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Proverbs and the Image of the Woman in Abimbola Adunni Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*

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Abstract

Proverbs are generally considered to be wise sayings. This paper examines the images of women as contained in the proverbs in Abimbola Adunni Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* and placed them in relation to the actions and declarations of the male and female characters. The paper discovers a contradiction in the images of the women in the proverbs and the actual images of the female and male characters as interpreted from their actions and utterances. The paper concludes that this contravention of the notions and images of the woman contained in the proverbs is an indication that though proverbs offer a view into the culture of a people, the actual images of the women in the text is also indicative of the existence of patriarchy in African culture that calls for the need to use feminism to address it.

Introduction

The central ideas of the various definitions of the term 'proverb' can be encapsulated in the following words and phrases: short, witty, factual, filled with wisdom, drawn from observable relationships and experience (Ojoade 1980; Olatunji 1984; Meider 1985; Yusuf & Methangwane 2003). However not all these concepts, notably shortness/ brevity and factuality are applicable to all proverbs. For instance, not all proverbs (especially those in the Yoruba language) are short as seen in the following which are actually translated from Yoruba into English, from *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (Adelakun 2008. Subsequent references in parenthesis and by page number only are to this edition):

1. "Somebody has been to heaven and back and he tells you they use their eyes to sit down there, how will you argue with him when you did not follow him there" (155).
2. "Become-as-I-have become of an invalid that is requesting for snake food, is it not to make sure that someone else goes to the bush to look for snake and get bitten too and become an invalid too" (165).
3. "One-who-gives-one trouble, wife of the bat; she went to the market and bought a sleeping cap for her husband when she's well aware the husband sleeps upside down" (185).

4. "They don't want you in a town; you say you want to start a song. When you have started it, we will see who will sing the chorus with you" (200). As for the qualities – truth and wisdom, Yusuf (1998: 64) declares that these cannot be the essential characteristics of the proverb:

This position is motivated by the fact that considering the overwhelming misogyny of proverbs relating to women in a range of remarkably distinct languages and nations or cultures, to associate proverbs with wisdom and truth would inadvertently be to believe that misogyny is wisdom and sexism is a truth.

This affirmation shows the subjectivity involved in the observation of natural and human relationships from which proverbs are derived

Therefore, this paper intends to compare some of the proverbs used to denigrate women in Abimbola Adunni Adelajun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* with the actions of some male and female characters in the novel. This is to ascertain the truths and wisdom of the proverbs. In proving that the actions of the female characters are at variance with the 'truths and wisdom' of the examined proverbs, the paper asserts that Adelakun's novel proves the nation that before the introduction of Western feminism, the concept has always existed in African culture.

Theorising on Afro-Centric Feminism

Feminism can be described as a movement which believes in the full equality of women with men. But this 'equality' has different perceptions in different cultural settings. For instance, equality has a different meaning in the Western cultures from that of the African cultures. Such differences have necessarily coloured the representations and interpretations of female characters, feminine symbols and images in African literature. This has led to the call for an African feminist theory that is derived from African culture. Feminist critics from Africa who initiated this call, have propounded various Afro-centric theories. These include African Feminism by Philomena Steady (1981); African Womanism by Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1985); Stiwanism as propounded by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994); Motherism advocated by Catherine Acholonu (1995); Womanism by Mary Ebun Kolawole (1997); and Nègo-feminism by Obioma Nnaemeka (2003) and African Feminisms (Aliyu 2013).

The details and the differences between these theories are not the focus of this paper. We will therefore focus on the major similarities. The central idea behind

these various theories is that African culture should be the framework which constitutes a theory of feminism that is distinctly African. This is borne out of the belief that there exists in African culture a concept of feminism which women have always exploited for the purposes of liberation and self-actualisation. Features of the theories on feminism as proposed by these African theorists include the accommodationist principle. The accommodationist feature does not see the African male as the enemy but as one playing a complimentary role with the woman for the sustenance of humanity. What is considered as the enemy are those structures which have been used to marginalise and subjugate women. Thus in African society, the relationship between the two sexes is perceived not in terms of superior versus inferior but in terms of complementarity.

One implication of the accommodationist feature in the analyses of African feminist prose texts is that it allows for an investigation of both male and female characters. Thus feminist criticism is accommodationist.

