

The Ontological Limitation of Being in Existential World: A Study of Tewfik, Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach

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ABSTRACT

The Scientific and technological innovations are obviously designed to unravel the mystery and secret of nature for human being to live in harmony. Unfortunately, science and technology are still far behind in this attainment. They are seeing, only promoting material wealth and failed to promote spiritual wealth necessary to guarantee such harmonious living. There have been climatic changes that promote global warming in the universe. The effect of this global warming can be found in incessant global pandemics that ravage the world from time to time. The current issue of corona virus (Covid-19) is a pointer to this issue as scientist and technologist still fail to provide solution to curb the effect of the pandemic world over. In as much that science and technology cannot provide solution to climatic changes which led to global warming and of which the product is the global epidemic that we are witnessing from time to time, it is, therefore, imperative that man should design various means to exist amidst the pandemics which, as a result of scientific and technological activities are posing threat to the harmonious living to beings in the universe. This study is designed to observe the reactions of beings to the problems of nature as well as the problems created by the scientists and technologists, one of which is the "corona virus" (covid-19), the world is still battling with in this world of the existence. An in-depth analysis of Tewfik, Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach is done to seeing how man is able to live and adapt at the period of anguish and to suggesting the ways forward despite man's limitation in the existential world. Carl Marx "Existentialism" is used as a mode of analysis to make suggestions to man on how he could exist and move forward in the existential world. The study revealed that man needs to keep on struggling against all life's vicissitudes pose on beings by nature, science and technological activities in the universe.

Keywords: Scientific, Technology, Heroism, Existentialism, Ontology, Fate.

Introduction

The first and the second world wars (World War I & II) have brought outstanding change to the advanced nations such as Europe, Italy, United States, United Kingdom etc. In these nations emanates the awareness associated with the name "civilization." The awareness can be found in the area of politics as we can see that democratic system of government now prevailed. In religion, it is seen that many religion denominations are springing up. Science and technology make us to witness the development and inventions such as aircrafts, ships, micro-chips, computers among others. This is to say that science and technology have brought improved standard of living. The presence of these in a country is as a result of the reason why many nations are known and called the civilized nations. It is pertinent to note that people

can hardly live conveniently today without electricity, pipe borne water, cars, mobile phones, computers, internet facilities among others. In all, man is in the apex of these achievements.

It is, however, sad that despite the achievements recorded, the nations are seen turning one against another. This conflict resulted into the first, second and the current verisimilitude third world wars. As said, man is at the apex of the achievements witnessed by the developed nations and even as the causal of the wars. The philosophers' then start to ask questions on the ontology of man. Who is this man that is behaving as beast? There must be an inherent ontological in him for him to behave thus.

The Europe of the 1930s and 40s was a kind of gloom, disillusionment, arid, hopelessness and complete wasteland. These absurdities are reflected and developed extensively in the work of the great artists and philosophers such as Harold Pinter, Albert Camus, Wole Soyinka and Tewfik, Al-Hakim.

To reflect the themes, of the absurdities, Tewfik, Al-Hakim formed number of Coterie¹. Fate of a Cockroach is one of the plays that are performed by the coterie. The play centres on 'heroism'. It demonstrates one's ability to face whatever trial, hardship and tribulations that come on his way even if it is an infamous act. The play demonstrates man's unremitting ability, his Spartan courage, continuous struggle, indefatigability and inner conviction which say that 'there is no sin in trying and fall but one should make sure he rises each time he falls. The Yoruba proverb says "Òtá mi má yo mí, bí mo bá su bú màá dide." (Do not mock me my enemy, whenever I fall, I will surely rise.) It is through this maxim that the cockroach in the play could be examined.

In all creatures, man inclusive, is an in-built tendency, an agent of behavioural character. The in-built tendencies at times, work in positive form and at times, they work in negative. The tendency, as we can see, happens not just accidentally, but basically in form.

The first of such in-born tendencies is 'fear'. In the play, the cockroach king is seen at the beginning of the play in half familiar restlessness and half strange fear. This is an indication that fears and insecurity could thwart the effort of man as we can see in the conversation of the Cockroach Queen who says:

Their being a continual threat to us. A Queen like me, in my position and with my beauty, elegance and pomp, can't take a step without trembling for fear that I might slip and fall on my back – and woe to me should I fall on my back – for I would quickly become prey to the armies of ants. (Al-Hakim: 4)².

And in the conversation between the King and his surrogates, they express the same fear:

MINISTER: yes, your majesty, the ants – none but the ants

KING: Ah, those ants! Tell us what happened.

MINISTER: What always happens?

KING: Be explicit.

MINISTER: My son was walking along the wall, just going for a stroll for amusement sake, like anyone else at his age – a perfectly innocent stroll of course...

KING: (impatiently): that's neither here nor there –what happened?

MINISTER: His foot slipped and he fell on the ground. Of course, he fell on his back... (Al-Hakim: 6 – 8).

¹ Small group of people who have interests and do things together but do not like to include others.

