

ZIRAILI NA ZIRANI, A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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The novel *Ziraili na Zirani*, by W. Mkufya, is characterised by the constant recurrence of themes featuring in theodicy, the philosophical ‘vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil’ (Oxford dictionaries online). The themes which emerge from the characters’ conversations throughout the novel provide a constant confrontation of arguments to support or refute the existence of God. This paper aims to analyse the novel from a philosophical perspective, in order to clarify and emphasise the connection between the ideas and words employed by the characters, and the theories of Western philosophers such as St. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and Leibnitz. The focus on these particular philosophical aspects contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel as a whole.

Introduction

*Ziraili na Zirani*¹, by W. Mkufya, narrates the adventures of the soul of Fikirini Zirani after his death. The themes presented through the characters’ conversations, both explicitly and implicitly, provide a constant confrontation of philosophical arguments to support or negate the existence of God. In particular, the peculiarity of the novel lies in the constant recurrence of themes featuring in theodicy, the philosophical ‘vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil’ (Oxford online dictionaries).

This paper aims to analyse the novel from a philosophical perspective, by providing the theoretical background of theodicy.² It seeks to clarify and emphasise the connection between the ideas and words employed by the characters, and the well known theories of philosophers such as Saint Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and Leibniz.

The paper will begin with a short summary of the plot, illustrating the author’s writing style, followed by an analysis of philosophical theories such as ‘the problem of evil’, the existence of free will, and the necessity of a ‘first unmoved mover’, and their employment in the novel. The concluding section will state that given the strength of the arguments provided what emerges is a characterisation of an ‘imperfect’ God, whose existence is, however, confirmed in the climax of the story.

¹ This paper presents an analysis based on the novel (Mkufya 1999) and on the author’s own English version *Pilgrims from Hell* (2006). References throughout the paper are made to either text. Quotes in Swahili are presented alongside the corresponding text in the English version.

² References made throughout the novel are predominantly linked to Western philosophical tradition. The choice of characters, key theoretical concepts, and the iterative patterns of the discussion mirror the life and thinking of great Western scholars such as Voltaire, Descartes, Schopenhauer or Marx. For this reason, I approach the analysis through the lenses of Western philosophy.

Plot and literary features

Following death, the soul of Fikirini Zirani, whose name, an “imperative in the plural, meaning ‘think and reject’” (Rettová 2007:224), reflects his atheist position, escapes and temporarily avoids the customary divine judgement. Lucifer captures and takes him to a cavern inhabited by devils where he is instructed on ‘satanic virtues’, and trained to take part in a rebellion to ‘bring down the heavenly kingdom’ (*mafunzo ya kuzipinga mbigu*) (Mkufya 2006: 56, 1999: 37). Once left the cave, Zirani reaches Hell, and immediately joins the camp of atheist souls, becoming a leader in the organisation of the fight against Heaven. The battle itself, resulting in the destruction of the world, is very short, and occurs only at the end of the novel; the bulk of the narration focuses instead on its preparation. What is central is most importantly the fight against the *ideas* of Heaven and God.

The fight involves three groups of characters: devils, souls of Hell and angels, each associated with a distinct school of thought. The angels promulgate the notion of an almighty God; the devils, although sure of His existence, constantly act against God, while the souls of Hell totally reject His existence.

The divergence of ideas emerges through the division between the locations of the groups: only the devils and atheists are found together from time to time, while the angels live a separate existence. This reflects their thoughts: devils and atheists agree in their fight against Heaven, and are open to collaboration. All groups are eventually found together in the battle, which may be compared to the final act of a long-lasting debate: it is only after this encounter that a solution to the discussion on the existence of God arises.

The lexical field chosen to describe the residence of the groups is a literary feature which further emphasises their disparity of thought. The depiction of the devils’ cavern and of Heaven, for instance, renders explicit the contrast between its inhabitants.