The feature of complementarity of the sexes in an afro-centric feminist theory also allows for a stretching of the definition of the concept. Consequently, this paper suggests that each character trait, whether positive or negative, that is found in one sex, will be present in the other sex.

Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*

The story in Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (henceforth *Rusted Roofs*) centres on Alhaji Arigbabuwo, his wives Motara, Afusa, Sikira and Moriyeba, his numerous children and some of his extended family. It is the story of how these people react to the different socio-economic and political challenges of the time in Ibadan, South-West Nigeria. The physical setting is apparent from the use of the words "brown rusted roofs" in the title of the novel. Brown rusted roofs form one of the landmarks of Ibadan, one of the largest cities in Nigeria. This landmark was made famous in J.P. Clark's poem 'Ibadan' (in Soyinka 1975). The time setting is modern day Nigeria as the events begin from the period regarded as the Second Republic in Nigeria's history (i.e. 1979) and end during the beginning of the regime of then military president Ibrahim Babangida (in late 1984). In spite of being set in modern Nigeria however, the characters, especially where issues concerning women are concerned, are placed in a family setting that is traditional, almost as if untouched by the vagaries of urban life. This prompts Abubakar (2010: 44) into the conclusion that "Adelakun uncovers the fact that postcolonial and modern life forms have not displaced traditional modes of existence from urban centres". The 'rusted' in the title thus becomes a metaphor connoting 'ancientness', referring to the traditional, or the past.

Adelakun's use of language in the novel is reminiscent of Achebe's in *Things fall Apart* (1958) in her use of proverbs, not in Igbo, but in Yoruba. Adelakun's deft use of language which reads more like direct translations from Yoruba into English in the dialogue of the characters and the narrative itself, foregrounds the traditional setting in which she places the characters. It also lends an element of humour to the story, which unlike *Things Fall Apart*, is not a tragedy.

The next segment of this paper examines the proverbs in *Rusted Roofs* that are meant to disparage women in and compares them with the actions and assertions of some of the male and female characters. This paper groups such proverbs into different categories, contextualises them and investigates the 'truth' in them.

Analyses of Proverbs and the Declarations and Actions of the Major Characters in *Rusted Roofs*

1. Proverb on Women Battery: "A woman loses character and blames her head for not giving her a good husband" (18). This is said by Baba Nsale, the oldest man in the extended family compound, *Agbole Alabeni*. Alhaji Arigbabuwo has just beaten his second wife, Sikira who refuses to back out of a quarrel with Afusa the second wife, over who should cook for their mother-in-law. Sikira laments over the beating she has been subjected to and Baba Nsale berates her with the proverb. This proverb not only justifies physical abuse, it also holds the woman responsible for being the cause of such battery. As such, rather than seek other reasons for such physical abuse, the proverb asks the woman to instead seek a transformation in her attitude which is deemed as the only cause of her battery by her husband. In fact after Rafiu beats Mulika, his wife, until she faints, he is warned by his father Alhaji and Baba Nsale to be careful with her. Rafiu protested with the excuse that he beat Mulika because she was arguing with him. Baba Nsale, rather than insist that Rafiu desists from battering his (Rafiu's) wife, gives another proverb which suggests that the woman is always at fault when her husband beats her: "See it as a lame man that is trying to disvirgin a hunchback, a task of patience" (102). Such proverbs imply that the woman has no option but to either change her attitude to one that does not earn her beatings from her husband, or accept battery as a part of her marriage.

However, in another instance in the novel, a woman refuses to accept the reasoning behind such a proverb and demonstrates that the woman has other options. Idris's wife leaves him for another man as a result of constant battery by her husband:

"The thing that is paining me most is my child she took with her: I want my child back," Idris said as he used his right fist to hit his left palm; the fist that had dealt several blows to his wife who left him because she didn't want to be taken home dead to her parents (129).

Idris's wife's action is thus a rejection of the defeatism and injustice implied in the proverb.

2. Proverb on Polygamy: "If a woman does not envy her mate, her soup cannot be tasty" (28). This proverb by Alhaji's mother, Iya Agba, is said when Sikira, out of jealousy, complains about the quality of the soup Afusa is about to serve Alhaji. This proverb encourages unnecessary rivalry and jealousy amongst the wives in a polygamous relationship. This makes the husband the centre of their lives.

