



**Proverbs, Context and Meaning: An Analysis of Selected Proverbs in Ola Rotimi's
*Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again***

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Abstract

Proverbs as an aspect of language repertoire have proven to be a tool for effective communication. Little wonder that Nigerian literary artists often use them as part of their communicative strategies in their literary expressions. Therefore, the paper investigates use of proverbs in Ola Rotimi's Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again. Varied definitions of proverbs, their forms and content are examined. Also, a synopsis of the text is undertaken to project panoramic view of the plot of the play. Twelve proverbs are identified in the text but six are purposely selected for analysis. Since proverbs are never used in a vacuum, the analysis is thus sensitive to the textual context in which they are used. Basically, the analysis reveals that proverbs are effectively used to project the thematic preoccupations of the text. Besides, they help to deepen the meaning of events in text; they illuminates the plots and they are efficacious tools for characterization in the text. The paper concludes that proverbs will continue to be prominent in Nigeria's literary craftsmanship because of their effectiveness in literary communication.

Keywords: Definition, forms and content of proverbs, synopsis of the play and methodology.

Introduction

Proverbs usage is a common phenomenon in language repertoire of African people. This simply points to the significance of proverbs in African culture. While proverbs are regarded as informal feature of language in Europe and America, to the Africans, especially Nigerian people, proverbs are freely used in both formal and informal contexts. For the Yoruba people of Nigeria, proverbs play a very significant role in their society. to say the least, they encapsulate the culture, beliefs, customs, values and worldview of the people. This account for why it is unlikely for any communicatively competent Yoruba to talk without garnishing his/her utterances with proverbs. In the light of this, Adedimeji (2003)

asserts that “expressions are not considered rich and intelligent except when they are duly laced with proverbs” (p.56). Corroborating this view, Akporobaro (2006) argues that “in the social life of the Yoruba people, the proverb constitutes a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs” (p.93). He stresses further that “one is likely to be struck by the way that the proverb has become so interwoven with living speech of the Yoruba that the proverb can be heard at any time and occasion” (p.93). In view of this reality, it is thus not surprising that Yoruba literary artists just like their other Nigeria counterparts often use proverbs in their literary expressions to communicate deeper meaning. For the purpose of this study, attempt is made to examine use of proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. The paper seeks to investigate how proverbs are used to project the thematic preoccupation of the text.

Proverbs: Definitions, Forms and Content

Proverbs are popular sayings, and many have attempted varied but related definitions. Whiting (1932) explains that “a proverb is a short saying of philosophic nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than of the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because it has been a semblance of the universal truth” (p.273). Akmajian, A., Demers, R. A., Farmer, A. K., Haruish, R. M. (2003) describe proverbs as “traditional saying having a fixed (general) sentential form, alluding to a common truth or general wisdom, with some (rudimentary) literary value, used to guide action, explain a situation, or induce a feeling or attitude. (p.367). Lau, K. J., Tokofskys P. I., & Winicks, S. D. (2004) defines it as “message passed between and among people... brief and pithy, wise and witty, rhetorically forceful but discreetly indirect” (p.2). In her description, Sheba (2006) describes it “apparent truth reflecting human experiences” (p.viii). Expressing similar view, Famakinwa (2009) notes that “a proverb is a simple and concrete saying popularly known and repeated with the aim of expressing basic truth in common sense and practical experience of humankind” (p.246). All these definitions point to the fact that proverbs are not only popular among Africans but very significant in their communicative behaviour.

Forms of proverbs are classified into three. According to Finnegan in Akporobaro (2006) “three cardinal points constitute the form of proverbs: shortness, sense and salt” (p.71). Shortness relates to size in terms of usual characteristic brevity and catchiness of proverbs. Sense has to do with the message, the content and the profound meaning of potential proverbs. And salt refers to linguistic style in which proverbs are captured. The varying stylistic devices such as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, pun, rhyme, etc. make proverbs spicy. According to Adedimeji (2009) “it is the combination of these three elements or at least the presence of one that makes proverbs memorable” (p.546).

In terms of content, Osani (2008) submits that “proverbs may refer to any situation because proverbs emanate from the reservoir of people's collective history, knowledge and wisdom” (p.96). For him, proverbs embody people's norms and values, thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Therefore, they reflect and articulate a people's philosophy, mythology and religion as well as their empirical observations of their physical and social environment.

Synopsis of the Play *Our husband Has Gone Made Again*

The play opens with Lejoka Brown's resignation from the army to take care of his father's cocoa farm, his preparation to contest in an election and reception of his wife, Liza

from America, who arrives earlier than scheduled and her discovery that her husband has two other wives, Mama Rashida and Sikira. On arrival from the airport, Liza rebuffs and accuses Lejoka Brown of insincerity in terms of his polygamous status. Hence, Liza threatens not to be treated as a wife but a guest. Initially, their living together is full of strife but later they allow harmony to prevail.

