

## Proverb Usage in African Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** This study analyzes the integration of proverbs in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds* that is their active and passive usages. The proverbs were isolated and related to available data in published works to ensure that they are real oral lore. Rems Umeasiegbu's reflective model for assessment of Igbo proverbs that was used to test Chinua Achebe's works was used to assess Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi's use of proverbs. They tallied. The model shows that they have really used proverbs effectively. The work concludes that the model for the study of proverbs used in Achebe's novels fits very well the proverbs used by Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi.

**KEY WORDS:** Active, assessment, folklore, passive, proverb and reflective,

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are essential to life and language, and without them, the language will be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul. It is also used to add colour to every conversation. In the foreword to W. H. Whately's *Selection of African Prose*, (1964) the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe says this about a proverb

... In Igbo they serve two important ends. They enable the speaker to give universal status to a special and particular incident and they are used to soften the harshness of words and make them more palatable. (viii)

The real master of proverbs is one who is able to summon the entire cavalry at will and make them perform precisely those tricks he has in mind. Even the speeches of old men are usually spiced with them and it is certainly an index of traditional wisdom to apply them appropriately in one's speech. Bernth Lindfors (1973) opines that Nigerian literatures are remarkably rich in oral lore and some Nigerian authors like Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe have been outstandingly successful in reworking oral art into literary art. Also, many Nigerian novelists like Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, E. C. C. Uzodimma, John Munonye and Clement Agunwa followed Achebe's footsteps in the use of folklore, and nowhere is their motivation more evident than in the way proverbs, folktales and other bits of oral lore are woven into the fabric of their novels. In view of this, Rems Umeasiegbu wrote that several authors utilize folklore especially proverbs in their writings. It is this use of folklore especially proverbs in *Efuru*, *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds* that we wish to study in this work using Umeasiegbu's model.

### II. INTEGRATION OF PROVERBS IN THE NOVELS :

Rems Umeasiegbu (2007) gave a tentative model for the assessment of proverb usage in novels written by Igbo authors in his paper "The Reflective Use of Proverbs," published in *Anyigba Journal of Arts and Humanities*. This model teaches an interested person how he can assess someone's use of proverbs in conversations. It will be used to assess the proverb usage by Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi in their novels.

**2.1. Reflective Use of Proverbs :** In "The Reflective Use of Proverbs," Rems Umeasiegbu stated that context of a proverb is important for successful utilization of proverbs because it helps us to understand its meaning if we apply it properly. He went further to explain that a man who knows few proverbs and can apply them correctly will present a more convincing case than someone who knows many proverbs but does not use appropriate context. The concern here is not knowing the most proverbs but applying them to the discussion or problem at hand.

Also, Rems Umeasiegbu noted that Peter Seitel had earlier presented a model for the study of proverbs, but the model had some weaknesses which were modified by Rems Umeasiegbu in his paper “The Reflective Use of Proverbs”. He stated that he had no intention of discarding Seitel’s model but wanted to point out its weaknesses, thereby making suggestions for its improvement. He introduced the concept of reflection as against Seitel’s correlation. The occasion during which proverbs are used help us to decide what the intention of the speaker is in the use of the particular proverb. In his own views, Roger Abrahams(1968) held that proverbs may ...‘handle problems in various ways, depending upon whether the question is being faced immediately or whether the crises has already passed but left a residual feeling of disorientation”(47). Therefore, a proverb may have entirely two different meanings depending on whether its utilization comes before the incident to which it refers, or after it, in other words, whether its use is active or passive, as Roger Abrahams termed it.

### **2.1.1 Active Use of Proverbs**

Rems Umeasiegbu in his model stated that proverb usage can be active if the incident that necessitated the use of a particular proverb is yet to come.

He illustrated with the following proverbs,

Some Specific Examples –Reflective use of Proverb

In the “Reflective Use of Proverb” Umeasiegbu uses some examples from Achebe’s novels – Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God, Girls at War and Other Stories.

