offering. Abanuka observes that:

> the ritual aspect of religion… is surely a way of expressing the inner intention to be part of or make contact with the supernatural or invisible world… the main aim of ritual is to excite feeling and act on our inner intention… ritual is relevant to the extent it enables the individual to reach beyond self or the attainment of a perfect state of being (17).

Labo Bouche Abdou in "The Force of Charms in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966) and *The Great Ponds* (1969)" "handles the supernatural from the angle of fetishes or charms". Abdou uses fetish to refer to "the inexplicable side of religious beliefs inherited from forebears (215). Abdou claims that: "the preoccupation of Elechi Amadi while treating the theme of fetishes in *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds* was, clearly bound to the geographical environment in which the author grew up… and the political events of the time, in that part of Africa" (216). The priests and seers in these novels are presented as mysterious beings. Anyika in *The Concubine* is a mystery to his co-villager likewise Nwokekoro, the priest of Amadioha. Abdou is of the opinion that:

> Religion in African Society places great emphasis on supernatural agencies. The African himself is superstitious and believes very strongly in mystic rites. He reconciles himself to these forces and treats them with reverence and dignity. He believes that his every action is guided and directed by spirits (217).

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) dramatises the Yoruba perception of the world around them and its relationship with the supernatural. This play shows the Yoruba belief that when a king dies, his horseman will perform a suicidal ritual which is essential to helping the chief's spirit ascend to the spirit

world. If it is not done, the chief's spirit will wander the earth and bring harm to the people. But when this ritual is interrupted in the play by a colonial officer, Elesin's son; Olunde commits the suicide in fulfillment of his father's intended objective in the uncompleted ritual. He has done this to elevate the shame which his family will face afterwards. But Elesin sees his son's death as punishment from the gods for his failure to carry out his duties and this drives him to suicide.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru (*1966) presents the eponymous character of Efuru whose life revolves round the desires of the water goddess Uhamiri. Efuru is a woman who loves her tradition and respects it to the fullest. She has been chosen to be a worshipper of Uhamiri. She sees the goddess in her dreams and finds it pleasurable to look at her beauty. In her dreams, she notices that the Woman of the Lake (as Uhamiri is called) is rich but does not have children. This can explain why Efuru is given wealth in place of many children. Towards the end of the novel, Efuru is happy being a free woman and she feels fulfilled as a devotee to the Woman of the Lake. Also Asare Konadu's *A Woman in her Prime* (1967) reveals the Ghanaian belief in predestination. Pokuwaa, the heroine of the novel is made to undergo all sorts of rituals and sacrifices to Tano, their god out of her desire to have a child. Yet, the child never comes until a certain period of her life when she has decided to end the rituals. This is to say that Tano has already predestined that Pokuwaa will not conceive until the predestined times reaches. J.P. Clark's "Abiku" (1965) provides a vivid picture of the African belief in reincarnation. This means that when an *abiku* child is born, the baby dies and repeats this cycle for as much as it wants. But when some sacrifices are made, it either ceases to die or remains dead without coming back to its mother again. While the Yorubas call this kind of baby an *abiku* the Igbos call it *ogbanje*. The mission of such children is to bring sorrow and sufferings to their mothers. Majeed (2012), in "An Examination of the Concept of Reincarnation in African Philosophy" views the concept from the cultural perspective of the Akan people of Ghana. He distinguishes reincarnation from related concepts such as metempsychosis and transmigration. He, therefore, dwells more on the belief that a deceased person can be reborn, referring to reincarnation. For clear understanding of the concept, he also shows how reincarnation is understood in some religious philosophies representing the worldview. He, therefore, submits that reincarnation is not a pristine concept contrary to the belief of many scholars. Chigbo (2009), in "Belief in Reincarnation among the Igbo of Nigeria: A challenge to Christianity" submits that: " the Igbo concept of reincarnation includes belief in a group of souls called ogbanje who are born, die in early life, and are reborn in the same family, often repeatedly. She further postulates that researchers could delve into the subject using viable scientific method as participant observers with objectivity, tolerance, sympathy, empathy, and openness to be confronted by their findings, as well as readiness to be converted to African traditionists world view and modes of thought which generated Ino uwa (reincarnation) among the Igbo society. All these establish the fact that beyond nature, there is the supernatural.

The Concept of the Supreme Being

In relation to the aspect of the supernatural in Adimora-Ezeigbo's 'Waiting for Master', the supernatural being, which can also be referred to as the creator, is one and most powerfully identified. As a matter of a great importance, and inevitableness, almost every religion recognizes and gives a high preference to him. In fact, in the African cosmology, the concept of the Supreme Being remains one golden thread running through the heart of their religion. John Mbiti, a great African traditional religious scholar succinctly puts it thus:

> Without exception, the people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being. As the Supreme Being, He is self-sufficient, self-supporting, self-containing just as He is self-organizing. There are no images, or physical representation of God. Providence is one of the most fundamental beliefs about God. God provides for all things He has made that their existence can be maintained and continued (1969:42-45).

In support of this notion, Kofi has noted in relation to the Supreme Being, that:

> In classical polytheism, the gods in the pantheon were all independents of one another. One of the gods might be regarded as the chief, but he was never regarded as the creator of the other gods. In African traditional religion, however, the picture is quite different. God, or the Supreme Being, is outside the pantheon of gods. He is the eternal creator of all other gods, and of men and the universe. This makes Him absolutely unique, and He is differentiated from the other gods in having a special name (1990:5).