Liza becomes a woman liberation crusader. She gives Mama Rasida and Sikira lessons about how to live independently and be liberated. In Act 2 scene 3, Liza speaks to the two women about equality between male and female. She lays emphasis on the need for Nigerian women to form their own political party. When their husband arrives Sikira puts on the dress sewn for her by Liza. To Lejoka Brown, it is not right for a cultured woman to put on such a dress. Sikira, for the first time, would not want to obey her husband by removing the dress. This leads to a serious crisis between Brown and Sikira on one hand, and Liza and Sikira on the other hand. The conflict leads to emanation of three new rules from Lejoka Brown: one, Liza's dress must cover her body properly, she must stop smoking and start acting as a real wife. While the disagreement between Liza and their husband is going on, Sikira packs her things and moves back to her parents' house, with the conviction that "Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again" (p.59).

In Act 2 scene 4, the members of National Liberation Party address a press conference in Lejoka Brown's house. The host uses the opportunity to explain to the press that all is well with their party. He has a snapshot with Mallam Gasikiya, the Deputy Leader and Osagie, the Secretary General of the party. The arrival of Liza in her swim-suit makes Lejoka Brown order everybody into a kneeling position, so that they would not see his wife's nakedness. In reaction to the embarrassment in Brown's home, the other party executive members meet and remove Lejoka Brown as their party's candidate. Madam Ajanaku, Sikira's mother reports Lejoka Brown to other party executive members. Eventually, she requests that the market women be given room to present the political flag bearer of the party. Also in this scene, Lejoka Brown pleads with Liza not to leave him. Brown explains to Liza how he comes about the first two wives. Mama Rasida is married to him through inheritance while Sikira is married for political strategic reasons, so that he could win the election. Hence, if Brown could become a minister, Liza would have a husband of her dream. Information is brought to Lejoka Brown that he has been voted out of office. Liza restrains Lejoka Brown from fighting back. There is a resolution of the misunderstanding between Liza and Brown. Okonkwo, Lejoka's friend, brings news that Sikira has been appointed as a replacement of Lejoka Brown, which is shocking and unexpected and indeed the climax of the play. With the resolution of the conflicts in the play, Lejoka Brown becomes satisfied with Liza and foregoes his political ambition and Liza promises not to leave Lejoka Brown forever.

The central preoccupation of the text is to present the major socio-political experience of many African countries, especially Nigeria, immediately after independence. The three major themes that clearly manifest in the text are: polygamy as a normal phenomenon in the lives of traditional African people; post independence intra-party leadership crisis; and influence of foreign ideology on Nigerian women, that is, feminism

and the struggle of African women to liberate themselves from men's domination.

Methodology

In the entire text, twelve proverbs are identified. However, six proverbs are purposively selected for analysis in this study. These six proverbs are very significant to the themes of the play and also significant for character portrayal in the text. More importantly, to allow for economy of space so that the analysis will be compact and concise.

The six selected proverbs are:

1. A tree that seeks a task of brute humiliation may dare the reality of an elephant in a headlong thrust (p.ix).
2. Man-u way go chop-u frog, make he kuku chop-u di frog-u way get-i egg-i for belle! (p.5).
3. A paddler doesn't say a crocodile has an ugly lump on its snout, until he has safely crossed the river (p.29).
4. Two bulls can't drink from the same bucket at the same time ... (p. 44).
5. When the vine entwines your roof. It is time to cut it (p. 66).
6. Man way carry ogbono soup-pot for hand, and di man way carry foo-foo for head, na who go fin who go? (p. 68).

For the purpose of analysis, we shall write-out the extract in which each of these proverbs are used in order to provide the context in which each proverb arises.

Analysis and Discussion

EXTRACT 1

Agemo o se je	The chameleon is no food.
Agemo o se je	Indeed
Eni ba fori so le a foju so kun	The chameleon is no delicacy. The impact of the human head on hard ground commands tears from the eyes!
Lejoka-Brown l' anteriba fun	The reality of Lejoka-Brown's presence itself commands instant awe!
Igi t'o l'owun yio f' oju di ajanaku	The tree that seeks a taste of brute humiliation
A fori s' ole, erin a gori re k'oja	may dare the reality of an elephant
A k'ori s' igbo	in a headlong thrust!
Agemo o se je	Indeed the chameleon is no food! (p.ix)

The extract is a song composed to suit its context and purpose. Proverb like any other feature of language can be expressed through the medium of song. The extract points to the fact that in political campaigns in Nigeria, use of songs is a veritable tool of expression. It is often used to praise a politician or political party and to denigrate the opponent. The proverb in the extract is laced with metaphors. Elephant is the metaphor for Lejoka Brown while a tree is any political opponent. In Yoruba worldview, elephant is the most formidable animal in the forest because of its size and strength. And when it moves there is no tree that can obstruct its movement. In other words, no tree is a match for elephant

and it is only a tree that seeks humiliation will dare withstand the elephant.

