

Proverb as a language technique in Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*

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Abstract

*The effective use of language determines the writer's relevance, uniqueness and acceptance by the desired audience. This feeling of relevancy, acceptance and uniqueness is easily found in most African oral tradition, one of which is proverb. The use of proverb as a language technique by most African playwrights is ultimately aimed at creating more effective communication for the desired audience. It is also an avenue for upholding and promoting the traditional African oral tradition. Using the qualitative research, this paper studies the use of proverb as a language technique in the play, *Echoes of Madness* by Emeka Nwabueze. The aim is to examine the use of proverb for effective communication in written literature. This paper reveals that proverb is a language technique that is applicable for every situational use.*

Introduction

Language is a very important instrument for every literary artist. The acceptability of every literary work relies heavily on the language and style of the writer. This is because the language of every society is an integral part of its culture (Asomugha Chibuzo, 42). Language is the spoken or written method of communication that consists of words used in a structural manner. Emenyeonu N. defines it as “any code employed for giving, receiving, hiding and distorting information” (73).

Language is the medium of communication and expression of inner thoughts and feelings using words and or signs.

Contributing towards the concept of language, Asomugha C., opines that “language denotes the functions, the capacity with which man is naturally gifted to express himself and communicate with his own kind through the word” (39). It is the vital key for effective communication, the absence of which will result to communication gap that can be catastrophic for the concerned individuals. Ezeama P.A. adds that “language is an essential factor in forging what our conception of reality is” (69). According to Asomugha, through language, man becomes the carrier of information...”(40). The views and customs of the people is easily reflected in the language of the people. Because language is the means by which communication is achieved, it thereafter follows that for writers to communicate effectively to their readers, a language technique has to be developed for effective communicator. This is because as Asomugha puts it, “the human life is mirrored in language” (42).

One language technique that is rapidly gaining the attention of African writers is proverb. This may be as a result of the fact that African writers have come to realize the importance of this oral tradition in distinguishing African literature from literature written in English.

Commenting on Achebe’s international reputation as an African author, Rems, Umueasiagbu opines that “this rests partly on his (Achebe) ability to utilize and re-create successfully the folklore of his people in his works” (65).

Researchers have come to realize that proverb is a very effective tool in communication and a vital instrument in promoting African literature. Judging from the different opinions of various scholars regarding the concepts of proverbs, one can

succinctly assert that proverb is a special language technique that is capable of elevating the works of the literary artist by giving it a unique taste.

According to Donatus Nwoga “proverb is a terse statement which figuratively gives expression to the point of traditional wisdom relevant to a given situation” (16). Proverbs are usually short sentences that are symbolic in nature. They could be represented in stones or other materials and could come inform of songs or dance. They are also used in various dimensions in promoting cultural practices. Most times, they appear inform of moral advice illustrated in a very brief manner. Thus, Ouarcoopone defines it as “A short well known saying expressing a truth and pointing out morals” (31).

Emmanuel Obiechina perceives it “as philosophical and moral expressions shrunk to a few words, and they form a gnomic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory” (156). The compact nature of proverbs helps the individual to easily memorize and remember them when the situation arises. They are “philosophical, allusive and metaphorical citation that give credence to traditional truth” (Jasper, Onuekwuso, 17).

Nkem Okoh defines proverb as “pith saying that expresses some fundamental truth of human life or expressions even if such truth is abstract”(124). He explained that proverbs are essential devices for embellishing speeches adding that anyone interested in African conversational behavior will discover that there is virtually a proverb for every occasion.

From the various definitions of proverb cited, one can easily state that proverbs are short, abstract and truthful symbols of communication used for embellishing speeches. The use of this

language technique is highly valued in traditional African society, the Igbo in particular.

Importance of proverb as a language technique

According to Crystal David, “the effectiveness of a proverb is largely in its brevity and directness” (185). Proverbs are the wisdom of the people. In proverbs, complete stories, events, actions, situations etc are contracted in a few words or phrases that capture and retain the intended meaning. They strikingly express obvious truth in concluded and memorable manner. Proverbs express certain value bases for comprehension of an action to further a social end.

