

Contextual appropriateness of proverbs in Igbo drama

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt at an analysis of the extent to which Igbo proverbs are appropriately used in some selected Igbo plays. It identifies the types of proverb in the plays and relates them to the contexts of their use. Finally, it determines the appropriateness of their use in such contexts. In this respect, Goddy Onyekawu's drama *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọ jụ anyị)* was chosen. The study sourced its data from secondary sources. The paper identifies the proverbs used found in the text to include proverbs for admonition, prayers, bragging and retribution. After correlating the proverbs with their contextual uses, the paper came to the conclusion that most of the proverbs were used appropriately and did not only vividly explain the views being portrayed but also embellished what were said and thus made them suitable in Igbo gathering/contexts.

Background of the Study

Proverb in Igbo communities is seen not just as part of the Igbo orature, but an essential aspect of the Igbo culture. As such, it should be imbibed by all normal Igbo man/woman. In this vein, it is usually said that proverbs should not be explained to any normal Igbo person. A proverb is a wise saying in most cultures; Akporobaro (2008) contends that it is a wise saying and is an embodiment of moral advice and truth expressed in a clear and unambiguous manner. Proverbs mean a lot and occupy a worthwhile position in the matrix of people's culture as a means of interpreting and understanding several phenomenon and event around them (cf Asika, 2016).

Proverbs are equally important in literary works, especially literary works that are meant to showcase the culture and the way of life of African people. If literature is the mirror of the society, then proverbs are an essential part of the Igbo culture/orature, and any literary work of Igbo extraction must be filled with proverbs for it to be worthwhile and thus become a true representation of the Igbo people and their ways of life. In this respect, Asika and Emeodi (2012, p.112) opine as follows:

Proverbs as ... elements peculiar to any given homogeneous society have in the recent time proven to be a fruitful way of interpreting and analysing the works of writers, especially African writers. No writer writes in a vacuum and no work of art can exist significantly in isolation of the society. Writers write to reflect the realities of their time and to highlight on the peculiar socio-political and economic situations that have exerted a lot of influence in shaping them and pushing their frontiers

Just as Asika and Emeodi assert that proverbs are not used in isolation, Ihueze and Umeasiegbu (2015, p.30) state that, there almaster of proverbs is one who is able to summon the entire cavalry at will, and make them perform precisely those tricks he has in mind".

These tricks can be to educate, admonish, teach, or to persuade those present to accept your vices. For these proverbs to be meaningful, the inherent meaning must be in line with the contextual meaning, which the society ascribes to such a proverb. Thus, the meaning of the proverb must be appropriate in addition to being suitable to the context. In this study, efforts were made to ascertain the extent to which the use of proverbs by Onyekaonwu in his play was appropriate. This is with a view to finding out the quantity and more importantly the efficacy of these proverbs, where they are used.

The major objective of this study is the review of Goddy Onyekaonwu's play as it relates to the use of proverbs in *Nwata Rie Awo (Oju Anu)*. The specific objectives were to identify the various proverbs used in the play, *Nwata Rie Awo (Oju Anu)*, classify these proverbs according to their usage, ascertain the inherent meaning of these proverbs and ascertain if the proverbs were suitable in the contexts in which they were deployed.

Concept of proverbs

Proverbs are the people's legacies and words of wisdom, which capture not just the wisdom of the people but also contain the history of the societies in which they are used. Proverbs, according to Winda, Suhandi, and Purwamo (2019), are short well-known saying in figures of speech or symbolism, and have stood the test of time in most societies. On the other hand, Ihueze (2013) states that, "a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk, which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views and are handed down from generation to generation. It is one of the various ways the wisdom/popular sayings of the people are transferred from generation to generation. Thus, every culture and language has its own proverbs, which convey moral lessons, customs, beliefs and values (Igwebuike & Nweze, 2020). These researchers went further to support the views of Agbaje (2002), Egenti and Okoye (2016) which states that proverbs are ever present in all the activities and in all spheres of life, even though they are more visible in conflict situations, where traditional wisdom inherent in them dictate rules and modes by which social conflicts can be peacefully resolved.