Therefore, Lejoka Brown is the elephant in the political terrain and any other contestant is a tree that cannot match him or withstand him. The proverb is hyperbolic. It projects Lejoka Brown as a formidable, fearful, and larger than life politician. The underlining meaning of the proverb is that Lejoka Brown is an overconfident, arrogant and ruthless politician. Over-confident because, he sees himself as the most outstanding. Arrogant because he compares his opponent to a tree and ruthless because he is ready to make his opponent to have a taste of brute humiliation for daring to challenge him.

EXTRACT 2

OKONKWO. Major Rahman Lejoka-Brown! Yarn me boh!
Ehen, so you're now in full time politics!

LEJOKA-BROWN. Are you there...? Politics is the thing
now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You
want chop life? – Na politics... Once we get elected to the
top, *wallahi**, we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls
of the National chin-chin

LEJOKA-BROWN. Abi? Yoruba man say: “**man-u way go
chop-u frog, make he kuku chop-u di one-u way get-I
egg-I for belle!**” Abi, no be so? (p. 4–5).

The proverb is rendered in pidgin English. this portrays the protagonist of the play Lejoka Brown as a polyglot. The background to the proverb reveals the distortion that an average Nigerian politician has brought to the concept of politics. Indeed it is quite revealing. For Lejoka Brown, “politics is the thing now in Nigeria”. The word “thing” as used by Lejoka brown seems ambiguous or vague but it can rather be deduced from the verbal context of his utterance. The word “thing” stands for: “to be famous”, to chop a big slice of the national cake”. And once he and his horts get elected their preoccupation is to “stuff themselves with huge (not small) mouthfuls of national chin-chin”.

Sadly, this shows that in Nigerian politics, the aim is not to serve but for personal aggrandizement, and that the motivation for winning election is not to use the resources of the country for the welfare of the populace but for self-enrichment. Lejoka Brown does not believe in dignity of labour. He has a cocoa plantation as his inheritance but this does not mean much to him. He incorrigibly sees politics as the shortest and easiest route to overnight wealth! This distortion accounts for why politics has become a “do or die” affair in Nigeria. Therefore, the proverb depicts deep-sited greed, avarice and crookedness that characterized Nigerian politicians.

EXTRACT 3

OKONKWO. If I were you, Major, I'd go easy with Liza, at
least, till the elections are over; treat her like an egg.

**A paddler doesn't say a crocodile has an ugly lump on its
snout, until he has safely crossed the river!**

LEJOKA-BROWN. You can tell her if you like. But don't

just start talking blo-blo-blo-blo-blo ... like an over-beaten war prisoner. (p. 29).

The proverb is a form of advice and warning given by Okonkwo to his friend Lejoka brown. Lejoka Brown is the proverbial paddler while Liza, his American wife is the proverbial crocodile that must be carefully managed in order to prevent her from checkmating his political carrier. The ugly lump on the crocodile snout is the anticipated negative reaction of Liza when she gets to know that Lejoka Brown has two other wives. Brown is counselled to make Liza feel at home first before explaining to her the reason for polygamy. Lejoka Brown has to be careful because his marriage to Liza takes place in a court registry, which means their marriage is to be monogamous.

However, Lejoka Brown finds himself in a complex situation. He has to marry Mama Rashida (the wife of his late elder brother) as culture demands. His foray into politics necessitates some political strategies for survival. Hence he has to marry Sikira (the daughter of market women leader) in order to get support from market women, a factor which is very crucial for winning election. His intention is to make Liza the first lady when he wins election. Given this scenario, Okonkwo advises his friend to treat Liza like an egg that could be broken if not well handled. Again, the egg is a metaphor for Liza who needs to be cajoled to understand and accept the situation and actions of Lejoka Brown. Indeed, for Lejoka Brown to successfully paddle through the milky water of politics and eventually win a political office, he needs not be confrontational with Liza on harsh reality of his polygamous family life.

EXTRACT 4

LEJOKA-BROWN. A-ah! Why now?

Listen, Liza ...

