



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN PROVERBS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

In African literature, proverbs can also be regarded as one of the most common literary tools that reveal literary dimensions of works. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a particular emphasis is placed on the study of proverbs as literary techniques. This article aims at revealing the relevance of African proverbs in literary works and their stylistic use as literary devices to understand happenings and facts in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The work is carried out in the view to discover how the use of proverbs is important in communication in African communities. As a result, this article examines how proverbs and adages help to educate, to counsel and to set conflict resolution. They are also employed for aesthetic and cultural preservation as in *Things Fall Apart*. Post-colonialism and structural-narratology are used as literary theories to study the events in the story.

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INTRODUCTION

In the art of communication in African societies, the use of proverbs appears as a wise way to say indirectly something. So, in the olden time in African societies, proverbs were regarded as the foundation and key elements of communication especially among old people. As a character narrator in *The Death Certificate*, Mula declares: "proverbs and sayings are the foundation stones of any given society" (Epie 200). In a simple definition, a proverb is a short, well-known pithy saying that states a general truth or pieces of advice. According to Meider "a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, moral, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memoizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation". (27) It is clear enough that people resort to proverbs to convey particular messages on particular occasions. In Africa, the role of proverbs in conversations, debates, folktales, myths and stories are so significant that writers make use of them to express their thoughts and impart knowledge. Thus, beyond their cultural and traditional function, proverbs are also regarded as adequate literary devices and effective tools for communicating in literature. This research is carried out in the context of African oral literature which is boosted by the colonial contact. In fact, colonization has in some extent positively impacted African literature which was exclusively oral. Nonetheless, intellectual

as one of the cornerstones of African culture. In Adewole's article entitled "The art of conversation proverbs", the scholar makes it clear that "the use of proverbs in communication is paramount for Africa's socio-cultural development" (7). The latter thinks that proverbs are essential ingredients in the art of conversation. Alimi, in "A study of the use of proverbs as narrative terms on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* reveals how proverbs are used to examine characters' utterances, and for the interpretation of their thoughts" (13). He thinks that Achebe makes use of proverbs as a tool for delineating his characters in their respective roles. According to Neji in "The verbs and proverbs in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, "the presence of verbs and proverbs in writers' works play a linguistic identity role" (15). This study aims to demonstrate how proverbs function not only as linguistic tools but also as a carrier of cultural values, moral lessons, and aesthetic expression. To reach the goal of this article, it employs close textual analysis of key rhetorical devices like proverbs figure of speech in the novels. The analytical approach used is based on the study of literary devices in *Things Fall Apart*. As a theoretical framework, postcolonial theory coined by theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Chakravorty is employed to study the historical context of the article. Structural Narratology's pioneers like Todorov Tzvetan and Gerard Genette bring a clear study of the narrative structure of the story in *Things Fall Apart*. This research is significant in brightening how proverbs serve as real tools of communication in African literature.

Origin of African proverbs: It is a well-known fact that before contact with Europeans, African literature was purely oral. In fact, African history and culture are deeply rooted in oral tradition and story tellings. Proverbs are rich sources of imagery and succinct expressions on which more elaborate forms can draw. They are integral parts of African culture and are passed on from generation to generation for centuries. Old men and women, though they were not educated, were referred to as great sources of knowledge because of the paramount roles they have played in the building of African society. In contrast with *Heart of Darkness* in which Joseph Conrad paints Africa as a continent without knowledge, this metaphorical phrase is a pure mistake because African oral literature is as rich as European written literature. The richness of African oral literature is certainly what inspires Amadou Hampaté-Bâ to state that: "En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle."¹, "In Africa, the death of an old man is compared to a burning down of a whole library". As a matter of fact, the wisdom he (the dead man) has acquired from his forefathers, and his own lived experience goes with him and would be profitable for nobody else. Hence, African proverbs are vehicles of cultural transmission. So, they reflect the cultural value, beliefs, and wisdom of African societies providing insight into their history, customs, and way of life. According to Nketia:

This ...approach to proverbs which is evident in the speech of people who are regarded as accomplished speakers or poets of a sort makes the proverbs not only a body of short statement built up over the years and which reflect the thought and insight of Ghanaians into problems of life, but also a technique of verbal expression, which is greatly appreciated by the Ghanaians. It is no wonder therefore that the use of proverbs has continued to be a living tradition in Ghana. (Nketia 21)

It emerges from Nketia's view about proverbs that they are originally from Africans' customs and they infallibly value with no restraint. For they play important roles in people's conversations. Moreover, the latter reveals that the use of proverbs unquestionably improves speech in African literature.

