

Predestination: a Critique of Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*
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Abstract

Being a cultural belief that everything happens as pre-decided or preplanned, predestination is a topical issue that attracts the critical imagination of Chika Unigwe in *Night Dancer* (2013), an African novel. There appears to be no critical attention on *Night Dancer*. This study examines the novel to illustrate predestination as a belief that persists today. New historicism is adopted as a critical theory to show that predestination is a cultural attitude, while the novel is subjected to critical literary analysis. In *Night Dancer*, Rapu at birth is so named to predict her as an instrument in the hands of fate to wipe poverty away from her family. As a housemaid in the house of Mike, a wealthy married man, she is unable to control or avert the hand of fate as she has sexual contact with her boss/master (Mike); as the sexual contact results in pregnancy, and the birth of a male child; and pre-ordained marriage. This thus fulfils what has been preordained at her birth that she would attract wealth to her poor family which fulfils by her marriage to Mike. This paper thus argues that Chika Unigwe creates the artistic impression that everything happens as preordained at one's birth. And no one has control over this as demonstrated in the novel.

Keywords: Predestination, Cultural, Preordained, marriage, Rapu

1.0 Introduction

In the study of migration in African literary discourse, attention has most times been focused on transnational migration. This is a movement of the migrant from one nation-state or continent to another for a better living condition. Little attention, it has been observed, has been paid to rural-urban migration where there is a noticeable movement from the rural setting of material inadequacy, and want, to the urban setting of material abundance, wealth and comfortable life. Bhugra (2014:129) states that:

migration is a process of social change where an individual, alone or accompanied by others, because of economic betterment... leaves one geographical area for a prolonged stay or permanent settlement in another geographical area. It must be emphasised that migration is not only a transnational process but can also be rural-urban.... Rural-urban migration is more likely to be for economic... reasons....

This is the fictional fact we find in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. In this setting, Unigwe presents us with a migrant character whose migratory outcome illustrates predestination. The *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* defines predestination as: "The theory or the belief that everything that happens has been decided or planned by God in advance or by FATE and that humans cannot change it" (1151). Synonymous to this is "pre-ordination" which the same dictionary above sees as something "already decided or planned by God or FATE" (1154). Looking at both, it can be concluded that there is the belief that things and events happen as they have been decided before they occur. And this, we note, cannot be influenced or altered by man. In other words, events and occurrences are pre-planned, pre - decided, preordained before they happen in real life. This is what a critical reader sees the author of *Night Dancer* tries to project. She tries to preoccupy herself with the belief that nothing happens by chance, but by a preordained harmony that manifests in the life of man. This belief is no doubt a cultural trait that Unigwe attempts to reecho in the novel. Culture has been defined as "customs, beliefs, art, way of life and social organisation of a particular country or group [...]. The beliefs and attitudes about [something] that people in a particular group or organisation share" according to the dictionary being cited above.

Looking at the phrase "predestination" and its meaning, one would conclude that it is a culture, it being a belief that people share. Studies reveal that the people who share this belief in everything that happens as ordained by God, or fate include the Christian faith. Wikipedia.org states that:

Predestination, a Christian theology, is the doctrine that all events have been willed by God, usually regarding the eventual fate of the individual soul [...]. In this usage, predestination can be regarded as a form of religious determination; and usually predeterminism, also know as theological determinism.

The comment above shows that predestination is also a Christian theology. Among the members of Christianity, it is believed that nothing happens by scientific chance, but as willed by God regarding an individual's life or fate. This is akin to theological determinism which, according to Wikipedia.org is:

the belief that people are not free to choose what they are like or how they behave because these things are decided by their surroundings

and other things over which they have no control. (399)

And the *Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (1989:78) adds that:

The thesis posits that any event whatever is an instance of some land of nature [...]. Frequently, however, the thesis of determinism is understood to involve the thesis that the will is not free, that choice is illusory and that how we act is determined.

In view of the above conclusions, and reading Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, an episodic plot reveals predestination fulfilled in a migrant in the novel. Unigwe, born in the Eastern part of Nigeria, is a writer who appears to share this cultural belief, being an Igbo, and an African writer. This cultural orientation so far defined is obvious in the life of her character in the novel – Rapu. Dobie (2012:176) while looking at new historicism as a critical theory sees culture as referring to:

the sum of the beliefs, institutions, arts, and behaviour of a particular people or time [...] cultural studies can be said to address an almost unthinkable broad body of knowledge; language customs, legal systems, literature and more.

