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The Palm-oil with which Good Stories are told: Proverb as Plot Generator in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*

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Abstract

The proverb is one of the genres of folklore handed down from generation to generation. It is one of the most commonly used, respected and highly valued element of folklore because it reflects the culture, worldview and perception of life of a homogeneous set of people. It also serves as a means of interpreting and understanding life and events around them. In this regard, therefore, irrespective of the level of modernity, advanced technological growth, and level of western education and exposure witnessed all around us

today, the proverb has continued to play prominent roles in debates, arguments, speech and over all communication of the people, both the literate and non-literate alike. Chinua Achebe defined proverb simply as the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Proverb has become an essential part of any viable and homogeneous society which accounts for their outlook, approach and perception to life because it is believed to be the wisdom and philosophy of their fore-fathers who existed in the time past. Many African writers in their bid to create a true African story have resorted to the use of proverbs among other folklore materials in their literary works. Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa rank among them. This paper looks at proverb as not just the metaphorical oil with which the Igbos eat words but the literally palm-oil with which good, genuine and believably African stories are told. This paper studies proverbs in the two novels of Flora Nwapa, Efurú and Idu respectively. The study contends that proverbs in the novels of Nwapa did not occur by accident but were consciously explored by the author to make her story genuine and to advance and shape the plot of her story in such a way that the works are appealing to both native and non native of her Igbo community.

Introduction

Proverb as part of folklore elements peculiar to any given homogeneous society has in the recent time proven to be a fruitful way of interpreting and analyzing the works of writers especially African writers. No writer writes in a vacuum and no work of art can exist significantly in isolation of society. Writers write to reflect the realities of their time and to highlight on the peculiar socio-political and economic situations that have exerted a lot of influence in shaping them and pushing their frontiers as writers. In the bid to recreate a familiar and believable story or account of a given set of people, many African writers have tend to look inwards, deep in the oral tradition of the people which signifies the people's deep and rotted contact with art, culture and literature peculiar to them and which overtime has served as a means of showcasing their individual uniqueness, common goals, perception, way and outlook to life. This may differ from one traditional society to the other, and it behooves every writer to reflect this socio-cultural realities of his people, not just for posterity sake, nor for the fact that it makes the writing more true to life and authentic but because the written work produced by the writer is part of the larger society, an extension of their socio-cultural milieu from which the expositions, intrigues, conflicts, actions and experiences in

the work could be made readily appealing and worth experiencing even to a non-native of the socio-cultural setting of the work when laced with the beauty of their rich lore. It is in this regard that many African writers incorporate a lot of folklore materials and other cultural artifacts in their works which proverb is one of them. Proverb plays an important role in the writings and lives of characters not just in literary works but in their ordering of society at large as Onwudiwe George posits:

To use proverbs is to economize words and yet make a pungent point. The Igbo people hold anyone that uses proverbs and uses them correctly in oral speech as a good orator. He is also seen as a 'true son' of Igbo land as well as a scholar. Correct and frequent use of proverbs serves as a security device hence; proverbs are veritable ingredients in communication, especially in Igbo (159).

The above places much emphasis on the use of proverb in the Igbo community which coincides with the setting of the two works of Flora Nwapa under study. Proverb occupies an integral position in the matrix of the Igbo culture just like some other elements of folklore and in written literature it performs much greater role, function and significance which is the crux of this essay. Proverbs, myths among other elements of folklore have become part of the most prominent and re occurring aspect and technique of writing in many of the literary works that replete the African scene. Since the writer's tool is word made possible by language use, proverb has become an effective tool and technique with which African writers store and weave ideas and thematic concerns; heighten the suspense. Through a conscious, apt and artistic rendition of proverbs in literary works, actions and conflicts are well manipulated and realities of human lives disguised under the umbrella of fiction are portrayed. The use and incorporation of this folklore material, proverb needs all the considerable scholarly and critical attention it can get. This is as Emmanuel Obiechina avers that:

The use of proverbs in the novels need special attention if only to answer the criticism of the imperipient readers that the ubiquity of proverbs, especially in Achebe's novels, is an idiosyncrasy rather than a natural way of representing the linguistic reality of the world of the rural novels. Proverbs are natural part of the speech of all traditional societies. Other prose writers dealing with

characters whose consciousness is conditioned by an oral rather than a literary tradition have recorded this tendency to be sententious and steeped in proverbial lore (155).

