

YORUBA ECO-PROVERBS IN ENGLISH: AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF NIYI OSUNDARE'S *HORSES OF MEMORY*

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Sub-theme: New Directions in African Poetry.

“The proverb is the horse of the word, the word is the horse of the proverb, when the word is lost
it is the proverb we use for finding it.”
- Niyi Osundare -

Abstract

In an attempt to promote African culture and tradition, current literary trends have been witnessing an increasing use of proverbs in African writing. New proverbs are cropping up and creatively modifying old known ones. This paper examines eco-proverbs/nature proverbs and its importance as literary resource tool today, in their meanings and relevance to contemporary social and aesthetic realities. We explore how he creatively deploys known Yoruba proverbs to capture and reconstruct nature focused proverbs, and how he uses these to promote his poetic vision of the natural environment related items like fauna, flora, landscape and seascape derived from Yoruba eco-proverbs. This paper is an eco-critical enquiry into the social, aesthetic interpretation of “Who is afraid of the proverb” on one hand, and in order to further explore the dynamics of Yoruba praise poetry, we examined his poetic deployment of nature centered metaphor, personification and imagery in the poem “For the one who departed”.

1.1. Introduction

The word proverb is from the Latin word ‘proverbium’. The study of proverbs is called paremiology, from the Greek “proverbs”, dates back to the time of Aristotle. Thus paremiology is the collection of proverbs. It is a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson. It is a saying that requires explanation. It is a simple and concrete saying popularly known and repeated; it expresses truth, based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. Its author is generally unknown else it will be a quotation. They are often metaphorical, short sayings that express some traditionally held truth. They are usually metaphorical and often, for the sake of remembrance, alliterative. Many proverbs in English are said to have been absorbed into English having been known earlier in other languages. Wolfgang Mieder(1993), a prominent proverb scholar defines the term proverbs as a short, generally known sentence of folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation(119). Stylistic features of proverbs include the use of alliteration, parallelism, rhyme and ellipsis. In some languages, assonance, the repetition of a vowel, is also exploited in forming artistic proverbs, such as the following extreme example from Oromo, of Ethiopia: kan mana baala, a’laa gala (“A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere”: ‘somebody who has a big reputation among those who do not know him well.’

Mieder (2004) contends that proverbs are found in many parts of the world, but some seem to have richer stores of proverbs than others (such as West Africa), while others have hardly any e.g. North and South America (108,109). Pritchard (1958) opined that proverbs are often borrowed across lines of language, religion, and even time. According to him a proverb like “No flies enter a mouth that is shut” is currently found in countries like Spain and Ethiopia. Though this proverb has gone through multiple languages and millennia, the proverb can be traced back to an ancient Babylonian proverb (146). Proverbs like this can go through transformation with time and culture and a Nigerian proverb like “The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into grave” could result. Mieder (1982) also contends that the Nazis deliberately used proverbs as a propaganda tool in years of the Second World War (435-436).

According to Obeng (1996), Proverbs remain invaluable for a variety of purposes. Among its uses are for saying something gently, in a veiled way, for carrying more weight in a discussion, to simply make a conversation, discussion more lively. In many parts of the world, the use of

proverbs is a mark of being a good orator (521). The study of proverbs has application in a number of fields. Those who study folklore and literature explore proverbs for its cultural themes; scholars from a variety of fields have profitably incorporated the study, using them to study abstract reasoning of children, acculturation of immigrants, intelligence, the differing mental processes in mental illness, etc. proverbs have also been incorporated into the strategies of social workers, teachers, preachers, and even politicians. Proverbs has been and remains a most powerful and effective instrument for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another” (Akporobaro, 2003, 69). Proverb reveals the thought, wisdom and verbal techniques of the past and is a model of compressed or forceful language for the speaker and the verbal artist. Not only is it a technique of verbal expression, it also gives a certain amount of freshness to speech of accomplished speakers (70). Proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. “In terms of form, the proverb belongs to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms (71).

1.2. Yoruba Eco-Proverbs in English

The Yoruba proverbs that we have in English today are translations from Yoruba language to English. Yoruba proverbs themselves are as old as the users of the language itself. Its foundation is embedded in the moral wisdom of the Yoruba culture and world view. In fact proverbs are the vehicle for understanding the depth of the language. In an interview with Osundare, David Shooks (2007) observes that nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society’s values and beliefs is its proverbs. Proverbs has remained relevant in Yoruba traditional rhetoric and prosody through the ages and survived the trials of extinction. Significantly, it has remained a potent literary force not only in oral tradition, oral narration and poetry, it as continued to remain relevant in African writings today and thus, giving African writing its uniqueness and legitimacy. The Yoruba proverbs, from where Osundare derived or reconstructed is eco-proverbs belong to the world view and cosmology of the Yoruba people of South-Western, forest region of Nigerian. With a rural and an agrarian setting, Osundare creatively draws his aesthetic and social literary forms from the rich store house of the Yoruba oral tradition. Osundare ‘s primal consciousness is from this oral root and an ancestry of poetic artists and verbo-performance and was thoroughly immense into this mytho-legendary experiences of father-poet and mother-weaver (Shook, 2007) he emerged

naturally as a nature poet. Osundare's eco-poetics in *Horses of Memory* discourse in English is thus constructed to further impact the trajectory of the verbal arts in the Yoruba aesthetic-dialectics.