She goes further to argue that a new historical investigator “seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context – the anxieties, issues, struggles [...] of the era in which it was created” (181). In Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, our critical focus, we would observe that she illustrates predestination as a belief in the cultural context of her imaginary Igbo society.

The novel has not attracted significant critical examination hence this study demonstrate the work as one that focuses on the cultural issue. Labeodam (2009:240) argues that: “Africa in general and Nigeria, in particular, had strong indigenous values, systems, beliefs, practices, knowledge dissemination and acquisition before contact with the West”. She adds that:

the traditional or indigenous cultures are the norms and social values, as well as mental constructs, which guide, organi[s]e and regulate a people's ways of thing and making sense of their world [...] culture is the shared ideas, norms, values, beliefs, and languages of a people [...]. (241).

Thus far one can conclude that predestination is a part of the people's belief, and mental construct, and thus the culture of the Igbo society of Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, where she invents preordained marriage to illustrate the cultural belief that every event in one's life is planned and concluded in advance and that the victim has no control over it, and cannot alter it as well.

1.1 Preordained Marriage

Predestination is observed to fulfil in Rapu's life as she migrates from the village of Lopanta to the city of Kaduna. The author reveals that she metamorphosed from a housemaid into a housewife as was preordained by the gods. Set in Nigeria, the narration between fictional Eastern, and Northern Nigeria, Unigwe reveals in *Night Dancer* how Mike and Ezi (husband and wife) travel to the rural area of Lopanta in the East to negotiate for Rapu to serve as a house girl, from Echewa, the father of the former. The author shows an element of preordination when she narrates thus:

when Rapu was born, Mmeri, the expert midwife and certified soothsayer from down the road took the umbilical and between her stubby fingers, rolled it beside her ear, sunk her teeth into it, spat on it and gave it to the baby's father to bury with the words: 'she shall lead you away from hunger. Ugani has left your household. Famine shall never visit you again. It is gone. (127)

In the above quote, the author hints at the element of preordination as Rapu was born. The expert midwife, Mmeri, a prominent soothsayer, divines that Rapu shall put an end to hunger and poverty in the family. But she does not disclose how Rapu was going to eradicate poverty from her household when she grows up. However, the author reveals this when she dramatises its fulfilment through the marriage of a supposed maid (Rapu) through unexpected pregnancy that resulted in the birth of a male child for her master, and business

tycoon, Mike. There is predestination pronounced on Rapu at birth. The novelist, to realise and project predestination as a cultural belief, and indeed an artistic vision in *Night Dancer*, she situates Rapu's family in a poverty-stricken environment and creates a business mogul from the urban Kaduna in the North to negotiate for Rapu from Echewa (the father) to serve as a housemaid. Echewa does not refuse this negotiation. For him, it appears the sun wants to smile on his poor family, and thus fulfil Mmeri's vision when Rapu was born. The poor economic background of the family forces Echewa to release his daughter to Mike to serve as a housemaid for economic gain. He advises his daughter thus:

behave yourself in the city and you'll bring honour not only to our family but to yourself as well. Walk like a chameleon in the city. Adapt to their ways but remember who you are [...]. Do not get tempted by the evils of the city, by all its lights. Remember the family you've left behind. Be like the tortoise: clever and careful. (140)

Rapu in the above is being advised by the father to be a good ambassador of the family as she migrates (moves) from the rural setting in the East to the urban setting in the North. Rapu's migration to Kaduna in the North is to negotiate economic survival as she serves as a paid housemaid in the home of Mike and Ezi, husband and wife. She moves away from the hunger and poverty in her family. She sees her movement as a brand new life as she is excited at the thought of a new adventure (141), as she would be paid for the services she renders. Unigwe writes: "Rapu hoped the rain would not follow them to Kaduna. It would not be a very auspicious start to her brand new life" (146). That Rapu is a migrant is not in doubt as she moves from rural to urban area for economic reason and betterment. When she was born, the author, still hinting on preordination writes:

people said what a blessing it was. They had suffered enough [poverty]. The baby had come into a family notorious for their bad luck and it was right that their fortunes should change. Visitors streamed in and out to take a look at the miracle child". (129)

Optimistic of a better living condition for herself, and her parents in the rural area, Rapu envisions consolidating her economic survival through marriage to

Mike as she entices her boss into matrimony. This appears preordained as events in the housemaid/master relationship unfold. There is no doubt that she is migrating from an impoverished socio-economic space to a space of opulence, and a distinguished socio-economic landscape where she could successfully eke out a living. This is the aim of her parents when Mike and his wife, Ezi visit to negotiate her for the job of a maid (135). The author reveals that Mike “[...] was not just successful, he was more successful than he had thought was possible. He had exceeded his ambition” (170). Critically looking at the setting, one would conclude that Unigwe’s impoverished environment where she pushes Rapu away from, to embrace the socio-economically rich environment of Mike is a microcosm of the macrocosm of the African condition, which pushes her youths like Rapu, to migrate to the western world and environment for greener pastures. Though such transnational movement is not our focus here, Unigwe uses the rural-urban migration of Rapu for financial betterment to buttress the argument that people mainly migrate for economic reasons.