Being an open, ‘empty’ space, Heaven and its creatures are described through terms such as *utamu* ‘sweetness’, *wororo* ‘tenderness’ and *furaha* ‘happiness’. Its silence and tranquillity (*kimya*), are reflected in the need to ‘mumble’, opposed to the *mluzi* ‘whistle’ performed by Lucifer to be granted entrance in the cavern. The cavern is in fact ‘chaotic’, ‘polluted’, with ‘pungent air’ and smoke. Its architecture differs as well: unlike Heaven, infinitely extending vertically, it has a roof, painted in black, and closed spaces, such as a ‘snaking’ corridor. Its colours, contrasting with an ‘immaculate’ Heaven full of ‘violet light’ (*nuru ya zambarau*), are mostly grey and black (Mkufya 1999: 30-31, 44, 2006: 39, 53-54).

The ontological argument: a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God

Anselm (1033-1109) was an Italian/French Benedictine monk, whose work has brought fundamental contributions to theology. Of particular interest is the *Proslogium* (Anselm 1903), a prayer in which Anselm illustrates the features of the Christian God, and gives an ontological

proof of His existence.³ God is nothing but that ‘being than which nothing greater can be conceived’ (Anselm 1903: ch. 2). It is in the very fact that the concept of such being is understandable by all, even by ‘the fool’, that Anselm’s proof of His existence lies: as to exist is better than not to (*ibid.*: ch. 3), the greatest entity, necessarily an expression of the ‘absolute good’, must be real. Consequently, were He not to exist, He would not meet the standards of a ‘being than which nothing greater could be conceived’ (*ibid.*: ch. 3). A similar standpoint is taken by René Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher, mathematician and writer, known as the ‘Father of modern philosophy’, given his influence on the development of Western philosophical discourse. It is in his *Meditations* that he concludes that the very nature of God entails His existence (Descartes 1901). God is hence characterised as omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent: he who is powerful is greater than the powerless; similarly to be wise and good is greater than to be ignorant and bad (Anselm 1903: ch.7).

The qualities which, according to this argument, legitimately describe God, coincide with the characteristics of the God presented in the novel; this understanding of God will therefore be used throughout the discussion as the model against which to weigh the critiques presented by the characters concerning His existence and perfection.

Such God, as earlier mentioned, is not accepted by most souls in Hell: the slogan of the camp itself,

kambi ya roho za binadamu walioamini itikadi ya udhahiri wa vitu, hali, jinsia, na maumbo kwa sifa zao zionekanazo au kutambulika kwa hisia na vipimo vya binadamu na sio kwa sifa za imani au dhana peke yake,

Camp for souls of humans who believe in the ideology of the manifestation of things, essences, forms and states can be detected by human senses or their instruments and not through belief or any form of idealism (Mkufya 1999:68, 2006:87),

shows a critique of the truthfulness of Anselm’s claim. Recall that the claim sets existence as greater than non-existence. Should not material manifestation, on the same lines, be regarded as greater than the mere spiritual one? This implies the necessity for God to be tangible, if He were to be the greatest conceivable.

The next section will focus on the additional critiques of Anselm’s proof which may be detected in the novel.

The ‘problem of evil’ and free will: Are God and evil incompatible, or does their coexistence reflect ‘the best of all possible worlds’?

The philosophical discourse known as the ‘problem of evil’ appears to lie behind the major critiques of Anselm’s thesis presented throughout the story. This discourse refutes Anselm’s almighty God by drawing attention to the existence of evil in the world. Anselm’s God, ex-

³ Ontology is that branch of metaphysics which analyses being and existence, and focuses on the nature of entities (adapted from Oxford online dictionaries).

pected ‘not [to] be partial’, and to guarantee ‘concern, guidance and protection’, equally to all tribes and races of mankind (Mkufya 2006: 92, 1999: 73), does not appear in reality, and, on the other hand, causes ‘all pious and evil people [...] to suffer the same punishment’ (Mkufya 2006: 92, 1999: 74).

‘Free will’

The term indicates the belief that humans act independently from divine influence, and should therefore be held responsible for their own actions.⁴ It is a critically relevant and complex component of theodicy. Its complexity is a result of divergent assessments provided by analysts on its effects: the concept is employed both by believers and atheists to present their position.⁵ The range of standpoints on the topic is well depicted in the novel, throughout which several characters present distinct views.