²All page references to Al-Hakim's are to Al-Hakim, Tewfik's (1973) *Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays*. Nairobi:Heinemann, pp 2 – 76.

The fear of what is likely to happen might have resulted to the fall of Minister's son. In the midst of Covid-19 global pandemic, many people whose case was not connected to the ailment were reported dead, having been grouped with those that were positive having the infection. By the time the actual result of these people would arrive they are already dead, with the fear that they were positive with the ailment, whereas the result confirmed that they were negative.

The second tendency can be seen in the 'quest motif' of the king. It is to be noted that one ever present, ever constant, undeniable characteristic is 'quest'. Man's restlessness in search after things either known or unknown pervades. The quest holds for the Cockroach King. Through the curiosity, thirst for knowledge and discovery, the Cockroach king catapults into the bath-tub by simple logic. This is not a sin, as man innate is always to search, strife after incomprehensible things to pass away time.

The physiological make-up of the cockroach is another in-born tendency. The make-up, are not of the cockroach grand design, they, therefore, become by necessity, liability, an acceptable burden it must bear. The body chemistries' are all its agent of struggle. So they become paramount importance in whatever it does. This also dictates willy-nilly to what extent the cockroach struggles.

With these agents, namely, quest motif, constant intractable fear and physiological imposition in mind, we can now set off into the heart of the matter.

The agents, all work in consonance with fate. In the same vein, fear comes in as a formidable agent of fate. Through the same procedure, its physiological make-up also acts as an agent of fate. This is the burden the cockroach carries forever.

Lastly, and of chief importance, is the quest which lead the cockroach into falling into bathtub. It is rational, logical and completely sensible for one to search, quest, and thirst for knowledge, food and material wealth for him to fare well in this existential world. This is exactly what the cockroach does. Around this narrow path between quest and where the adamant misfortune lurks, is the question of heroism.

Fate is what no man has appointed with, when it comes with either good or bad, joy or sorrow, one takes heart and continues the struggle. Maria ma Ba, says:

*One does not fix appointment with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants. When it moves in the direction of your desires, it brings you plenitude. But more often than not, it unsettles, crosses you. Then one has to endure.*³

The above statement is true with the cockroach king who does not fix appointment with fate, but all of a sudden or perhaps by act of omission or commission, it finds itself in the bathtub.

Upon all the tendencies mentioned, the cockroach does not accept completely that it belongs in the bathtub and rather, it sees it as a challenge, stumbling block or most appropriately still an obstacle that surmountable for it. With this at the back of its mind, the cockroach begins the life proper which is but from the womb to tomb. There is nothing other than rigorous struggle against all life's vicissitudes. With the analysis, we can see that the cockroach is a great hero. Adil's conversation with Samia and the doctor help to buttress this:

Adil: Look Samia. It's still struggling – with the same perseverance. I tried to catch it out slacking or giving up, but never... never... never...

SAMIA: (looking into the bath tub with feigned interest): it's certainly courageous.

ADIL: And what courage!

³ Maria ma Ba. (1980) *So Long a Letter*. Nairobi: Heinemann. P. 2

ADIL: No you merely misunderstood me. I did not...

DOCTOR: (pointing to the cockroach in the bath) that?

ADIL: Yes, that hero

DOCTOR: Hero?

ADIL: Indeed, a hero... (Al-Hakim: 67 – 70)

Cockroach repeatedly of falling –rising – falling- rising continues. At this point, Adil, a human character, cannot but mirroring himself and seeing his reflex action could not but salute the cockroach for not giving up. He confirms that the cockroach, for not given up, has tried for uncountable times but without a bit of rest. This is human being restiveness in incomprehensible, mysteries and illogical wilderness called life. Adil watches endlessly when the cockroach will totally give up but the zeal of the insect dazzles him.

We cannot but see the clear image of man's fate in the cockroach and to further add to the matter-of-fact discussion, Nelson Mandela says in one of his numerous speeches thus: "struggle is my life". This terse sentence is a bold, clear-cut testimony of a trying man. But alas! No single regard, as to whether he succeeds or not. At the tails end of the play, and after the cockroach has been destroyed, Adil states in clear term thus:

*The important thing was its struggle for life,
Makes a hero out of the cockroach king (Al-Hakim: 72.)*

Conclusion

Just like Nelson Mandela who says severally in his speeches, "struggle is my life", it is pertinent to conclude this discourse with a brief life history of the Nigeria's acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, Late Chief Moshood Kashimawo Abiola.