The need to study proverbs, their roles and functions in African literary works from varying degrees, perspectives and dimensions is increasingly becoming more important, crucial and a matter of necessity if the body of what will collectively refer today as African literature could be best understood, interpreted and appreciated. This will go a long way in portraying the artist not just as a 'creator' or 'a maker' who 'entertains' to 'instruct' but as a moral consciousness of his society; a custodian of the totality of the belief of his people, a diviner, a preserver and an agent of change and transformation. In this vein, African writings will be more readily appreciated as the gifts of time, given only by patriotic and genuine African writers concerned with the task of reconstructing the African history and through the gains and merits of the golden and idyllic past, will usher in the needed elixir for today and tomorrow's glory of the African continent through writing.

Several scholars have attempted to define the proverb, each from the dimension or viewpoint that is more appealing and enduring to him. This has given rise to various definitions of proverbs found in many scholarly publications. Proverb, in the words of Donatus Nwoga, is a "terse statement which figuratively gives expression to traditional wisdom relevant to a given situation." While Chinua Achebe views it as "the palm oil with which words are eaten".

Emmanuel Obiechina perceives of proverb as "the kernel which contains the wisdom of traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words (156).

Rems Umeasiegbo sees proverb as any expression recognized by a people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. He admitted that the definition has its pitfall but the strength lies in the words recognized by people as embodying the wisdom and philosophy of their ancestors. This he believes is important for an outsider cannot tell the people whose lore he is studying what a proverb is (9).

Onwuekwusi Jasper summoned up these definitions by looking at proverbs from their major and peculiar characteristics. He believes that proverbs are

popular, common and numerous. They are pleasant expressions which adorn the rhetoric of a people. Proverbs constitute a part of the oral tradition of a people, which is unconsciously acquired and also used unconsciously. In his words:

A proverb is a philosophical, allusive and metaphorical citation that gives credence to traditional truth and wisdom. It is allusive and metaphorical because it refers to some truth outside itself. It is philosophical because it is a product of a long period of reasoning and observation which expresses some timeless truth (17).

These are among the several definitions of proverb by scholars and critics in their publications. In all these varying definitions, something could be deciphered which could account for the general characteristics of proverb and that is the idea that proverbs are short and terse in nature and they are embodiment of in-depth wisdom and philosophy about life and nature formulated in the time past by our forefathers in their bid to understand and explain their world better. This is what makes proverb as an element of folklore, vital and enduring in our African society, even in our contemporary age.

Proverbs have become tools with which writers justify the actions of characters, criticize bad ethical and immoral behaviours while advocating for right virtues and morals. Through the use of proverbs, writers try to express the wealth of philosophy, wisdom and perception of life as they affect and control their community. These wisdom and rich philosophies were handed over to them from their ancestors and the use of them is a continuation and linkage between the past, which ushered in the present and will in the long run determine the future. By so doing, African writers succeed in giving their works a touch of African beauty; these help them to enhance the plot of their stories, sharpen their characterizations and influence their storyline to suit their purposes. A justification of this could be seen in Bernth Lindfor's critical analysis of Achebe and his use of proverbs. He argues that Achebe uses proverbs to reinforce the image of Okonkwo as a man who struggles with his chi (79). He went ahead to illustrate this with examples from several of his novels. Bernth Linfors while writing about Achebe and his use of proverbs concludes thus:

In a *Man of the People*, as in Achebe's other novels; proverbs are used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict and to focus on the values of the society Achebe is portraying. By studying the proverbs in a novel, we gain insight into the moral issues with which the actions of characters can be measured and evaluated. Proverbs help us to understand and interpret Achebe's novels. It is this last talent that enables him to convince his readers "that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from European, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value, and beauty, they had poetry and above all, they have dignity (92).