I swear, I'm going to do my best to treat you well in this house because no matter what, you are my wife, and I will remain head. Hear me? I want peace in this house, true. But you can't set your separate rules and hand me an ultimatum.

Oooh no, Woman. **Two bulls can't drink from the same bucket at the same time: they will lock horns!**(p. 44).

The proverb arises against the background of culture clash. Liza is an American. In her culture, women enjoy unfettered liberty and freedom. Man and woman are deemed to be equal. Even in marriage, the husband and wife have equal standing. No one is regarded as superior to the other. In fact, western society favours women than even men. Therefore, women are expressive, assertive and opinionated. The opposite is the case in African culture. They are to be submissive to their husbands. They are to obey "rules" set by men and not to hand down "ultimatum".

Liza is completely oblivious of African culture. She teaches the older wives to seek freedom from Lejoka's domination, which eventually leads to Sikira's rebellion against her husband. She always square it up with Lejoka. The African culture of "husband is the head does not make sense to her. Therefore, out of frustration Lejoka has to make this proverb to

Liza. In a family, by African culture, there can only be one bull (the husband). The bucket is a representation of a family. The water is the affairs of a family which is expected to be directed by the husband. Where a wife is not submissive but contest instructions at home it is tantamount to two bulls drinking from the same bucket and the result will be conflict that will eventually tear apart the family. Through the proverb, Lejoka counters Liza's philosophy of women liberation or gender equality. He reiterates the need for Liza to adjust to her new environment by accepting men's superiority.

EXTRACT 5

MALLAM GASKIYA. The Emergency Committee of the National Liberation Party will now resume its deliberations.
OSAGIE. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr Lejoka-Brown's disgraceful behaviour at the news conference this evening has further demonstrated his outright contempt for, and gross callousness towards the feeling and dignity of members of our beloved Party! ...
My beloved brothers and sisters, I appeal to you! In the proverbial wisdom of our forebears – **when the vine entwines your roof ... it is time to cut it!**(p.65 – 66).

The proverb encapsulates excesses and ignoble behaviour of Lejoka Brown and the punishment that follows. Osagie, a member of National Liberation Party utters the proverb out of anger and in reaction to the disgraceful way Lejoka Brown treats his fellow party members. The vine is a metaphor for Lejoka Brown. Though a harmless plant, the vine is not expected to entwine with the roof because it will eventually destroy it. That is, it is dangerous and threatening for the vine to do so. And when such happens the appropriate reaction is to cut it off. In other words, Lejoka's misdeed is dangerous and threatening to the party and therefore he should be cut off by replacing his candidacy.

EXTRACT 6

MADAM AJANAKU. Dat na too much grammar. We want woman candidate – una 'gree abi una no 'gree. We no dey beg una. Political Party dem bocoo* for country; dem dey wait for we vote.
MALLAM GASKIYA [*leading executives members out*]. We shall be back in about fifteen minutes.
MADAMAJANAKU. Na una sabi!
Man wey carry Ogbono* soup-pot for hand, and di man wey carry foo-foo* for head, na who go fin' who go?(p. 68).

The internal crisis that ensues within National Liberation Party accounts for this proverb. The proverb is rendered in pidgin English which depicts Madam Ajanaku that uses the proverb as an illiterate market woman. The proverb indicates internal crisis within the

party: “man way carry ogbono soup-pot” and “di man way carry foo-foo for head”. The former represents the women while the latter stands for the men. Because of their numerical advantage in the party, they suddenly become bold to assert their choice in the party. They know for sure that if they don't have their way the party will eventually lose the general election.

The proverb is a pointer to the fact that in party system in Nigeria, there are factions within the party and the stronger faction often take advantage of the situation to impose its will on the party. This often lead to imposition of narrow interest or mediocrity. Is it not surprising that Madam Ajanaku nominates Sikira her daughter to replace Lejoka Brown? This is a case of nepotism. This reveals that the way political parties are organized and run in Nigeria does not allow for credible candidates to emerge, rather self-interest prevails.

Conclusion

The investigation into use of proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* has shown that proverbs are not only useful in casual conversation but they are equally effective tools in literary communication. In they play, it is clear that proverbs are used to capture despicable characters, internal crisis, thuggery, crude tactics and corrupt tendencies that characterizes Nigerian politics. Also, traditional culture of polygamy, male domination and gender conflicts are enunciated by use for proverbs in the text. Generally, it is realized that the environment, status, social experience, linguistic competence and field of discourse determines appropriate proverbs to be used in a specific context. In sum, Ola Rotimi, like other Nigerian writers has successfully deployed proverbs as an effective communicative strategy in his literary work and this will certainly boost use of proverbs in other genre of literary works because of their salient effectiveness.

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