To start from the root, the name 'Kashimawo', according to his origin, the Yoruba of South-western, Nigeria, is symbolic. It means "Let us wait and see." Abiola was his father's twenty-third child, but the first to survive infancy. Abiola is a typical example of Wole Soyinka's poem "Abiku." His father was a produce trader who primarily traded cocoa, and his mother traded in kola nuts. As a young boy, he struggled hard to assist his father in cocoa trade but by the destruction of cocoa consignment declared by a Produce Inspector of poor quality grade and unworthy for export to be destroyed immediately, Abiola found himself in the symbolic bottom of bathtub, just like the 'cockroach' in Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach struggling for existence. His relentless struggle led him to his first business of selling firewood gathered in the forest at dawn before school to support his father and siblings. Abiola also founded a musical band at the age of fifteen and would perform at various ceremonies in exchange for food. Later, he was eventually able to acquire payment for his performances and he used the money to support his family and his secondary education. Abiola did not relent, and he struggled further. Then, at the age of nineteen, he joined the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). In 1960, Abiola obtained a government scholarship to study at the University of Glasgow, where he earned his degree in Accounting and qualified as Chartered Accountant of Business Career Edict. Still not relenting, he became a Bank Account officer before leaving for Glasgow, Scotland to pursue his higher education. He later worked as Senior Accountant at the University of Lagos Teaching Hospital. His struggling further took him to join the United States firm, Pfizer, before joining ITT Corporation, where he rose to the position of Vice-President Africa and Middle East. Still, Abiola would not relent, then, after a decade of military rule, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria military junta came under pressure to return democratic

rule to Nigeria, Abiola joined the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and secured the presidential mandate for the June 1993 election.

So far, we are able to see that Abiola struggled hard and managed to work his way out of poverty. The culmination of his struggle was the June 1993 presidential election. He defeated his rival AL haji Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Party (NRC) and became the first candidate ever to win Nigeria's freest and fairest presidential election as observed by the national and international observers. Abiola was seen winning in his Northern opponent's home state of Kano. However, the election, which Abiola won and observed to be freely and fairly unprecedented in Nigeria's history was annulled by the military Administrator President Ibrahim Babangida. The effect was the political crisis which led to Gen; Abacha's seizing power later in the year.

With the annulment of M.K.O. Abiola's presidential mandate, there arose a new era of struggling of his existence to claim his mandate, come what may. His struggling this time resulted to his arrest, incarceration and put in solitary confinement for four years with a Bible, Quran and fourteen guards as companions. Still, not relenting, Pope John Paul II, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Human Rights Activists from all over the world lobbied the Nigerian government for his release. The sole condition attached to his release was that he renounced the mandate something that he refused to do. Hence, the struggle continues despite the fact that the military government offered to compensate him and refund his expenses. For this reason, Abiola became extremely troubled. Then Kofi Anan, (The United Nations Secretary General), in company of Emeka Anyaoku, reported to the world that he, (Abiola) offered to renounce his mandate after they met him that the world would not recognise a five-year old election. At the apex of the struggle just on the day that he was due to be released, that is, July 7, 1998, Abiola died in suspicious circumstances shortly after the death of Gen. Sani Abacha, the head of the military junta. The official autopsy stated that he died of natural causes while Abacha Chief Security Officer, (Al-Mustapha) who was detained by the Nigerian government but later released claims to have video and audio-tapes, showing how Abiola was beaten to death⁴. His death is, therefore, similar to that of symbolic Cockroach, who after a lot of struggles to exist was defeated and exterminated by Attiya, the Cook, who act as the force beyond its control. Hence, Adil shouts:

ADIL: Umm, Attiya, bring the bucket and rag and wipe me out of existence.

Abiola is seen being wiped out of existence by the force similar to Attiya, the cook who wiped out the Cockroach from existence.

Conclusively, fate says the Cockroach must struggle, so also is human being which Al-Hakim uses cockroach to represent and as depicted by late Chief M.K.O. Abiola. It is, therefore, glaring that man must strife, attempt to climb a mountain, otherwise, man's struggle in life, is, of course, not in vain until the point of destruction, and that is what life is, in human concept. It is, however, germane to round off this discussion finally with Earnest Hemmingway's last words in *Old Man and the Sea* that:

*Man cannot be defeated, he can only be destroyed. And what destroys all is nothing but the dreadful name of death, the original death itself.*⁵

Symbolic Motif: cockroach in the play is the symbol of man, in the play, there is the symbols of existential wars, dread, death and disease. These are well represented thus:

1. The existential war is seen in the way the cockroaches are looking for possible invasion of ants and the sense of fears that accompanied it.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>. Moshood Abiola Wikipedia. Content made available under CC BY – SA 3.0.

⁵ Hemmingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*.

2. Death is revealed in the sense of what no man can avert.
3. The symbol of disease is telling us of the fact that there is limitation to human faculty. The character of the cockroach servant represents the intellectual and what he knows, which are inadequate to cope with the problem of existence. This same way the Scientists and Technologists could not find instantaneous solution to the problem of corona virus (covid-19), for almost a year, the problem persists.
4. The ‘priest’ represents the religion institution. It is pertinent to note that prayer does not remove the calamities of man. It can only shows man what he needs to do.
5. The Minister shows the fall. All the cockroach characters are manifestation of man. (The pseudo-self). There is symbolic moving at different level.
6. The life of cockroach is a representation of the ability of man to face the existential obstacles. It is seen at the end of the play that the characters in the play understand the metaphorical aspect of being.

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Conflict of Interest

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