Other writers like Chinua Achebe made use of proverbs in their works to suit their purposes, communicate their thoughts and reflect even their unspoken message to the outside world. These writers include Onuoha Nzekwu, Elechi Amadi and Wole Soyinka among others. Flora Nwapa's use of proverbs among other genres of folklore make her works unique, for they possess the true touch of African beauty and reflect her community; her people's way of life, part of the crucial role which literature performs in society. It is in this regard, Rems Umeasiegbu in acknowledgment of the incorporation of proverbs in the works of Achebe as well as some other Igbo writers, made this generalized statement:

Several Igbo novelists have utilized proverbs in their literary works. With the possible exception of Obi Egbuna and Cyprian Ekwensi, there is no Igbo novelist who has not used some proverbs in his writing. The most consistent and thorough in this regard is, of course, Chinua Achebe. He, more than any other writer, has placed Igbo folklore, especially the proverb, on a functional literary perspective. His international reputation rests partly on his ability to utilize and recreate successfully the folklore of his people in all his works... many critics ignore completely in their assessments of literary works from Igbo land, the use of folklore in the literary works (13).

One peculiar characteristic of proverbs, even as they manifested themselves in the works under study, is the fact that they carry a persuasive power as belonging not to the speaker but to our ancestors in the past which ought to be applied in the best sense of it. As proverbs constitute the worldview and outlook of our forefathers, they have continued to point at the way forward in order to help us achieve a balance and sanity in our lives. These proverbs as many of them came to us are believed to have been handed over to us from our fore fathers. These were their proverbs which they created in order to make out more meaning and understanding of their world and environment. This helped them in various ways to achieve harmony and balance in their lives and when we use these proverbs, we are reflecting and cultivating on their worldview and perception of life which aids our understanding and interpretation of certain cosmological and phenomenal occurrences around us and for a more codified human relationship; hence, the need to cite proverbs in our speeches.

Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes explain this better in their seminal paper titled “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore”

Like other forms of folklore, proverbs may serve as impersonal vehicle for personal communication. A parent may well use a proverb to direct a child’s action or thought, but by using a proverb, the parental imperative is externalized and removed somewhat from the individual parent. This guilt or responsibility for directing the child is projected on to the anonymous past, the anonymous folk. A child knows that proverb used by the scolding parent was not made up by the parent. It is a proverb from the cultural past whose voice speaks truth in traditional terms. It is the “one”, the “Elders”, or the “They” in “They say”, who direct ... (70).

Chinua Achebe incorporated proverbs in his works in his effort to portray and project the culture and heritage of the Igbo people. He sets out to portray a typical Igbo community in transition with its beautiful philosophy, culture and tradition, alongside other imperfections of his community. He did this at a time it mattered most in order to challenge the Eurocentric views of Europeans about Africa and the absence of culture and literature. Achebe, with his incorporation of folklore elements and other facets of the Igbo culture and tradition, succeeded in passing an important message to the

outside world that African did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. Flora Nwapa did not only recreate a typical Igbo society, but was able to create certain areas and manifestations that made a particular set of people, her community great and distinguished from all others. She was able to document some vital moments and aspects of her culture in transition, for the generation yet unborn. She recreated a believable day-to-day life of the people governed by communal life, belief in deities and goddesses. She, in the process of creating her stories, made abundant use of proverbs. It is the roles and functions which proverbs perform in the works of Flora Nwapa that we shall now go into details, to analyze and buttress.

Proverb as Plot Conflict Generator in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*

From our study, Flora Nwapa did not use proverbs in her novels for the sake of using proverbs; neither can one comfortably say that these proverbs were accidental in the context they appear. Proverbs were used for the advancement of the plot of her story, as we shall now demonstrate.