2.1. Tenets of Eco-criticism and Theoretical Framework

Eco-proverb is an aspect of eco-critical study which falls under the ambit of ecocriticism theory. Eco-critical theory attempts to find a meeting point between literature and the environment. The tenets of eco-criticism revolve around the rereading of major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world, give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as a major part of their subject matter, such as the American transcendentalists, the British Romantics like Jonnathan Bate, the poetry of John Clare and the work of Thomas Hardy. They extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant 'factual' topographical writings like essays, travel writing and regional literature. "They emphasis "ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility and the claims of the world beyond ourselves" (Barry, 1995: 264). Jonnathan Bate, the British Romantics makes a distinction between 'Light Green' and 'Dark Green'. According to him the former on one hand are environmentalists who value nature because it sustains humanity and contributes to our well-being. This school believes we can 'save' the planet by more responsibility forms of consumptions and production while 'dark Green' or 'deep ecologists' take a more radical stance. They opine that technology is the problem and therefore can't be the solution and so man has to 'get back to nature. The 'Dark Green' dislikes the anthropocentric term 'environment' but prefer the term 'nature'. Nature, according to this school, is there for its own sake, not for man's sake.

Eco-critical literary theory emerged from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment. Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of the relationship between humans and his environment, between land and language. Recently, anthropologists, geographers and environmental managers, historians and literary critics have shifted focus from these broad areas to relationships between neo-colonial interests and eco-critical perspective. The scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries into the destruction of their own environments,

consequently making the destruction of the environment one of the most damaging aspects of Western Industrialization. This is further evidence of the continuing importance of an ecocritical analysis of global crises. Ecocriticism refers to an emergent movement and denote a critical approach which began in USA in the late 80s and in UK in the early 90s respectively. Glotfeltry is considered to be the founder of this academic movement. She co-edited with Harold Freeman, a collection of essays on nature related matters titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1990) and also co-founded the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, with a house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE).

However, Michael P. Branch, notes that Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 70s at a meeting of 'The Western Literature Association' (W.L.A.), a body whose field of interest is in the literature of the American West. He traces the word back to William Rucckert's essay: 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. The term 'Ecological' is made prominent by USA ecocritic Karl Kroeben in his article 'Home At Grasmere: Ecological Holiness' (*PMLA*. 89, 1974: 132-41). Branch observes further that, the terms 'ecocriticism' and 'ecological' remained dormant in the critical vocabulary until the 1989 W.I.A. Conference when Glotfeltry, (then a graduate student at Cornell University and subsequently Associate Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada), revived the term 'ecocriticism' and encouraged its use to embrace the critical field previously known as 'The study of nature writing'.

Three major 19th century American writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) whose works celebrate nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in the American natural environment are credited with the current status of ecocriticism in the USA. Among their collections are: *Nature* (1836). *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), and *Walden* (1999). UK's version of ecocriticism studies takes its bearing from British Romanticism of the 1790s. The founding literary figure was Jonathan Bate who authored *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

3.1. Eco-Proverb and Literary Devices in *Horses of Memory*

“For The One Who Departed” is a dirge for the departed soul. ‘The cock has crowed behind the man’ (‘akuko ti ko lehin omo okunrun’) is repeated at the end of every stanza. This repetition in the accompaniment of the drum serves a rhythmic device of emphasize in respect to the object of reference. Through the use of metaphor and personification, the poet deploys items of nature like the sky, rivers, and lakes as a part of the universal family of the dead. Death is not just a human family tragedy, the universe and all aspect of nature moans:

The moon moans in the closet of the sky
Stars wring their hands in sparkles grief
There is a frown on the brow of every river
The lake wears a shawl of ash and adamantine mist
The noonward sun strikes a gong from the tower of
Clouds(5).

This passage metaphorically, means that ‘the heavens and the earth moan the death of a great man.

Or ‘the man’ (not just ‘a man’) has passed on before the cock, harbinger of a new day, could crow the coming of dawn.

