

A Study on Chinua Achebe's Use of Proverbs in Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease

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Abstract: In all of his five novels, Chinua Achebe creatively uses oral cultural elements such as proverbs, folktales, myths etc. to convey different messages. Proverbs, in particular, give a special character to his writing. His use of Ibo proverbs reveals his strategy to make a foreign language his own and his endeavour to make it express African sensibilities. His dexterity in the use of proverbs lies in the way he manipulates their application to suit the different social, cultural and political contexts portrayed in the novels. He uses them skilfully and in a restrained manner so that they do not appear imposed and forced. Proverbs used in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel set in a rural oral society and in *No Longer at Ease*, a novel set in an urban literate society mark how Achebe's handling of the African oral cultural element is not mechanical, but strategic and highly manipulative.

Key words: Africa, Ibos, modernity, proverbs, tradition.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Postcolonial literature, Chinua Achebe occupies an important position. As an African writer, he was determined to carry forward his counter-discourse against European colonial discourse in order to prove that "Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape — it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position." (Achebe, *Thoughts* 92) Therefore, from the very beginning of his literary career, Achebe endeavours to restore the beauty and value of the African cultural past. Achebe said that he wrote *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a protest against what he finds as misrepresentation of African culture and people in the works of western writers like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad, and that his fight is not against any individual author but is against the whole western colonial discourse which advocates a biased and incorrect image of the continent and its people. Achebe's attempt is to challenge racism and to secure a respectable status for his people. One way in which Achebe stressed the humanity of Africans was to show the rich oral skills of the Ibos in pre-colonial and early colonial periods.

Achebe accomplishes his mission of emphasising the humanity of Africans by drawing heavily from African oral literature. Achebe finds it necessary to unlock the treasures of Africa's oral cultural heritage and prove that the African oral tradition is a rich and varied medium of expression. He manages to manipulate the English language with the infusion of numerous Ibo legends, proverbs, riddles, moral tales and myths. But it is not merely a process of sprinkling a few proverbs and myths here and there; it is a much more complicated task. Through his language, Achebe attempts to capture the entire mental make-up of the African people, penetrate the past and give his readers the experience of the whole culture. Commenting on Achebe's use of language, Simon Gikandi says: "Although we read the world of the Igbo in English, Achebe goes out of his way to use figures of speech, most notably proverbs and sayings, to give readers a sense of how this culture might have represented itself to counter the highly regimented and stereotyped language of the colonizer." (11) Thus Achebe tries to capture the psyche of his people, their emotions, aspirations, idealism and dilemmas by subverting the language and by making it say the African story from an African viewpoint.

The incorporation of the elements of African oral culture in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is Achebe's calculative strategy to prove African humanity to the world. But Achebe does not stop just at that. All his subsequent novels show how he uses the oral elements to serve his purpose of telling the true story about Africa. The following discussion will concentrate on a study on Achebe's use of the elements of oral culture especially proverbs in two of his novels set in two different historical time periods.

II. ACHEBE'S STRATEGY IN HIS USE OF PROVERBS

Oral traditions of Africa can be categorized in many different ways. These traditions, manifested as "formal speech communication, in some circumstances coexisting with music in form of song, or with instrument, and dance, generated an almost unimaginable range of genres." (Gunner 67) These oral genres such

as myth, legend, anecdote, song, proverb, riddle, sayings etc. together come under what is called African oral literature. The elaborate use of proverbs renders a special character to the writing. For Achebe, African proverbs have great literary value; their use authenticates the language, making non-African readers realize the linguistic patterns of African people. He observes:

Those who wonder why literate Africans take so little interest in collecting their proverbs may not be fully aware that proverbs by themselves have little significance. They are like dormant seeds lying in the dry-season earth, waiting for the rain. In Igbo they serve two important ends. They enable the speaker to give universal status to a special and particular incident and they are used to soften the harshness of words and make them more palatable. (Foreword, *A Selection of African Prose*. viii)