Again, supporting the supremacy and the all-powerful aspect of the supernatural, Miller declares that God is: "All powerful; as he is all knowing; there is only one God, no other exists, God was the beginning before the appearance of men and the creation of nature, being Himself the creator of all things" (50). The cryptic response of the Master to the numerous complaints from the representatives of the villages buttresses His supremacy thus:

> I hear all; I know all. Your thoughts are not my thoughts;
> your ways are not my way…your problems will be solved
> in ways you have not imagined or thought of. When my divine
> will come, you will not be in doubt... (Ezeigbo 31)

Besides, Francis Arinze has taken a note that:

> God is the supreme spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals Him in power. He knows everything He is altogether merciful and it is from Him that each individual derives His personal spirit (1970:3).

Meanwhile, the foregoing critics on the supreme Being have credited the fact that He, the Supreme Being, is the creator and controller or chief manipulator of all others known or unknown deities or supernatural forces.

The Supreme Being as an Arbitrator in "Waiting for Master"

The community of YIHO is plagued with the issues of leadership, accountability, uncertainty, and deceit and is certain that the state of their misfortune can only be solved with the help of A Supreme Being, called Master since the highest court known as the council of Arbiters is corrupt in themselves. The account given by the first to fifth voice explains the political situation of the people as these people do unthinkable things to pervert justice as far as the leadership of the people is concerned. Since man has little or no power over the situations around him it becomes a matter of necessity to sometimes surrender to the will and purpose of the powers that govern the affairs of man. This power is the supernatural and a mystery beyond human understanding. The desire to be happy is inherent in man, however external factors act upon this desire for a life of fulfillment. These factors include the supernatural and also man's inability to remain passive when his dignity is challenged. Since man is first of all a product designed by the supernatural to fulfill a purpose, man has no absolute power over his life. A member of the community simply known as the First voice desires a lasting situation concerning the issues of selecting Chiefs in the community and her belief in the supremacy of Master is captured thus:

> Master, we have come to you to solve, once and for all, the political problem we have in our community. You are our last resort; if you do not help us, we are lost. Our disease has eaten deep into our system and we thrash about like people drowning (Ezeigbo 2019: 27).

The insistence on the balance between the striving for rationality on the one hand, and the recognition of the underlying irrationality of existence on the other makes up the quest for justice. In trying to find answers to these basic existential questions humans cross the boundary line set for mortals to the realm of the supernatural. At the realm of the unknown one becomes aware of his mortal nature and the irrationality of human existence. However, he is unable to retrace his steps because the thirst for answers which is a strong force operating within the tragic figure, structures his psyche to remain on the quest for truth no matter how irrational the situation around him might be. The quest for power and fame also made some communities who itch to usurp power engage the services of smaller gods as recounted by a representative christened the Third voice: "The so-called winner of the match used illegal and unorthodox means to defeat his opponents…we must find solution to such corrupt practices. This is why I have come to seek your wise counsel" (Ezeigbo 28). The Third voice is of the opinion that the community will continue to wait for what Master has to say as it is a waste of time to take the matter to the YIHO Council of Arbiters because "no right thinking person thinks that a stick bent by the harmattan can be straightened again" (Ezeigbo 28-29). This search for answers brings humans to the boundary line which should be the limit. This confrontation with the human limitation is what Karl Jaspers describes as the "boundary situation" which upholds a confrontation with the rationality of human existence than resignation to absolute

fatalism. The Master is saddled with responsibilities untold from issues of injustice, marginalization fear of the future, reconciliation, compromise, neglect and even weakness all characterized by the people of YIHO who wait patiently for the intervention of the Master who they believe is the last resort to their leadership injustices.

> …We are the underdog of the community, the neglected people. Sometimes our people wonder if it is a crime to be weak in strength and few in number…we are derided, plundered and abandoned like a whore (Ezeigbo 2019:30).

The expression of weakness by one known as the Fifth voice and acknowledgement of the Master as the giver of strength and mediator in all situation calls for reconciliation and compromise to be accommodated in the affairs of things, affirms the belief in the one Supreme God. This relationship has been explored in different ways by writers and critics of African literature. Some writers present the One Supreme God as an omniscient guardian of the African race whose actions or inactions affect the wellbeing of man.

The Supernatural genre, a common avenue of representation in African cultural production, combines fantasy and horror as it deals with the social and psychological anxieties surrounding the unknowns of its time. While the natural world can appear to some extent knowable, the supernatural world refers to the unknown and potentially unknowable or that which cannot be comprehended. The experiences of the unnamed protagonist in "Waiting for Master", is that of horror and dreadful with the rains falling in such torrents at that time of the year. The place, time and scary situations expressed by the protagonist shows the presence of the supernatural taking control of events when she seemed helpless, "my frantic hand discovered a wooden door built into the wall…where were my wet umbrella and mud-soaked shoes? I was wondering why I was in the empty half-screened room and how I came there in the first place (Ezeigbo 2019:25).

Conclusion

The supernatural has an overwhelming influence on human activities in the fictional world of 'Waiting for Master'. It suggests the possession of qualities which are beyond human comprehension. It also suggests a sense of the divine. Every faculty of human life is controlled by supernatural elements. The supernatural has strong influence in the shaping of man's destiny which is designed by the gods before he is conceived. Thus man's actions and inactions only help to lead him to the fulfillment of his destiny. This sense of predestination and fatalism suggests man's helplessness before the supernatural forces that frame his destiny.

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