

PROVERBS IN NIGERIAN LITERARY DRAMA: EXAMPLES FROM OLA ROTIMI'S THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to show the use of proverbs in Nigerian literary drama. The paper is basically an analytical study of Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not to Blame. The specific purpose of the paper is to analyze the proverbs used by the playwright in the play. The analysis is intended to explicate the meaning of the proverbs used therein. The findings reveal that proverbs are used to illustrate ideas, reinforce argument, clarify issues and deliver messages of inspiration, consolation, celebration and advice. Proverbs also identify and dignify culture. They express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviours. The paper concludes that Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not to Blame, is well embellished with African proverbs which the characters utter deliberately to drive home their points

Keywords: Proverbs, Literary Drama, Ola Rotimi, The Gods Are Not to Blame.

INTRODUCTION

A proverb is a simple statement with deep meaning. It is concise in nature, often known by heart, loaded with philosophical meaning and passed from one generation to another (Zakariya, Mashood, 1).

Yusuf and Methangwane also define proverbs as "relatively short expressions, which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of social functions" (408). Proverbs usually express the collective wisdom of a people, reflecting their thinking, values, and behaviours. They (Proverbs) reveal a people's historical development, their worldview and attitude. Some proverbs state facts from peoples history, customs and practices; others express philosophical thoughts, beliefs and values (Chiku Malunga and Charles Banda, 2).

Proverbs manifest a great deal in Nigerian literary drama. They are used by such writers as Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Zulu Sofola, Irene Salami Agunloye among others to pass (weighty) messages and also to embellish their works. But the concern of this paper is to explore Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*, in order to prove that proverbs are important literary features in Nigerian literary drama, and that they are used to teach lessons-either to praise, to condemn, to exhort, to persuade or to dissuade action.

The Gods Are Not to Blame

Ola Rotimi, who died in 2002, is an internationally acclaimed Nigeria playwright. He has written and published several plays to date, namely *Our Husband has gone Mad Again* (1977), *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), *Kurummi* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), *Holding Talks* (1979), *If* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988).

The Gods are not to Blame, is a tragic story of king Odewale who, at birth, is divined to kill his father, king Adetusa and marry his mother, Queen Ojuola. To prevent this ugly incident, Odewale is ordered to be killed in a grove. But Gbonka, the palace messenger detailed to carry out this instruction, fails to kill the child out of pity for the child and the barren Ogundele and Mobike, his wife, rather he hands the baby over to the barren couple to foster. When Odewale is fully grown up, the message of the gods are delivered to him again at Ijekun Yemoja. Mistaking his foster parents for his biological ones, Odewale runs away from his presumed home to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy, only to achieve fame and royal feats at kutuje, where he lives to fully act out the wills of the gods by committing incest with his mother, having inadvertently killed his father over a piece of land in Ede.

The use of Proverbs in Africa

Chinua Achebe summarizes the importance of proverbs in Ibo society in his introduction to *Things Fall Apart*, when he remarks that: "among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (ix).

Proverbs deal with all aspects of life. They are used to emphasize the words of the wise and are the stock-in-trade of old people, who use them to convey precise moral lessons, warnings and advice since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary discourse. The judicious use of proverbs is usually regarded as a sign of wit, (Iwuchukwu Onyeka, 28).

Proverbs are often marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor, (Finnegan, 399). Proverbs are pictures, figurative and at the same time poetic in nature and these qualities differentiate them from the normal everyday speech or discourse.

According to the BBC's book, *The Wisdom of Africa*, "proverbs are used to illustrate ideas, reinforce arguments and deliver messages of inspiration, consolation, celebration, and advice. Some proverbs are used in oratory, counseling, judging, embellishing speeches and enriching conversations. Some are also used to serve as warning, advice, admonition, curse, or blessing. In traditional Africa, proverbs are used to unstick "stuckness," clarify vision and unify different perspectives. Proverbs add humour and diffuse tense or otherwise sensitive issues. For centuries, African societies have used proverbs to ease uncomfortable situations, confront issues and build institutions and relationships. They can be understood where literacy is low and yet appreciated by even the most educated (Malenga and Barika, 3).

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The proverbs used in the play are presented herein in the context in which they are used in the play. This is because proverbs are generally understood better if treated in the context they are used. Although, the play is indeed well embellished with a great deal of proverbs, only a few of them will be treated in this paper.

