

Conference Paper

Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This article is a literary study which is concerned with the analysis of proverbs found in the novel *Things Fall Apart* written by Chinua Achebe. The objective of this study is to identify as well as to analyse proverbs used in the novel. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework proposed by Honect (1997) who states that proverbs are an intuitive aspect of their mental functioning and can be viewed by using seven views: Personal View, Formal View, Religious View, Literary View, Practical View, Cultural View and Cognitive View. The study was conducted by applying qualitative method with a descriptive approach proposed by Creswell (2009). The result of the analysis shows that there are 27 proverbs found in the novel. Of the seven views of proverbs, six are found in the novel. The view that is not found in the novel is Literary View.

Keywords: proverbs, personal view, formal view, religious view, literary view, practical view, cultural view, cognitive view.

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1. Introduction

Proverbs, a short well-known saying in figures of speech or symbolism, seem to have stood the test of ages for their usefulness in modern society. Proverbs have been found to serve people well as a significant rhetoric force in both oral and written communication, from friendly chats, powerful political speeches, and religious sermons to lyrical poetry, best-seller novels, and the influential mass media (Mieder, 2004).

Thing Fall Apart, a novel written by Chinua Achebe, consists of a lot of proverbs which are originally African so that they are different from the common well-known proverbs. This novel is praised as the finest novel written about life in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. Published in 1958, it is unquestionably the world's most widely read African novel, having sold more than eight million copies in English and been translated into more than fifty languages.

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The bulk of the novel takes place in Umuofia, a cluster of nine villages on the lower Niger, populated by Igbo people. Umuofia is a powerful clan, skilled in war and with a great population, with proud traditions and advanced social institutions. In the Umuofian society, proverbs are used very often in conversation, and help people understand things better by presenting the truth and can also give them advice. Proverbs have an important impact on the storyline. All proverbs have some kind of deeper meaning behind them, and this is part of the Nigerian culture. Proverbs are used by people of all ages and statures to tell others about the importance of something. People in the Igbo Tribe use proverbs everyday as they are an important part of their culture and traditions, and the art of conversation is regarded very highly throughout the clan. The Igbo culture is a very oral language. "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". This quote shows how important proverbs are in everyday life as they are referred to as 'palm oil' which is a very important part of the tribe's life.

This research focuses on the use of proverbs reflected in the novel and would indicate seven views of the proverbs in the novel. The theory of seven views of proverb is proposed by Honeck (1997). By reflecting the views of proverb in the novel *Things Fall Apart* the researcher figures out the subject matters of this research.

2. Literature Review

There are some theories related to Proverbs. According to Taylor (1931: 3) in Mieder's Book *Proverbs – A Handbook*, 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 give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. Those who do not speak a language can never recognize all its proverbs, and similarly much that is truly proverbial escapes us in Elizabethan and older English. Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable. Dundes (1984) in *Proverbs – A Handbook* by Mieder states that the proverb appears to be a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element, a descriptive element consisting of a topic and a comment. This means that proverbs must have at least two words. Proverbs which contain a single descriptive element are non-oppositional. Proverbs with two or more descriptive elements are maybe either oppositional or non-oppositional.

Honeck (1997: 13-14) argued that the history of proverbs within the species sketchy, it is clear that the proverb has fascinated the lay person as well as the scholar. Paremiology, the study of proverbs, is practiced by many different kinds of people including cultural anthropologists, psychologists, folklorists, linguists, sociologists, educators, psychiatrists, historians, students of religion, literature buffs, and even lawyers, advertising executives, management consultants, and an occasional proverb aficionado. Therefore, it is clear that proverb is practiced by many people from different studies and it shows how important proverb is.

As Honeck (1997: 14) points out that it should not be surprising that all of this interest in and resulting vast literature on the proverb has yielded different goals, perspectives, assumptions, methodologies, findings, and theoretical conclusions. The result is that there is no overarching theory of proverbs. Instead, different views have emerged. He himself refers to seven reasonably distinguishable of such views as presented below.

2.1. Personal view

The proverb is treated from a subjective viewpoint based purely on personal experience and understanding. The personal view might also be called the phenomenological, subjective, or folk view. Most people in all cultures have knowledge of some proverbs, along with various proclivities, attitudes, and tidbits of information about them. As with puns, there are proverb lovers, haters and apathetic.

