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Proverbial Space and the Dialectics of Place and Displacement in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*

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Jegede, Olutoyin Bimpe - Department of English, University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract

Literary scholarship on proverb usage in Nigerian literary discourse had focused mostly on canonized writers and the nature, structure, form and context of proverbs in literature. Little work has been done on Sade Adeniran, her novel and the effect of place and displacement on proverb usage. This study is concerned with Adeniran's use of proverbs in her debut novel titled Imagine This. The novel, which won the Best First Book award for Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa Region) in 2008, has not received much critical attention because of the relative newness of the writer and the novel. The current paper examines Adeniran's attempt at creating a large proverbial space through her conscious use and structural arrangement of proverb in language. It foregrounds the dialectic of place and displacement, and location and dislocation as a crucible for her identity formation and major factor in appreciating her proverbs in the novel.

Postcolonial theory served as the theoretical framework for the paper. Through the reading of the cultural features, Adeniran's techniques of writing which demonstrate her use of proverbs were purposively selected and

subjected to content analysis in order to discuss the dynamics of language change in the novel. Proverbs are graphically enacted and foregrounded and Yoruba and English overlap in *Imagine This*. Through an examination of the implication of location and dislocation on proverb usage in the novel, the novel reveals an abundant usage of techniques of postcolonial writings such as code-mixing, pidginisation, use of proverbs, untranslated words and other language variants through which Adeniran creates a cultural space for herself. Geographical place and displacement as a feature of postcolonial writing imposes a gap that produces linguistic displacement. Therefore proverbs and other language variance and identity as in their literary contexts are areas of postcolonial study that require further research.

Introduction

Sade Adeniran's debut novel, *Imagine This* won the Best First Book award for Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa Region) in 2008. Lola, the protagonist of the novel, was born in London in 1968 and is abandoned by her mother at a tender age of eighteen months. She lives in a foster home with her brother in London until later when her father brings them to Nigeria. She leaves her familiar childhood environment in London and moves to an entirely different one in a remote village in Nigeria where she has no inkling of the language and culture of her "strange relatives".

She records her daily experiences in her journal, and relates her disgust with life in Nigeria. The situation she recreates is similar to a post-independence phenomenon in which parents who go in search of educational advancement abroad, return to Nigeria with their children or leave them in Nigeria in the care of relatives who ill-treat them. Adeniran writes that the protagonist's father's reasoning for sending her to relatives on their return to Nigeria is "to gain an understanding of the Idogun culture and the ways which are different from the white man's. I, apparently needed de-programming and needed to realize that life can be hard and that it takes a whole village to raise a child" (238). Like most children born in England and returned to Nigeria, the protagonist suffers culture shock. She shares her loneliness and frustration with Jupiter. Her journal is a:

depiction of her journey towards wisdom ... a sensitive and perceptive account of a voyage through memory, imagination and a re-imagined past.(334)

One of the striking features of the novel, like postcolonial writings, is her use of English Language as a variant and an indication of her difference as a

Nigerian writer on one hand, and as a medium through which reality is conceived and finally established on the other. Of equal importance is her use and graphic arrangement of proverbs (Ashcroft et al, 8).

Literary scholarship on proverb usage in the Nigerian literary scene had focused mostly on traditional proverbs in canonized writings, and the nature, structure, form and context of proverbs in literature. Olatunji (1984), Bamgbose (1968) Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002) and Yusuf (2002) discuss the nature, feature, function, performance, content and context of proverbs while Aderemi Raji- Oyelade analyzes the grammar and structure of Yoruba postproverbs as “new alterity...and the radical discourse of literacy and modernity among Yoruba Youth”(2004:301). Jegede (2008) locates proverbs and postproverbials in their literary contexts and underscores their relevance in postcolonial writings. Jegede’s focus has been on analyzing proverbs in specialized areas; using different examples to determine whether they appropriate the logic of traditional ones or they transform them by shrinking or elongation.

