

Exploring The Playwright's Perspectives of Teaching Through Proverbs: A Study of Olanma By Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh

Emmanuel Iroh * 

Ph.D

Department of Theatre & Film Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Abstract

Proverb is a communication and language device. It is one of the tools a playwright uses to communicate his message to his readers and audience. They actively teach morals, ethical behaviours, and kindness. The way a writer manipulates this language tool determines how his message is accepted. This work is to highlight the importance of proverbs in aiding creative writers and playwrights in their crafts. Olanma by Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh served as the case study. This work therefore used the content analysis approach of the qualitative research methodology to explore the role of a playwright in teaching through his craft. The choice of methodology is for in dept analysis of the case study. The findings revealed that proverbs aided the playwright to actualize her thoughts and convey her messages to her readers. The data is contextually analyzed, interpreted and objectively evaluated with a view to locating the lessons taught through the usage of proverbs in her work. The study concludes that proverbs with their deep meanings are veritable tools for playwrights to use in their craft for the education of the masses and mastery of their craft. It recommends the teaching of proverbs in our schools to inculcate morals and values as well as assist in the development of critical thinking in our young ones.

Keywords: Playwrights, Teaching, Perspectives, Proverbs, Education.

Introduction

Proverbs are very important in traditional education and have been in use since the creation of man. The use of proverbs is part of Africa's oral culture transmitted from generation to generation. Other cultural genres include myth, riddles, legends and anecdotes. Plays are wrought, they are crafted. This is why those who write plays are called playwrights and not "writers". A playwright writes plays. Most African dramatists, playwrights and novelists use proverbs as a literary device to convey messages to their audience.

* Corresponding Author: Emmanuel Iroh

Email: irohemmaogbo@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8377-8078>

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By fully incorporating proverbs into their drama, these playwrights and dramatists ensure that the proverbs are preserved and Africa's rich cultural heritage is brought to limelight as well; thereby, helping to "restore the beauty and value of the African past to suit the different social, cultural and political context portrayed in their writings" (Gitanjali Gogoi, 2017np).

The importance of proverbs to the Igbo nation was further accentuated by Achebe where he compared it with the all-important palm oil as quoted by Alimi. According to him, "Achebe (1958) comments on the importance of the use of proverbs among his people hence, he says "among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (122). He further submits that "the use of proverbs is inevitable because they are highly prized in the traditional African society and are used to portray certain actions or events in picturesque manner" (122).

The use of proverbs by playwrights, novelist is aimed at preservation of the cultural ethos of the people from being eroded by civilization. This is the submission of Gogoi. According to him, the "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" (np. www.iosrjournals.org).

The Holy Bible and the Christian faith recognize the importance of proverbs to the upbringing of the child and maintenance of morals in the society, thus devoting a whole book of thirty one chapters "concerned with various virtues and vices and their consequences" (Microsoft Encarta, np). For example, in proverbs chapter 5 verses 3 and 4 advice young men to be faithful to their wives as the consequences for disobedience may lead to death. "The words of an immoral woman may be as sweet as honey as smooth as olive oil. But all that you really get from being with her is bitter poison and pain... if you follow her, she will lead you down to the world of the death" (539-540). Again, while admonishing against laziness, sluggishness and the need to work hard and prepare for the rainy day, Chapter 6 verses 6-9 counsels:

Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer or ruler, Provideth her meat in summer and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thou sleep?... so shall thou poverty come as one that travelleth and thy want as an armed man (1130).

Furthermore, chapter 18 verses 5 warns against perverting justice when it states that “it is not good to accept the person of the wicked to overthrow the righteous in judgment”, thus admonishing the need for the maintenance of integrity and uprightness as well rejecting all gang up against the upright and righteous person.