**Reflection on the Speaker :** “Eneke the bird says that since men learned to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching: *Things Fall Apart*. (23). Okonkwo, the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* visits a kinsman to borrow yam seedlings. The man says that he is unwilling to lend yams to young men. He also said that they have grown lazy and he has become insensitive to their pleas for help because “Eneke the bird says that since men learned to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching” the speaker here refers to himself as Eneke the bird. The usage is active because the proverb was used before the lending of the yam seedlings. His intention is to justify his actions for refusing to lend the yams.

### **Reflection on the Listener**

“Haste makes waste”.

In the proverb “Haste makes waste”, it can be used both passively and actively. In the active sense a man may engage his friend in a conversation and informs him that he wants to rush a job. His friend may warn him that rushing a job is dangerous, hence the use of the proverb. The usage here is active because the rushing of the job is yet to take place.

### **Reflection on the Third Person**

“We do not bypass a man and enter his compound.”(*Arrow of God*, 125).

A man visits his kinsman, who offers him kola nut which is customary in Igboland. The host requests the guest to break it but, he rejects it. One of the people present urges the man (guest) to break the kola. The guest turns to his host and cites the proverb. Even though, the guest is speaking to the host, he is also referring to the other man who supported him. The usage is active since the kola which brought about it is yet to be broken. The reference is on a third person and negative judgement is implied. In summary, according to this model, if a proverb is actively used to reflect on the speaker himself, the intention is to justify the speaker’s action but if the reflection is on the listener, the intention is to advise or persuade the listener to follow a line of action usually the speaker’s. Then, if the reflection is on a third person, the intention is to express a doubt or negative judgment.

The examples and discussions above show that Rems Umeasiegbu’s model apply to Chinua Achebe’s works and may possibly help anyone who wishes to learn how to use proverbs, and also others who want to assess other speaker’s use of proverbs.

*Active Use of Proverbs in Efurú, The Concubine and The Great Ponds*

### **Reflection on the Speaker**

“An elderly person cannot watch a goat being entrapped and do nothing” (Efuru,57) Ajanupu visited her sister Ossai and her daughter in-law (Efuru). After kolanut had been broken and shared, her sister (Ossai) left for the stream. She told Efuru that she had specifically visited her to inquire on her husband’s whereabouts. Ajanupu had come to ask Efuru about her recent relationship with her husband. She said, When I see or hear anything that would affect you adversely, it is my place to come and tell you. I do not like the footsteps of your husband (57)

The visitor came to Efuru and used the proverb “An elderly person cannot watch a goat being entrapped and do nothing”. She heard rumours of Adizua’s infidelity that he was planning to desert his wife, and she thought it wise to tell her friend (Efuru). She used the proverb to justify her action in telling Efuru about her husband’s behaviour. The usage is active because Adizua’s activities are not yet divulged. The reflection is on the speaker who referred to herself as an elderly person.

...“The slow-footed always fail in battle” (129) is a proverb in *The Concubine* Owing to the strong attachment between Ihuoma and Ekwueme, Wigwe, Ekwueme’s father, decided to destroy the relationship by bringing home Ekwueme’s betrothed wife. During the process of negotiation, Wigwe was always in a haste to conclude the arrangements; this embarrassed Wagbara and he often pointed out that while Wigwe had countered by saying that the “the slow-footed always fail in battle”. The proverb usage is active because the marriage negotiation had not been completed. The intention is a justification of the speaker’s action. “The fellow with the foofoo usually moves over to the man with the soup, never the other way round” (*The Great Ponds* 56) The Aliakoro people kidnapped four women from Chiolu while they (Chiolu) captured a prisoner from Aliakoro after their war. Among the four women were Chisa, Ikechi’s friend and Olumba’s pregnant wife. With this new development, Ikechi was in his father’s house brooding over his loss when Olumba came and told him that the two villages would negotiate the release of the women. Olumba told Ikechi that they had to negotiate at Aliakoro because they are the people being held in the wrong place, hence the proverb. The usage is active because the negotiation is yet to take place while the reference is on the speaker as the fellow with foofoo. The intention is to justify their action in wanting to go to Aliakoro village for negotiation.

