

Proverbs: The Carriers of Ancient Wisdom with Timeless Pertinence

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Abstract:

The premise of proverb and its rich proliferation is vast. It ranges from social, traditional, cultural, political, geographical to economic sectors of human life and presents an opulent spectrum of various knowledge-packed truisms. Its wider span sees no boundaries of form, construction, grammar or any technical formula. Its structure, composition, creativity and capacity is rooted in the age old traditional way of substantiating a fact based content. Proverbs present the content more conversationally skilled. With a traditional and colloquial fragrance and cultural association proverbs are prospectively rich, inherently wisdom rich and assertively contextual in reference. With adoration for proverbs that have tiny construction and a huge scope for interpretation, this paper studies a few African proverbs that literally augment the linguistic beauty with metaphorical, allegorical and analogical expressions.

This paper studies how proverbs cover all the sectors of human life and convey the proposed idea poignantly and accurately. Written language has a concrete pattern, construction and boundaries that can be registered and documented in libraries and book shelves. Whereas Oral language has a dialectical beauty that adds value of wonder, touches the zenith of adoration and

creates a long lasting impression in human memories. Oral literature has plethora of moral stories, ancient wisdom songs, the advisory and instructive proverbial statements that collectively bear generality and universal truthfulness. From ice-age to stone-age to machine-age to industrial-age, oral literature permeates every class, creed and social sector. Although rooted in specific cultures, oral literature has established its stronger applicability to the scripted literature. It helps draw a corollary between two concepts of ideologies and thus establish a truthful and just connection between apparently different situations. Oral literature has a magical knack to transform every local experience to the universal one. It is elusive in documentation but all pervasive in life. It is the illuminating star that shines brightly, floats lightly and embellishes the galaxy of language. Proverb is the smallest unit of oral literature that is potentially rich in capturing an epic situation in a nutshell. With the help of select novel *Devil on the Cross* from African literature, this paper studies the role of proverbs that give an incremental value-addition to language and literature.

The word proverb is derived from the Latin word *proverbium*. The study of Proverb is called paremiology. Charles L. Briggs quotes Archer Taylor who defines the word proverb in his book, *The Proverb*, in these words:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and given them each the proper emphasis, we should not even have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us that this sentence is proverbial and that one is not.

Proverbs are compact in construct and rich in content. They are the sentences that suggest a strategy, method, idea, advice, process or instruction. If the wisdom that is packed in proverbs is followed, one can lead a life without

complexity or anxiety. The contextual reference of proverbs can be traced back to the history or mythology of the land. They explain the meaning of events and experiences, present a powerful imagery and share the age old traditional knowledge. Proverbs are the reservoir of knowledge and wisdom that make an impactful impression.

The meaning inter woven in a proverb bears more of a pragmatic than semantic value. Semantics is one of the important branches of linguistics that deals with interpretation and meaning of words, sentence-structures and symbols. The meaning of the word is determined also on the reading comprehension of the readers, how they understand the word and its associated interpretations. William Frawley defines linguistic semantics as "the study of literal, decontextualized, grammatical meaning". He analyses (a) "meanings that are actually reflected in overt form differences". (b) "what state of affairs . . . in the world [an] expression represents" (2), not what it "suggests about the speaker's intention" (c) the "meaning that is determinable outside of context" and (d) "meaning that is bound up with the mechanisms that language has for grammatical expression". Semantics and pragmatics are branches of linguistics. Both of them deal with the study of meaning. Semantics deals with the study of meaning of word without the context. On the other hand, pragmatics understand the language meaning by keeping the context in mind. Semantics is concerned with the conceptual meaning related to words. Semantics does not focus on the context, rather it deals with the meaning according to grammar and vocabulary. The focus is only on the general rules used for a language. The study of linguistics is majorly divided into Phonetics (speech sound), phonology (phonemes), morphology (words), syntax (phrases and sentences), semantics (literal meaning of phrases and sentences) and pragmatics. **Semantics** can be understood at two levels, Connotative and Denotative. **Connotative semantics** is the meaning that is associated with the word emotionally, imaginatively and metaphorically. The meaning is inferred by

readers who can relate to the suggestions associated with the word. Simply, the reader takes the figurative meaning associated with the word. Usually poets use this type of meaning in their poetry.

Contrary to this, **Denotative Semantics** suggests the literal, explicit or dictionary meaning of the words without using associated meanings. It also uses symbols in writing that suggest expressions of writers such as an exclamation, quotation and colon marks.

Every word has a singular and stand-alone denotative meaning. It is the smallest unit in a sentence that represents an idea, object, action or place. Words can have more than one meaning. It is the characteristic of a word that it may have several meanings, in fact, words play an enormous part in the field of linguistic study. Words express, convey and describe. Despite these features, words can not give a comprehensive meaning that is complete in itself. To get the cognitive meaning of the word, it needs to have a relation with the other parts of a sentence. A word is interpreted in relation to the experience, situation and time conveyed by the other parts of the sentence.