The Proverbs

The Proverbs in *The Gods are not to Blame* are mostly crisis-motivated proverbs. This is because the events in the play are predominantly crisis-driven. The following are some of them.

When the head of a house hold dies, the house becomes an empty shell (p.9).

This proverb is used by the second citizen to accuse king Odewale of his failure to save the people of Kutuje kingdom from the ravaging disease. The inability of the king to act as expected is the metaphorical death of the head of the house hold while the long suffering of the people of his kingdom is the metaphorical empty shell. The idea of an empty shell implies the dullness, lifeless, and meaningless nature of lives of the people of Kutuje as a result of the diseases ravaging them (Zakariyah, Moshood, 121, words in italics).

It is Said that the secrets of a home should be known first to the head of the home (p.19).

This proverbial statement is made by Aderopo at the scene where he comes with the unsavoury message from the oracle of Ifa, which he feels should not be announced publicly at that moment. The interpretation of the proverb is that Odewale, the head of the land and the king of Kutuje deserves a fore knowledge of the news brought by Aderopo before it is disclosed to the public. But Odewale refuses to cooperate with Aderopo as he counters his proverb with another:

A cooking pot for the chameleon is a cooking-pot for the Ligard: (p. 19).

In this proverb, Odewale is declaring that no privacy is warranted as far as the present situation is concerned. Indeed, what Odewale is saying, though not altogether correct given the social structure of the Yoruba community, is that all of the people present are equal, which removes the need for a preferential treatment offered by Aderopo. By Aderopo's act, he is veiling the news to honour Odewale as the king and head of the community (Odebunmi, 12).

The horns cannot be too heavy for the head of the Cow that must bear them (p.20)

This proverb is used by queen Ojuola when she finds that Aderopo, her son is reluctant to disclose the findings from the Ifa oracle, concerning the cause of the pestilence and death in Kutuje to the king in public because the message is a bad one. The queen by this statement is emphasizing the fact that, no matter how bad the message from the Ifa oracle may be, the king who is the custodian of the land will bear it, because it is his responsibility to do so. It also implies that a man cannot run away from his shadow. No matter how big the magnitude of the problem that befalls a man, he is expected to shoulder it alone. The revelation from the priest is the metaphorical horn that must not be too heavy to bear. Odewale is the metaphorical cow that is expected to bear the horn. The implication of the proverb is that certain issues are not meant to be disclosed in public. The didactic significance of the proverb is that people should be very sensitive of the information to be disclosed and determine the right place and time to disclose them. Thus, Ojuola encourages her son Aderopo to speak out and tell the people the message they are waiting to hear.

Until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution, (p.21). This statement is made by Aderopo. As he is prompted to disclose the news from Ifa oracle, Aderopo reluctantly presents the report which reveals that the cause of the pestilence in the land is the presence of a man in their midst who killed the former king Adetusa. This revelation startled the people who begin to wonder whom such a man could be in their midst. It is at this point that Aderopo makes the statement to justify his silence in the midst of the potential killers of the former king. The meaning of the proverb as used in this context, is that not until the culprit, the murderer of the former king who is not yet known and is still in their midst is identified, it will be dangerous to make certain utterances in the presence of such a murderer. This is why Aderopo himself admits that he feared to speak. The proverb is pragmatically engaged to caution Odewale and the Chiefs about the approach to use to identify the enlprit.

When the frog in front falls in a pit, others behind take caution (p.23)

This proverb is made by king Odewale. Odewale used the proverb to express his suspicion of the chief's plot to black mail him on the pestilence in the land. The interpretation is that Odewale is expressing the need for him to be cautious so as to avoid the same tragedy that befell the former king Adetusa. To further support his allegation that the chiefs are plotting evil against him, Odewale asks the following rhetorical question.

When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they not do to the flesh of a frog? (p.23) In this proverb, Odewale's expresses fear that he is not safe with the chiefs, reasoning that it is possible to trace the death of the former king Adetusa to them. Invariably therefore, Odewale implicitly accuses the chiefs of being responsible for the death of king Adetusa, and possibly posing a threat to his own life as well, whose situation is even worse being a non-native of Kutuje. This time around, king Odewale has not discovered his true identity. He still thinks (wrongly) that he is an Ijekun man.

