



Local Imagery, Proverbs and Metaphors in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* uses local imagery, simile, proverbs and metaphors which are capable of not only revealing African rich cultural heritage, but also helping in building the African child. In many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology, comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs, local imagery, simile and metaphors are striking. This paper examines some snatches of Chinua Achebe's variety of English in his urban novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. It is discovered that while handling contemporary issues of political corruption and dictatorship, Achebe blends expressions with local colour with the ones associated with educated characters. The paper explores the concept of context of situation associated with Halliday which emphasizes language use. In this model proposed by Halliday, three strata are identifiable: context of culture, context of situation and co-text. Findings from the analysis reveal that certain lexical items only make meaning within the context of the author's native cultural values and environment.

INTRODUCTION

Literature performs a social function in enabling the individual interprets his/her experiences of the natural world. The writer, a product of the society, is not only influenced by the society, but also influences it culturally, socially and politically. The only tool with which the writer expresses himself/herself is language which in most cases, a product of his culture. Language is the

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road to thinking and the key to the heart of people, their knowledge and treasure.

African literature is that written about Africa, her sensibility, culture, manners and beliefs. African writers like Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara have been able to adopt a variety of English which bears the weight of African experience. Although, some people share the opinion that writing about African culture in literature with English, was misplacement. Thus, writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi and Gabriel Okara were criticized on the choice of English in their writing.

Achebe (1975) posits that a writer must look for a sacrifice whose blood can match the power of his offering. In his defense of English, Achebe compared those condemning the use of English in African literature with a dog who throws off and later eats its vomit. This is because the critics do not air their views in African language but in English. Akpojisher (2009) puts it thus “why condemning the use of English and continue to bask in the beauty and comfort of our cars and modern houses which do not reflect African culture? Or is English the only vector of Westernization in Nigeria”

Much work have been done on Achebe's novels about rural Igbo life but only few seemed to have been done on his urban novels in the area of language. Again, several efforts have been made by Africans including Tanure Ojaide, G.G. Darah and Isidore Okpewho, among others on how to develop oral literature in Africa. This is because the custodians of oral literature are dying daily. Children are no longer told stories as it used to be years ago. Today, Nigerian children are alienated from folktales, local imagery and African proverbs. They rather stake their heads on MANCHESTER UNITED, CHELSEA, ARSENAL, BARCELONA and pornographic pictures. Parents no longer speak to their children in proverbs and parables as they will make no meanings to them.

This present work which examines the use of local imagery, metaphors and proverbs in *Anthills of the Savannah* intends to bridge the gaps. The writer believes that one way to develop oral literature is through written literature, as done by Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Theoretical Framework

The work tilts towards Halliday's systemic functional model in which context of situation is relevant. Again language must not only be based on the context of use but on the culture of the users. Lyons (1981 cited in Ativie (2014) opines that full understanding of the several kinds of meaning that are encoded in the grammar and vocabulary of a language comes only with a full understanding of the culture, or cultures in which it operates. Baker (2000) notes that context of situation is closely related to various texts and certain situational contexts ask for certain texts and in return, certain texts create certain contexts. Leech (1983) describes context as “any background

knowledge assumed to be shared by S and H which contributes to its interpretation of what S means by a given utterance”

Adebija (1999) cited in Ativie (2014) notes that there are four types of context—the physical, socio-cultural, the linguistic and psychological. The physical context according to Adebija, is the location or setting in which an utterance takes place while the socio-cultural is concerned with the cultures, values, customs, habits and beliefs of the participants in discourse and how these interact with the communicative process. The linguistic content concerns the words that occur in the verbal environment of an utterance (i.e. co-texts). The psychological contexts is the state of mind of the participants in a speech event. All these according to Adebija are germane in the inferential process of adducing to, or deducing from the meaning of utterances.

Bronislaw Malinowski, a social anthropologist was the first to use the term context of situation. To him, the meaning of words must not be restricted to sounds or utterances or their grammatical structure but should also include the pragmatic context in which they are uttered. Halliday employs Malinowski’s conception of the term “context of situation” to examine the relations between language use and social interaction. He agrees with Malinowski’s opinion that foreigners living outside a given society cannot fully understand texts written by members of that society even when translated into their own language. This is because the texts make more meanings than those expressed in the words they contain.