Wolfengh, Mieder observes that “traditional proverbs still play significant role in today’s speech where they continue to be used to moralize, to instruct and to reflect on everyday occurrences” (158). He further stressed that they play a role in the teaching as a part of cultural or metaphorical learning and convey the values and metaphors shared by a culture. They serve as a powerful channel for cultural dissemination and transmission of culture.

Nkem Okoh adds that “proverbs cover virtually every known aspect of life ranging from animals and birds...human activities and affairs, natural phenomena, supernatural beings, abstract or metaphorical” (125). They are relevant in virtually every aspect of human social living.

According to Carolyne Parker, “proverb has been used to relieve the tensions of a conflict situation, to influence behavior, to justify behavior, to lend support for argument and to reflect values and philosophy of those who use them”(11).

Proverbs enhance language, making it more creative, vivid and more powerful tool for communication. The use of proverbs

in conversations and speeches is highly valued in the traditional African society and particularly the Igbo. Thus, the popular Igbo adage that says that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.

Proverbs strengthen argument, satirize ills and ridicule situations in a very compacted manner. Compared to ordinary words and sentences, proverbs are more potent and effective in everyday speech because they are abstract, philosophical, metaphorical and rhythmic in nature. Good orators express their ideas more concisely using proverbs thus making such speech more natural, more impacting and more effective. The effective use of proverb provides a sense of security for the speaker. The satiric nature of proverbs exonerates the speaker from any eventuality that may result from a speech or conversation.

Proverbs economize words but at the same time, make pungent points. They are vital instruments in communication and speech art because they enhance language, making it more creative, natural and vivid. They are powerful tools of communication useful in every event, situation or occasion.

The play *Echoes of Madness*

In this master piece, Emeka Nwabueze sets out to tell a story of a clan faced with the problem of choosing a replacement for a dead chief priest of an important and powerful oracle that plays significant role in the day to day activities of the people. The failure to announce the successor of the Chief priest within a specified number of days spells doom for the entire community. This all important task rests solely within the portfolio of Osuofia, the village diviner.

However, influenced by greed, corruption and selfish interest of some prominent elders of the clan led by Akamonye, Osuofia's pronouncement is manipulated and a wrong Eze-Avuja is named. The desperation to "Wright" this leads to the conflict which threatens the traditional values and beliefs of the clan. Intimidation, manipulations, blackmail etc become the order of the day. The end result is the total destruction of a promising young man, Obiora, by his desperate and selfish uncle, Akamonye.

Proverb as a language technique in the play *Echoes of Madness*

The use of proverbs in the play derives from the playwright's knowledge of this oral tradition. He incorporates proverbs in the play and subtly blends it in every situation. In the many speeches of the characters, especially the elders, proverbs replete their utterances, distinguishing them and marking them out as unique personalities who have not lost touch with the culture and tradition they originate from.

Nwabueze uses proverbs in the play to sharpen his characters and to present and elaborate the theme of the play. Proverbs are used in the play to replete the speeches of characters and to reveal the uniqueness of their cultural values.

The focus of this paper is to examine some proverbs in the play that justify the assertion that there is virtually a proverb for every situation.

At the meeting in Avuja shrine, the characters punctuate their speeches with proverbs; e.g "The cock says that the reason he looks up to the sky when he drinks water is that he does not know whether death will come from the sky" (5). This proverb expresses caution, to avoid mistakes. Nzeduba uses this proverb

to appeal to the people of Onuama to tread wearily in their actions to avoid the wrath of the gods. Still advocating for caution, Ogbuagu states that “It is with sense that a man kills a fly perching on his scrotal sack” (6).