Although some argue for the reality of free will as a consequence of the non-existence of a higher being, resulting in the lack of external divine influence on individual decisions, its relevance to theodicy lies in its use as a *proof* to support the non-existence of God. The issue is strictly connected to the ‘problem of evil’ outlined earlier, and to God’s non-intervention.

Free will: an argument rejecting an almighty God

One possible implication of the acceptance of free will as a reality is the lack of responsibility on God’s side in the creation of evil. Evil in the world uniquely depends on human choice, and not on a malevolent God. However, even holding solely men responsible for evil leads to the refutation of His almightiness. If free will is a consequence of God’s inability to affect the course of nature, He does not meet the criteria of omnipotence. If God, on the other hand, deliberately *chooses* to allow men to harm one another without intervening, and to perform as a mere observer, He should be considered malevolent: He is not using his total power to prevent suffering which could be avoided. This incompatibility, to which reference is made throughout the novel, is clearly stated in multiple occasions by the soul of Voltaire, a character of the novel who represents the French prominent philosopher of the Enlightenment Voltaire (1694-1778). It is through the words of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) that he explains his own standpoint:

Ama Mungu ana uwezo wa kuzuia uovu na mateso ya dunia lakini hataki, hivyo ana nia mbaya kwa wanadamu; au duniani upo uovu, mateso na uonevu, lakini Mungu hawezi kuuzuia, hivyo si muweza wa yote

⁴ Adapted from Oxford online dictionaries

⁵ All characters in the novel seem to accept the existence of free will, when opposed to God’s influence. The idea that free will does not exist, will not therefore be treated in this paper. It should however be noted that the souls in the camp do not believe in total individual responsibility, but rather partly justify negative behaviours as a necessary reaction to an oppressive society: [*s*]asa huoni kwamba kiini cha makosa yako sio wewe? [...] kiini chake ni ile hali iliyosababisha tofauti la pato la fedha baina ya wewe na hao matajiri [“but don’t you see that the root of your sins was not yourself? [...]don’t you see that all [your sins were] caused by the difference of wealth between the rich and the poor”] (Mkufya1999: 93, 2006: 113)

There is evil in the world. Either God can prevent it and he doesn't, so he is malevolent; or God cannot prevent it, so he is not omnipotent (Mkufya 1999: 74, 2006: 92).

Free will: the very proof of the existence of a perfect God

This argument, supported by the angels, gives a different perspective on the relation between God's almightiness and human responsibility. In this framework God is seen as omnipotent *precisely* because He is able to create beings who are free to reason, and even free to refute His existence and authority: "God allows humans to make mistakes and to disobey him" (Mkufya 2006: 47, 1999: 39). To better clarify the thesis parallels may be drawn with the qualities of a toy-maker. The latter will be considered more skilful if capable of constructing toys which are able to move independently, rather than mere puppets subject to his constant control. God's creation is described by Lucifer as "self-willed intelligent toys" (Mkufya 1999: 74, 2006: 76).

***Just a possibility, not 'the best of all possible worlds'*⁶**

The angels' conversations in the epilogue reveal that what has ended is, in fact, *a* world: many others have existed before, and a *better* one will probably now be created. An opposing position has been argued by the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried (von) Leibniz (1646-1716) who focuses instead on an *a priori* assessment of the world, based on the presumption of God's perfection.⁷ Because He is perfect, and because the world is His own act, such creation must be perfect⁸ (Leibniz 1908: 260). Leibniz moreover justifies the existence of evil in the world as a necessary incentive for the rise of the good: the positive quality of courage, for instance, may exist uniquely in the presence of evil to be fought. The world we know is depicted as the best balance between good and evil. In the novel, on the other hand, the devils "managed to turn man's free will against God" (Rettová 2007: 233), and only a minority of three million four hundred thousand five hundred and thirty one individuals lived according to God's teachings (Mkufya 1999: 237).

The first unmoved mover

An additional philosophical theory which suggests the existence of God, known as the cosmological or causal argument, arises through Zirani's dream. The theory was originally developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) in his *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1953), to suggest the necessity of a 'first unmoved mover' to justify motion in the world. It was later embraced by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)⁹, an Italian Dominican priest, who equating the

⁶ Leibniz 2005: ch.168.