Proverbs and African literature: As mentioned above, African literature was more predominant of orality than the written form. Africa's oral literature derives its strength largely from the preponderance of proverbs. As a matter of fact, proverbs contribute to the enhancement of African oral literature even if the written form was rare. The introduction of the written form of literature in Africa has to some extent brightened up African literature as far as their use as figures of speech is concerned. So, proverbs have become significant tools for writers to justify their characters' actions, to criticize bad ethical and immoral behaviour. They offer guidance or pieces of advice. Undoubtedly, they also declare a well-acknowledged fact or universal truths. Since, the oral tradition gives rise to most proverbs, they are typically written in a style that makes them easy to remember.

The use of simile "The clan was like a lizard, if it lost its tail, it soon grew another" (Achebe 121) by the omniscient narrator gives a clear detail on how Umuofia population grows faster

and consequently no space is left. The presence of simile as figure of speech in this part of the story describes the growth of the clan and that subsequently leads to shortage of land. So, Okonkwo's abandoned space is quickly occupied by another son of the clan. Here, the growth of Okonkwo's clan is compared to a lizard's tail that was once cut off but it continues to grow.

In addition, through the use of proverbs, African writers express the wealth of philosophy, wisdom and some perception of life as they affect and control their communities. For example, when Okoye pays Unoka a visit with the intention to ask the latter his few cowries he had lent him before, he does not go directly to the subject as the omniscient narrator says: "having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next dozen sentences in proverbs. "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 5). Achebe makes use of proverbs to teach readers some wisdoms. Indeed, the fact of not being outspoken towards Unoka in his (Okoye) speech reveals also the quality of the conversation they are engaged in. Though Unoka is aware that he owes Okoye some cowries, he may turn this simple issue into a serious dispute if the latter were very harsh in claiming his cowries back. In his turn, Unoka explains philosophically his awareness about the few cowries, but how does he succeed in convincing Okoye?

Look at that wall...look at those lines of chalks Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I own that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first. (Achebe 6)

It comes into sight that proverbs are tools that enhance the aesthetic aspects of African literature. In fact, some people are naturally endowed with the art of convincing, and that is certainly why, though Unoka never pays back his debts, he always succeeds in piling them up. They are also used to provide a grammar of values by which the different actions of characters can easily be measured and evaluated in a given context. Apart from that, the use of proverbs also is marked by some poetic quality in style or in its literary form. A cursory look at children's song: "The rain is falling, the sun is shining, Nnadi is cooking and eating" (Achebe 25). The presence of assonance as a figure of speech is perceived through the repetition of the identical phonemes "ing" in the words "falling", "shining", "cooking" and "eating". The interpretation of this song is nothing but the aesthetic aspect of literature that Achebe shimmers to readers. So, like proverbs, songs also are part of African customs and play an important role in African literature.

A figure of speech is a literary device in which language is used in a particular and in an unusual way with the view to produce a stylistic effect. It appears in Okonkwo's worry about his first son Nwoye's future life. In fact, as the main character, Okonkwo early notices a slight resemblance between his late father and his own son as far as their social status is concerned. In truth, his fear is that he should on no ground be lazy and be compared to his father who appears as a social misfit. In a swearing, he says: "I will not have a son who cannot hold his head in the gathering of a clan" (Achebe 24). To avoid being outspoken, Okonkwo softens his words though the actual

¹ From Amadou Hampaté Bâ's declaration at the international conference of UNESCO in 1960.

message he intends to convey is “I will not have a lazy and weak son”. The use of euphemism by Achebe in this semi-proverbial sentence is a way as well to emphasize the literary device elements. Okonkwo’s fame and his social status allow him to bring up such a son who is seemingly becoming a mere loafer. The semi-proverbial sentence is simply used to attract Nwoye’s attention to his future life as a man.