All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell which lizard suffers from bellyache? (p.23) King Odewale is still the speaker. Here He uses this proverb to reinforce his argument and substantiate his accusation of the chiefs for plotting evil against him. The interpretation of the proverb is that since all the chiefs who in Odewale's opinion conspired to kill king Adetusa have all denied knowledge of the plot, it will be difficult to tell exactly which of the chiefs that is still loyal to him and the one that is not. The proverb can be further interpreted to mean that intention of people can not be known through their facial expression. In the traditional Nigerian society, kings and elders speak authoritative and commanding diction. The hero's language is above the ordinary man's language. It is well polished, austere and responsible. Odewale's utterances here are powerful, philosophical, rich in metaphors and pregnant in meaning.

Is it not ignorance that makes the rats attack the cat? (p.28)

This proverb is used by Baba Fakunle, the Ifa priest, following the plan by king Odewale's body guard to attack the priest. Baba Fakunle feels that the body guard does not know the extent of his supernatural fortification, else he will not attempt to dare him. The body guard is the metaphoric rat that ignorantly attacks the cat. The implication of the statement is that certain things are done wrongly by some people out of ignorance. The truth about this statement is that people who do things without having adequate knowledge of what they do usually regret their action. The proverb therefore advises that one should not to into a fight with someone who he does not know the limit of his powers.

When the evil plotter beats his drum for the downfall of the innocent, the gods will not let that drum sound (p.30)

This statement is made by king Odewale when he suspects Aderopo of being intrigued with Baba Fakunle to call him the murderer of king Adetusa. The meaning of the proverb in the context in which it is made is that the gods will not allow Aderopo's evil plot against Odewale to thrive. Aderopo is the evil plotter here, while Odewale is the innocent. This view however, is wrong because Aderopo is innocent of the charge against him while Odewale is the one who had unwittingly killed his father at Ipetu at the three-road junction before arriving at Kutuje.

The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come (.30)

Odewale continues his allegation of plots, subversion and intrigues against him in this proverb. He sees himself as a hen flirting with the hyena, Aderopo (the plotter), who is out to ruin him. Odewale is blaming himself for believing too much in the people of Kutuje.

If you think you can drum for my downfall, and hope that drum will sound, then you head is not good. (p.32).

Odewale accuses Aderopo further in this proverb. The proverb exploits the knowledge of the socio-cultural functions drums are made to perform in the Yoruba community. This time around, Odewale has become very angry and aggressive. His accusations has changed to insulting words.

If you think like a tortoise, you can plot against me without my first cutting you down with my own tortoise tricks, then, fellow, madness is in your liver (p.32)

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These accusations together with the vulgar words are made by Odewale out of anger. What Odewale means by this proverb is that he is set to counter any tricky plot against him with his own tricky wisdom. The situation degenerates into serious verbal combats between Odewale and Aderopo, leading to Odewale's threat to banish Aderopo from Kutuje, for he sees him as a dangerous contender. This is expressed in the proverbs:

Two rams cannot drink in the same Bucket at the same time. They will lock horns (p.34)

By this proverb, Odewale threatens Aderopo, who is presented as the ram that tugs his throne with him. Odewale sees Aderopo as a ram contesting his position with him. The proverb is used by Odewale to stress that there must be only one master in a community at a time. This is important in order to avoid crisis.

...Oohh! Take your time, child, if you rise too early, the dew of life will soak you! (p.35).

This proverb is a dangerous threat to Aderopo's life by Odewale. It is a warning to Aderopo not to be too ambitious for power, else he may die in the process.

The toad likes water but not when the water is boiling (p.60)

This proverb is used by Odewale following the prophecy of the gods revealed to him and which makes him to flee home. The proverb means that Odewale likes his home like the toad likes water but the unbearable circumstance under which he flees home is represented by the boiling water. The implication is that Odewale does not want to remain at home under such unbearable circumstance just because he likes his home.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have identified a number of proverbs used in *The Gods are not to Blame*. We have also analyzed the proverbs as used in the play. The paper has revealed that most of the proverbs in the play are crisis motivated. They are used mostly by the king and his chiefs to illustrate ideas to reinforce arguments, to admonish and to advice. The paper also has established the fact that Ola Rotimi, like other African writers deploy the use of proverbs in his literary works not only to embellish his works but also to teach lessons. The paper therefore has proved the fact that proverbs are important literary features in Nigerian literary drama.

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