

LEVERAGING ON THE APPLICATION OF LITERARY THEORIES ON FOLKLORE FOR MITIGATING MORAL DECADENCE IN IGBO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

African oral traditions show a unique situational use of language. Proverbs and folktales which are embodiment of folklore express African worldview especially the spiritual dimension which is mythically believed to validate cultural norms and behavior. They are beyond scientific expressions as they bear pragmatic rules that regulate behavioural patterns. In this study, four literary theories namely, Sociological, Formalistic, Marxist and Psychoanalytic are applied to the explication of five proverbs and two folktales. The study highlights those proverbs and folktales that use characters and consequences to reinforce positive communal ethos. It further delineates that applying these critical lenses to proverbs and folktales help to transform them from simple literary permutation into a more defined cultural artifact. It then concludes by asserting that proverbs and folktales have remained past precedent for present behaviour.

Keywords: traditions, proverbs, folktales, values, behavior, moral, society. folklore, culture, oral, literary, theory

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is the sum of cultural patterns of behaviour by which we define ourselves in our environment. According to *Alder*, it encompasses verbal, material and social rituals that have been handed down primarily orally and practically. To *Michahopos*, folklore serves as a powerful - driven antidote to social and moral decadent as it preserves cultural identity and instills core values. Proverbs and folktales which are aspects of Folklore are the major concern of this paper. Proverbs according to Salmon are laconic and witty sayings generally used in projecting commonly held ideas and beliefs. Folktales according to *Akporobaro* are stories told orally using fantasy, imaginary events and characters for the purpose of entertainment, humor and promotion of moral values in the society. Literary theory offers an appreciable insight into literary works in terms of their analysis, explication and evaluation. The four theories that would be examined are Sociological, Formalistic, *Marxist and Psychoanalytic*. The study will investigate how Proverbs

and folktales in relation to these theories can be utilized in mitigating moral decadence in Igbo society.

Literary Theory: According to Culler, literary theory has to do with the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods used in the practical reading and interpretation of literature. To Nwahunanya, it is the basis of all literary criticism because it gives us the basic assumptions for the study of literature as we understand literary categories using generalizable principles. A literary artist according to him reassesses the fundamental assumptions behind the critical evaluation of any tradition of literature with the view of correcting them if they are faulty, setting up proper criteria and thereby aiding readers in the correct interpretation of literary facts. The following theories are considered here, Sociological, Formalistic, *Marxist and Psychoanalytic*.

Literary theory highlights the effort of a writer in educating the masses and sensitizing them so as to accomplish his artistic vision. Such a writer through his creativity and social relevance helps to cushion the oppressive people's ideological instincts and tendencies towards a better human existence. This he does by exposing his readers to the rediscovery of some salutary elements in their everyday experiences. It further acts as a mirror through which the ugliness and weakness of a particular society can be ascertained.

The Sociological Theory: Sociological approach takes into cognizance the social context of the text, the Sociology of the writer and the influence it exerts as a literary work on the society. It is a mirror of social norms.

The Formalistic Theory: It is an interpretative strategy that emphasizes literary forms and the study of literary devices within the text. (Nwahunanya) To the formalist, textual analysis should be done strictly on the unique form generated by the work so that no extraneous rule can be applied to it.

The Marxist Theory: This relates to economic base and ideological bureaucratic structure in a system obsessed with materialism. It sees literature as a reflection of socioeconomic conditions and class struggle. The theorist, *Karl Marx* advises writers to use their artistic medium in denigrating the elitist negative tendencies.

The Psychoanalytic Theory: This focuses on the effects of literary work on both the writer and the reader. It unfolds the idiosyncratic traits of the writer on his creative work. *Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung* are the major proponents. Freud interprets folk narrative through repressed desires and family traits while Jung focuses on archetypes which represent universal human instinct. These traits become artistic values in enhancing the readers' perception of the text.

PROVERB: A Proverb according to Onuekwusi is a metaphorical, philosophical allusion citation that gives credence to traditional truth and wisdom. Nwachukwu-Agbada is of the view that Proverbs state laws of life based on logic and possibilities as they serve as instructional, cognitive and corrective measures. They employ literary embellishments such as similes, metaphors, personification etc. in their projection of cultural norm. In Igbo milieu it is regarded as wise saying and the oil with which words are eaten.

FOLKTALE: The etymology of folktale indicates that it is a conflation of two ideas namely "folk" meaning the people and "tale" meaning a narrative or story. It contains different types of stories

that involve man, animals and spirits. It is creative, didactic, entertaining and dramatic. It admits according to *Onuekwusi* a lot of improvisations which shows to a large extent a particular narrator's ingenuity. It uses highly unusual human or absurd situations as the basis of narrative action. Its narrative structure according to *Akporobaro* has a determinate pattern which consists of four basic elements which are the opening coda and setting, the narration, the musical interlude and the conclusion.