When things get gradually broken in Umuofia after Mr Brown’s appearance for Christianity, Okonkwo is in exile. His coming back is a great shock and grief for him. The clan falls apart. The need to fight back is impending, but a man is seemingly an obstacle for Okonkwo. For the latter, Egonwanne, a minor character, is a coward who can prevent the assault against the white man and his people. Knowing Egonwanne well for what he is wont to do, Okonkwo nervously says: “The greatest obstacle in Umuofia is that coward, Egonwanne. His sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash. When he speaks, he removes our men to impotence” (Achebe 141). A keen analysis of Okonkwo’s utterance displays an exaggeration. Literally, the use of “his sweet tongue can change fire into ash” by Achebe as hyperbole emphasizes Egonwanne’s quality as a good orator. The presence of the figure of speech portrays somehow Egonwanne social status as a very good and convincing orator. It is clear that figures of speech in literature allow writers to apply familiar ideas and imagery to less familiar concepts. They are widespread in both written and spoken language. That is the reason why African oral literature can be considered as rich as the one of others.

Through the examination of *Things Fall Apart*, the omniscient narrator draws readers’ attention to the great number of people. Indeed, they are out of number and the use of the hyperbolic sentence is used to make a greater effect on readers or listeners. It simply comes from the art of writing, for Achebe’s intention is also to give readers and listeners a much clearer picture of what people can read and listen to messages. In this regard, when the village crier is out to call for an urgent meeting because the matter in hand is critical, the market-place in Umuofia gets quickly crowded. Regarding the huge crowd, Achebe makes use of hyperbole to put stress on the unexpected number of people there at the market-place. The narrator explains: “When Okonkwo and Obierika got to the meeting-place there were already so many people that if one threw a grain of sand, it would not find its way to the earth again” (Achebe 142). The exaggeration in the author’s words reveals in reality a great surprise of something unexpected. It is beyond expectation that only such a figure of speech can enhance the actual message to be conveyed. In fact, figures of speech as literary devices also appear as better tools to scrutinize and analyze coded messages.

Proverbs figures of speech are also used to express allusion. Okonkwo says: “I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle” (Achebe 117). The proverb figure of speech is a pure allusion to Okonkwo’s wealth and prosperity. He prospers and does not want to do things like a stingy and a poor man. He is just saying that he has the wherewithal and can easily afford such a feast in order to be grateful to his kinsmen as they have been kind to him all along his seven years in exile. He also adds that: “A child cannot pay for its mother’s milk” (117). In fact, Okonkwo is saying that they have done good things for their own child and that it is of their duty to do so. As a figure of speech here, allusion is used to bring to readers’ knowledge that parents are the ones who

bring children to life and consequently, they are responsible for them and should take care of them as it is due. Achebe’s concern with this proverb is that parents who think their children should pay them back once they grow up are ridiculous.

Proverbs and their meaning in context: As said very early, proverbs are simple ways of expressing a well-known truth or adage based on common sense or experience. They are considered to be imbued with ancestral wisdom, passed down from generation to generation until they become of a society’s tradition. Throughout *Things Fall Apart*, a number of proverbs are used in different contexts to teach different lessons and for different reasons. With old persons, proverbs are introduced in communication to enhance the quality of the conversation and to point out how they mean them. However, it is important to mention that it is not often easy for people to quickly grasp the deep meaning of proverbs when they are employed. It takes younger people a while to understand clearly the clear meaning of proverbs when old men say them. But in literary meanings like in Achebe’s novel, proverbs are perfectly understood. Irony is used when Unoka receives Okoye. He does not mean to pay on the spot his debt because he owes many other people as well. But not only is the latter aware that he cannot afford to pay Unoka the debt, but he is also aware that he must not frustrate him. The only thing to do is to find a very wise way to be rid of him. Unoka proverbially says: “Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them” (Achebe 6). In this proverb, Unoka indirectly explains that he should first prioritize larger obligations over small ones. In fact, the debtor wants to pay his larger debts before paying Unoka his twenty cowries. Additionally, Unoka subtly mocks Okoye, suggesting that if he is not being chased for larger debt, Okoye should not be stuck to his back for small debt.