Ndimele (1999) alludes to this fact by stating that there are three basic factors that make the hearer discover the implicit meaning of an expression. The first, he contends, is the situation in which the utterance is produced. The second is the shared previous knowledge or common cultural background between the interlocutors while the third is the linguistic context in which a particular expression occurs. Ativie (2014) notes that it is these experiences shared by a particular speech community that allow its members interact with each other and provides writers with material for their work. Chinua Achebe’s works are imbued with African sensibility. His *Anthill of the Savannah* is a satire of political oppression and ruthless dictatorship in a typical African state. In handling these themes, he falls back on the rich source of his Igbo culture.

Achebe’s Variety of English

Achebe uses in some of his novels a certain form of English within the context of English as a second language. Orisawayi (1989) observes that the characteristics features of the form of English, are found to exist in the areas of lexical choice, idioms and expressions rooted in standard English syntax. This choice reflects very closely the lexicon, idioms, expressions and socio-cultural realities of Igbo language and people. Taiwo (1985, p. 66) reports that: Chinua Achebe adopts the English language to his own needs in an

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intelligent manner. In him we recognized the beginning of a successful experiment. While refusing to adopt slavishly recognized English Language, he uses the language to put across ideas and concepts which were originally foreign to it.

Lindfors (1979, P. 50) observes that: In the urban novels, one also finds similes and metaphors drawn from village life but in novels set entirely in tribal society, one finds no similes and metaphors drawn from urban experience. He contends that this is altogether fitting, for Achebe's urban characters have lived in villages, but most of the characters of his village novels have had little or no exposure to cities.

The expression are used to bear the weight of African experience and according to Orisawayi (1989), Achebe's aim was to prepare a potent medicine which would by osmotic pressure, transform and assimilate the English language into the African socio-cultural system without doing damage to its form as universally known and recognized.

Local Imagery, Proverbs, Similes and Metaphors

The use of local imagery, proverbs, simile and metaphors in *Anthills of the Savannah*, does not only help to create effect and highlights the African experience, but also makes messages clearer and helps for the moral upbringing of the reader, especially the Nigerian child. This is because the child is able to imbibe the moral lessons these lexical items convey and also finds it easy to understand the meaning they convey.

Through the use of these lexical items in the novel, Achebe creates the pictures of political oppression, hardship and fierceness of the heat of the sun, illustrative snatches include:

As he savoured this wonderful sense of achievement gained in so short a time spreading over the soaking into the core of his thinking and his being *like fresh red tasty palm oil melting and diffusing itself over-piping hot roasted yam* (p.22)

The above simile does not only show the reader a type of food in Nigeria, but also helps him understand how deep the character reflected on his achievement. Morning herself went into the seclusion of a window's penance in soot and ashes (P. 56). Here, Achebe depicts how hot the day is. The sun sent morning into hiding. Among the Igbos, a woman who lost her husband was required by tradition to go into seclusion for some months to mourn her husband. This is the picture Achebe paints of the hotness of the day. The coolness of the morning is not felt as the scorchy sun overpowers it.

To show the importance of Ikem the journalist to the people, an old man in chapter nine says:

Monday Ojevwe Akpojisheri

Leave this young man alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole of Kangan; *the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighbourhood. You should be proud that this bright cockerel that wakes the whole village comes from your compound* (P. 122).

This proverb reveals how Ikem uses his profession, journalism to sensitize and fights the cause of the poor, irrespective of ethnic/social affiliation. Ikem is the “bright cockerel” who wakes up the oppressed to become conscious of their right. The importance of a true story teller is echoed in the following lines:

But the lies of those possessed by Agwu are lies that do no harm to anyone. They float on the top of story like the white bubbling at the pot-mouth of new palm-wine. The true juice of the tree lies coiled up inside, waiting to strike (p. 125)

With this, Achebe seems to be saying that the sounding of drum which calls people to war and the fighting of war are good but giving an account of the war takes the ‘eagle feather’ (Nkoli Ka). Achebe therefore, esteems the story teller higher than the other two. The story teller must be an accomplished one and not a challatan. To Achebe, a challantan is the ‘*liar who can sit under his thatch and see the moon hanging in the sky outside... His Chalked-eye will see every blow in a battle he never fought*’.

The expression *chalked-eye* makes sense to those who are familiar with communal wars among the Igbos. The warriors usually draw native chalk on their eyes signaling readiness for war. Often, some cowards would cleverly escape from fighting and later boast of what they would have done if they were at the battle ground. The proverb for this set of people among the Urhobos is ‘*ora hɔnre gbɔ ɔyi diɛ ogba*’. (It is those who are absent during wars that are brave and mighty).

“During the naming ceremony of Elewa’s child that she has for late Ikem, her uncle says:

I said to myself. Something is amiss. We did not hear *Kpom* to tell us that the palm branch has been cut before we heard *waa* when it crashed through the bush (p. 226).