Adelakun however presents in Afusa, a woman whose character traits contradict the intent of this proverb. Of the wives in the novel, only Afusa's is the good cook. She goes out of her way to provide good meals for her family which is acknowledged by others in the family (pp 46, 163, 211, 213). However, the primary reason Afusa does this is not to get the attention of Alhaji over and above the other wives. In the novel, Afusa is presented as a visionary woman. She plants the idea of politics in Alhaji's mind and encourages him in it (37, 96); she understands the importance of education, ensures her children go to school (48; 164-167), sacrifices personal comfort for her children's education (139); and in spite of the constant quarrels that Sikira picks with her, Sikira expresses confidence in the fact that her children will be adequately taken care of by Afusa (145). Therefore, Afusa's ability to cook is just one of her admirable qualities. That Afusa possesses good qualities is attested to by the fact that her mother-in-law, Iya Agba confesses to herself that she (Iya Agba) and Motara, the first wife try unsuccessfully to find fault with Afusa (46).

3. Proverb on the Perceived Insignificance of the Woman:

- a. "Whatever does not have a mouth should not be smarter than you are" (p. 30). Baban nsale provides this proverb as consolation to Alhaji who is bothered by Sikira's quarrelsome behaviour. Alhaji's brother desires that Sikira's parents be invited so that they can caution her. Baba nsale however dismisses Sikira's issue as not worthy of being concerned over: "Send for who?... You will send for her parents? Why waste time over a woman? *She-aw!*" (30). This proverb promotes the myth of the voicelessness of the woman; it portrays the woman as a non-intelligent being, not worthy of being heard or listened to.

b. "Don't you know that any home where a woman shouts *atoto arere*, it is the *arere* tree that grows there?" (98). Baba nsale advises Alhaji on the expediency of first informing members of the extended family (*Agboole*) of his (Alhaji's) decision to contest for an elective position in the forth coming elections before it becomes public knowledge. In the first house visited, Baba nsale comes upon a younger relative of his, Fatai, playing a game (*ayo*) with his wife, Iyawo. Baban nsale is dramatic in his shock on sighting the two of them and asks Fatai: "You did not see any of your mates to play with except a woman?...What if she defeats you? Do you think she will ever respect you as a man again?...The world has spoilt" (p. 98). This proverb depicts the woman as an inferior being to the man and the underlying threat to man's loss of leadership in the home. The *arere* is a tree that produces an unpleasant and nauseating smell. Such a tree is undesirable and worthless. Baba nsale captures this threat in another proverb thus: "Don't you know that if an elder and a child sit on a farm to eat yam together, the child looks straight at the bridge of the nose of the elder?" (99). The choice of the metaphor 'child', which refers to the woman, is instructive. Baba nsale succeeds in this admonishment as when Iyawo asks for the resumption of the game after the exit of Baba nsale and Alhaji, Fatai shouts on her: "Get inside the house!" (99).

c. "They say what will we do with the height of a woman as long as she straps a child on her back and the child's feet are not dragging on the floor?" (75). Rafiu, Alhaji's son by his first wife, Motara impregnates Mulika. He is then forced to marry her. However, while it is alright for Rafiu to sleep with Mulika (p. 30-31), he is reluctant to have her as wife because she has a slightly deformed leg. His mother persuades him to marry her with this proverb. This proverb seems to suggest that the only role a woman plays as wife is to bear children. Again, this denigrates other roles which the woman plays in the lives of her husband and her children.

Yet Adelakun in the novel is at pains to present the woman as an intelligent being who is clever enough to negotiate around certain challenges in the culture and as a being who plays a significant part of the life of the man, whether as husband or child. First we find a parallel in the querulous nature of the women in the novel to the cantankerous and irritable manner in which the men hold their political meetings (22-27, 31-36, 59-66). Indeed, Chief Akeweje's character is the male version of Sikira's.

Adelakun debunks the myth of vioclessness of the woman in various ways. The novelist shows how the women exploit avenues in the culture to overcome certain challenges. Polygamy presented in the text as not being wholly favourable to the woman, yet it is an accepted way of life to which the women must abide by. The

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two major options open to women in the novel is either to leave such unfavourable polygamous marriages (as Sikira and Moriyeba do) (43, 179-181) or to stay. When women stay there are other options which they take advantage of in order to overcome contentious issues such as sex (18, 40, 184) and contraception (143) (Aliyu-Ibrahim, 2011). Again Adelakun debunks the myth of the voicelessness of the woman through the way the wives of Baba nsale speak out against the sharing formulae for Baba nsale's estate in spite of being sent away outside from the meeting (217-220):

From where Alake and Risi sat outside, they shouted that they would rather control their husband's property themselves. Alake went round the house to the window that was by the side of the house and began to shout from it that she would rather control her husband's property herself. ...

