



The Use of Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions in Chinua Achebe's 'No Longer at Ease' and 'Arrow of God'

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to critically analyze and examine the use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the two novels of Chinua Achebe; 'No Longer at Ease' and 'Arrow of God'. It basically probes deconstructively, the sociocultural norms, traditions, and communal practices in Achebe's narratives as exemplified via proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the selected texts. It is an analytical descriptive and thematic study whereby, proverbs are carefully sorted out, explained and analyzed according to the contexts of their occurrences. After a thorough analysis of the primary texts, the paper concludes that, Achebe has skillfully uses the proverbs as vessels of folklore and oral traditions and to buttress his ideas in addition to present his people's collective thoughts, beliefs, cultural values and lifestyle. Thus, understanding his novels readers are recommended to contextualize his texts and put them within the confines of his schematic cultural milieu; because Achebe has juxtaposed the meanings of these proverbs manipulatively to project some aspects of African cultural and folkloric elements against the Western stereotypes.

Keywords: Igbo; Proverb; Folklore; Idiomatic expression; Clan; Cultural vessel; Social norm; Tradition.

1. Introduction

In all cultures around the globe, proverbs play a vital role as ingredients of human communication. It's also to note that, proverbs have profound values of linguistics metaphorism and they are sociocultural relative. These proverbs and other idiomatic expressions are filled deep meanings and variety of interpretations. Thus, when deconstructing a proverb, one has to recall the entire extraneous cultural milieu.

In traditional communities like the Africans, proverbs play vital roles in instilling wisdom and sociocultural values. It is believed that, as Mieder (1989) mention; a proverb is:

a phrase, saying, sentence, or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons, and advice concerning life which has been handed down from generation to generation"

Moreover, it is noted that proverbs and idiomatic expressions are considered as cultural relics that are used metaphorically from generation to generation in order to present general truths about life. Balogun (2006), explains this as follows: "Proverbs are cultural relics preserved amid countless destructions by reason of brevity, laconic and in-depth meaning. Proverbs, which are pithy sayings, are popular devices usually used to state metaphorically, certain general truths about life." They are universally accepted by all cultures and in all languages of the world. They exemplify life in all its aspects and transliterate the imbedded social and communal traditional norms through conveying moral lessons, warnings or giving advice. In this regard Taiwo (1976) defines them by saying:

"Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are the stock in trade of old people who use them to convey the precise moral lessons, warnings and advice, since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words."

This research paper is an analysis of the use of proverbs in Chinua Achebe's novels. Namely; No longer at Ease and Arrow of God. The main focus of the paper stems from the fact that, in Achebe's community (the Igbo in Nigeria), proverbs are important in day to day oral discourse apart from trying to instill pride and self-esteem among the people, a good speaker is the one who uses proverbs and idiomatic expressions skillfully and wisely to persuade others. In Achebe's world, proverbs and idiomatic expressions are used to function as images, metaphors, symbols, and moral lessons all through his writings; and amongst all African writers Achebe is known for his extensive use of proverbs in his fictional narrative to explore life within the confines of its functional, ethical, and aesthetic values.

1.1. The Objectives of the Study

This research paper attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate how Chinua Achebe employs proverbs and idiomatic expressions in his fictional narratives to present his traditional culture

2. To probe deconstructively, the sociocultural norms, traditions, and communal practices in Achebe's narratives as exemplified via proverbs and idiomatic expressions
3. To explicate how Achebe habituates his linguistic and folklore repertoire to metaphorically enunciate about his fictional surrounding settings and local color variety.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

It is noted that Nigerian communities and ethnic groups have greatly influenced by the arrival of the Whiteman as a colonizer. Thus, local languages, traditions, customs, norms, and general mindsets have greatly changed. This of course inevitably brought about some intricate problems specially culture representation wise. Thus, the first problem is representation of local culture which is mostly oral in a language of the colonizer; that is how to express African experiences in a language that was originally evolved to embody different kinds of expressions and to convey different kind of sensibility. Another problem is how Achebe can render his characters' words, feelings, and attitudes in an international form and still retain their proverbial, sociocultural and idiomatic qualities? It has been also noted since proverbs are part of the written and spoken discourse in Nigerian context; the analysis of these proverbs has become a vital issue. So, this research paper tries to investigate the conceptual and features of proverbs in the universal sense as used by Chinua Achebe in his fictional narratives. Then, this paper thematically analyzes the meanings of proverbs in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964).