In *The Gods Are Not Blame*, the proverb, “the hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come” (30) by Odawale simply cautions that we must be careful of our association because the consequences of carelessness or care freeness may be fatal and in most cases lead to our death. This is similar to the proverb as used by Ekpenyong in Bellgam’s *Erebie*, “a king who decides to eat with vagabonds will enjoy the reward of that association” (47) which means that a man who is not upright in his dealings will be punished for his actions no matter how highly placed. Nwakibie in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* tries to explain to Okonkwo why he has placed stringent conditions for borrowing yam seedlings to Okonkwo when he tells him that “Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching”(17) meaning that he has learnt his lessons and would not want to falter again to be caught, deceived or even die from a second mishap or mistake. However, he goes further and encourage Okonkwo when he reassures him that “you can tell a ripe corn by its look” (17) meaning that hard work and its results are not hidden, as the output is visible for all to see.

Stressing the importance of proverbs to African novelists in shaping their works, Emmanuel Obiechina affirms that “in no aspect of its form is the African novel more “oral” and “traditional” than in its use of proverbs” (199). He concludes that proverbs embellish African stories which is a primary form of the oral tradition, used “as a mode of conveying culture, experience and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings and attitudes in oral societies” (200).

Proverbs serve as a teaching tool, not only for the transmission of culture but for molding of characters and the education of the populace. Teaching according to Emmanuel Iroh “practically involves sharing or impartation of knowledge from one person (the giver) to another (the receiver). It is also communication because message is transmitted from one person to another” (90). Beryl Ehondor agrees that proverbs “are coined in order to impart practical knowledge to mankind... the teaching they give, which ranges from general truths of advice, warning and comments they offer on human experience, encourage each of us to act and behave in certain ways” (5). According to him, other functions of proverbs to include:

1. It is a figurative expression, a stylistic device used to achieve a desired semantic force
2. They express intellectual and emotional attitudes e.g. intention, sympathy, apology, regret, warning, congratulations, attract attention, approval etc
3. It is a powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another
4. It reflects the ethnography of the people
5. It provides insight to a people's way of life, their philosophy, criticism of life, moral truths and social values
6. Proverbs to the continuity of the given society and the individual who lives in it or adopts it
7. Proverbs strengths tradition of a society
8. It is used to illuminate and buttress the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct (7-8)

From the forgoing, it is evident that the aphorisms in proverbs centered on norms and acceptable code of conduct which is a reflection of social values and sensibilities of the people (8), is a veritable tool for playwrights in their craft, hence this study.

Summary of *Olanma*

The drama is about Ugwunzu and Umungwu communities. Odidika kills a woman of Ugunzwo mistakenly during a hunting expenditure. The people of Ugwunzu sent emissaries demanding for a replacement. The Elders of Umungwu agree that they will not go to war with the Umungwu and asks Odidika to provide a replacement. Odidika connives with his friends to trick Agbomma and Mgbafo, to give out Olanma and Onwubiko their daughter and son respectively. As Onwubiko and Olanma were being taken to Ugwunzu by the warriors, Olanma escapes but the warriors overpower Onwubiko and recapture him. The warriors under agree to lie to their people to cover the shame about Olanma's escape; they swear an oath of secrecy to seal the lie.

Olanma finds her way to the maternity where she kneels before the white nurse, Matron Florence to be accepted to serve as an assistant nurse. After a while, she goes to see her mother

in her sister's house Nwanyiafor and explains to the mother about her escape and her new place of work at the white woman's maternity.

There is an epidemic breakout at Umungwu which killed a lot of people. Olamma pleads with Matron Florence and facilitates their visit to Umungwu to administer drugs to the community. As they were rounding up the treatment, the warriors from Ugwunzu enter into an alliance with the Abam warriors to attack Umungwu to probably wipe them away. This pact is revealed by Okwudili, a young hunter who overheard the plot while on top of a tree. Again, Olamma comes to the rescue of her community as she relays their scheme to the Matron who immediately alerts the District Commissioner. The DC enters into an agreement with the people of Umungwu for protection while they will in turn double their allegiance to the Queen. Gun men are positioned and as the Ugwunzu warriors arrive, they are utterly killed while others run away.