Okpewho (2004) discusses the philosophical, stylistic and metaphorical views of proverbs, giving credence to his discussion through the use of contextualized examples. In his indepth study of structure, he identifies simple, complex, interrogative and direct ones, and gives different examples of each. According to him, complexity of structure is sometimes determined by the context and audience. One interesting area of focus in Okpewho’s book is his discussion of features of form and style in which he observes that proverbs present “ philosophical views of human existence and intimate observations of human experience”(236). We share the view that when a proverb refers to an actual historical event, its literal import cannot be overlooked, however, the philosophical meaning of a proverb, which in most cases is woven with the metaphorical, has more complex and weightier meaning. These works provide the necessary background for the study of proverbs in Nigeria but have not examined proverb usage in fictional, isolated and dialogic contexts like they are found in *Imagine This*.

The current paper, however, examines Adeniran’s attempt at creating a large proverbial space through her use of proverbs. It also investigates the dialectic of place and displacement, location and dislocation, as crucial features of postcolonial discourse and site for “crisis of identity” (*Empire*,9) on the one hand; and as Levi-Straussian pairs of complement and opposite, on the other. Hen Bertens opines that in Levi- Straussian ideology, “the structure of

primitive thinking is binary and that the world and human experiences are categorized in basic terms-culture/nature, sacred/profane, light/darkness”(49). Through a critical examination of the proverbs, their underlying structures would be unveiled with a view to showing the inner feelings of the protagonist; and how the language of the environment gives capacity for formulating new cultural experiences.

Construction of home, place and displacement

The protagonist says “sometimes I dreamed that the red slippers transported me home, but I am still not sure where home is”(156). Andrew Gurr explains “for the postcolonial exiles, the search for identity and the construction of a vision of home, amount to the same thing. Typically, the home is set in the past, in memories of childhood, which is the only basis for a perdu, the home of memory, which is the only basis for a sense of identity...”(11). The protagonist’s past and childhood are rooted in London. She has no knowledge of her Nigerian ancestry; therefore as she journeys through life and moves from childhood to adulthood, and migrates from Nigeria to London, she is exposed to her motherland for the first time; and can only naturally think of London as her real home. As she compares London with Nigeria, she is disappointed with what she finds in her motherland-rural, illiterate, and cultural environment. She is therefore faced with the problem of finding and defining a home because her understanding of home is bound up with her “memories of childhood”. For her, home is the place of comfort and easy communication. Her attachment to the European centre makes her dream of London as a place of belonging, an arena with which she is intimately attached and a space with her familiar landscape:

I suppose I have to get used to calling this place, “home”.
But I have to say right now –my **real home** is in London...I
really hate it here ,I really want to go back to London.... no
one understands a word I’m saying, there’s no water,
no electricity, no television, ... I can’t go to school because
they teach in Yoruba and I can’t read, write or even speak
it properly yet (*Imagine*,8)

Thus, she suffers as a result of her re (dis)location from London, and later, Lagos; and is compelled to go into forced exile at home (Idogun). Exile is therefore both a state of mind and geographical space from where physical and emotional traumas arise. The dislocation that results from her migration erodes into her conception of self (Ashcroft et. al, 9). This in turn affects her

interpretation of home and is intimately bound up with her feelings of love for London and hate for Nigeria.

Marxwell's (1965) model of postcolonial theory suggests, the protagonist's communication system is disjointed and sub-planted by her mother tongue-Yoruba. Since no one understands a word of what she says, she struggles to free her language from linguistic colonization by using her mother tongue and variants of English such as pidgin, code-mixing and proverbs in order to gain acceptance and admittance into a culture from which she is alienated.

Proverbs as counter discursive Formulations

In *Imagine This*, reality and meaning are constructed through the protagonist's proverbial discourse. She describes a reality that is not clear – cut and defined by a pretty set of rules. The proverbs enter into a dialogue with alternative social structures which are not fully understood by the protagonist but against which she struggles (Ana Maria Sanchez Arce, 77). They are used as codes through which symbols of communications are processed. They are also part of the content and structure of the novel, drawn from different backgrounds in Africa. They serve as the title of the chapters and as embellishments in speech. As titles, they are isolated, fore-grounded, and at once de-familiarized. The rural setting of the novel provides an occasion for teaching Nigerian culture of eating, relationship, farming, appeasing Sango (god of thunder) and so on. She connects her personal experience to international fairytales and movies such as Cinderella and Tarzan respectively.