1.3. Scope and Limitation of the Study

As proverbs are considered as ingredients of any discourse- written or spoken- and in all languages around the globe, this research paper focuses on written proverbs in English as used in Nigerian context by Chinua Achebe. It concentrates only in the proverb used in two Achebe's novels; namely *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). This paper is a thematic analytical in-depth exploration of proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the selected novels.

2. Literature Review

"Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". (TFA, p3)

All over the world, proverbs are used for the transmission of wisdom, knowledge, heritage, morals norms, traditions, customs, experiences, cosmology, beliefs, and other communal practices in a given society or an ethnic group. According to Balogun (2006):

"Proverbs are cultural relics preserved a mid-countless destruction by reason of brevity, laconic and in-depth meaning. Proverbs, which are and pithy sayings, are popular devices usually used to state metaphorically certain general truth about life".

They are also contributing in assigning meaning to different experiences of traditional communities. This is illustrated by Taiwo (1976) as follows:

Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are stock in trade of old people who use them to convey the precise moral lessons, warnings, and advice, since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words. This judicious use of proverbs is usually regarded as a sign of wit.

These proverbs in the African context are mostly seen as cultural heritage, which is held in high regard since they embody their philosophy, values, wisdom and knowledge of their ancestors. Momoh (2000) notes that:

"proverbs are to the traditional Africans what the Quran or the Bible is to the religion leaders".

Chinua Achebe is a prolific writer who was able to deeply reflect the impact of the western culture and values on his own traditional society. Like many other Nigerian writers he was able to use English language for portraying his traditions, customs, social norms, and communal practices. Hence, the use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions are with people is just like the use of language. In Achebe's community in Nigeria for example, some indigenous languages have been translated into English. Moreover, as in all cultures in Africa; the proverbs in Nigeria usually function as moral codes, conversational wisdom and explicit rules of conduct. They present the people's experiences, moral intuitions and guidelines life expectations and inspirations.

On the other hand idiomatic expressions usually work as reflective thoughts and contain a supreme wisdom and cultural aspects of the community. In Achebe's community proverbs and idiomatic expressions carry truth, ancient wisdom, sociocultural traditions and norms. They excessively contain figure of speech and other rhetorical linguistic and idiomatic expressions to convey real life situations and social practices. Thus, Dzobo (1992) affirms this in the following line:

Nigerian proverbs are always stated a long with figure of speech (metaphors and images) rather than plain language. At times, things that are alike or antithetical are compared. One needs to reason and use one's imagination in order to understand a proverb intended meaning that is why to understand a proverb correctly is a task calling for discernment, for those who hear the proverbs do not always understand them. The truth is that, in its own context and particular situation, each may be apt. for in real life situations the best thing to do is to be silent.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, proverbs and idiomatic expressions also serve different purposes and functions. For instance, as Adakoke (1999) illustrates, the Idoma proverb: "if you want to send a message to God, throw it to the wind" can be used in different environments or situations. It shows that God is everywhere. Some proverbs may differ in citation but teach the same moral lesson.

They are also used to make people appreciate speech and facilitate understanding life much better. Kudadjie (2004), mentions that, proverbs are also used to communicate a fact or an opinion that might be impolite or even offensive to state in direct speech or plain language.

It is noted that, although some writers find it difficult to use English language in order to describe their indigenous cultures and stimulate the readers' attention without losing the flavor of the intended meanings, Achebe was able to mold and manipulate English to express the exact meanings.

Achebe in his own fiction succeeded in using English to explain and present his people's culture and experiences by his use of imagery drawn from both native and alien sources. He made use of proverbs, folktales, and religious telnets conveyed through prayers, speech and songs.

Moreover, Obeichnia (1993) mentions that, "in all Achebe's novels the uses of proverbs in the African passages appear very significant. He uses proverbs in the right environment and not throws them about indiscriminately. This is why Obiechina says:

"proverbs are the kernels which contain wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shine for a few words".

Thus knowing the importance of proverb amongst his community, Chinua Achebe was able to mould English language which is not his mother tongue, to represent and expose his culture and traditions worldwide. Hence his novels; namely "No Longer at Ease", and "Arrow of God" include many proverbs, sayings and idiomatic expressions which reflect Igbo culture in all walks of life.

3. A Brief Introduction to the Primary Texts

Chinua Achebe was born in Nigeria, known in the literary circles as a great novelist, poet and critic. He attained international popularity by his famous novel *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s; his later novels include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Achebe wrote all his novels in English. The primary texts in this paper are *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*.