The most important point in Achebe's use of proverbs is reflected in their adaptability and variability. Achebe dexterously demonstrates the complex workings of the human mind through his use of proverbs. Achebe's ingenuity lies in the fact that, while he successfully maintains the use of proverbs in each of his five novels, he shows how the use of proverbs undergoes transformation in accordance with the changing contexts of his novels. His use of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* as well as subsequent novels accomplishes the twofold function of Africanizing English and upholding the great resource of African wisdom. Through the use of proverbs, Achebe attempts to establish that Africans had authentic linguistic codes with which they defined life and the world around them. Oral narrative traditions find a 'literary' place for them in his novels, and his writing is invigorated by the energy of these oral traditions.

III. USE OF PROVERBS IN THINGS FALL APART

Set in the rural background of Iboland, *Things Fall Apart* is filled with detailed description of the lives of the Ibos. The subject matter of *Things Fall Apart* is the encounter between the British colonizers and the native people of Iboland. It presents the fictionalized history of Iboland approximately during 1850-1900, when the colonizers and missionaries entered Iboland and began expanding their activities. Ibos lived in many villages across Iboland, but Achebe concentrates on one imaginary location, a village called Umuofia. Achebe shows the colourful and vibrant community life of the Ibos and also the disruption of the same as a result of the extension of the colonial administration in Iboland.

The setting of *Things Fall Apart* gives Achebe ample opportunity to incorporate proverbs, myths, folktales etc. into the narrative. The society of *Things Fall Apart* is purely an oral society where people regarded words as sacred and hence their utterances bore utmost significance. In portraying the pre-colonial Ibos of Umuofia having systematic social, cultural, educational, administrative and judiciary arrangements, Achebe uses the proverbs, myths and folktales as the depositories of values and customs. He gives expression to the philosophy of the Ibo world through the proverbs and myths. He shows that the community could exist as a unified entity because of their strong adherence to the values and ideals embedded in the proverbs.

Achebe surprises the reader by giving expression to the complexities of the issues of the time in rather simple language. But a close reading of the novel shows that the simple vocabulary and syntax may have been deliberately used by Achebe to contrast his language with Conrad's. In his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", Achebe draws attention to Conrad's use of adjectives in describing Africa and Africans. For example: "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention", (183) "We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil", (185) Achebe says that Conrad's insistence on adjectives "raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity." ("An Image" 5) So, while Conrad used complicated language to create a distorted image of Africa, Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, resorts to straight-forward language to show the real Africa. His demonstration of the dexterity with which Ibos used words is, of course, also an answer to what he took to be Conrad's fictional representation of Africans as people without language. However, Achebe enlivens the language by infusing elements of Ibo oral tradition and refashioning the imperialist language for his own use.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the significance of community and kinship is emphasized through a number of proverbs. Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu said that kinsmen are more precious than money and it is kinship that separates human beings from animals. He stresses his point with a proverb: "An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him." (165) The interdependence of one person on the other or the relationship between the individual and his/her society is thus expressed. Again, the oneness of the community is suggested even in this proverb with a warning: "if one finger brought oil it soiled the others" (125) Achebe shows that it is not only in words but also in deeds that Ibos follow these lessons. That individuals are not above the community is proved when Okonkwo is severely punished for breaking the Week of Peace and is banished from Umuofia for killing a clansman as these activities are believed to put the whole community

in grave danger i.e. the wrath of *Ani* who is the goddess of morality. Belief in the goddess *Ani* was thus an effective strategy to ensure discipline in the society.

Though Ibos placed collective welfare and community sentiment above all, they nevertheless gave utmost importance to man's individual success and achievement. This is highlighted through a number of proverbs: "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings", (8) "a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness", (19) "the lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did", (21) "when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his *chi* agreed." (27) etc. The proverb about *chi* emphasises the fact that "among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father." (8) This proverb implies the significance of perseverance, will power and dedication to succeed in life. In other words, the proverb seems to valorize individual effort for success. Achebe exemplifies these proverbs through the character of Okonkwo who succeeds in life by dint of his dedication and will-power.