The real interest of the writer is in bringing out the contradictions that arise in a situation of forced relocation where one is compelled to compare. Like the binary opposites identified by Levi-Strauss in the analysis of the American Indian myths, the symbols in *Imagine This* have binary relations: rural/urban, London/Nigeria, poverty/wealth, literate/illiterate, beautiful/ugly. The story is as satirical as it is humorous “he came to get me from where I was playing hopscotch and told me it was time to come and chop, I thought he was going to make me cut up wood and I had visions of chopping off my foot or finger since I had never used an axe, but I didn't have to worry. Come and chop means come and eat”(10). The novel begins with a proverb that reflects the protagonist's fate in the world: “The spirit that keeps one going when one has no choice of what else to do must not be taken for valour”(3) African proverb

This proverb does not occur in any of the situations that Okpewho identifies—speech-act, formal performance, ritual or chant performance and verbal contest. Rather as a cultural and language activity, it unveils the internal logic of the writer to give importance to Nigerian language.

Proverbs as cultural language

We share Penfield and Yankah's view that proverbs are recognizable quotations which can be expanded and used to generate further meanings, and especially cultural meanings. Through "different literary master language, Adeniran claims legitimacy as a writer and presupposes the reader's immersion in a distinctive set of interpretive conventions" (Stephanie Newell, 2000: 9). Nwoga's observation that proverbs operate three levels of meaning is equally apposite. The literal meaning is taken as what is said but the philosophical and contextual meanings have cultural implications. Even when proverbs are drawn and *displaced* from an (un)identified location and securely grafted into other cultural spaces like Sade Adeniran does in this novel, it is capable of generating further texts. When the protagonists' family relocates from London to Lagos, Nigeria, she reluctantly accepts her father's decision but when her father sends her to live with a relative in Idogun, a rural community, she strongly objects. She is forcefully taken to the village but she immediately runs back:

We didn't want to come to Nigeria, but we came and now he's breaking our family again. I'll be eighteen, an old woman before I ever see Adebola again, he probably won't recognize me(6) ...I got scared so I bolted back the way the bus had come from. I know I was being stupid, but I was going to run all the way back to Lagos and to daddy. (7)

At this turbulent time, she portrays herself as a wanderer at a crossroad and a psychologically dislocated being. Adeniran therefore relates the logic of the protagonist's action with the symbol of freedom /force. She quotes an African proverb:

1. "The spirit that keeps **one going when one has no choice of what else to do** must not be mistaken for valour" African Proverb.(3)

This proverb refers to difficult situations (spirit) that compel individuals to continue in what they are doing. With it, Adeniran prepares the readers' mind for the struggles of the protagonist's life. Within a space of a page, and

beginning another chapter, is a Yoruba proverb which further underscores Lola's attempts at refusing to live in Idogun and making London her permanent home, and the need to keep going on despite all odds. The difficulty she faces is brought about by her refusal to live in Idogun. She says: "no one listens to what I want" (19):

2. "Whatever the eyes of a dead man see in the **burial yard** is caused by death" Yoruba proverb.(4)

The **burial yard** space is restricted, dislocated and confined; a space of final abode and limited choice. Its image portrays Lola's symbolic confinement to fate. The need for caution coupled with her desire to wait for a change is further expressed in another proverb:

3. "Until the **rotten tooth is pulled out**, the mouth must chew with caution" (25).