Besides, Unigwe undoubtedly shows Rapu as a character whom she fictionally invents to negotiate economic survival. Now in Kaduna, Mike’s house as a housemaid, the author tells us that:

sometimes she felt like the mistress of the house. She had complete dominion over everything that mattered, everything that made one a wife: she cooked, she cleaned. And it was she who Uncle Mike called if he needed anything” (165)

The author describes Rapu’s role in Mike’s house above. Rapu cooks, washes, cleans and does almost everything in the home, including errands from her employer, Mike. The narrator of the novel clarifies this role further: “

with her pregnancy, Aunty Ezi became more demanding, Rapu’s work doubled. She often had to cook several times a day to cater to her mistress’s craving. Still, she cooked, washed and ran errands in her usual punctilious manner”. (182)

With these wifely roles above being performed by a housemaid, one wonders what remains for her to gain full possession of the house, and Mike, as a wife. It will be recalled that it was hinted at by the author that she would forever end

poverty and suffering in her family when she was born. The “fortunes should change”, but “how”? becomes the all-important question. The author in her skilful invention of preordination writes that:

Rapu always knew that whatever the gods had fated, they found a way to bring it to pass. That was the greatest lesson her father ever thought her, [...]. Everything was preordained. (187)

Unigwe earlier reveals in the novel: he story was repeated to Rapu several times during her childhood. Of how she had found favour with the gods, of how she would take the family out penury [...] but it was not clear how Rapu was to go about seeing to its fulfilment. It was believed that she would stumble upon it, for the ways of the gods are mysterious, but it was also generally known that the gods expect a certain amount of initiative. (131).

In her narration above, the author draws the reader’s attention to African oral heritage and belief in the gods, and preordination as she shapes Rapu in her attempt to survive economically, and put an end to the wretchedness in her family. But how she achieves this is left with the gods, who have preordained that she was going to be the sun that will swallow the darkness of poverty in her family. In the novel, the author reveals that Ezi, Mike’s wife is pregnant. Consequently, Rapu’s domestic chores continue as usual but more tasking as she cooks more often than before Ezi’s pregnancy. All this she does for her economic gain in the city and opulent house of Mike. The author weaves a more technical and craft mode of negotiation for economic survival as she characterises Rapu’s fantasies about taking over the role of a wife in Mike’s house. The narrator tells us:

she had taken her mother’s advice seriously and was quite certain that she had become indispensable. She knew the house like the inside of her palm, even better than the owners themselves, she told Anwuli. And Anwuli laughed and told her that maybe the day she would become the mistress of the house and all that knowledge would come in

handy [...]. And Rapu said when she became the mistress of the house, she would have Aunt Ezi out of her bed very early to train her out of her laziness. (183)

The quote above shows Rapu and her friend Anwuli day-dream when, and how Rapu could become the mistress of the house. The author reveals in the above excerpt that Rapu is now very much free, and appears like the owner of the house already, as she now knows it in and out. The author weaves her narration on Rapu in this manner as she skillfully moves towards the fulfilment of what the gods have preordained for Rapu. But of critical interest in this scene, is the fulfilment of Rapu's wish, or daydreaming? The narrative reveals that Mike impregnates Rapu, his housemaid. This pregnancy eventually rocks Ezi's matrimony as her husband eventually marries Rapu and accepts the child resulting from the extramarital sexual affair Mike enjoyed with Rapu. The narrator reveals:

every day when he saw Rapu, no matter what she wore, he pictured the wrapper falling. And so perhaps it was inevitable that on the day his wife was away to a friend's wedding, he found himself, quite against his will going to Rapu's room [...]. And it seemed like destiny when she did not fight him but opened up warmly to welcome him as if she had waited her entire life for this. And she led him between her thighs as if she had done this many times and her tightness confused him because he could not believe that she was a virgin. (185)