While community sentiment and personal success are important aspects of Ibo life and culture, Ibos also profess the ideals of adaptability and tolerance. The adaptability of Ibo culture is suggested by the proverb: "Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching." (22) Social harmony, equality and interdependence seem to be suggested by the proverb: "let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break." (19) When Enoch, a converted Christian, committed the crime of unmasking an *egwugwu* in public, all the masked *egwugwu* of Umuofia assembled in the marketplace. After demolishing Enoch's compound, they moved towards the church in order to destroy it as they thought it to be the only way to pacify the spirit of the clan. Before demolishing the church, an *egwugwu* demonstrates the sense of equality and democracy suggested by the proverb about the kite and the eagle when he says to Mr. Smith, a Christian missionary: "You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the god and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt." (190) Achebe shows that these people who have "survived through adapting and learning to fly without perching, will ultimately be left without any place to perch as the colonial government takes over." (Innes 114) Thus these proverbs do not merely enhance the beauty of the language, but they also make the readers understand the value of the culture that was shattered in the process of colonialism.

Emmanuel Obiechina says that in Achebe's novels, proverbs are interwoven to the mainline narrative and they render an organic unity to the plot. In his words: "Each narrative proverb is a vital tributary to the main flow of the narrative, or to use a botanical metaphor, a substantial branch on the main stem of the giant tree." (126) Therefore, proverbs merge with the flow of the language without appearing forceful or imposed.

IV. USE OF PROVERBS IN *NO LONGER AT EASE*

While *Things Fall Apart* is set in rural Iboland, the backdrop of *No Longer at Ease* (1960) is an urban city, Lagos. Set on the eve of Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule, *No Longer at Ease* is marked by Achebe's close critical observation of the society while understanding its many dimensions as an insider. What Achebe is involved with in *No Longer at Ease* is an exploration of the process of change that occurred in African society because of western modernity introduced by colonialism. With the portrayal of urbanization, industrialization, modern city life, western educated city dwellers in *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe hints that modernity is not all positive as it came like a wave that washed away old, traditional values that have always stood as a mark of identity for the African people. Thus the socio-cultural context of *No Longer at Ease* is quite different from that of *Things Fall Apart*, and different linguistic skills are required to present and evaluate such a complex scenario. Achebe devises his linguistic strategy in such a way that it proves successful in dealing with the urban setting of *No Longer at Ease*.

Achebe's use of proverbs in the novel involves an attempt to secure a place for orality in the written tradition. This transplantation of Ibo proverbs from the rural setting of oral society into the urban milieu is a means to prove the adaptability of orality in the literate society. In the new urban setting, the proverbs seem to remind one of the losses effected by colonial modernity — the loss of the old, stable order of traditional, pre-modern oral society. Chantal Zabus who calls Achebe a 'proverbalizer' observes that the novelist, by "bastardizing the terse form of the *ilú* [proverb] and vulgarizing its meaning" (158) attempts to prove the validity of African oral tradition by establishing a link with the present moment. This way he prepares his language to accommodate the changing time and sentiments.

The hero of the novel is Obi who completes his higher study in England on the sponsorship of Umuofia Progressive Union, a group of Umuofians residing at Lagos. Achebe shows that these people, amidst the conflicting situations of the country, are integrated in their values and views. Before leaving for England, the villagers advise him: "We are sending you to learn books. Enjoyment can wait. Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasure of the world like the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come." (12) After returning, they compare him with the wrestler who has come back defeating the spirits in a foreign land. They are proud of Obi who has achieved greatness. They liken greatness to the iroko tree:

You cannot plant greatness as you plant yams or maize. Who ever planted an iroko tree – the greatest tree in the forest? You may collect all the iroko seeds in the world, open the soil and put them there. It will be in vain. The great tree chooses where to grow and we find it there, so it is with greatness in men.” (62)

Later on, when one of the members of the Umuofia Progressive Union expresses his reservation about helping Obi in the bribery case because the crime has already been proved and helping him would only be a waste of money, he is told that Obi's foolishness can be discussed later as “The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush.” (6) The sense of kinship and solidarity among members is even more strongly evident when they come together to save Obi from being imprisoned. In spite of Obi's aloofness, the Umuofians are determined to fight for him in the court because they believe in the proverb that a “kinsman in trouble had to be saved, not blamed; anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone.” (6)

No Longer at Ease also highlights another important issue of the time i.e. the failure of the idea of the nation. While the Ibo language stands for wisdom and moral values, Obi finds that the Ibos are unable to break the boundary of community sentiment and reach out to the nation as a whole. So they confine themselves within the boundary of their community, and their sentiments do not reach up to the national level. The language that the characters use demonstrates their attitude towards the new nation and the new political set up. Because of this inability to reach beyond the community level, they do not see Obi's corrupt practice as harmful to the economy of the country. Actually they are not at all critical towards Obi as they believe that “If you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one.” (7)

That is why, later on, when Obi steps out of his pleasure car to attend one of the monthly meetings of the UPU, they feel extremely happy and encourage Obi in his material achievements as they believe in the proverb: “A man who lived on the banks of the Niger should not wash his hands with spittle.” (11) That they give more importance to community sentiments than to save the country from corruption becomes apparent when they expect Obi to use his position in restoring Joshua's job which he has lost due to negligence of duty. They justify their approaching Obi for the favour as they believe in the proverb: “Shall we kill a snake and carry it in our hand when we have a bag for putting long things in?” (91)

Obi who is initially determined to keep himself away from the rampant corruption finds that his mother tongue cannot be a medium to address the nation as a whole. In fact, he sees it to be used to encourage and practice communalism that ultimately stands against national concerns. When Obi finds it extremely difficult to meet the demands coming from his personal and social relations, he starts taking bribes. He finds nothing strange in asserting his individuality and breaking away from the organization as they themselves say “Ours is ours, but mine is mine.” (36) In this way the clash between cultural solidarity and modern individualism takes place.

Thus Achebe's apt use of proverbs shows how the African society, on the doorstep of independence, was negotiating modern ideas with traditional values. *No Longer at Ease* points out the great divides that were needed to be bridged as the country was going to be independent.

Thus, the shift from a colonial rural society of *Things Fall Apart* to a pre-independence urban centre in *No Longer at Ease* is marked by Achebe's expert handling of proverbs through which he attempts to portray not only a vastly changed society but also the moral issues of the time. In the multicultural and multilingual city of Lagos in *No Longer at Ease*, truth and reality are now measured not by traditional wisdom but by materialistic values introduced by colonial modernity. Achebe captures the transformation from rural to urban, traditional to modern, community to nation etc. through the use of proverbs. He shows how traditional wisdom embedded in proverbs is now misappropriated to justify materialistic values and narrow community sentiments.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus Chinua Achebe has demonstrated remarkable skill in his strategic use of proverbs. The elaborate use of proverbs by Achebe is intended not only to portray African culture but also to prove that African oral literature can be the means of enriching novelistic writing. While proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* successfully gives expression of the sensibilities of a pre colonial Ibo society, proverbs in *No Longer at Ease* point out the moral, cultural and social divides of the time. Thus Achebe creatively uses this particular oral cultural elements i.e. proverbs to convey different messages. His dexterity in the use of oral elements lies in the way he manipulates their application to suit the different social, cultural and political contexts portrayed in the novels. Through the use of proverbs, Achebe reviews the past, examines the present and assesses the future. This particular linguistic strategy imparts a distinctive characteristic to Achebe's writings.

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