With this expression, the old man means that he did not hear of the news of Elewa’s marriage to Ikem, but was invited for the naming of the child. By implication therefore, Ikem did not marry Elewa. Among the Urhobos in Delta State, the above expression is rendered as ‘*O de she kpoo ko she waa*’. This proverb holds clear meaning for people who are familiar with palm fruit harvesting or palm wine tapping, an occupation in many Communities in Africa. “Kpom and Waa” are onomatopoeic. When the tapper strikes the palm branch with the cutlass, it is accompanied by a “Kpom-Like” sound. In

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the context of the novel, it implies the authority to begin a thing. The fall of the branch is accompanied by a “waa” sound, which in this context implies completion and success. Thus, the old man expected Ikem to Marry Elewa before impregnating her.

While offering prayers at the child naming ceremony, the old man makes a toast in Igbo, although transliterated to English:

Everybody's life
Isẹ
The life of Bassa
Isẹ
The life of Kangan
Isẹ (p. 229)

English version should have been ‘A toast for the prosperity of everybody, Bassa and Kangan’. Before beginning his speech, the old man has said “Everyman his own, everyman his due (p. 128). This is the same as saying: “All protocols duely observed”. The use of these expressions and English words with African referents, does not only promote African culture, but also helps in stimulating and nourishing the thought of the African child and reader (Akpojisher, 2004, P. 103).

People can figure out things and ideas that a language has created by naming. It is because people find in their language words like *snow*, *apple*, *fox*, *crimson*, *fig tree*, *mustard seed*, etc, that they are able to philosophize about them. No wonder, Jesus Christ with His vast knowledge, did not use *Udala* seed, *Ukwa*, *Mfin* or *Utiẹ* in His teaching. The intention was to make meaning clear to His followers. Hence, he used words like *fig tree*, *mustard seed*, *mountain*, which were within His immediate reach.

In *Anthills*, Achebe made copious use of proverbs, similes, metaphors and local imagery. Fayose (1995) posits that proverbs are instrument for creating ‘vernacular’ style in English because they reveal the local speech patterns of various Nigerian languages.

Literary Relevance of Local Imagery, Metaphors and Proverbs

In the novel, although, Achebe focuses on political corruption, poor leadership and oppression in a contemporary African nation, he could not but fall back on the resources of his Igbo culture and language. For instance, in the context where it is used, the expression *chalked-eye* symbolizes a warrior who is equipped for war. To demonstrate the battle between the weak and strong. Achebe in *Anthills* uses the folktale of a duel between tortoise and leopard.

According to Orisawayi (2000), such linguistic outlines and guide posts could not, in the descriptive process be totally divorced from literary considerations and evaluative judgments. The literary relevance of the lexical

choice is anchored on the fact that such choices enable Achebe to satisfy his African and Western audience. Orisawayi (1989, p. 52): further states that such lexical choices cannot be best perceived or evaluated in isolation. Their effectiveness and the freshness they bring into the creative use of language sparkle in their syntactic context, and their context of situation which render their semantic interpretation plausible. According to him, the untranslated lexical items require no glossing, or extraneous explanation because narrative context clues provide guideposts for comprehending the sentences where they occur.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A study of some Achebe's novels often reveals two assumptions. One has to do with the situation of English being taught, learnt and used inevitably in Nigeria in the context of second language. No matter how teachers and learners strive to approximate native speaker competence, socio-cultural and linguistic forces continue to exert pressure on its lexical and in some cases, the syntactic systems, which produce discernable characteristics that are largely localized to those nonnative areas into which English has been imported.

A second assumption is that literature is a very powerful medium for influencing language use and development particularly in the younger members of the society. This enables the students to identify the speech styles of characters, their lexical choices, idioms and expression easily because such expressions and lexical choices are close to their immediate experience and are imbued with a pictorial freshness not easily displaceable by the remote idioms of British and American English. Moreso, such expressions in African literature, help in inculcating in the child rich African heritage.

The symbiotic association between Achebe's English and literature thus, blossoms. While lexical choices help him to achieve his purpose of promoting African culture on the one hand, it promotes the frontier of English as an international language on the other.

The following recommendations are made:

- i. African literature, especially those for children should be awash with proverbs, local imagery and words with African referent. This will help in developing African cultural heritage.
- ii. Nollywood stars should be encouraged to use African proverbs, local imagery and metaphor in their utterances when they are shooting films.
- iii. Lastly, institutions of learning and the mass media should promote the use of proverbs and local imagery.

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