Unigwe in the above skillfully engages master, and servant, (Mike and his housemaid, Rapu) in sexual contact. This works in cooperation with the gods to realise her predestined life. But she does this unconscious of the fact that fate was working on her to her destiny. For Rapu, surviving is dependent on marrying Mike as a second wife. This is unavoidable as the reader is shown that Rapu's aim is to not only conceptualise and envision the possibility of being the madam of the house but also to show how to achieve the aim. No other way than through sex and pregnancy to rope Mike into a matrimonial relationship. Thus, the author employs this sex scene in the narrative not necessarily to show lewdness on the part of Rapu, or Mike, but to reveal how one can be driven by economic poverty to negotiate economic survival through any means. In the

excerpt above, the author writes that Rapu warmly welcomes Mike into her sexual dome expectedly, without resistance. This is because, Rapu feels that the quickest way to realise her fantasy or dream of becoming the madam of the house is through the sex act, and subsequently pregnancy, and marriage. This reminds the reader of Rapu's father's advice for her to be like the chameleon and the tortoise, smart but careful. And her ability to trap her master, Mike, into sex and unexpected pregnancy is with the intent to actualise her dream and secure her economic survival through marriage. It would be recalled that this has been preordained. This sex act is the initiative the gods expect from Rapu to attract wealth and end poverty in her family.

The reader observes the author's employment of oral literary element in her narration. Echewa, it is noted, tells his daughter to walk like a chameleon in the city and to be "like the tortoise, clever and careful". A critical look at this shows the author's deployment of oral element – the invocation of the tale of the chameleon that walks carefully and adapts to any environment, and the tale of the tortoise that is always exhibiting tact and cleverness and sometimes craftiness to achieve his aim. This, Unigwe does as she presents Echewa with his fatherly advice to Rapu to show that she is writing African literature, in an African setting. Her deployment of oral element, the image of the chameleon and the tortoise to describe the behaviour Rapu should adopt when she gets to her new environment in the city, as a maid, is quite interesting as it helps the reader to know that Unigwe, in the novel, presents African fictional experience. Thus, the author attempts to depict that in the negotiation for economic survival, man needs to tread carefully and be clever, wise and tactful like the tortoise to succeed in life. The reader can conclude that Unigwe indeed is a creative writer who has been able to recognise the presence and vitality of the oral tradition in fiction writing. Lindfors (2002:32) argues that "the most creative Nigerian writers have been those who have united the oral and literary "traditions" available to them". Unigwe, a Nigerian, as well as an African writer, has been able to blend the oral tradition with written literary tradition in her novel writing as she occasionally weaves in orality to hint at and illustrate preordained marriage as Rapu transforms from a housemaid to a wife.

But critically intriguing is Unigwe's novelistic skill in designing her plot in such a way and manner that is conventional and complex, as it helps with the fulfilment of Rapu's preordained life. The novel at the opening shows Mike in an unhappy marriage, as he has no child to take over his wealth in the event of his death. This becomes worrisome as his wife, Ezi, does not get pregnant (11). The novelist creates Ezi to be pregnant and immediately thereafter, Rapu, the maid gets impregnated by Mike as well. Both deliver their babies. While Ezi gives birth to a baby girl, Rapu gives birth to a baby boy. This sexual identity

shatters Ezi's marriage to Mike as she forces herself out of her matrimonial home, unable to stand the truth that her husband impregnates her housemaid, and the former gives birth to a baby boy. The complexity of the plot of the novel lies in the fact that Mike's sexual relations with Rapu appear to be a response to sexual impulse initiated by Rapu's naked body. For Rapu, her opening up and welcoming Mike sexually is to schematically negotiate her economic survival, and secure her negotiation through this means knowing the outcome could be pregnancy, delivery and thus marriage. In effect, we can discern an element of causality in the above scenario in the plot Unigwe weaves in *Night Dancer*. Forster (1974:87) reminds us that "A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling causality", and adds that "[...] but a plot ought to cause surprise" (91). Boulton (1975:48) on his part, argues that:

besides carrying us forward by keeping us in suspense, a plot lets us follow the workings of causality; we may go forwards and see what leads to what, or backwards and find out why.