The dislocation of the rotten teeth enhances free movement of the mouth. Lola's situation requires caution at this time, and no matter how hard she tries, Idogun is not easy for her. With some money missing in the family, all fingers point at Lola as the thief, despite her innocence. She is taken to a fake diviner who confirms the allegation of theft against her. Lola keeps wondering how everyone would allege she steals fifteen naira and a bottle of oil when in actual fact, she is innocent. The ill treatment she gets from her grandmother is worse than that from her aunt. When she is starved, she prepares a meal of rice which is later taken and thrown away by Mama, her grandmother. The incident exposes Mama's lies that Mama is starving when in actual fact; she lives in abundance with a bag of rice hid under her bed. Mama Rotimi, her daughter-in-law could not conceal her disappointment which is expressed through this proverb that portrays distrust:

4. "Since all lizard lie prostrate, how can a man tell which one has belly ache"? Yoruba Proverb (60).
5. "The teeth are smiling but is the heart?"(73) West African proverb.

Proverbs 4 and 5 which are interrogatives and indeed rhetorical, emphasize the fact that one cannot know the innermost thoughts and feelings of people or trust their moves. They portray pairs of opposing symbols: healthy/unhealthy, teeth/heart. The heart does not compliment the effort of the teeth. Through the symbol of the teeth (outer) and the heart (inner),

Adeniran opines that man's outer expressions cannot adequately express their inner feelings. Shortly after, the protagonist gains admission into a Secondary School and is very happy to leave home for boarding school. But her joy is short lived and is cautioned by:

6. "Joy has a slender body that breaks too soon" (61) Yoruba Proverb.

This proverb is a personification and a comment on the protagonist's hope of getting freedom in the boarding school. Everyone picks quarrels with her because she is the youngest and smallest in the class and within weeks, she starts avoiding classes in Mathematics and other subjects she does not like:

7. "The **moon moves slowly** by day but by day break it has crossed the sky" (117) Yoruba Proverb.

Like the proverb before it, the above proverb is a personification and an observation, but unlike the one before it, it is a direct statement. The next proverb (8), is used to express the need for perseverance. After the demise of her brother and only companion, his ghost appears to her all the time and everyone thinks she is mad, so people avoid her and she becomes lonely. She moves to Uncle Jacob's house in Lagos:

8. "A child does not **die** because the mother's breasts are dry" Yoruba proverb" (154).

Thus proverb (8) is an observation of the protagonist's lonely situation and the need for her to continue living. The complementary symbols implied in the proverb are "living" and "dying". Through the use of the negative correlate "does not" with "die", the importance of life is emphasized.

9. "Calamity has no voice; suffering cannot speak to tell who is really in distress" West African proverb (224).

Proverb 9 has a complex structure with a subordinate clause that provides explanation on its first clause. The opposing symbols in the example are 'voice of calamity' and "voicelessness of suffering". In the context of this proverb, Lola suffers sexual abuse from her other Uncle whom she had held in high esteem and in whose house she now lives. Having to feign ignorance of her uncle's harassment of her, even to her uncle, is a very difficult task. Not long after, her uncle loses his job and arranges for her to be helped by the British government, but to no avail.

10. “My child is **dead** is better than my child is **lost** Yoruba proverb” (235).

He therefore arranges a family meeting for the protagonist’s admittance into her father’s space.

11. “When there are **no elders**, the town is ruined and when the master dies, **the house** is desolate” (235).

Proverb 10 is the title of the chapter where the protagonist’s family insists that her father should look after her instead of leaving her in the care of relatives. The complementary symbols in the proverb are “dead” and “lost”. Both the dead and lost are displaced. The structure of the proverb is simple and comparative; and to start the discussion, Uncle Jacob uses a complex proverb (11), that is a statement of fact. Its parallel ideas, “no elders”/“master dies”, on the one hand, and “town is ruined/ house is desolate”, on the other, portray some measure of physical displacement which the protagonist is likely to suffer if her father does not change his attitude.

Proverb 12 is an example of proverb that Okpewho describes as wellerism, “a complex and dramatic structure in which a statement is put in the mouth of a fictional person or thing” (237), in this case, it is the elders of Idogun:

12. “As the elders of Idogun are fond of saying, *A jealous person has no flesh upon them, for however much they feed on jealousy; they will never be satisfied*” (236).