⁷ In God, "perfection is absolutely infinite" (Leibniz 1908: 259).

⁸ Following from God's perfection is the perfection of His acts: "my opinion is that God does nothing for which he does not deserve to be glorified" (Leibniz 1908: 7).

⁹ The idea is developed in part I of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.

‘first mover’ to God proved His existence. The theory presumes that things in the world are in constant motion, and that kinetic energy is continuously transferred. This energy transfer is the phenomenon which allows still bodies to be set in motion. If we are to trace the chain of cause and effect of motion, we must eventually reach the point of origin. It is now that the existence of a first mover must be acknowledged: being the first one, and the source of any subsequent motion, the first mover is not himself the result of a previous motion, but motion itself, pure energy. The man appearing in Zirani’s dream references the argument, discussing the idea of a higher being attributing tasks to each entity, coordinating the universe, and creating all motion (Mkufya 2006: 193). This being, unlike Aquinas’ God, is beyond human understanding. The old man’s speech has put forward many questions, creating a difficult position for Zirani: the points presented become a “challenge to him and his participation in the goals of the materialist camp” (*ibid.*: 193).

The imperfect existence of God

Although the author himself strongly stresses the atheist feature of the novel,¹⁰ I do not believe the novel depicts atheism as a valid philosophy. Reason for this is its unexpected ending. The finale of the battle reveals in fact the existence of a God, and the collaboration and interdependence between devils and angels. Although the end of the world has destroyed the earth and humankind, it has left all heavenly creatures untouched. What the novel seems to suggest is rather a refusal of atheist logical discourses and the confirmation that the existence of a higher being is beyond, and independent from, its rational understanding, a view earlier introduced through Zirani’s dream. It should be noted, however, that the characterisation of God, both throughout the novel and in its climax, suggests His imperfection.

The angels’ conversation, earlier referenced while discussing Leibniz’ argument, probably provides, among all theories featuring in the novel, the strongest reason to negate the perfect character of God. By explaining how the last world created by God was not in fact the best among existing possibilities, the angels judge the outcome of His action ‘imperfect’. This, by consequence, negates the perfection of His very nature: “[some] think that God could have done better” (Leibniz 2005: ch. 168). This is an opinion which “[derogates] from God’s supreme perfection” (*ibid.*: ch. 168).

Conclusion

The author’s choice to treat the central theme of religion from a rational angle has given philosophy a fundamental role in the novel *Ziraili na Zirani*. Reference to philosophical theories has in fact been treated by the author as one of the very tools for the development of the story: the individuality of the main characters, for example, owes much to their distinct philosophical approaches towards the events in the novel. Similarly, specific events themselves become

¹⁰ See Mkufya’s paper *Atheism in the Swahili novel* delivered at the Research Colloquia of the Departments of African Studies of the Universities of Leipzig and Bayreuth, respectively on the 17th and 23rd May 2006.

relevant as they provide new philosophical insights: Zirani's dream, for instance, assumes importance because it serves the function of introducing the reader to a new perspective.

This paper has attempted to clarify the main philosophical themes employed in the novel; by focusing on the recurrence of the issues of free will and of the 'problem of evil', it has explained the views and arguments on which the various characters base their acceptance or refusal of the existence of God. The analysis attempts to assist the reader by bringing light to theories which may have not been explicitly or extensively illustrated by the author. The philosophical component is in fact treated by Mkufya as a mere means to the development of the story. Despite its frequency in the novel, it would be erroneous to consider philosophy as anything but a feature of the novel: it is rather on elements such as the storyline and the conflict between the characters that the novel is based. *Ziraili na Zirani* is a novel which *allows room* for philosophy, not one which was *created by* philosophy. The ultimate expression of this reality is the finale, where the fictional nature of the text overweighs its philosophical character: given the dynamics of the confrontations of ideas throughout the story, a philosophical writing would have culminated in the victory of atheism, rather than in an unexpected ending.

Resources

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