and concludes: "[...] a plot contains motives, consequences, relationships" (45). A critical look at Unigwe's contrivance of the reordering of Mike's matrimonial home with the emergence of a maid being a wife through an unplanned pregnancy, one could note the elements of causality and surprise. Mike's sex act with Rapu is an adventurous one, as he does not do it with the intent to see if he could get a male child from such a careless and extra-marital relation. On the part of Rapu, she happily receives her boss's advances because she hopes to secure her economic survival. The novelist reminds us that Rapu "was a name that asked the ill-luck to go away and never return, Rapu. Go away. A name that banished the ill-luck to a hole deep enough to swallow it and keep it down. For as everyone knew, names had as much influence on one's fortune as the gods did" (130). No wonder the author writes:

but how long would it remain a secret for? Mike (he was no longer Uncle) and she were destined to be together, and sooner or later everyone would know it. And she would give him the children that he wanted. Every man needed a son. She might be young and inexperienced but that much she knew. If she gave him a son, her future will be secured. (188)

While the author creates the problem of childlessness for Mike, the reader is curious to know how the author resolves it. Thus there is suspense as well as surprise as the reader follows the author to the East to negotiate for a girl on the verge of adulthood as a maid and Ezi's laziness contrived into the matrimony to give credence and indispensability to Rapu in the home. Thus, on the part of Mike, and Rapu, there is motive and consequence of their actions. There is also suspense and surprise as the narrative is woven around the sex act between Rapu and Mike that results in a male childbirth forces Ezi out of her marriage.

A critical examination of this sex episode confirms the preceding argument that Unigwe's plot has an element of causality. The author reveals that Rapu and Uncle Mike are pre-destined to live together as husband and wife. They had no control over it, as it has been decreed by the gods. Indulging in extramarital sex to result in a pregnancy that gives birth to a male child would secure Rapu's future. In a way, Rapu's indulgence is for economic reasons and motives. Thus economic survival motivates Rapu to enchant her master and boss into sexual contact and matrimony, as a way to secure her economic survival in life. For Mike, the natural need to respond to sexual impulse motivates him into unguarded sexual contact with his housemaid (189), which resulted in pregnancy and the birth of a male child (191-92).

But we must note the fact that Rapu's creation in this sex scene is with the author's noble intent to show the extent women could go in an attempt to secure economic survival in a post-colonial African society where caution and decency are thrown into the wind. It further demonstrates that survival is an instinct in man, and man by nature is desperate to survive through any means. Rapu in her attempt to survive through sexual overtures, and consequently matrimonial engagement is evident when the author through her narrator tells us that "Rapu, would have a child who would also call this paradise a home" (191). This indeed fulfils Rapu's dream and imagination for a greener pasture, different from her poverty-stricken home in Lokpanta, a rural setting, as she looks forward to being fully integrated into Mike's home as a wife, and the bearer of a male child for him. And this no doubt secures her greener pasture and future in an urban city and, in the house of a business mogul. The author confirms this conclusion thus: "Rapu settled in quicker than she had expected. Ezi leaving was a blessing [...]. Mike paid Rapu's bride price [...] newly promoted from maid to wife" (202). There is no doubt at this juncture that the author has creatively engaged her plot to illustrate predestination as the preordained life of Rapu gets fulfilled at this point. Thus far, Unigwe has been able to use her migrant character, Rapu to show that predestination is a cultural belief of her African society using Igbos: Rapu, Ezi, Echewa, Mmeri, and of

course Mike, though bearing an English name. They all share the cultural belief in predestination, which fulfils in Rapu's life outcome. Rapu, by giving birth to a male child for Mike, and having her relationship with the latter consummated in marriage, confirms the meaning of her name: poverty, ill-luck, go away. Her father, Echewa, concludes that the gods have answered their prayers. The narrator tells us thus: "Her father said that the gods had fulfilled their promise beyond his expectation" (207). This is predestination fulfilled. Indeed, the marital relationship between Rapu and Mike have been preordained. The examination of events surrounding them as housemaid and master in a matrimonial have as revealed in the plot of the novel, is evident from the fact that it has been ordained as none of them could resist the emotional and sexual pull towards each other. They could not control events in their lives. The author in a way uses this episode in her novel to project and sustain the cultural belief in predestination.

1.2 Conclusion

Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, this paper argues, is an African novel that is used to illustrate, and sustain the cultural belief in predestination among the Igbo people in particular, and Africans in general. Though in Christianity's theological philosophy, predestination is also a cultural philosophy. We argued that the novelist weaves the sex episodic plot in the novel to show Rapu and Mike in a preordained, and thus uncontrollable marital relationship. Consequently, on the part of Rapu, she attracts wealth to herself and her family to wipe off the family's poverty as her name connotes, and as predicted at birth. The author thus engages this artistic imagination to strengthen predestination as a cultural belief that still persists in this contemporary era.

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