METHODOLOGY: Sociological and Formalistic theories will be applied in the explication of five proverbs, while *Marxist and Psychoanalytic* theories will be applied in that of two folktales. Since proverbs and folktales are verbal arts, their explication will focus on the act of speech because for one to understand folkloristic event, one must realize the manner in which social beings communicate.

Igbo proverbs and their transliterations in context

- Ukpana okpoko gburu, nti chiri ya. (A grasshopper killed by a noisy predator is deaf)
- Agwawa nti ma o nughi, e gbuwe isi, nti esoro ya. (If the ear is warned and it refuses to hear, when the head is cut off, the ear follows)
- Ukwu jie agu, mgbada abia ya ugwo. (If a lion's leg is fractured, an antelope comes for debt payment)
- Eme ngwa, emeghara odachi. (Promptness to an urgent task averts disaster)
- Anu bu uzo na-anu mmiri oma. (An animal that comes first drinks the best water)

The folktales are reconstruction from one of the writers. They are coined from her repository knowledge of folklore.

Their figurative interpretation: The first two proverbs buttress the fact that evil befalls anyone who refuses to hearken to wise instructions. The third highlights that people take undue advantage of others to satisfy their urge. The last two shows that when one does what one is expected to do at the right time, one averts calamity.

Application of sociological theory to the proverbs: It is generally believed that the 'bird' Okpoko, a predator gives its prey sufficient warning before attacking and it is only a wise grasshopper that takes precautionary measures for safety. In the same vein, the head and ear are the inseparable parts of the body, so what happens to one affects the other and so the calamity one suffers because of stubbornness affects others. It then implies that there are societal norms and values which wise people should subscribe to because disaster awaits any who flaunts social order. It is believed that an antelope is a weaker animal compared with the enormous strength of the lion. The societal norms demands that one should not cash in on someone's weakness or misfortune to actualize one's selfish ambition. On the other hand, one should not use the resources at one's disposal to fight others. The last two underscore the need for one to be diligent and prompt in discharging any given assignment as delay portends danger. A social role receives more recognition and appreciation when it is timely played as it becomes more beneficial to all and sundry.

Application of formalistic theory to the proverbs: These five proverbs have literal significance even when they enjoy transferred meaning in contextual usage. They can also be considered as

grammatical units because of their sentence structure as this shows their linguistic relationship with ordinary utterance. In its formalistic approach, the size of the grasshopper is a metaphor of miniature and stubbornness. The imagery of the two animals is used to portray the different idiosyncrasies of people. The ear and the head are symbolically used to project the consequences of stubbornness. Its stylistic impetus in consonance with its intended meaning appeals to the reader's sensibility as he is advised to heed to warnings and advice that are not detrimental. In the third proverb, the size of a lion is a metaphor of enormous treasure while that of antelope is that of opportunistic tendency. Both animals are allusive as they capture vividly man's interaction with his kind. They are parallel in nature as both of them cannot coexist. The two characters are personified in order to show that their attributes in this context can also be seen in man. The fourth and fifth are reflectors of the consequences of indolence. Self-discipline is a vital tool for man's survival. The semantic import of all these clausal proverbs is the amplification of the audience perception of their relevance in establishing acceptable code of conduct.

FOLKTALE IN CONTEXT

Once upon a time, a man by name, Okoro married two wives Olamma and Alaezi from two different socioeconomic backgrounds. Olamma's parents were wealthy farmers whereas, Alaezi's parents romanticized with poverty. Okoro was more favorably disposed to Olamma because of her parents' wealth. He hated Alaezi and her four children. This exposed them to hardship because they only depend on their mother's meagre income for survival. One day as Alaezi and her children went to farm, the first son forgot his flute on the farm and remembered it when they got home. Although, his mother dissuaded him from going back to the farm because it was dark, he still went and was accosted by the spirits who inhabited the land. As he narrated his ordeal to them, they decided to keep him so as to try him. As a child with sound moral upbringing, his activities within that period impressed them as he displayed humility, diligence, honesty and dedication to any assignment that was given to him. On his day of departure, he was given a sealed calabash and he was asked to open it immediately he got home. This he did and many good things filled as this transformed their social status. Alaezi shared some of these items with Okoro and Olamma. Olamma and Okoro out of envy and greed, contrived a similar scenario for their son. She advised her son to leave his flute on the farm. When they got home, he pretentiously went back to look for it. When he got there, he became confrontational and began to insult the spirits for playing with his flute. As they kept him there in order to try him, he proved to be stubborn. On the day of his departure, he was given the same sealed calabash. When he got home, his mother gathered all the family members except Alaezi and her children into a room. When the calabash was opened, the room was filled with dangerous animals which devoured all of them.