While the heavenly bodies and the landscape moan, the surrounding vegetation represented by the ‘grass’ and its tears of ‘dew’ is not left out:

The roadside grass still dew-laden
In the protracted adulthood of dawn?
the grass heard the news from the lips
of absent feet...(5).

“the news from the lips of absent feet” is a metaphoric construction craftily combined with personification: The absent feet of moaners thus represent mourners who keep away from their labour to mourn their dead

The metaphoric image of the mourning-grass is carried into stanza three, where death made “the farmer to break his wonted word”, his habit of “songs in the earthy orchestra/of his gathering hand” and of “threshing the weedy saddle of the harvest wind; and because “the farmer broke his words” and the grass takes its dew to the sun: “the grass carried its dew to the furnace/of the

sun”(6). The sun eats the grass-dew that used to whet the feet of the man (who is now dead) and soften the soil of the farmstead.

The sun has eaten the dew
The dew, the dew, earth’s joyful tear,
Limpid balm on wrinkled dusk
One shy drop which mothers the sea(6).

The poet here introduces a subtly the atmospheric process of mopping the dew through evaporation and condensation of the dew into rain cloud and rainbow: “the sun has eaten the dew/the opening noon is a vast maternity/of scampering rainbows/the dew, the dew, earth’s joyful tear”. A burst of rain-song follows in stanza five to celebrate the natural virtues of the life giving ‘dew’:

The dew is the mother of the rain
The dew is the mother of the rain
Wombed by misty shadows
And soundless whispers of retreating stars
The dew is mother of the sun

In a paradoxical tone, the poet qualifies the deceased as “the one who departed” in the proverbial praise of manly toughness: “The matchet is the man/the matchet is the man(11). The poet also describes this toughness in a Yoruba fauna-proverb about how the ‘horse’ and the ‘word’ complement each other in Yoruba rhetoric:

Owe l’ esin oro
Oro lesin owe
T’oro ba sonu
Owe la fi ‘n wa

The proverb is the horse of the word
The word is the horse of the proverb
When the word is lost
It is the proverb we use for finding it (99, 101).

Proverb (owe) in essence is the concretizing of ‘oro’(word) “The proverb is the horse of the word/The word is the horse of the proverb/When the word is lost/It is the proverb we use for finding it” (101). This is introducing what proverb is in relation to the ‘word’ what the Yoruba also call ‘ohun’(voice).

The poem thus describes the man as a principality to be reckoned with in physical term and in oratory. He deploys images of eco-landscape and eco-fauna to express this:

The word was your horse:
You rode it through fire, through frenzy
Through waters of silver depths

You rode it through echoing hills
Through valleys of flowery songs

You rode it through bristling seas
Through lakes with merciless shells

You rode it through rock through steel
Through quarries of dreaming metal

You were the word which fell from the sky
And, touching earth, broke
Into a thousand truths

You were the word
Which shot the deer
Before the hunter's gun

The matchet is the man(14, 15).

3.2. 'Who's Afraid of the Proverb' in *Horses of Memory*

In the 'Memory Tracks' section of this collection, Osundare takes a different approach to the question of proverbs. He starts every stanza of the poem with a rhetorical question: "Who's afraid of the proverb", and follows this with nature related answers to the question. "Who is Afraid of Proverb" can be subdivided into two. The first part makes a poetic enumeration of the quality of the fearless persons who are not afraid of the truth and power imbedded in proverbs. This persons in question appreciates, get inspiration, strength and innate succor from proverbs.

Part two of the poem examines the nature of the fearful, those who are afraid of the power in a proverb will not go, literarily beyond the surface – being cautious in the light of Oscar Wilde's (1977) contention on arts which states that "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril, those who read the symbol do so at their peril (6) and Osundare opinion that "When two proverbs fight/it is memory that suffers" (61). "Who is Afraid of Proverbs" is derived from a Yoruba eco-proverb which states that 'When two elephants fight, it is the grasses that suffers'.

When we relate this to another proverb: “The wise person is angry/And slowly thinks about tomorrow/The not-so-wise is angry/And instantly calls for an arrow (61), we can adduce by implication that when we compare those who appreciate value of proverbs and those who despise proverbs express contempt for one another in the forest battle of words, it’s the gullible that suffers. The first part of the poem in question tells us of those who appreciate the immense benefits of proverbs, its social and aesthetic values. The persona qualifies them as: “men for all seasons”(13) ‘okunrin lada’, literally translated as “The matchet is the man”. Metaphorically, this refers to ‘men of steel’, fearless men/women of letters: “seasons of “mellow mouths dropping wisdom like gnomes (13).