In the course of the meeting, Osuofia is also informed that “The sword that blunts its edge demands to be treated as a stick” (7). This proverb is used to remind Osuofia that his relevance to the clan depends solely in the efficacy of his divinations. The moment he fails in his task, his relevance ceases to exist. This conversation is necessitated because the clan has waited for two weeks for the man named as the successor of the late Eze Avuja, by Osuofia, to return from the United States of America to no avail. The proverb is used to warn Osuofia that sooner or later, the respect he commands with the people will wane if nothing is done. The urgent need for action is expressed in the proverb “the bush fire does not wait for the Chameleon” (7). Odukwe uses this proverb to inform Osuofia that the people are impatient to know why the named Eze-Avuja has not returned as promised. The need for quick action is further stressed in the proverb. “It is the law suite of a fool that keeps the court sitting all day long”(7). It is also used to tell Osuofia that his power as a Chief Priest is at stake if the named Eze-Avuja does not return as he prophesied.

In an effort to salvage his image before the people, Osuofia uses the proverb below to tell the elders that they are powerless over him; “When the Penis stands up, it behaves as if it would penetrate a wall” (8). With the above proverb, Osuofia reduces the entire speeches of the elders as baseless and mere chanting. He uses the proverb to inform the people of Onuama that they are powerless over him.

After the return of Obiora and his refusal to accept the verdict of the divination, Nzeduba says “The Okra does not grow

above the person who planted it” (13). This proverb connotes the protest of the elders against Obiora for refusing to listen to their plea. The proverb intends to remind Obiora that no matter how rich or enlightened he might be, he is still under the control of the clan and must adhere to the customs and traditions of the clan.

As the events of the play progresses, Okanume, realizing the possibility of failure states “the serpent is still locking in the rafter” (27). This is used by Okanume to inform Akamonye that danger is still looming despite his assurance that everything is under control. The proverb conveys the feeling of fear and apprehension.

Akamonye responds with another proverb, “only the bird on top of the iroko tree sees the drummers who play the music to which it dances (28). This proverb is used to reassure Okanume and the rest of the group that he, Akamonye, knows what he is doing and should be trusted.

Despite this assurance, Ojinnaka tends to detach himself from the group because his conscience is pricking him. Hence he utters this proverb, “It is with wisdom that an elderly man runs away from a mad cow” (24). Ojinnaka uses this proverb to plead with Akamonye to read the handwriting on the wall and stop this mad quest for power. However, Akamonye insists that there is no going back. To express the enormity of his position, Ojinnaka states, “an unlucky man drinks water and it sticks to his teeth” (25).

Akamonye stressed the stupidity of Ojinnaka’s decision to quite by describing him as “a man of little ambition who prefers the indigent agwu celebration to the prestigious Ozo title” (29). Ojinnaka replies that “the god who has come to kill will demand that the victim procures the intestine of an ant” (29). This proverb is used to tell Akamonye that the promises he made are

unrealistic. Akamonye reminds him that “the man whose head the gods have shaved has no further need for a barber” (29). This means that because of the oath binding the group, no one is free to opt out.

Nevertheless, this did not deter Ojinnaka, thus he tells Akamonye that “a snake can never fail to give birth to what resemble it” (30). This proverb is used to remind Akamonye that criminality, greed and desperation is part of his family lineage. Akamonye reacts by saying that “It is the leaves that taste sweetest to the goat that kills it” (31). This proverb is used to explain that it is Ojinnaka’s passion for honesty that will be his doom.

After witnessing the fight between Ojinnaka and Akamonye, a feeling of doubt is noticed in Chinwe by Akamonye. To reassure her of the benefits of their mission, Akamonye utters the following proverb “the fly that moves with elephant will never experience the pains of hunger”(31). This means that if Chinwe continues to be loyal to the course, then she will have nothing to lose for she will be greatly rewarded.

In another instance, when Okanume wanted to ascertain from Akamonye of their safety regarding the situation at hand, Akamonye answers thus “if you grow big teeth, you should also be prepared to grow big lips that will cover them” (45). He continues by adding that “an old woman does not forget the dancing steps she used to dance in her youth” (45). The above proverbs are used to alleviate the fears and doubt in Okanume and prove that Akamonye is actually the master of the game.