The personal view is in most respects an egocentric and non-scientific view, even though it derives from specific cultural experience with proverbs and may entail scientifically valid ideas. It is a starting point for a scientific view, but it sometimes moves off in antiscientific direction.

Example: 'Like father, like son.'

The example above means a son's character or behaviour can be expected to resemble his father. This proverb is related to personal view as it contains subjective viewpoint.

2.2. Formal view

This is a scientific approach that primarily uses the methods and concepts of linguistics, logic, and semiotics to define, classify and semiotics to define, classify and otherwise analyze proverbs. This view is characterized by attempts to describe the linguistic and

semantic-logic properties of proverbs. Often the goal is to define the proverb in these terms. In other cases, the goal is to create a proverb typology.

Example: 'Man proposes, God disposes.'

This proverb is seen from the logic viewpoint where the meaning is human being can make any plans they want, but only God that decides their fate. So this view approaches the proverbs logically.

2.3. Religious view

Religious teaching and wisdom are examined in texts. It is concerned with big issues in life such as how people should conduct themselves, what constitutes good and evil, the place of people in the larger scheme of existence, and questions of afterlife. It is not surprising, therefore, that religious figures have used proverbs to teach about these issues.

Example: 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

This is a proverb of Buddhism from Japan which means everything in our life is dualism (everything depends on the past and future). This is something that related to their belief where the fate that is waiting in the future decided by the past.

2.4. The literary view

Proverbs in prose and poetry are analyzed in terms of their literary value and what they tell us about the writer, their times, and so forth. Proverbs are used in prose, poetry and song. The reasons vary with the genre. Poetry and song tend to follow certain rhythmic structures, so the poetic and balanced syntactic structure of some proverbs can be appealing. In addition, they pack a great deal of information into a short statement, and poets and song writers often have verbal economy as a goal. For writers of prose and some poetry, the goal may be different, with a shift in focus to the rhetorical, sometimes indirect, distant style that typifies proverbs. Perhaps the fundamental reason why proverbs appear in literary sources is that they pack an emotional and aesthetic punch. This effect can be traced not only to their frequent use of poetic devices, but to their common omnitemporal (timeless) form and their arousal of affect-laden universal ideas about human affairs.

Example: 'Better late than never.'

This proverb means if we do something or arrive later is not a good thing but it is better than not at all. In this view, the proverb is analyzed from where it comes from, whether it exists in a prose or a poetry. It comes from Emily Dickinson's poem.

2.5. The practical view

The many uses of the proverb in intelligence testing, psychotherapy and other areas are examined. Proverbs have characteristic properties that make them useful for everyday purposes. They are relatively short, poetic, typically concrete, and used as indirect comments. They have the power and wisdom of many people behind them, and they perform categorization and pragmatic functions. These properties strongly suggest that they can be used to facilitate memory, teach and persuade.

Example: 'A stitch in time saves nine.'

The proverb means that if you sort out the problem you get immediately then you can save a lot of extra work later. This view approaches with intelligence test where someone who is in action to solve his problem.

2.6. The cultural view

This is a scientific approach to the proverb that treats it as a multifunction from of folk literature that arises from and is embedded in a socio-cultural context. The cultural view emphasizes the use of proverbs in socio-cultural context. The basic premise is that proverbs are cultural linguistic products, created and used in social situations for social purposes. These purposes largely entail the codification of important lesson in the culture.

Example: 'Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.'

The proverb means you cannot dump something valuable along with something that you do not desire. This proverb is from the medieval age, around 1500- 1600's from German, where they have culture to bath their babies in a bucket. After bathing, they will throw the water which means the waste. If they are not careful, they can throw it with their babies. So this proverb is related to their culture.

2.7. The cognitive view

This is a scientific approach based on cognitive science that attempts to explain how an individual uses and understand proverbs. The cognitive view attempts to describe the

mental structures and processes that sub-serve proverb learning, comprehension and use. For example, the cognitive view would have us focus on the following issues: the mental representation of proverbs, the phases in their comprehension, how proverbs categorize events, and the pragmatic functions they perform.