Odidika maneuvers his way to the DC who accepts to install him as the Warrant Officer. Dressed in his traditional costume of Isiagu and red cap, he is inaugurated as the new Chief of Umungwu to represent her Royal Majesty but immediately after his inaugural speech, Olamma arrives with her brother, Obiechena whom Odidika kidnapped three years ago and sold as a slave. She reports Odidika to the DC who orders for the arrest of Odidika. Shortly after his release and dethronement, Odidika plans to sell off Agbomma's compound to a stranger and convinces Chinwuba who pays fifty shillings for the whole compound and ten shillings for a big goat. Agbomma appears at this juncture and accurses Odidika and the stranger (buyer of her compound). Odidika tries to shut her down, but she raises alarm. Confused, Chinwuba finds out the truth about the ownership of the land and raises some questions to Odidika who tries in vain to cover up. Chinwuba demands for the return of his money and tries to rough-handle Odidika who promptly refunded the money. Olamma is admitted at the Royal Hospital, London to be trained as a professional nurse, facilitated by Matron Florence. Olamma departs to London after admonishing her brother Obiechenna to take good care of their mother.

Odidika is arraigned before the elders, he sold Obiechenna, his brother's son to headhunters who would have used him for ritual. The palm wine tapper who saw the negotiation from a palm tree had quickly alerted the warriors who apprehended Odidika and thereafter ran after the headhunters to rescue Obiechenna. The Elders in unison agreed that Odidika has committed an abominable act and should be thrown into Otaka River with a stone tied to his neck to enable him sink properly.

Olanma returns from London after her studies. She meets with the Elders where she informs them that the DC is to build a maternity for their community. At another meeting in Dara Nwigbo's house, the elders inform Olanma of their decision to honour her with a chieftaincy title because of her numerous achievements to their community which includes Schools, Courts, Churches, Maternity as well as facilitating for the training of many of their citizens as Court Clerks, Nurses and Teachers.

Olanma is humbled by their decision but also uses the occasion to inform them of her decision to get married to Dr. Okechukwu Nwanwu of Ugunzu, this was received with great shock and mixed feelings as there is a sacred vow by their forefathers prohibiting intermarriage among the two communities. However, after many persuasions from Olanma, the elders tentatively accede to her request with the promise to consult the Priest of Ogwugwu to perform the necessary sacrifices to free the community from the wrath of the sacred vow.

Finally, Ogwugwu gives them permission after their consultations and the elders depart in high spirit. Peace is finally restored among the warring villages as Olanma marries Dr. Okechukwu Nwanwu in a colourful traditional marriage ceremony that attracted large turnout of people from both communities.

Selected Proverbs in Olanma

In situation two, Dara Nwigbo, the oldest man in while addressing the warriors from Ugunzu said "a visitor to our home should not come with the intention of harming us, when he is going, he will not develop hunch back (2). Plainly, he is saying that the goodwill to people never breeds evil consequence. Contextually, he reminds the warriors of their peaceful disposition and the need for nonviolent resolution of whatever that brought the warriors to Umungwu. Acknowledging that whatever brought them to Umungwu must be very serious, as "a toad does not run in the daytime in vain" (3), he urged them to declare their mission since they may not have come without a purpose, which to him is very important. The above teaches us to be humble and not to be brash and to handle matters of great importance with utmost carefulness.

The men of Ugunzu were confused and started talking randomly after the departure of the warriors. Again, Dara Nwigbo, called them to order. According to him, "please let us cultivate the farm of the man who hired us" (7), "that there is no need beating about the bush" (7). He was literally calling them to order to face the task ahead. The warriors of Ugunzu have just delivered their message to them and the best thing for men of Umungwu to do is to face the task of finding solutions to meeting the demands of the warriors of Ugunzu and not dwelling

on trivial things. These proverbs emphasize the need to be focused to do justice to one's present engagement as well as dedication and concentration to one's duty.

In situation three, as Odidika invites Agbonma to his hut, he tells her "that a messenger is not free until he has delivered the message given to him" (12). This simply means that one who has an obligation on his shoulders must discharge it first before being distracted. Contextually, Odidika, faced with procuring a girl and a boy to be delivered to Ugwunzu in a market's time, invites Agbonma, Olanma's mother and feigns that the community has decided to give Olanma as a replacement to the murdered Ugwunzu girl. To him, he is only a messenger with a heavy load from the community to be delivered to Agbonma. Therefore, there is need to accomplish the mission before other challenges will distract him. This proverb also teaches us to be focused in carrying out our mission/responsibility, and to be meticulous.