In line with the above discussions, Chidoka (2021) aver that Igbo proverbs are taken directly from Igbo world life, and as such, proverbs from their ontological perspective coined by people not intentionally but from activities and experiences encountered by the people in their daily activities. Thus, a good awareness of Igbo proverbs and their meaning would lead to a deep understanding of the Igbo, their philosophy, which encompasses their tradition, cultures and more importantly their ways of life.

Proverbs, basically, according to Oboko (2020), add beauty to language and are used creatively to achieve different purposes. They can be used to teach, soften words and situation, deepen the meaning of what is said, add aesthetics to discourse, interpret what is said, drive home one's point, admonish, draw inspiration, and so on.

Though Igbo proverbs should be used by all the people, Obika and Ojiakor (2019) observe that there are restrictions. According to them, in Igbo land, young people are not supposed to use proverbs on their elders; rather, the elders use them to garnish their speeches so as to educate the younger ones and to converse among themselves.

This may be why proverbs are seen to be the exclusive preserve of people with *grey hair* in the Igbo cultural context, people with great wisdom.

While supporting the views of Kanu (2014), Azubuike (2020) observes:

Some may be wondering why proverbs are usually highlighted in any discussion involving the Igbo people. This is because proverbs are not only an embodiment of truth, but also an effective instrument of education in the traditional Igbo society; since proverbs embody what the people perceive as truth, it becomes imperative that any person wishing to have some idea about the Igbo worldview should beam his search light on Igbo proverbs.

As literature is said to be the mirror of the society, it is expected that works of literature should capture the truth about the people and their worldview, which include the use of proverbs in the society. Since literature portrays the people's ways of life and language use, this study focuses on appraising the use of proverbs in Goddy Onyekaonwu's play, *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọ jụ Anụ)*.

Empirical review

The place of proverb in the Igbo language and in Igbo society cannot be over-emphasised. In view of this, many studies have been carried out on this subject matter. In this sub-heading, studies on proverbs are reviewed.

In a study carried out by Egenti and Okoye (2016) entitled, 'on the role of Igbo proverbs in conflict resolution and reconciliation', the researchers x-ray the important role proverbs play in resolving conflicts in Igbo land due to its richness. The main objective of the study is the examination of the extent proverbs were used as tools for reconciliation and crises management in the Igbo society. According to the researchers, the data were collected through planned and spontaneous settings, while the speech acts theory was adapted to the study as the theoretical framework. The study found out that proverbs are an essential instrument for enhancing conflict resolutions, promotion of inter-personal relationship and for enhancing peaceful co-existence among the people.

Another study captioned, "Justice for rectifying social anomalies: A study of Igbo proverbs" was conducted by Obika and Ojiakor (2019). The main objective of the study was to ascertain how the Igbo proverbs were used in the traditional justice system and in correcting social anomalies. The proverbs were collected from the people randomly, and analysed. The results indicate that these proverbs contained what the ancestors' basic standard for truth and justice upheld. These were, *aka nkwumọto* and *ike nkumọto*; these were the essential ingredients for fairness and settling of disputes. The study concluded that the lack of these ingredients put the people in disarray.

Mmadike and Nwankwere (2020) focus on the topic, “Stylistic analyses of proverbs”. The objective of the study was to illustrate aesthetic (sound) lexical and tonal characteristics of sub-genres in Igbo proverbs. The proverbs used were got through direct observation and or attendance to village meetings, where these proverbs were collected during deliberations. At the end of the collections and data analysis, it was found that tone played a crucial role when the proverbs were recited as there were tonal contrasts and repetitions of sounds. These were for emphasis and for the person being addressed to pay attention to details. It was however concluded that the rich traditional sub-genres were fast being eroded in Igbo social discourses due to the advent of technology.

From above reviews, it can be seen that lots of researchers have been conducted researches in this area but none to the best of the knowledge of the researchers has focused on the analysis of proverbs in literary works especially in Igbo plays, hence the need for this study.

Presentation and discussions

In *Nwta Rie Awọ (Ọ Jụ Anyị)*, there is an extensive use of proverbs. Under this sub-heading, these proverbs are displayed, classified, and analysed in such a manner that both, the inherent/denotational and contextual meanings are brought to the fore. The proverbs selected for analysis in this study were classified into the following: proverbs for admonitions, proverbs on effect of evil, proverbs as prayers and proverbs for bragging and remorse.