Another proverb used in the play says “when an old woman is seen running up a hill, if she is not chasing something, then something is chasing her” (46). Ojinnaka uses the above proverb to confirm the suspicious movements of Akamonye and

Okanume. Akamonye responds by saying “when the needle gets too hot, it burns the thread” (46). This is used to warn Ojinnaka to be careful with his utterances for whatever might be the outcome of their mission must affect him too. Ojinnaka refutes this with the following proverb “if the egg cracks a nut, shame becomes the stone” (46). Ojinnaka uses this proverb to remind Akamonye that if he ends up not carrying out his threat, shame will become of him.

In the examination of conscience ritual performed in Avuja shrine, Ogbuagu uses the proverb below to explain Obiora’s actions in the play “when the foul pollutes the air, the ground pursues him” (47). This explains the fact that Obiora knows why he refused to accept the prestigious role of the chief priest of Avuja. Many things disqualify him as a true son of Onuama clan. One of which is his inability to witness the burial and funeral ceremonies of his own parents.

In the same ritual, Odukwe uses the following proverb to describe Akamonye “if a foot path is clear, there is every reason to pass through it again. But this foot path is filled with thorns, its surface changes like Chameleon” (47). In the few words above, Akamonye’s character is x-rayed and the reason for his disqualification as the chief priest of Avuja explained. Reacting to his disqualification, Akamonye asks “the man who drives a dog away from excrement is he going to consume it?” (47). He uses this proverb to remind Odukwe that despite his zealousness and his wonderful character, that he will never be the Eze-Avuja.

Nzeduba cautions Akamonye by saying “the stubborn foul becomes contrite in a pot of soup” (47). This proverb expresses the need for a retreat. Okanume adds “when the cobra spits, the elder’s eyes are not strong enough to withstand the venom” (47). The above proverbs are used in the play to explain to Akamonye

that calamity will befall them if they do not call it quit now. Nzeduba continues by emphasizing that this calamity will have no exception in the social strata of the clan unless they listen to the voice of reason and call it quits. He uses the proverb below to drive home his message “the witch doctor that threatens to inflict cholera in his neighbourhood, did he hang his anus in the air” (47). This proverb is used to remind Akamonye that the consequent result of this desperate quest for power will have negative effect on everybody without any exception.

Reacting to Ifeanyi’s enquiry concerning Obiora’s condition, Akamonye offers the proverb below as an answer “if a child eats what has kept him awake, he falls asleep” (50). Akamonye uses the above proverb to explain to Ifeanyi that Obiora is responsible for the misfortunes that befall him. He emphasizes this by adding that “one who is an in-law to the lizard will always pay condolences” (50). This proverb explains that whatever that is happening to Obiora is his own making. No one should be held responsible. Since he is the architect of his misfortune, he should be ready to face the consequences.

The proverbs in the play are not exhausted, the few highlighted ones obviously show that proverbs are used in the play to discuss and clarify many issues for effective communication. Thus confirming that proverb is a language technique that is helpful to literary artist for communication in every situation.

Conclusion

One interesting thing about Nwabueze’s use of proverbs in the play *Echoes of Madness* is his application of transliteration of words. Most of the proverbs in the play are directly translated there by retaining the original words and meaning. This creates a

very clear mental picture of traditional African community. The image of every meeting, conversation and speech is clearly reflected in the proverbs used.

Nwabueze's use of proverb in the play also portrays proverb as being uniquely different from other figurative languages. The intended message is quickly delivered and the clarity of the message is never lost.

The functionality of proverb is highly observed in almost all the speeches in the play. Complex issues are explained in simple statements. This important aspect of proverb is exhibited in all the conversations in the play.

The power of proverb lies in its striking expressiveness, which Nwabueze utilizes effectively in the play. They are concise, easy to remember and applicable in everyday situation thus confirming the assertion that there is a proverb for every situation.

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