In situation eight, the community is thrown into confusion because of the influenza epidemic. Dara Nwigbo informs the community about the medicine woman in Mbano and advises them "that it is better to look for a black goat during the day time lest nightfall comes and it blends in with the darkness" (39). This is simply warning us that we should start on time to pursue our goals especially when one is young as delays may lead to regret when we are old. Contextually, Nwigbo is saying that the community must hasten up to avert a great danger that will befall the community if they relax and not send emissary either to bring the medicine woman from Mbano to Umungwu or send their sick ones to her to avert the impending calamity of being wiped out by the influenza. The lessons include the need for proper planning to execute our projects in time to avoid late execution which may cost us more and may lead to regret and doing the right thing at the right time.

In situation twelve, Osadebe's wife was delivered of a set of twins which was regarded as an abomination. The elders are confused because killing of twins has been abolished by the Whiteman and they know the consequences of going against the law. Hence, Ezike Mmetu admonishes them that "the white man has become a tse-tse fly perched on the scrotum; if you kill it you injure yourself, if you leave it, it will suck your blood". Simply, it is saying that all things without remedy must be accommodated. Contextually, the proverb admonishes that the elders must thread softly to avert the wrath of the whiteman who will waste no time in apprehending, trying and sentencing them to jail. The lesson is that in life, we must apply caution in handling critical issues as to avoid unpalatable results and regrets that may follow.

In situation fifteen, Agbonma's distress cry attracts the villagers who assemble to render help only to see Odidika who has almost concluded plans to sell off Agbonma's homestead to Chinwuba. The villagers are bemused at Odidika's behaviours as Ezike Mmetu reprimands him that he is "like the proverbial man, who on being cured of the swelling of the scrotum, develops the swelling of the stomach" (84). Plainly, the proverb shows that human beings are insatiable in nature as our several desires becomes our greatest undoing in life. Contextually, Odidika is being reprimanded for his insatiable desires which have led him to commit one atrocity or another. First, he sold his brother's son, attempted to exchange Olanma for the Ugwunzu girl he killed but Olanma escaped, now he is about to selloff his brother's homestead for money. The lessons here are that we must control our desires, wants and needs so that they will not lead us to committing crimes. Again, we should not be overambitious so as not be entangled with evil.

In situation twenty-one, Olanma is allowed to seat with the elders after her return from Royal Hospital London having graduated as a nursed and now in charge of the big government hospital at Oshimili. Dara Nwigbo, while addressing Olanma, acknowledged that "if a man washes his hands well, he will eat with kings" (105). This mainly signifies that good characters or behaviours attract commendation from the elders. Contextually, the elders are grateful for the contributions of Olanma to their community and have wholeheartedly welcomed her in their midst. In appreciation, Duru Nwosu said that "when the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand should in turn wash the right hand as the elders have unanimously agreed to houour Olanma with a chieftaincy title of "Onwa na Etiri Umungwu" (The Sun That Shines for Umungwu). Apart from teaching us to be appreciative, we also learnt that the reward of hard work is success. Therefore, every young person who works hard will succeed and contribute to the growth of his community while the community will in turn accept, appreciate and honour him.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the playwright showed remarkable mastery in her use of proverbs to convey her messages. Again, the lessons from the proverbs were very topical, apt, effective, didactic and interesting. The fluidity and lucidity in the method of conveyance makes the lessons to be easily assimilated, thus leading to general acceptability of her plays as well as promotion of African values, traditions and cultures through their works. This in line with the submission of Ahmed Salwa where he stated that in African societies, proverbs are:

employed pragmatically. They are used to comment on social conflict situations, to criticize people or events in an indirect and metaphorical way, to counsel when a situation requires it, to criticize unacceptable attitudes, to discipline children and youth, to direct certain human behaviour, or to question old or new values. Proverbs name social conditions and they are used to make people's opinions and feelings known to others and make people effective in their roles. (17-18).

From the forgoing, it is evident that the playwright effectively used proverbs understudy to teach morals, admonish offenders, caution going against societal set rules; thus, authenticating that proverb is a veritable tool for playwrights to use in their craft of playwriting.

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