In all the proverbs displayed above, the meanings were revealed and they are all appropriate in the context they were used. The first proverb for example warns “*Onye ji ngwere, haa ngwere*,” this is appropriate for warning about the imminent danger, which will come if Awọrọ does not desist from his evil behaviours/acts. Also the proverb, “*Ọgba nhọ di...*” was appropriate in warning Obioma about the dangers of rejecting many suitors and the tragedy that eventually resulted from not adhering to the wise counsel may not have happened if she listened. From the analysis, it could be seen that the proverbs were not only meaningful and rich but also fitted well in the context in which they were used.

Effects of evil deed

Good deeds beget good things; likewise, evil deeds. In this drama, proverbs that warn about the evil that accompany bad deeds are shown below.

(i) ...*Ocho ihe ukwu ga-ezute agba enyi*(pg.37)

Literal meaning: One who searches for a big will encounter the jaw of the elephant.

Meaning-One who tastes for negative things will encounter negative things

Context-This is warning Obioma against having the quest for rich men/suitors.

(ii) ...*Ọghochara ụkpaka ihe ọmịrị anaghi esi n'ukwu ya ariada.* (pg.65)

Literal meaning: Whoever harvests all the fruits of the oilbean tree does not climb down from the trunk.

Meaning- One who wants to gain everything must surely lose all.

Context- Warning against Obioma marrying Aworọ because of his strength/fame

(iii) ...*Mkpume laa elu, egwu atuba ite*(pg.80)

Literal meaning: If the stone rises, the earthen pot becomes afraid.

Meaning- One becomes afraid of the consequences of his actions.

Context - Dibia afa's warning about the consequences of Aworọ's actions.

(iv)...*Ihe onye gutara n'ike oku, ya were*

Literal meaning: Whatever one picks from the depth of the bowl, let one take

Meaning- One should face the consequences of his actions

Context- The people of Amaudele should enjoy what they bargained for.

All the proverbs listed and explained above are proverbs that warn about the negative effects of evil deeds and actions. In the first (i) and second (ii) proverbs objectified here, Obioma is warned against marrying Aworọ, but she fails to listen. In the last two proverbs, Aworọ and Amangwu people are urged to await the evil effects of their actions.

Proverbs used as prayers

Certain proverbs in Igbo communities are forms of prayers. In the drama, "*Nwata rie awọ (Ọju anụ)*", some proverbs were used extensively in form of prayers. Below are some of the proverbs, used by Onyekaonwu in this drama.

(iv) *Ya buru okuko ọzọ labaa ọra* (pg.19)

Literal meaning: May he go to roost before the hen.

Meaning- He should be eliminated early.

Context- Praying for God to eliminate the enemy.

(v) *Ngu anyi ji eko agaghi akwalaghu anyi.*

Meaning- Whatever we need in life shall not elude us.

(vi) *Ọbịara be onye abiagbula ya, o laa mkpuukpu apula ya*

Meaning – Both the visitors and the host should stay in peace after the encounter.

Context –This was appropriate since it was said in a marriage ceremony.

(vii) *Ha ga - abuzi nnu na mmanu.*

Literal meaning: They will become salt and palm oil.

Meaning- They shall live together as one.

Context- Praying that the husband and wife should live peacefully as one.

As can be seen in above proverbs, they are both proverbs and prayers at the same time. The first prayer is against their enemy and is appropriate as the people of Amaudele have just challenged them for a fight (wrestling). The second one is for prosperity as every Igbo man desires to be prosperous at all times. The last two were for oneness and peaceful co-existence, which are also appropriate in marriage ceremonies.

Bragging and remorse

Sometimes, bragging can be an instrument of war, while remorse tones down tension in most cases. These were used extensively in the text- *Nwata rie Awọ....*

i. ...zighachiri Akatọisi na ndị Amaudele ozi na ha emetala agụ nọ n'ụra.

Literal meaning: replied Akatọisi and the people of Amaudele that they have woken a sleeping lion.

Literal meaning:

Meaning: Send this message back to Akatọsi and Amaudele community, that they have awoken a tiger that is asleep.