**Reflection on the Listener :** “If an old woman falls twice, we count all she has in her basket” (*Efuru* 17). Ajanupu met her sister at the market and told her that her son had had a convulsion. The sister felt sorry for her and advised her, using the above proverb since her own child had previously died of convulsion. Here, the usage of the proverb is active because it is referring to a future event – death. The reflection is on the listener Ajanupu because she is being advised to take proper care of her ailing son. She (Ajanupu) is being referred to as an old woman.

“You must not be like the caterpillar that holds fast to tree branches and falls to its death when much older” (*The Concubine* 107) Ekwueme was desperate to marry Ihuoma, but his parents were angry with him because Ahurole was betrothed to him twenty years ago. It is an abomination for Ekwueme to disappoint them. Using the proverb, “You must not be like the caterpillar that holds fast to tree branches and falls to its death when much older,” Wigwe, Ekwueme’s father then advised his son against such an irresponsible act because he had shown signs of growing into a sensible young man. The proverb was actively used because the disappointment is yet to come. The reflection is on the listener who is being referred to as a caterpillar and it is intended as a piece of advice. The listener is being urged to see reason by not marrying the woman he has in mind.

“He who pursues an innocent chicken often stumbles” (*The Great Ponds* 22) Aliakoro people came to Chiolu because their men were captured at Wagaba Pond. When the ransom for the release of the men was being discussed, Okehi of Aliakoro chipped in that Chiolu’s men may stray into their land and in reply Diali of Chiolu told him that if his people were caught just passing by they should not be harmed but if they were caught stealing they should deal with them, hence the proverb. Here, the usage is active because it is referring to future event. The reference is on the listener (Aliakoro people) and it is regarded as a piece of advice.

**Reflection on a Third Person Absent :** “Remember that a hen cannot scratch for food with her two legs simultaneously” (*The Concubine* ,107). After the death of Emenike, Ihuoma had won the heart of the hunter Ekwueme. He was so deeply in love with her that his parents felt sad. Wigwe advised his son that Ihuoma was a wrong choice for him because she is a widow with three children and her husband’s compound to look after; her allegiance to Ekwueme would take second place. He used the proverb to stress home his warning to his son. This usage is active in that she had not even accepted the marriage proposal. It also reflects on the third person absent and the intention is to show negative judgement on Ekwueme’s interest in Ihuoma , a widow. “When one finger picks up oil the others soon get soiled with it” (*The Great Ponds*, 79) The war between Chiolu and Aliakoro over the ownership of the ponds was so intense that it is threatening to spread to neighbouring villages (Erekiwi Clan). As a result, the eight villages of Erekiwi Clan met and decided to settle the dispute between the warring villages. The Eze of Isiali spoke after kolanut had been broken and shared using the above proverb because their welfare had been endangered. The proverb is actively used because the war is yet to spread to the

neighbouring villages. The reference is on the third person and negative judgement is implied. Chiolu and Aliakoro are referred to as one finger that picks oil.

**Integration of Proverbs in the Novel –Passive use :** Rems Umeasiegbu in his model in “The Reflective Use of Proverbs” stated that proverb usage can be passive if the incident that necessitated the use of a particular proverb has already taken place.

He illustrated with the following proverbs,

**Reflection on the Speaker :** “A woman can only place so much of her leg over her husband” (*Girls at War and Other Stories*). An influential man in a particular village visits a fellow villager and the host offers him kola. The visitor expresses his gratitude and the man feels flattered and utters the above proverb. The usage is passive because the kola has been offered and eaten. The reflection is on the speaker who is implying that he is poor and has given what he can afford.

**Reflection on the Listener :** ... “when mother cow chews giant grass her little calves watch her mouth” (8) is a proverb from “Vengeful Creditor” in *Girls at War and Other Stories*”

Mrs. Emenike complains that her maid Vero has been using her cosmetics in her absence and the husband uses the above proverb to show her that the maid had seen her use the cosmetics. This usage is passive because the cosmetics have already been used by the maid (Vero). The reflection is on the listener because the intent is to scold or insult in a clever way. In the proverb “Haste makes waste”, it can be used both passively and actively. In the passive sense a man may have rushed the job and made mistakes in the process. When he discusses the mistake with his friend, he may cite this proverb. In this case the usage is passive since the incident that gave rise to it has already taken place.