The cognitive view brings proverbs within the general theoretical scope of cognitive science. It follows, therefore, that there is no virtue in having a paremiology or special sub-discipline with its own concepts and theoretical accoutrements devoted exclusively to the study of proverbs. At the same time there is no reason why the study of proverbs cannot or should not inform cognitive science.

Example: 'Great weights hang on small wires.'

The proverb above shows the contrast between the "great weights" and "small wires" where the verb "hang on" means depend on. So in this view, the proverb is approached by using our thought to examine the content of the proverbs.

3. Research Method

Research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detail methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009: 3). However, the selection of a research design is actually based on the nature of the research problem or issue being addressed.

This research follows qualitative method of research for it involves the characteristics of qualitative procedure of analysis. This research explores and understands the social or human problem. The researcher makes interpretations of the meaning of the data. Data collection and analysis follow the procedures are under researcher's role as the key instrument.

The data which are obtained from the novel are analyzed in chapter four of this study. The analysis is conducted by classifying the obtained data into two subchapters related to the research problems of this study. The first subchapter displayed the seven views of proverbs found in the novel. Then, the second subchapter related to reveal how the proverbs used. The data analysis is the way to answer the two research problems in this study.

4. Result and Discussion

After analyzing the data, there are 27 proverbs found in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. Among all of the seven views of proverbs, there is only one type of proverb which is not found in the novel, that is Literary View.

4.1. Personal view

This is the first view that is analyzed as the reference for the proverbs found in the novel. After finding the proverbs, there are nine proverbs that show the relation to Personal View as Honect explained in his theory. The following proverb is one of the proverbs related to this view:

Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because, as the saying goes, **an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.** (Achebe, 1997: 10)

From the quotation above, the bold sentence shows its relation to Personal View where the proverbs treated from subjective view. That proverb means people may feel uneasy when someone mentions something that affects them personally. Especially, if it is something related to their bad past, they will find it uncomfortable to hear. In this quotation, Okonkwo is having conversations with the other villagers when they hold a meeting. Nwakibie, Okonkwo's benefactor as well as a well-known man in Umoufia, says a joke about someone's past that makes Okonkwo feel uncomfortable as he remembers his own father, Unoka. He is a very lazy man who likes borrowing the others cowries.

4.2. Formal view

This is the second view of this research. This view is approached with the concept of linguistics, logic and semiotics. There are six proverbs that contain the point of Formal view. These following proverbs belong to this view:

We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. **Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.**" (Achebe, 1997: 09)

The first proverb of this view means we have to treat someone equally. The proverb says if we want to let the kite perch, we have to let the eagle too. In case we only do

one, it will bring a bad thing. Logically, if only we treat someone good and the other bad, it will make us look as a bad person. No matter where we are, to whom we meet, we have to treat them equally depending on the situation or condition.

In this part in the novel, Okonkwo uses this proverb when he has a meeting with the other elders and their family. There is a man named Nwakibie, a wealthy man who has three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. It was for this man that Okonkwo worked to earn his first seed yams. In this meeting, all of the villager eat and drink the same foods and wines. Even though there are elders among them, they share the same meal with the others.

4.3. Religious view

This is the next view that is analyzed and identified in the proverbs found from the novel. This view shows the approach from religious view and wisdom which is examined in the proverbs. There are two proverbs found in the novel that show the view of religious. The following proverb is one of the proverbs related to this view:

Everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo when Okonkwo called him a woman. The oldest man present said sternly that **those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble**. Okonkwo said he was sorry for what he had said, and the meeting continued. (Achebe, 1997: 12)

The meaning of proverb in this quotation is those who have been success must not forget their creator. It means that they cannot be arrogant for what they have and do not forget to stay humble. There are many people who become arrogant after enjoying their success and forget the one they believe has helped them. No matter how hard or easy our life is we must remember God that has always helped us. From this explanation, it is clear that the proverb contains the point of view from Religious view.

This part in the novel happens when Okonkwo comes to the meeting to talk about the next ancestral feast and a man without any title shows up. A man who has no title is called woman so Okonkwo mocks him. Then the oldest man who presents at the meeting said the proverb to remind him not to be exaggerated.