I cannot keep quiet and what is on my body keep quiet with me (219).

Eventually, the women get exactly what they want.

Iya Agba, Alhaji's mother, plays important roles in the lives of her two sons. As a young woman, she was hardworking and she introduced her two male children to her trade of selling yam powder (elubo) from which they prospered (45).

The crucial role the woman plays in the lives of her husband and children is best illustrated in the character, Afusa who, of all the male and female characters in the novel or play: is presented as possessing the foresight to arm herself and her family against challenges ahead. She plays a pivotal role in Alhaji eventually being elected as Local Government Chairman (37, 96) before the military coup put an end to democracy. In spite of not being educated, Afusa is intelligent and clever. Alhaji tells her everything about his life including the fact that he could not have fathered his last wife's child as he was losing interest in sex (185); it is to her he goes to with his worries about Baba nsale when the old man is admitted into hospital including the fact of his finding so much money on Baba nsale's body (211, 216). As the narrative informs the reader, Alhaji feels totally naked before her (38) and tells her years later: "Afusa, I think we've come a long way together and all these years, you have been that tree that has held my *fence*. There is nothing I can hide from you anymore" (185). Afusa also plays a significant role in the lives of her children. She teaches herself the alphabets so she can monitor her children's progress in school. She is able to dissuade her son, Sikiru, from ending up like his other half-brothers who have become thugs and struggling musicians by ensuring he attends school as did her other two children (48, 164-167).

It is worthy of mention that Afusa never once disrespected her husband; neither did she show, in any way, that she has any influence over her husband. In view of this, Baba nsale's proverb is ironic. The irony is further foregrounded by the fact that unknown to Baba nsale, his (and Alhaji's) decision to inform the members of the extended family of Alhaji's intention to contest for the Local Government Chairmanship position is actually building on an idea conceived of by Afusa, a woman.

4. Proverb on Marriage: "A husband's house is a house of learning" (179). Sikira's first child, Ajara has introduced Wasiu to her father, Alhaji, as the man she intends to marry. On being told by Baba nsale that the women of Wasiu's family "are very wicked", Alhaji is apprehensive about the safety of his daughter's life. Baba nsale attempts to ease Alhaji's apprehension with the proverb, urging that: "She won't be killed; she will only learn. You've forgotten how our mother's used to say it, 'A husband's house is a house of learning'. You give her out and look elsewhere" (179). This proverb intends to teach the woman patience to remain in her husband's house and bear whatever challenges she might encounter. By implication, therefore, since total happiness in a husband's house is unattainable the woman might as well stay in just with just one husband; thus the woman has no option but to remain in one husband's house irrespective of the challenges she might be forced to face. That Baba nsale introduces the proverb with the words, "You've forgotten how our mothers used to say it that..." lends the proverb authenticity as it highlights the fact that this proverb about women was created by women who have gone through the experience and should therefore know better.

However as is illustrated in the stories of Sikira and Moriyeba (Alhaji's third and fourth wives) and of some of the wives of Baba nsale, a woman can indeed leave her husband's house for better conditions elsewhere thus contradicting the patient perseverance intended in the proverb. This is particularly so in the case of Moriyeba who is forced to get married to Alhaji for economic considerations in spite of the difference in their ages; Alhaji is actually her father's age mate as they are friends. Moriyeba is however not happy especially as Alhaji cannot satisfy her sexual needs. Moriyeba confesses to her mother: "He is too old to make someone pregnant. I don't like it when it is my turn in his room. He just does it anyhow" (184). Moriyeba's first takes a lover before she eventually runs away. Baba nsale is presented as a miser and uncaring husband and the narrative tells us that, of the eight wives or more he has had, only two (Risi and Alake) have "survived the experience of living with the man and were still currently in his house" (38).

5. Proverb on Women and Gossiping: "A woman goes to the river for the love of gossip" (18). Sikira picks a quarrel with Afusa which results in Alhaji beating

Sikira. Other members of the extended family including Baba nsale come in to intervene. The squabble ends and the mediators begin to leave. However one or two women linger behind and Baba nsale in a bid to make them leave shouts this proverb at them. This proverb seems to suggest that women love gossip and would use any excuse to, including the household chore of going to the river for water to fulfil this desire.