Very often, when old men or women sit together, their conversation is not as easy as the one of young men. They always skirt around to avoid directly their mind. They visibly tell their listeners to guess their thoughts through proverbs, sayings or adages. Nwakibie declares this: “a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness” (Achebe 14). Nwakibie employs this proverb when Okonkwo comes to ask for ‘seed yams’ for his own farm. Nwakibie does not tell Okonkwo directly of his consent. But the use of the proverb mentioned above carries all the answers and it is up to Okonkwo to grasp the coded message. As a matter of fact, Achebe uses this proverb to point out how respect is regarded in African societies with keen interest by old men when they collaborate with young men. Indeed, according to Achebe, if you respect greatness, you will become great too. Moreover, the proverb means that in Umuofia, successful men respect greatness.

The issue of respect in African societies especially the Igbo’s is a serious matter as Chief Nanga mentions it in *A Man of the People* addressing Odili and Mr Jalio, “I don’t care if you respect me or not. But our people have a saying that if you respect today’s king others will respect you when your turn comes” (Achebe 63). The proverb teaches people respect and how it is a must for them to honour elderly people. Through the proverb, Achebe instructs on the respect of the hierarchy that exists in the political sphere. Only respect can make way for young people to take over political power. Achebe’s interest in African proverbs is without limit, for he knows very

well their role in literature. So, due to the respect Okonkwo has toward Nwakibie, the latter gives him the seed yam for his farm's project. On the spot, Ogbuefi Idigo mentions that "a toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (Achebe 15). This proverb carries a strong and a warning message. As a matter of fact, a toad is known for its nocturnal stroll. It is rare to see a toad wandering in the daytime like some other insects or wild animals. Its sudden appearance in waking hours is assimilated to a danger or a good surprise ahead. The use of that proverb concerns Objako the palm-wine tapper who suddenly gives up his job. According to some villagers, the latter learns from their Oracle that a danger is menacing him. The message carried by the Oracle is that he will fall from a palm tree and die. Visibly, a tragic death is announced by the Oracle to warn Objako about his job. For Nwakibie and his friends (Okonkwo and Akukalia), the palm-wine tapper cannot drop his job without reason; something must push him to do so. His sudden dropping of the job is compared to a toad's appearance in the daytime hurrying away to save its life from danger. Achebe makes use of the proverb to teach about warning of a possible danger or a good surprise ahead.

Proverbs are used as imagery in literature to praise people for their remarkable effort. A cursory look at Okonkwo's social status helps to perfectly understand how proverbs are used to praise a person who clearly stands out from others. While asking Nwakibie the seed yams, the latter tries to convince the old man to trust him. Confidently, he declares: "The lizard that jumped from high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. I began to fend for myself when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts. If you give me some yam seed, I shall not fall you" (Achebe 15-16). A lizard that falls from an Iroko tree to the ground should normally be torn into pieces because it is known of its incapacity to perform such a risky task that can turn to be a mere death. In this circumstance, Okonkwo is compared to the lizard that jumps from an Iroko tree. The hard task of jumping from the Iroko tree is assimilated to farm work which apparently is difficult for the young men in Umuofia. Okonkwo's sudden success is based on hard work and determination.

He thinks that he is different from the others because of his early interest in hard work while the latter still relying on their parents for help due to their inexperience. In this regard, even the old man (Nwakibie) realizes Okonkwo's great success as a poor and a young man who could not expect anything as heritage from his father Unoka. The old man assimilates Okonkwo's success story to the following proverb: "Looking at a king's mouth, one would think he never sucked his mother's" (Achebe 19). The proverbial sentence explains his (the old man)'s surprise as Okonkwo springs from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the most respected in his clan. Through proverbs, Achebe sensitizes people about solidarity, fraternity and social cohesion within a society.

It is also an appeal to people living in the same community to join hands for a better brotherhood in order to achieve a common goal. This desire to see such a bound community in which people can inwardly be attached to one another is the keen interest of the old man Uchendu who fiercely declares:

We do not ask for the wealth because he has wealth and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than

animals because we have kinsmen. And animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him (Achebe 117)