4.4. Literary view

In this part of view, there is no proverb, relates to literary view, can be found in the novel, as it is examined from the prose and poetry then also the point of view of the writer, their times and so forth. Even though the Igbo people respects highly on art, but there seems no proverbs that can be seen from the view point of literary. This view can be applied to prose or poetry.

4.5. Practical view

The fifth view is seen from the intelligence testing, advertising point of view. As Honeck says in the example of his theory, proverbs in Practical view refers to something that is done by the people. There are seven proverbs found that related to this view. The following proverbs is one of the proverbs related to this view:

Our elders say that **the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.** (Achebe, 1997: 05)

The proverb means that the biggest thing will be done first than the smallest one. When finishing the biggest first, we will find it easy to finish the other problems. Because of the difficult one need to be taken care of directly than the easy one. This proverb relates to practical view as the meaning of it shows the intelligence of a person solves his problems.

This proverb is said by Unoka when Okoye, his friend, visits him to ask him paying his debts. Unoka has borrowed his two hundred cowries from more than two years. Instead of paying his debts, he says a proverb about how he has to pay off the biggest debt first than the small one. Hearing his words, Okoye decides to depart from his house.

4.6. Cultural view

This is the sixth view that is applied to the proverbs found in the novel. This view approaches the proverbs with the scientific approach from cultural point of view. This view is seeking the cultural view which contains in the proverbs. There are only two proverbs can be found in the novel. The following proverb is one of the proverbs related to this view:

Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and **proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.** (Achebe, 1997: 04)

The proverb above means “proverb” is very important in their culture. It is as important as “Palm-oil” which becomes the ingredients to cook their meal. Without the oil, they will not be able to cook the dishes. It shows how important proverb is. It is also the part of art where they are highly regards it. This proverb refers to this view as it contains cultural viewpoint

This proverb is used when Okoye talks to Unoka asking him to pay off his debts. Even though he uses the words favorably, Unoka replies him back to give excuses not to pay his debts. Proverbs are usually used in conversation and occasion such as to show respects or as a reminder to the others. It is used by the Igbo people in their daily conversation. One of the examples is when Okonkwo says a proverb to show respect to his superior who is in the same place with him. Another example is when an elder in the meeting room reminds Okonkwo not to be arrogant for satirizing a man.

4.7. Cognitive view

This is the last view that is applied to the proverbs found in the novel. This view is only has one proverb that is fit with Cognitive view. This approach is seen from a scientific approach based on cognitive science (the study of thought, learning and mental organization). The quotation below is the only proverb can be found which is related to this view.

On a moonlight night it would be different. The happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard. And perhaps those not so young would be playing in pairs in less open places, and old men and women would remember their youth. As the Ibo say: **“When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.”** (Achebe, 1997: 5-6)

The proverb in this quotation means people who afraid of darkness will only be brave to go out when it is bright. But in this view the proverb is seen from the cognitive point of view where it is examined with thought and learning. There are the word “cripple” and “walk” which become the subjects to be analyzed. The contrast between those words is “cripple” refers to someone who is hard to move and “walk” refers to someone who is able to move freely. If we examine it with the thought about someone, who is hard to move, will not go out for something ordinary except it is urgent.

This proverb is used when the Igbo people, who fear to darkness, will warn their children not to go out at night as they believe that there are many evil spirits and dangerous animals become even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. But when

there is moonlight, the villager will come out and the children's playing sound will be heard. Even if they are afraid of darkness they like moonlight. Everybody enjoys the light that it makes the cripple wants to walk.

5. Conclusion

Based on the result of the analysis, it is found that the personal view has a lot of proverbs which can be approached by this view. From all of the proverbs, it is clear that there are subjective points of views, contained in them. The second view that gets a lot of proverbs is Practical which has 7 proverbs. The third one is Formal and the next is Religious and Cultural that have 2 proverbs each. The last is Cognitive view which only has 1 proverb.

Furthermore, the proverbs used in the novel are commonly used to express respects, to show the subjective view, to convey something logically, to describe some actions and cultures. Each point can be seen from the quotations that have been analyzed in the chapter four.

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