Plot is the skeletal framework of a story, the arrangement of actions and events; each event gives rise to the other; all of them leading to an inevitable end. Plot is the sequence of events in the novel. It is the arrangement of actions and events in such a way that one grows out of the other, the other from another in a logical manner till the story comes to an inevitable end. Plot is the skeletal frame work of a story, the background and pivotal point of any work of art. It is the most important and crucial element of a work of art, without which the story becomes lifeless, uncoordinated, meaningless and insignificant.

Plot according to Onukaogu Abalogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu refers to the arrangement of events in a story in such a manner that meaning can be made out of the story, in such a way that one event will necessarily and coherently follow or will be followed by another (43).

Stories are made up of episodes. It is the responsibility of the story teller – the novelist, the poet or the dramatist – to arrange these different episodes in a way that guarantees meaningful readings, appreciation and enjoyment.

Edgar Roberts and Henry E Jacobs in the description of a plot say:

Fictional characters, who are drawn from life, go through a series of life-like actions and incidents, which make up the

story. In a well-done story, all the actions or incidents, speeches, thoughts and observations are linked together to make up an entirety, sometimes called an organic unity (151).

Thus, plot is the taproot of a story, which supplies data and ingredients on which a story grows, germinates, matures and blossoms which the reader can then pluck, savour and enjoy. In every story, there is a conflict situation, a problem which the characters try to solve and it is this process of unraveling the conflict that sum up to the concept of plot and 'plotting' (44).

These definitions are necessary to show what plot entails and the crucial task before a writer even at the point he first conceives his story and decides to put it down. The argument here is that proverbs in these two novels of Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* and *Idu* respectively are part of the author's conscious effort to plan, arrange, coordinate, build and sustain the plot of her stories. We shall consider these proverbs in *Efuru* as they appeared and explain how they functioned significantly in the shaping of the events in the novel.

It is well, but not very well. It is said that an elderly person cannot watch a goat being entrapped and do nothing. That is why I have come to you (57).

Context: *Efuru's* husband, Adizua, at some point in the novel begins to keep late nights and in some cases he does not come back at all to the house till the next morning. It happened that Adizua later abandoned his house and disappeared to an unknown destination. News had it that he had run away to another woman at Ndoni. Ajanapu had come to visit *Efuru* and had given this proverb to show her concern for the poor, young woman over the actions of her husband. Thus, Ajanapu as a friend and in-law to *Efuru* believes that she cannot fold her arm and watch things go wrong. She expressed her thoughts following the proverbs thus:

... Your mother in-law and I are sisters ... If anything happens to my sister today; it will be my responsibility to look after you so I am your mother-in-law today. When I see or hear anything that would affect you adversely, it is my place to come and tell you. I do not like the footsteps of your husband. I do not like it at all. There is a rumour that he is going to marry another woman soon... there is

nothing wrong in his wanting to marry a second wife, but he must go about in an open and noble way (57).

The above proverb gave rise to the above statement. This proverb helps us to anticipate the plot of what will happen. It helped to weave the suspense as one tends to fear the actions to be undertaken by Efuru and others to forestall the unfortunate event. Indeed several actions were arrived at by Ajanapu and these actions enhanced the plot of the story and ended up seeing Efuru back to her father's house without a husband, following the death of her only daughter. Ogonim, who Adizua did not care to come back and mourn her death.

Another example of a proverb that affected the plot greatly is given by Ajanapu:

My advice is this my dear child: be patient and wait. It is only the patient man that drinks good water (58).

Context: Ajanapu following the disappearance of Efuru's husband, Adizua, advises her on the right manners and approach she thinks at first will help the situation and so she cites the proverb. In the above context, the proverb helps the reader to anticipate the initial course of action from Efuru following Ajanapu's wise counsel as she thought. This affects the plot, for Efuru's silence and inability to take urgent actions to bring back her husband, sees Adizua disappearing farther in an unknown land. It is only when Efuru was tired of waiting, following the death of her only daughter, Ogonim, as well as the futile result from the emissaries sent to Ndoni to bring back Adizua, to at least to mourn his only daughter, that Efuru decides to go back to her father's house. May be if she had not listened to Ajanapu's advise and had done something the initial moments her husband started to keep late nights, one can argue that she may have succeeded in bringing Adizua back and save her marriage.