Uchendu's main concern focuses on human beings' relationship in a community to act as one. For him, nothing must prevail over human relations as the key motor for solidarity and a perfect social cohesion. The old man stresses the interdependence of one person on the other or the relationship between the individual and his or her society. A similar proverb is used at the meeting when Obierika's daughter Akueke is preparing to get married. In fact, when Akueke's suitor and his parents come to visit Obierika for the different steps to undertake to complete the marriage, the old man realizes that two families are on the point to be bound. In this context, nothing but a constant collaboration of the two new families can help to overcome rough times. That is the point at which Obierika draws his invitees' attention to by saying: "If I fall down for you, fall down for me; it is a play, marriage should be a play and not a fight; so, we are falling down again" (Achebe 51). Achebe launches a vibrant appeal to the African community for mutual cooperation to foster their social relationship. To back up Uchendu as far as solidarity is concerned; an old man wisely declares:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlight in the village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (Achebe 118)

Achebe really cares about African societies for their community life. He worries that his people may be divided one day and could not be able to stand as one due to the Europeans' arrival. Apart from the interdependency relationship one can learn from Uchendu's utterance, Obierika thinks and insists that negotiation and compromise are better ways to achieve a common goal because they are inevitable and are paramount for a community's social development.

Igbo people have a keen interest in proverbs and consider them in their conversations as parts of their life. In his careful explanation about the dark moon that falls on Umuofia, the omniscient narrator says: "When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" (Achebe 7). It is a well-known fact that in African villages, some evil spirits wander at night because that moment is considered by them as their daytime. Evil spirits are thought to work in darkness because they cannot act in full day when people are awake. It is undoubtedly the reason why children are often given freedom to play sometimes in full moon, but when the moon is quite dark and may bear some evil spirits, they should hide in their respective parents' house because they could easily disturb that spirit in their business.

When Akueku's marriage is being planned, a conversation is held among Obierika's and his people about Maduka, the latter's son. Obierika complains that his son never listens carefully when he is being told something or sent somewhere and that he hurries away before hearing the last words. Unfortunately, a quick remark is made by one of the men sitting there and he proverbially says: "When mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth" (Achebe 49). The sentence means that children learn by observing their

parents' actions rather than by listening to their words. The proverbs stipulate that parents must be good examples for their children because they are more influenced by what they see than what they are told.

Among the many functions of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*, the entertaining aspect must also be taken into account. As literary techniques improve and enhance the quality of a literary work, proverbs, sayings and adages amuse readers and make them have fun. Here is a clearer case when Obierika says: "never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married a new wife" (Achebe 99). A careful reader would burst into giggles when he grasps actually what the minor character Obierika means. In fact, Obierika thinks about some marital duties that could have restrained his friend Nweke before dawn. A similar statement is mentioned in Umuofia's old men's conversation:

"What we are eating is finished"

"We have seen it," the other replied. "Who will drink the dregs?" he asked.

"Whoever has a job in hand", said Idigo looking at Nwakibie's elder son, Igwelo, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Everybody agreed that Igwelo should drink the dregs. He accepted the half-full horn from his brother and drank it. As Idigo said, Igwelo has job in hand because he had married his first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palm-wine were supposed to be good for men who were going into their wives (Achebe 12)

Though the message conveyed by Idigo is highly coded, a good and knowledgeable reader can immediately decipher what the latter means. There are some conversations which sometimes lead to mere giggles because some characters appear comical and use proverbs to tease their fellows on some less important issues.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that proverbs play significant roles in African literature. Their stylistic use in communication as literary devices enhances African literature as seen in *Things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe. It emerges from the previous analysis that like some other literary devices, African proverbs carry significant meanings that consequently value African oral and written literature. In fact, the use of proverbs, sayings and adages in literary works reveals somehow African social matters and how that society is structured. It is doubtlessly the reason why Achebe makes use of them to convey his message.

In this research work, it is shown that African proverbs and sayings come from storytelling, songs, beliefs, customs, tales and panegyrics which were purely oral as the written form of literature was missing. But as soon as Africa knew the written form of literature, writers such as Chinua Achebe did not waste time in leaving his indelible literary mark on African literature with his outstanding novel *Things Fall Apart* in which proverbs appear as the "clothes" of the novel. It is shown throughout the work that proverbs, sayings and adages are also used as literary techniques to analyze and interpret literary texts for a better understanding. Some proverbs figure of speech such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, symbolism and imagery are relevantly used to bring accurate analysis of facts and happenings in the novel. Moreover, proverbs and sayings are interpreted in context to grasp the cultural meanings of the different social facts of the plot of the novel. This research work aims at revealing the relevance of African proverbs in literary works and their stylistic use as literary devices to understand literary texts.

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