Pragmatics refers to the strategies, exploitation of shared knowledge, assumptions about communicative intent, by which language users relate the dictionary/grammar meaning of utterances to their communicative value in context. Pragmatics generally refers to the encoding of particular communicative functions, especially those relevant to interpersonal exchanges, in specific grammatical and lexical elements of a given language.

Pragmatics includes a wide range of topics and elements that helps verifying the working process of all its elements which are listed below. While defining pragmatics, it is necessary that the listener is strong in perceiving, assuming, imagining and deducing the hidden meaning from the written text. **Entailment**,

Presupposition and Implicature are the linguistic varieties that help discern the correct meaning from the given sentence.

Entailment is a relationship between two sentences where the truth of one requires the truth of the other. Eg.

I will introduce you to my cousin in his birthday party.

The sentence entails that the speaker will invite the listener to the former's birthday party.

Presupposition is an utterance that is based on a background belief or prior knowledge. There can be a general assumption employed to reach an inference. It can present an assertion, denial, or question, and can be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature in the utterance.

Eg: I completed the task before office time.

It is presumed that he must be having a team of adequate employees.

Implicature is to read the implied meaning which is interwoven in the sentence but not meant to be conveyed. It is a technical term in the linguistic branch of pragmatics coined by Paul Grice who has introduced four Maxims – Quantity, Relation, Quality and Manner – that help infer the communicative intention and “inform our cooperative behavior in general as guiding principles in inference drawing. . . that communicative intention is a pragmatic inference, based on what was said explicitly and contextual assumptions the speaker intends the addressee to consider in the computation of the inference”. (Ariel: 2008; 9) Simply put, there are two meanings within a sentence. Eg. “. . . And they lived happily ever after”. Here, under the common presumptions, ‘they’ stands for a couple who fought against all odds and have successfully settled down and lived a happy married life.

Thus, the study of language is based mainly on three aspects, grammar, structure and meaning. The first two are present in the semantic and pragmatic understanding of the language. But the third aspect ‘meaning’ is more about the expressional interpretation than the verbal interpretation of language. The study of proverbs affirmatively substantiates this argument. Proverbs are the mirrors that reflect the society, culture and polity of a region.

In his paper Pragmatics, Robert Stalnaker writes,

Syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions. Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence. . . . Assertions, commands, counterfactuals, claims, conjectures and refutations, requests, rebuttals, predictions, promises, pleas, speculations, explanations, insults, inferences, guesses, generalizations, answers and lies are all kinds of linguistic acts. The problem of analysis in each case is to find necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful (or in some cases normal) performance of the act.

Stalnaker also discusses about Pragmatic ambiguity. He says, when there is a problem in determining the context and/or when there are possibilities of more than one contextual references; there arises a pragmatic ambiguity. The reader is stuck somewhere in the middle of the multiple possible interpretations and forced to determine the contextual reference embedded in the proverb.

Devil on the Cross is a novel set in post colonial Nairobi and Kenya of the 1980s. This was the difficult time for Africa when definitions of neo-colonialism

were not clear and corruption had entered the human mind. The society, polity and culture was badly affected under the impression of colonialism. Thiongo's concern to hold the mirror to the Africans shows his pained heart that sighs through the present novels. The morally fractured African society is captured in the novel that presents the story of Jacinta Warringa, a black Kenyan girl who is abandoned by her boyfriend and develops the suicidal instincts. On her way to Nairobi, she happens to meet her future boss who invites her to a party named "Devil's Feast" where businessmen share the most heinous ideas of robbery and loot and compete to fleece money from the community people. The novel is a satire on the post-colonial African society. The use of appropriate proverbs in the novel distinctly portray the fissured African society and culture.

About the corruption in Nairobi, Thiongo says it is "soulless and corrupt" . . .

But it is not Nairobi alone that is afflicted in this way. The same is true of all the cities in every country that has recently slipped the noose of colonialism. These countries are finding it difficult to stave off poverty for the simple reason that they have taken it upon themselves to learn how to run their economies from American experts. So they have been taught the principles and system of self-interest and have been told to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good. They have been taught new songs, new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of money. That's why today Nairobi teaches,

Crookedness to the upright

Meanness to the kind,

Hatred to the loving,

Evil to the good. (15-16)

Thus, the dexterous and incessant flow of proverbs exhibits how the African countries are gripped in the tight noose of corruption, poverty and hunger after the colonial rule.

It is an amazing and interesting thing to note that the use of proverbs in communication is common but its study demands uncommon endeavour. The reason is its strong association with syntactical structure, contextual reference, rhetoric, rhythm, tone and expression interwoven in it. This is only about the constructional and representational values of proverbs. The metaphoric dignity of a proverb is more due to its ability to convey a deeper context to the world around. The wide and various performance of language is well observed in the huge proverb-mass used in the African literary novel *Devil on the Cross*. The reading of this novel introduces Thiongo's communicative art through a heavy overflow of proverbs that drenches us with astonishment on finding a correlation between the matter and its relevance to the world of wisdom. The corpus of these proverbs is divided into three major categories: **purpose centric, person centric and plot centric**.