**Reflection on the Third Person Absent :** “A ripe corn can be told merely by its look” (*Arrow of God*, 143). This proverb is used when Edogo is discussing with a friend about the eldest son of a chief priest who wants to become the chief priest but the younger son is picked and the elder brother is understandably very angry. Edogo uses the proverb on the elder son as ridicule. The reflection is on a third person absent who wants a position that he is not qualified for. The usage is passive since the nomination has already taken place before the proverb is used. Therefore, on the passive level, if a proverb reflects on the speaker himself it implies a misfortune, bad luck or mistake while if the proverb is directed at the listener, an insult is usually intended, but if the proverb is aimed at a third person absent, negative judgment, with or without contempt is implied. Also, if the third person is present the intention is to insult. The passive use of proverbs in *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *Efuru* will be assessed to see if they conform to the model given by Rems Umeasiegbu for Chinua Achebe’s novels.

#### ***Passive Use of Proverbs in Efuru, The Concubine and The Great Ponds***

Reflection on the Speaker

“If a disease does not hide itself, I won’t hide it either”( *Efuru* 192)

Nwosu has had severe pains below his abdomen and solicits Efuru’s financial assistance. When Efuru inquires which part of his body is affected by the disease, he feels embarrassed but summons courage, by citing the above proverb. The usage is passive because he is already suffering from the disease. The reference is on the speaker who feels that it is his misfortune that he is sick, a sickness most people will be reluctant to talk about.

“One can’t eat a crab in secret” (*The Concubine*, 89). Ekwueme is interested in Ihuoma but she refused to acknowledge it. When he approached her in her house to tell her that many people know about his love advances to her, he used the proverb “one can’t eat a crab in secret” to clinch the point. This usage is passive because he is already in love with her and it is no longer a secret. Ekwueme felt that it was his misfortune and bad luck that his love was fruitless.

**Reflection on the Listener :** “...every mother thinks her child is a leopard for strength” (*The Concubine*, 22)

Okachi (Ihuoma’s mother), Ihuoma, and Ekwueme were comparing the wrestlers from their different villages – Omigwe and Omokachi. Okachi argued that the wrestlers in Omigwe were superior to Omokachi’s wrestlers; she gave an example of Ota Achara, the champion, but Ekwueme refuted this and said that Ota Achara used talisman. Ekwueme used the above proverb “every mother thinks her child is a leopard for strength” because he believed that Okachi is bound to defend her village. The usage is passive because there has already been a wrestling match; that’s why they were able to do the comparison. Its reflection is on the listener, Okachi, as a mother. The intention is to insult Okachi though in a subtle way for the way she defended her village, Omigwe.

“A bird that flies too fast may fly past its nest”( *The Great Ponds* 109) After the oath taking at Ogbunabali’s Shrine, Wago the leopard – killer wanted Olumba to die before the six months elapse so that Aliakoro village can inherit the ponds. He tried again to pressurize Igwu after the initial attempt to terminate Olumba’s life

before the given time failed. Igwu refused, hence the proverb” A bird that flies too fast may fly past its nest”. The usage is passive because Wago has caused war and has made some attempts on Olumba’s life. The reflection is on the listener Wago as a ‘bird’ because he seems to be running faster than his shadow and the intention is to scold or insult.