It indicates that an envious person is never contented. The family meeting is borne out of envy than interest in the protagonist’s welfare. She observes:

I don’t want to be pitied. I don’t want to be anyone’s charity case in their bid for heavenly redemption. All I’ve ever wanted is to have a family of my own, a Father, a mother and a brother, of my own but I guess that’s asking too much. Will I always be walking the shadows searching for light? (193).

It takes the whole family to convince her father, allow her enter the city space, but he refuses until after her accident and supposed “death and resurrection”. Entering the space of the child in her father’s house in Lagos is a problem. She is cast out of space and time. The novel narrates the pain she suffers as “a result of dislocation from places of intimacy and landscape of profound attachment”(Amos,4).

In Proverb 13, it is suggested that best results are got from unexpected places. Segun's efforts to authenticate the rumour that the protagonist lost her life in a motor accident could not yield any result, so the advice to search uncommon places for good results comes as the title of the chapter where the issue is discussed:

13. "**Do not follow the path, go where there is no path** to begin the trail", a West African proverb (250).

When the protagonist is insulted in her boyfriend's house, by the daughter of a rich man who is involved in shady deals, she remembers:

14. "Iya Soji always said, '*The bottom of wealth is sometimes a dirty thing to behold*'" (252)

Proverb 14, like 12, is an observation which implies that one may not be too certain about how people achieve their greatness. When she is asked to return to her house, she says:

15. "For once, I could say what Mama used to say that *because friendship is pleasant, we partake of our friend's entertainment, not because we have not enough to eat in our own house*" (253).

The above proverb with its explanatory subordinate clause implies that an act of love should not be taken for granted. To announce the death of her father, and portray the hypocrisy of her relatives, the protagonist uses the proverb below to begin the chapter:

- 16 "When the jackal **dies** the fowls do not mourn, for the jackal never brings up a chicken" (317)

Here again, as in proverbs 8 & 10, the binary opposites – death /life are symbolically recreated in the proverb. Lola expects that with the permanent dislocation or displacement of her father through death, more space would be made for her. Unfortunately, her uncles struggle for space and fight in order to get a share of her father's property. In order not to get caught in the struggle, the protagonist resolves to leave everything, run for her life and relocate into a freer space in London:

- 17 "They say **a man does not run among thorns** for nothing. *Either he is pursuing a snake, or a snake is pursuing him*" (327).

Proverb 17 therefore implies that people have genuine reasons for their actions.

Division of Space, Admittance and Language

There is synchronic division of space into three distinct places which represent rural, semi-urban and urban respectively. These are Idogun, Owo and Lagos; and are occupied by the protagonist, her brother and father. All through the novel, the protagonist finds physical admittance but struggles for psychological admittance into the village, Idogun, whereas she could not find full physical and psychological admittance into the city, Lagos. Both places are defined and confined by geographical boundaries that make her wander from place to place and relative to relative until her father accepts to relocate her into an “old flat”, a space reserved for tenants. The protagonist says, “the flat in Ikoyi really seemed like home; it was my refuge, my space in which to be whoever I wanted to be” (253). Unfortunately the feeling of freedom could not last longer than her father’s lifetime. She had to relocate to a freer space in London.

This representation of space and difficult admittance into expected ones touches on the significance that is accorded the centre-Lagos & London and the continuous struggle between tradition and modernity. In the protagonist’s family set-up, she struggles for a child’s space, whereas in the society, she struggles for psychological space. Her inability to secure full admittance, places a constraint upon her language activity; hence the proverbs are taken from the mouth of the people of Idogun, who are familiar with proverbs and culture. The protagonist merely recollects them from memory. Her use of proverb is an attempt to connect with the indigenous voice. Proverb therefore becomes a code with which she wants to identify and against which she struggles. This situation reveals that the farther away from the centre, the more pronounced are the proverbs used in the novel.

The proverbs are in two categories –passive and active. The passive are structural embellishment of space that is not actively involved in dialogue whereas the active ones are injected into speech. Both cases progress the plot of the novel. Besides, they are of simple and complex structures and are conceptually arranged as binary opposites: Nigeria/London; rural space/city space; death/life; claustrophobic/free.

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