The novelist's presentation of Baba nsale character however reveals that he loves gossip as much as anyone. Alake, his youngest remaining wife is described as being "a repository of information, gossip and matters of minding someone else's business with hers" (40). Baba nsale's on his part is a miser and uncaring husband. In spite of being a gossip, Alake is portrayed as intelligent because she exploits baba nsale's love of gossip to ingratiate herself into his heart:

She knew what information to give her husband about what happened in someone else's house to gain his favour and he, in turn, used such to gain access to someone else's home by startling them with 'revelations' whenever there was a quarrel. If, however, someone questioned him as to the source of his information, he would say, "If you let your eyes look down, you will see your nose" (40).

Both Alake and Baba nsale are thus gossips. This underscores the irony in the above proverb by Baba nsale.

Findings

The proverbs analysed prove our hypotheses concerning the tenets of a feminist theory derived from African culture. The principles of such a theory, which include accommodationism and complementarity, spring from the African perception of the relationship between the male and the female and of feminism in general.

Our analysis of the actions and utterances of the characters as they negate Proverbs 1,2 and 4 demonstrate the fact that there are other options which women have exploited to address perceived marginalisation or oppression. Thus, in Proverb 1, wife battery which is presented as being solely a consequence of a woman's bad attitude in the home, is negated by the action of another woman who leaves her husband's home for another man who does not beat her. This is also the alternative taken by the women in our analyses of the fourth proverb. In Proverb 3(b), our analyses disproves the myth of the voicelessness or silence of the woman. The woman in that proverb is presented as one who is silent and naive. However, we have interpreted the action of some of the female characters as

indicative of the fact that this voicelessness is a false belief. As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994: 11) contends, the silence of the African woman, especially the uneducated rural (or the traditional uneducated woman in the case of the text under study) is a creation of Western feminist discourses. She attributes this creation to the failure of such Western feminists "to look for their voices where we may find them, in the *sites* and forms in which these voices are uttered" (11). Ogundipe-Leslie thus insists that there are avenues where women do 'speak' out and take action.

That the alternatives these women take are not rejected by their society implies that these alternatives are part of the culture, just as the proverbs which, paradoxically, are antithetical to the women's decisions. This proves the hypothesis implied in our assertion that an Afro-feminist approach be adopted in the analysis of African feminist texts, that there is a feminist ideology in African culture which can be adopted and developed into a literary theory. Thus the culture that produces these disparaging proverbs that could be used to marginalise and oppress also provides avenues that can be exploited to redress subjugation. This proves that there is a feminist ideology in African cultures which was in existence before the importation of Western feminism. Furthermore, our analysis in this paper illustrates the complementary nature of the relationship between the two sexes in African culture. Unlike what is suggested in the Proverbs 3 (a,b and c), the woman complements the man and seeks to make him better as a wife and mother as illustrated by the roles played particularly by Afusa in the lives of her husband and children.

That Proverbs 2 and 3 (c) are said by women further conforms to the African concept of feminism which does not see the man as the enemy. Women are implicated in the structures that are used to subjugate fellow women. Thus in Afro-centric feminism, it is these structures, rather than the man that are considered as the enemy and are therefore fought against.

In addition, our analysis proves that Proverbs 3 and 5 which tend to mock some non-admirable qualities of women cannot be applicable to women only. Gossiping and quarrelsomeness are not natural to the female sex alone. The male sex is prone to these weaknesses as exemplified in Baba nsale and the men in their political meetings.

Conclusion

This paper analysed proverbs that are used to denigrate the woman and her duties in comparison to the actual actions and utterances of some of the male and female characters in Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*. The paper revealed an incongruity between the notions about women in the proverbs examined and in

the images of women arrived at in the interpretation of the actions of some of the characters. The article adopted the philosophy behind Afro-centric feminist theories advocated by Steady, Ogundipe-Leslie, Acholonu, Kolawole and Nnaemeka which stipulate that feminist theory derived from the principles of African culture be used to analyse African feminist texts. The notions of womanhood arrived at from the interpretations of the actions of the characters in the novel were analysed as being in conformity with the African concept of feminism. The paper concludes that the fact that the same culture that produced such disparaging proverbs about women also provides avenues for such women to assert themselves proves that a form feminism has always existed in African culture.

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