Context: This utterance is appropriate as it is a propaganda message aimed at instilling fear on the opponent.

ii. Na Awọrọga-agwaha ihe ndị mụọ ji ntị oke eme.

Literal meaning: that Awọrọ will tell them what the spirits do with the ears of the mouse.

Meaning: That Awọrọ is about to teach them a great lesson.

Context: This is still appropriate as it is a continuation of the propaganda.

iii. ...Agundụ ga-alụ nwanyị mgbakwute pg.58

Meaning: A living warrior getting married to a woman that ran to him.

Context: This bragging is relevant as Awọrọ used this proverb to justify his intended action

iv. Ọ bụ ebe chi m kwaturu m ka m dara pg.69

Literal meaning: It is where my God pushed me down that I fell.

Meaning: Wherever my god strikes me, there I fall.

Context: This is also appropriate as he remembers his god now that he is in trouble – sign of remorse.

v. M gaghị e ji anya m hụ ntị m! pg.83.

Literal meaning: I will not use my eyes to see my ears.

Meaning: I cannot be alive to witness this type of tragedy!

Context: This lamentation and show of remorse is appropriate in a situation, where a respected person is seen to have committed abomination and was at a cross road in his life. The proverbs shown above show the irony of life and the saying that pride goes before a fall. At first, Awọrọ brags, shows off and exaggerates his power as a warrior and even likens himself to a powerful tiger. In proverbs i, ii and iii he brags and states that he is not only more powerful than Akatọisi of Amaudele but also, that Obioma is not good enough to be his wife. However, in iv and v, he is seen crying with utterances that show remorse and a situation of helplessness.

The main focus of this study is to ascertain the extent of the use of proverbs in Goddy Onyekaonwu's drama and it can be seen in the above presentation and analysis that various proverbs are used and they are suitable in the various environments in which they were used. This also helps in deducing the actual meaning and classification of these proverbs. Most importantly these proverbs are used and the imagery they portray can be likened to what

happens in real Igbo societies.

Summary

Proverbs are a vital part of the Igbo language and are one of the things that single one out in Igbo land as a person with great wisdom. One who has this language device at the tips of his fingers is regarded as a treasure. As literature is the mirror of the society, it is thus expected that any literary work of Igbo extraction must parade an array of proverbs. In this study, appraising the proverbs in Goddy Onyekaonwu's play, *Nwata Rie Awọ* was pursued. This was to ascertain and identify, not just the proverbs that were used but also to assess their meaning and how they fit the contexts in which they were used.

The background of this study was the first thing that was given. In it proverbs, its use and importance were emphasised. Also, how some other scholars have looked at the concept was reviewed and it was discovered that though proverbs have been studied extensively, these studies never looked at its usage in Igbo plays. They focused more on oral literature and other genres of literature but paid no attention to drama. As such, the present study focuses on the appraisal of the use of proverbs in Goddy Onyekaonwu's drama, *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọjụ anụ)*.

The objectives of the research and the research questions were listed and formulated. Thereafter, the views of other researchers were captured in the review of literature. The summary of the findings at the end of the study indicate that the proverbs under review were extensively used in the play, *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọjụ anụ)*. These proverbs were grouped and classified under these four headings – proverbs for admonishment, effect of evil deed, prayers bragging and remorse.

These proverbs were not only meaningful but also used appropriately and lastly, the proverbs were used at the right context just as they are used in real social gathering in Igbo societies.

Conclusion

Proverbs are an integral aspect of the culture of the Igbo people. Based on this, a study of the Igbo proverb is a search on the Igbo people. *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọjụ anụ)* is one of the best Igbo drama not just because of the plot but because of the extensive use of proverbs by the author, Goddy Onyekaonwu; the attendant use of these proverbs conceptually and contextually helped in the aesthetics of the play.

In view of this, it is suggested that more studies, reviews, and appraisals should be carried out not just on this text, *Nwata Rie Awọ (Ọjụ anụ)* but on other plays written in the Igbo language. We therefore advocate that more researches should be carried out not just on the use of proverbs in Igbo drama but also on the use of figurative expressions and styles in Igbo plays.

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