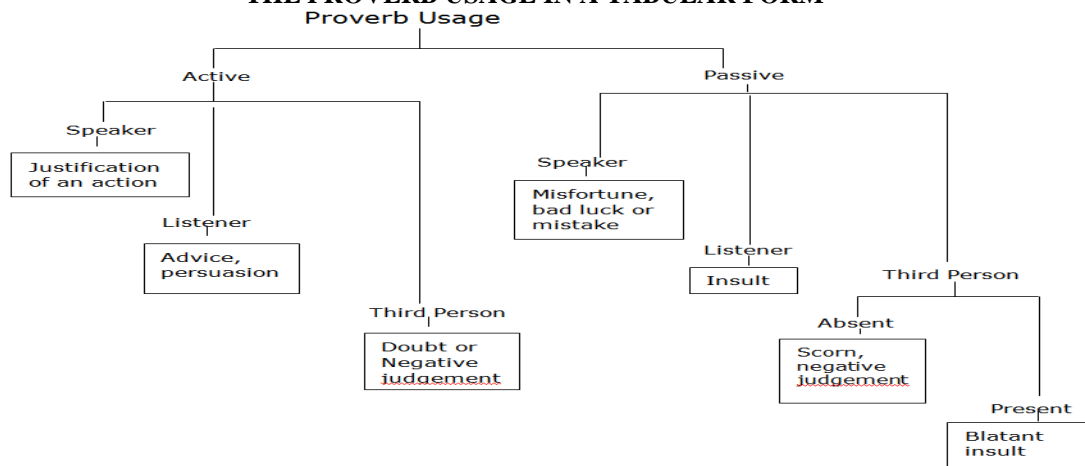
**Reflection on a Third Person Absent :** “The son of a gorilla must dance like the father gorilla” ( *Efuru* 51). Efuru bitterly complained to her mother in-law on her relationship with Adizua, her husband and how she has been enduring it. Her mother in-law felt sad because that was exactly what she suffered when she lived with Adizua’s father. She used the proverb to refer to her son because Adizua was doing exactly what his father did by leaving his wife and running after other women. It is passively used because he has already left his wife. It reflects on a third person absent and is a negative judgment. “The hunter who is never satisfied with small game may be obliged to carry home an elephant one day”. (*The Concubine* 73)

Madume wanted to usurp Ekwueme’s land and when he went there to harvest plantain for their market, he had a brief struggle with Ihuoma. Later a serpent spit into his eyes and he became blind. Being in that condition was trying for him, and he becomes deadly aggressive to everybody. His wife not feeling secured invited the elders to talk to him. When they came he treated them with scorn that was when Nwosu, one of the elders used the proverb. It is passively used here because his greed has already cost him his eyes. The reflection is on the third person (absent). Negative judgement is implied. This particular proverb has been used actively on page sixteen of this novel. “Anyone who wrestles with a gorilla must have a dusty back” (*The Great Ponds*, 122) Aliakoro people are trying everything possible for Olumba to die so that they can inherit the Wagaba pond. They used magical powers through their dibia, Igwu to cook Olumba but he was saved by Anwuanwu. During Olumba’s illness delegates from Chiolu were sent to Aliakoro to warn them to desist from such act but they denied being responsible for Olumba’s illness and the delegates feeling embarrassed left because they had no strong evidence to support their argument. Through, Wago Aliakoro people discovered that Olumba has recovered but still very weak. One of the men present at Okehi’s house said the proverb to show that they had really dealt with Olumba. The usage is passive because Olumba has recovered from his illness but very weak. The reference is on the third person absent and the intention is to scorn.

### III. CONCLUSION

Nwapa and Amadi are among the novelist, as Lindfors said, “Who constitute what may be termed a ‘School of Achebe’ in African Literature, for telling stories of traditional Igbo village life. They both employ stylistic techniques first introduced by Achebe” (168). It is evident from the works of Nwapa and Amadi discussed above that they borrowed from Achebe greatly in using and applying proverbs. Lindfors further stated that the proverbs Achebe employs are not unnecessary embellishments but functional agents of culture description. It is clear that Achebe in his novels is interested in communication effectively... (167). This is what Nwapa and Amadi achieved in their novels. Also, Umeasiegbu’s model which was used to test Chinua Achebe’s works was used to assess their use of proverbs in their novels and they tallied. This means that Flora Nwapa and Elechi Amadi are successful in integrating proverbs in their novels like Achebe. A reader who is not acquainted with Igbo culture will be enriched after reading the novels used in this research.

#### THE PROVERB USAGE IN A TABULAR FORM



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