Another example in that logical order is this proverb:

Mother, I cannot stay any more. A man said that he had wept for the death that killed his friend, but he did not wish that death to kill him. I cannot wait indefinitely for Adizua. You can bear witness that I have tried my best (88).

Context: Efuru is waiting for Adizua to come back but to no avail, and having exhausted every means available to her, accepted her last resort which is to go back to her father's house, following the death of her only daughter, the only reason she had continued to stay in her husband's house. She told her mother-in-law, Ossai, her intention to go back to her father's house. That was when she cited the proverb.

This proverb helps us to anticipate the course of actions and the direction of the plot of the novel *Efuru*. Efuru had used this proverb to justify her claims to go back to her father's house and obviously, we expected several other actions and events which will change the plot of the story. This later came when she got entangled and married Gilbert, a situation that opened another avenue of sorrow and sadness in the life of the beautiful, innocent Efuru, and triggered off other events that led to the sorrowful end of the story.

We shall consider yet another example:

... and if she is barren start early to look for a black goat, because at night a black goat will be difficult to find (139).

Context: In the novel, Efuru later accepted and married Gilbert but she was unable to produce a child after years of marriage to Gilbert. As the family and neighbours continue to grow impatient, Omirima, Gilbert's mother's friend advised her on the need for hasty and speedy action to forestall such a bad occurrence. Amede concurred to her suggestions and the outcome of her actions affected and changed the course of the story. Gilbert initially had no worries over Efuru's inability to conceive but following Amede's meeting with Omirima and her conviction to look for the black goat in daylight, she began to pressurize her son. This led to lots of events with consequences in the novel. In the end, when it was obvious that Efuru cannot conceive because of her involvement with Uhamiri goddess, a wife was picked for Gilbert. The new wife ended destroying the peace of the family and tore them apart. Gilbert also disappeared but unlike Adizua, he later came back and was at the verge of marrying Ogea, Efuru's maid when the tragedy that tore the couple apart struck. This proverb generated conflict and changed the course of the story.

Also in *Efuru* another proverb reads thus:

My mother was not an adulterous woman, neither was her mother, why should I be different? Was it possible to learn to be left-handed at old age? (219).

Context: Efuru fell sick for a very longtime, and following the wrong interpretations by the dibia, Adizua accused Efuru of adultery, a situation that finally destroyed their marriage for later it was realized that Efuru's sickness was caused by Uhamiri because she offended her. The sickness was healed following some sacrifices which appeased Uhamiri again. Efuru cited this proverb to show her disappointment with a man she has lived with for years. This proverb led to her decision to leave her husband and the action that followed led to drastic change in the plot as the novel. The story ends up with Efuru back in her father's house without a child or husband. Only the thoughts of Uhamiri and her confusion and the unknown future occupied her thoughts and in such a pitiable state the novel ended.

In *Idu* we shall cite these few examples:

One mother can bear two children in her womb, but one chi cannot belong to the two children. That's Adiewere and Ishiodu.

Context: Ishiodu and Adiewere are brothers but their behaviour and traits are far too different from each other. They do not share any familiar trait. Adiewere is rich and hardworking, loving and accommodating, while Ishiodu is poor, ruthless and lazy. It was Adiewere who caters for him and his family. In consideration of the behaviour of Ishiodu against that of Adiewere, Nwasobi cited the proverb.

This proverb accounts for the disparity in behavior of Ishiodu and Adiewere. With this proverb, Nwapa was able to give an insight on the differences between these two brothers that will help us to adjust and accept the outcome of their actions. Indeed, this disparity in the lives of these two brothers leads to their individual ways, attitudes and outlook to life, and their actions and aspirations affected and enhanced the plot of the story. Ishiodu is always the trouble seeker and Adiewere often pays through his nose to assist him. The lives of these brothers generated a lot of conflicts of interest. It led to several crises, which affected the plot of the story to an inevitable end.