Application of Marxist theory to the above folktale: The above tale is a reflection of the destructive consequences of greed and envy as well as reward for virtue. Okoro's house is an example of class distinction and economic inequalities syndrome. His interest and concern were on Olamma because of her parents' social status. Although, he treated Alaezi with disdain, yet she was optimistic. Okoro is an epitome of social misfit as his antisocial demeanor portray him as an opportunist who exploited others for his selfish aggrandizement. His segregational tendency, unbridled ambition and irreprehensible lifestyle made him a victim of capitalistic insensibility. Olamma who manifested traits of bourgeoisie was irrational and erratic as she barricaded her life

with an imposing wall of egocentricism, apathy and maliciousness. These are some of the attributes associated with people who are capitalist oriented.

Application of psychoanalytic theory to the folktale: The characters in the tale display neurotic strategies that informed their different behavioural patterns as they tried to cope with their different predicaments in life. The tragic pattern of degeneracy into neurosis usually begins with an acute deprivation through a stage of poverty as can be seen in the case of Alaezi. Our perception of reality is enhanced by Alaezi's humble demeanor. She is an embodiment of societal norms. Despite her psychological trauma, she showcases virtue unlike her co-wife and their husband. The narrator in his performance leaves his psychological imprints in the psyche of his audience.

FOLKTALE IN CONTEXT 2

Once upon a time there was a famine in the land. A kind rich baker sent for twenty of the poorest children in the village and said to them, 'in this basket there is a loaf of bread for each of you, take it and come back to me every day at this hour until God sends us better times' The hungry children always quarrel over the bread because they want to have the largest loaf. At last, they went away without thanking the giver. Ngozi, a poorly dressed little girl did not quarrel or struggle with the rest but always stood quietly at a place waiting for the ill-behaved children to take theirs and leave. At the end she would take the leftover, kiss the baker and go home. The next day, they all took the largest portion while she got just half the size, she got the first day. When she got home and her mother opened it, many new shining pieces of silver fell out of it. Her mother was very much alarmed and asked her to take it back to the baker. When Ngozi took it back to him, he refused to collect it but rather made her to understand that it was used to reward her for her good conduct.

Application of Marxist theory to the tale: The poor socio-economic status of the children shows that their parents have been victims of capitalism. Their display of antisocial traits may be attributable to the prevailing class distinction and economic elitism. The society owes them, the responsibility of catering for their welfare. The baker projects acceptable traits such as philanthropy and sound judgement. In a society where the rich exploit the poor, he decided to be different. The behaviour of the children is a reflection of their different moral upbringing. Ngozi with exceptional quality attests to the fact that one can stand for nobility despite all odds. Her mother lent her the moral life support so as to confront the strong tower monster, which is antisocial and maladjusted tantrums. The tale further reminds us that one should still exercise self-restraint and discipline despite challenges.

Application of Psychoanalytical theory to the tale: Since the children in the tale are destitute of material sustenance, there is no doubt that the characters in the tale sought solace in evasive gestures which can be described as neurosis, hence the neurotic tendencies of the children is a direct consequence of the unfavorable and emasculated socioeconomic discrepancy. The poor children's struggle for the bread dramatizes the disillusionment not only with the society that has failed to recognize their personal worth but also with themselves. This scenario benumbed them to the sensitivity and sacrosanct of life, thus, their character epitomizes the detached neurotic figure. The children's display of greed, selfishness and ingratitude is an inordinate action which is attributable to human frailties. It's remarkable to note that the baker is not depicted as a flawless or perfect character. In spite of the fact that he enjoys a pride of place as a superior personality, he

still degenerates and finds solace in neurotic solution. This shows that neurosis is not culture-bound but a fundamental universal human trait. This tale therefore, highlights that although the combined threats of extinction owing to hunger and a suffocating social context predispose individuals enmeshed therein to live neurotically, there is still a way out, a possibility of self-discipline, sincerity and a quest for a rational means of existence.

Proverbs and folktales as remedial measures: Moral decadence is the deterioration of ethical or moral values within a society or individual. Some of its causes are poor home upbringing, insatiable desire for materialism, negligence of spiritual rejuvenation etc. Proverbs and folktales can be employed as traditional means of inculcating sound moral behaviour especially among the youths thereby making them to develop good sense of judgement. They express social norms and what constitute deviance from them. They have purgative effect on people. They are sources of aesthetic satisfaction, entertainment, persuasion, social recognition and discourse embellishments. Utilizing them can combat corruption, oppression and greed among the ruling class.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs and folktales being products of creativity and ingenuity are tools of redressing societal malaise. It has been established here that imagery and symbolism are obtainable in them. The application of these four theories to them attests to the fact that their social significance and pragmatic utility are in conformity with their socio-normative expectation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital tools should be employed in the dissemination of proverbs and folktales for wider accessibility. They should be integrated into the school curriculum as pedagogic tools. Obscene proverbs and folktales should be avoided especially where younger people are part of the audience.

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