Purpose Centric Proverbs:

These proverbs work as a yardstick either to measure the interest of the listener or to teach a lesson to him. These proverbs have an ability to perform at the levels of teaching, predicting, soliciting and advising. Such proverbs assert and export the wisdom interwoven.

To bathe is to strip off all clothes (8).

To swim is to plunge into the river (8).

Today is tomorrow's treasury (14).

Tomorrow is the harvest of what we plant today (14).

Change seeds, for the gourd contains seeds of more than one kind (15).

Change steps, for the song has more than one rhythm (15).

No man licks an empty hand (19).

Person Centric Proverbs:

These proverbs highlight a person, his/her deeds and shows the ownership of the person to whom the event or episode is connected. The person may be acknowledged, blamed or claimed in the generality of the incident and his/her connection to the situation. These proverbs also show the speaker's familiarity to the person with whom the proverb is associated and with the situation which is also well observed by the speaker. Such proverbs may have a specific address to a class, caste or sect that is either leashed out or used as a signature of some ideal state. Proverbs like, The fart of a rich man has no smell. (63) The wound of a rich man never produces pus (65) speak about the commonly associated features to a certain class. These proverbs need to be understood beyond their semantic structure.

Plot Centric Proverbs:

Such proverbs draw a direct link to the history or the past of the place. It also shows some deep seated habitual aspects of the society. Plot centric proverbs contain a moral, ethical and advisory force for the present situation. Such proverbs try to apply the whole of the past event to the present situation and thus alert the participant to be judicious in future for the similar unfavourable consequences. Such proverbs are:

Happy is the traveler who is able to see the tree stumps in his way (1).

The forest of the heart is never clear of all its trees (1).

The secret of the homestead are not for the ears of the strangers (1).

Misfortune is swifter than the swiftest spirit (10).

One trouble spawns another (10).

That which is born black will never be white (11).

Aping others cost the frog its buttocks (12).

He who searches carefully never fails to find (34).

Fortune hides just on the other side of the bush (34).

Good luck never makes an early visit (34).

A stone hardened by age is never washed away by the rains (32).

A borrowed necklace may cause one to lose one's own (32).

Too much haste *splits* the yam (30).

Crawl but arrive safely (30).

The language of the eye is not the language of the ear (18).

He who wishes to sleep is the one who is anxious to make the bed (19).

A closer scrutiny of these proverbs shows the deep seated fear and subordination in the nature of African people. These proverbs reflect pity and pain, requisition, struggle, hopelessness, failure, rigidity, negative conformity, discrimination, discrepancy, trouble, abandonment, seclusion, isolation and hard-ill-luck. This is due to the age old colonial subjugation and marginalised status. These proverbs have a strong communicative ability. They appear in a running note so very convincingly and sheepishly that they do not even make us feel their exclusive presence. The protagonist in the novel, Kareendi, the young girl is stocked by her boss Boss Kihara who pursues her to be his mistress. When she politely refuses all his advances, he appeases her to forget her poor boyfriend and

accept a rich man like him. He says, “Kareendi, my new necklace, my tomato plant growing on the rich soil of an abandoned homestead” (22). But Kareendi was an upright person who bravely replies him in the chain of proverbial statements; “the yam that one has dug up for oneself has no mouldy patches. The sugar cane that one has picked out has no unripe edges. Those whom one loves do not squint (23). Kareendi tries hard to defend her boyfriend but unfortunately he also turns out to be a cheater. This draws attention to the cultureless society of Africa. The corrupted mind of the society is presented through the arguments between Kareendi and her friends who advise her not to reject a rich man’s proposal to be his mistress. The arguments run thus:

“Kareendi, you’d better change your ways: the seeds in the gourd are not all of the same type” they tell her. Kareendi replies: “A restless child leaves home in search of meat just as a goat is about to be slaughtered”. But the girls tell her: “Friend, this is a new Kenya. Everyone should set something aside to meet tomorrow’s needs. He who saves a little food will never suffer from hunger”. She replies: “too much eating ruins the stomach”. They taunt her: “A restricted diet is monotonous. Kareendi rejects this and tells them: “A Borrowed necklace may lead to the loss of one’s own” (20).

Thus, Thiongo’s novel *Devil on the Cross* presents a gamut of the proverbs that occupy the realm of the narrowmindedness of the society of Africa in the 1980s when corruption and perversion had enveloped the country to a maximum level. These proverbs have a specific association to the community’s mindset. Their assistance to the text delineates how pragmatic value supersedes the semantic framework of a proverb. The connection of proverbs to the community increases the speaker’s authority over the shared piece of prediction, wisdom or advice. This novel has a dialogic connection between the plot and the narration of the novel. The post colonial African society is not only masculine in mindset

but also abusive towards the female folk in the novel. Women are doubly subjugated here. Nevertheless, Thiongo, a revolutionist gives courage to his female character Waringa who rises from a self-effacing personality to a status of a revolutionary by her remarkable contribution in the upliftment of women in particular and Africans in general. The unity of the class of workers and the university students wins over their subjugators because, as Thiongo's proverb says, "Truth can break a bow poised to shoot" (215).

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