Another proverb in the novel reads: *You don't hide pregnancy with a cloth* (196).

Context: Nwasobi and Uzoечи were gossiping about Idu and her pregnancy as well as other matters related to it when she cited this proverb.

This proverb could be seen as a manifestation of all other good things that happened in the lives of Idu. There were so many things Idu cannot hide; her wealth and her love for her husband were part of them. That was why her taking her life after Adiwere's death could be said to have been anticipated, for their love and affection for one each other was very open and refined. People knew Idu cannot exist or survive without her husband. So her tragic death, days after her husband's funeral, was not surprising but part of the things no one can change, part of Flora Nwapa's technique to a desired plot.

These are among the proverbs with which Flora Nwapa used to heighten, anticipate and strengthen the plot of her story; to generate and achieve conflict and suspense which the sum total of it all gave rise to a whole; the full length novels under study. One conflict leads to another; this in turn generates another action, that will led to another, maintaining a degree of suspense till the novels come to their desired ends.

Conclusion

Proverb is an important element of folklore worthy of serious and critical discourse. As the study has shown and demonstrated, proverbs in the works of some African writers do not occur simply by accident but part of the writers conscious effort to cloth the story with the realities of the oral tradition of their people and create a believable day-to-day story of the community the writer writes about. Proverb in its shortness and terseness is an embodiment of the wisdom of our forefathers, wisdom and knowledge obtained by ardent and detailed study and observation of the world, humans, animals, spirits and certain phenomenon around us. Several African writers have over the time experimented the use of proverbs in their literary works, and in doing so, these writers succeeded in exploiting the gains of their oral tradition with the rewarding benefits of the written tradition even when they communicate in a language one can say is alien to them. This is done not in a kind of disjointed manner, but a matter of superimposition, a careful and clever way of blending the oral tradition with the written medium that one can hardly discover the very point the two traditions were juxtaposed. This is as Bernth Lindfors had expressed thus

... Not every African writer yielded so completely to foreign or indigenous literary influence. Some tried to combine the two traditions artistically, welding European form to African matter so skillfully that no one could tell without careful inspection precisely how or where they had been joined. These were writers who began to contribute something new to world literature, for they were forgoing genuine links between the two disparate cultures Africans had inherited, one by birth, the other by education (27).

In the light of this therefore, the study of proverbs in African literature in the recent time has become such a rewarding area of research in African literature. Much has been said about Chinua Achebe and the use of proverbs in his works especially *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* by both African and non-African critics. Same is with the works of Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Elechi Amadi, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo among other African writers. Yet in all these, much is still left to be said on the signification and the importance of proverbs in African written literature. Obviously true is the idea that proverbs help African writers to create a genuine African side of the story and project their rich cultural heritage to the fore courts of the Europeans who once acted as lords over African culture and presented a distorted and bias view of Africans as people without culture, at least a culture worth extolling and critical attention. But proverbs function more than that and that is the crux and contention of this paper, which studied the use of proverbs in the novels of Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* and *Idu* respectively. The paper was able to highlight that the proverbs in the works were not just used to recreate a believable and genuine African story but as a special tool to advance the plot and actions of the characters in her novels. Proverbs were used to achieve and anticipate the plot and direction of her stories. Like a moving train, proverbs provided the needed force and instrument to navigate and steer the train in the right and desired direction. Proverbs generated the plot of her stories and added authenticity to her characters and locations as typical Igbo people in a believable Igbo setting, her Oguta community. The paper raised a contention that the story may not have achieved the desired plot and may have lacked some touches and artistic quality and beauty they enjoy in the forms they are today in isolation of these proverbs. Thus, proverbs in the two novels of Nwapa provided a platform with which she was able to shape, manipulate, structure, weave, construct, strengthen, build and sustain the plots of her stories in manner than has made the two novels

classics of the works of one of the renowned and pioneering female writers in Nigerian and by extension African literature.

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