Both novels were written in the 60s immediately after the independence. *No Longer at Ease* was published in the year 1960 explores the Nigerian society, the height and the level of corruption in the country. It is about a civil servant who is embroiled in the corruption. It reflects the challenges facing a new generation on the threshold of Nigerian independence. The protagonist Obi is trapped between the expectations of his family, its clan, his home village, and larger society. He is crushed by these forces and finds himself imprisoned for bribery.

Arrow of God was published in 1964. It is set between the period of pacification and independence and explores the history of Nigeria. It portrays the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity. Set in the village of Umuaro at the start of the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of Ezeulu, a Chief Priest of Ulu. Shocked by the power of British intervention in the area, he orders his son to learn the foreigners' secret. The novel puts one man, the chief priest of the deity Ulu against colonial administration, Christian missionaries and his own people. The setting of *Arrow of God* is in the rural area of the southern part of Nigeria where the Igbo people reside.

4. Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions in *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*

Chinua Achebe is famous for the successive use of the local culture in his fictional writings. His fiction draws heavily on the oral tradition of Igbo people (his own community). He waves folktales into the fabric of his stories. The use of proverbs, sayings, and idiomatic expressions are another hallmarks in his writing style. For him, proverbs and folklores are the total sum of his people's oral traditions. These folktales are not mere digressions but fully functional narrative progressions, not only superfluous anthropological data, but meaningful metaphors, illuminating the special context in which they are used. By sprinkling the language with proverbs and other cultural references, Achebe slowly and naturally introduces the reader to Ibo culture. Achebe's honest and stunning style makes him the ideal spokesman for African Literature, or as little of it as the West can understand.

5. Proverb in "Arrow of God"

There are number of proverbs in the novel *Arrow of God*. They are used skillfully to represent certain concepts, beliefs, collective consciousness, aspirations and inspirations of the people. Their meanings and purposes revolve around hard work, social bond, respect, consequences of one's own actions, wisdom, and benefits of be prepared and skillfully experienced.

One of the striking aspects Achebe strives to maintain in using the proverbs in this novel are the social bond, working within the confine of one's own community and the importance of the family and the clan.

5.1. Family, Clan and Social Bonds

"no man however great can win judgment against his clan" (AOG, p:131)

"when two brothers fight, a stranger reaps their harvest" (AOG, p:131)

It means when two relatives fight each other, there is bound to be more problems which may cause the combatants great loss. When such quarrel ensued, usually it is a stranger that comes in to settle the matter whereby knowing the reason or the cause of the problem. Achebe uses these proverbs to discourage wrangling among clan members and families who have close ties. It could be argued that families as used here, should not be limited to people who only share blood ties, but family within the context of African communalism. This presupposes that, when Africans fight their fellow Africans they open doors for the West to inherit their rich resources. They could be

also interpreted as a wakeup call for unity among the members of the society and disapproval of the selfish schemes of the West. Achebe reechoes this proverb in another light:

"When two brothers fight to death, a stranger inherits their father's estate" (AOG, p:220)

In the African context in general and Nigeria in particular, a brother refers a biological brother, a person coming from the same lineage, a person from the same village, clan or a state. It is an intimacy term that carries a filial connotation. In the other had a stranger can be a visitor, a person who has not a blood relation with someone or who comes from another state. That is why, in Achebe's words:

"it is only a fool who treats his brother as a stranger" (AOG, p:94)

In African communities all clansmen are relatives of a kind and so are brothers. In every family, there is a bond and this bond unites them and brings development to the family. Thus, Achebe uses this proverb to preach love and unity among families, it is a wakeup call on African to uphold the essence and the importance of the communality, and other social ties.

Moreover, when someone is married to a woman he becomes indebted to his wife's family for life:

"A man's debt to his father-in-law can never be fully discharge". (AOG, p62)

This inevitably presupposes that, one someone marries he shoulders his in-laws responsibilities. It is a caution to those who are getting married, in order to know that expenses you spend in marriage do not end but continue as long as someone lives.

5.2. Proverbs Folklore and Socio-Cultural Vessels in "Arrow of God"

Throughout his fictional writings Chinua Achebe uses proverbs as a means for representing his people's folklore, traditional practices and culture, and provides solutions to many intricate questions and dilemmas which are related to his identity and overall communal settings. In his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, he asserts that: *"Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten"*. (TFA, p3).

Thus, for representing his cultural aspects and folkloric Achebe uses proverbs and words of wisdom in representing different themes such as hard work, respect, cause and effect, and consequences of one's own actions. For instance:

If you want to a dancing mask well, you don't stand in one place" (AOG , p46)

The above proverb emphasizes the importance of hard work. It means no one achieves anything in life without hard work. This proverb is a wakeup call against laziness and inactivity.