The poem starts with a rhetorical question: “Who is afraid of the proverb”, followed by a subtle answer: “Of the eloquent kernel in the pod/of silent moons”. In other words, proverb is a paradox, like wisdom of the tree hidden in its seed. The second stanza answers the same question through a Yoruba proverb which says: ‘enu arugbo lobi tin gbo’ which in translation means: ‘Kola nut ripens in the mouth of the elder’. The poet transforms this proverb metaphorically into an eco-proverb consisting of ‘mountain’, ‘cow’ and ‘sky’:

Who’s afraid of the proverb
of he kola in the mouth of the mountain
giant udder of the cow of the sky (99).

The third stanza talks of the eternal value of the proverb which cuts across space and time. The quality of its echo is timeless and its immortal value can be compared to what John Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale”(Gittings:1978) refers to as “No hungry generations tread thee down;/The voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient days by emperor and clown”(126) and in “Ode on a Grecian Urn: “When old age shall this generation waste/Thou shall remain, in midst of other woe than ours, a friend to man”(128).

Who’s afraid of the proverb
Of the drum which left its echoes
In the auricles of leaping streets (99).

The fourth stanza examines the universality of proverbs, its value and applicable truth in human society and art. Like a river, its meaning and the impact of truth flows with ease to al listeners and gives intellectual wisdom to all races and culture:

Who's afraid of the proverb
Of the river which traverses the earth
In limbless intensity (99).

The fifth stanza explores the intrinsic literary quality of the proverb, the metaphors, imagery, etc. that runs in its veins: "of the sonic feathers of metaphor in flight/the lift and thrust of impossible fancies (99). The sixth and the seventh stanza look at poetic musicality in the proverb. Proverb is like an instrument that plays melodic truth and exactitude in its message: "The wind's truthful lyre/melodic thrum of Desire's fingers/ of the shortest distance/between many truths" (100). Part two of this poem dwells on man fails to see the value and relevance of proverbs in human society and its intrinsic aesthetics. In stanza one, the poet examines their nature and disposition as those who feed on modernity and 'Lactogen' that has no root in the truth of past wisdom. They stand on the bank of river today forgetting that their primal fountain is the milk that flows down the breast of yesterday:

Who's afraid of the proverb
Who so fat on the Lactogen of the moment
Has lost all hint of the primal milk (100).

Stanza two of part two portrays a vivid picture of those are drunk with pessimistic ideas of foreigners on African and its 'primitive' world views. These "cant parrots" continue to mimic the cry against their own personalities symbolized by "the dialect of the drum":

Who's afraid of the proverb
Who so drunk on the cant of imported parrots
Has no ear for the dialect of the drum (100).

Stanza three continues in the flow of the former lines on 'deep' and 'shallow' waters, of "stalking minnows in brackish waters/scared of the shoals which surprise the deep" (100). These lines conjure images of nameless birds in realm of limitless sky and the infinite treasures in the deep sea: "anonymous spaces/in the abyss of the sky" (100). Stanza five also continues the idea of who's afraid of the proverb? He sees the fearful among the pioneers, the "first clay in the furnace" that kills the fire. They are the crooked fire wood that is a misfit in the furnace: 'igi woroko tin dana ru'. They live and trust only in their own kind of fire that dampens the common fire into chilling discord: "first clay in the furnace/of chilling fires" (101). The salt that sweetens

the soup and preserves decay is absent in them. According to the poet, those who are afraid of the proverb are “silent salt in the feast of delicious words” (101). Those who are afraid of the proverb do not see proverb as the horse of the word nor do they believe the word is the horse of the proverb, so when a word is lost in the labyrinth of the forest of discourse, they are “afraid of memory”(101) and would rather sweep the meaningful opulence of their yesterday under the carpet of decay of today and ‘let the sleeping dog to lie’ in the uncertain, surreal dream of tomorrow.

Conclusion

Proverb remains an oral form with constant relevance to modern man. It is a powerful and effective instrument for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another. Proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience, gives freshness to speech, reveals the verbal techniques of the past and is a model of compressed or forceful language for the speaker and the verbal artist. The form of the proverb is akin to the category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit, etc. This paper explores proverbs in the African context taking examples from countries and languages like Ghana, Tanzania, the Swahili, Igbo and Hausa languages of Africa. We examined also Yoruba eco-proverbs with English origin.

Proverbs in Yoruba tradition falls under Yoruba oral poetry and narration. Yoruba eco-proverbs can be classified under two main categories: eco-pejoratives and eco-friendly, eco-fauna and eco-flora and Proverbs that are minatory or disinterested but focuses on the nature of fauna, flora or landscape. They centered on flora, fauna or landscape poetry. Osundare describes the agrarian, rocky land and river/ seascapes of Ikere-Ekiti environment. Osundare in his *Horses of Memory* employed poetic technique of rhetorical question laced with subtle satire to comment on socio-political and aesthetic issues.

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