Sometimes he uses proverbs and idiomatic expression as wisdom and didactic tool to clarify a point or give a piece of advice as follows:

"A toad does not run in the daylight unless something is after it". (AOG, p21)

There is a reaction for every action and everything happens for a reason and based on a certain occurrences.

The some idea of cause and effect and the consequences of one's own action are repeated in several proverbs throughout the novel:

"The inquisitive monkey gets a bullet in the forehead". (AOG, p44)

"Unless the wind blows, we donot see the fowl's rump"

"The lizard who throws confusion into his mother's funeral rite, does he expect outsider to carry the burden of honoring his dead? (AOG, p:125)

The above proverbs sum up the overall meaning of "whatsoever a man sows, that he will reap"

In some other instances he uses proverbs to give an advice, respect for the elders, or passing wisdom:

A traveler to distance places should not make enemies". (AOG, p168)

It means one has to be tolerant with people all the time especially when he is travelling. Because no one knows who will help in life one day. It is therefore seen as a charge for the entire society to embrace one another and live peacefully.

In other words of wisdom he iterates that nemesis and retributive justice will always take its course one day:

"The slave who sees another (slave) cast into a shallow grave knows that he will be buried in the same way when his time comes." (AOG, p27)

In other words Achebe uses this proverb to reveal that, every evil or good committed, there comes a time for judgment. Thus one does not have to laugh at another one's misfortune or shortcoming, because his own will come one day.

"Wisdom is like a goatskin bag everyone carries his own" (AOG, p16)

It means every man is endowed with a certain level of wisdom and intellect, that is why we should respect every person as he is; despite of his look or outlook. Sometimes the way we look at one thing might not be exactly the same another person perceives it based on our perspective and view point. So, Achebe uses this proverb to call upon us to respect everyone's opinions especially on public issues that concern our communities.

6. Proverbs in No Longer at Ease

Again , in like all there novels Achebe has successively used proverbs and other idiomatic expression in *No Longer at Ease* for the purpose of demonstrating some communal practices and dissemination his people's aspirations and inspiration within the confines of sociocultural milieu.

"If snakes lie together in one place, who will approach the tub?" (NLAE, p73)

This proverb is used for the encouragement of the team work. It is believed that in the African context when people live together, the fear of the unknown is greatly reduced. They solve their problems without any difficulty. Because social bond is highly observed and being out of you clansmen means one's own death.

“he who has people is richer than he who has money” (NLAE, p72)

Thus, in the African context people are members of the same family. Of course money is good but it is not everything and not the ultimate goal to lead a happy life. The social bond and maintenance of the social pride and relation is irreplaceable and cannot be gained through money. That is, a man’s true legacy, wealth and pride are his own people. At the same time if a person did something wrong or a stigma, it will be linked to the family or even his clan:

“if one finger brings oil, it soils the others”, (NLAE, p68)

Achebe uses this proverb to indicate that the reputation of a people is at risk if one member of a family or a clan did something shameful or a committed a crime. Here the finger refers to an individual in the whole society and the oil is a metaphor for a wrong deed.

Another proverb that show social bond amongst the member of the community is:

“Anger against a brother was a fat in the flesh, not in the bone” (NLAE, p4)

As mentioned earlier people from the same clan or a state are considered brothers in the African context. And one expected to defend his clansmen in all circumstances because at the end, if one man gets hurt, it is the whole clan which gets hurt.

7. Conclusion

To conclude with, it is worth noting that Chinua Achebe is one of the few West African writers who could strive to present his own people’s culture and traditions to the outer world, molding and manipulating a language which was not his own native tongue. He did a great job when he shouldered the responsibility of evoking the miseries of the society of colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. He based his fiction on a solid arena cementing it with the most fascinating aspect of Igbo culture; the uses of proverbs and other idiomatic expressions. Thus proverbs in his novels in general and *Arrow of God*, and *No Longer at Ease* in particular, work as vessels of moral codes, conventional wisdom, and explicit rules of conduct.

As we have seen in the analysis of the selected texts, proverbs work as broad statements of social guidelines, didactic containers, and communal standard merits. To his own understanding, “proverbs are palm oil with which words are eaten”

Hence, the main purpose of this investigation is representing how skillful is Chinua Achebe in using proverbs in his two novels *Arrow of God*, and *No Longer at Ease* as vehicles of collective thoughts, beliefs, and cultural values of his own community. His mastery of English language, his education, his passion, his childhood, family background and above all his saturation with his people’s culture, folklore, and social norms enable him to write freely and skillfully.

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