

Proverbs as Vehicles of Truth in Contemporary English Fiction



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To speak about proverbs generally means speaking about human experience in all its varied manifestations. Individual reactions to the extra-linguistic reality are transformed in paremias into disindividualized observations encapsulated for the sake of universal application. Yet the wisdom contained in proverbs, with their generalized sense, still mirrors individualized experience, through, for example, its surface structure and literal reading. The multitudinous paremic scenarios are paralleled by an infinite number of real life situations which can all potentially be commented upon by means of proverbial sagacity. This is due to the fact that the abstracted meaning of a proverb, in one way or another, lends itself to actualizations in specific contexts of proverb use, all of which relate in logical and semiotic terms to the main meaning of a paremia. Each proverb then has many facets and this multifaceted nature is accounted for by the factors mentioned above: their internal features and external characteristics, such as their relationships with the extra-linguistic world and the situations which ask for paremic descriptions. The relationships that proverbs enter into in the process of their application are multidimensional, demanding comprehensive analysis, which should disclose the multifaceted character of paremias. Obviously, no such analysis can be undertaken in a short piece. Indeed it would be as futile as asking for a definition of the proverb, which some paremiologists think is unattainable (cf. Taylor 1931/1985: 3). I would like to stress, however, that each short essay on proverbs contributes in some measure to paremiological study as a whole.

In this paper I intend to look at one aspect of proverb application and analyse it from one perspective only. The aim is to look at the submergence of paremias in certain selected novels by contemporary English writers with an eye to sketching the ways in which proverbial wisdom/proverbial truth is assessed by the fictional characters and/or writers themselves. The truth of a paremia is understood here in terms of the proverb's applicability to and usefulness in a particular situation whereby it is to perform a given function. The present essay fits in with the tenets of what I call paremiostylistics (Szpila 2007), that is a study of proverbs in the context of literature. Among the many aspects of proverbs that paremiostylistics investigates the question of the attitude of a novel's characters to the paremic truth in general as well as in particular cases as manifested by their use of proverbs can be addressed.

The first observation to be made in an investigation of proverb application in literature is to note their presence in the works of contemporary English writers,

regardless of time reference in their novels. The latter of course can influence the use of proverbs and reflect in one way or another the popularity of proverbs as a genre or individual proverbs in the time fictionalized. By the same token, the presence of paremias in novels by modern authors shows that proverbs as a category of fixed multi-word signs persist in the minds of users of English. However, again it would be unjustified to jump to conclusions concerning a proverb revival in the present age or their usage within a language community when considering only a small number of contemporary novels. So I simply highlight this fact which should not be overlooked in any discussion of proverb vitality in the modern world. To exemplify the proverbial presence in the works of one of the selected writers, I will quote Salman Rushdie's novels (9 novels in toto), which contain altogether nearly 100 proverbs and almost 180 actualizations. Salman Rushdie is definitely not the best example of "averageness" in this respect as he is an extremely phraseological and paremic writer. Nevertheless, the numbers show that a novel can be paremically saturated, which, other criteria taken into account, manifests the usefulness of paremias in conveying certain messages in a piece of fictional literature. It also points to paremias as statements of a universal nature on which a character/writer as well as a reader can take an individual stand.

What I will concentrate on in my paper is not the numbers themselves, since, as implied before, the mere statement of proverb presence in a piece of literature is not enough to either label it paremic or decide how paremic it is or say anything about the proverbs therein. Instead it is the quality of proverb use in the selected literary material upon which I will focus. I will attempt to show that the traditional truth of proverbs can be either accepted in its entirety or categorically rejected, demonstrating two contrasting approaches to paremic wisdom, but also that between the two poles exists a scale on which we can locate other different uses. The scalar approach to proverbial messages demonstrates the very multifaceted character of proverbs which I have already mentioned and which reveals itself in the various possible approaches one can take regarding their truth and wisdom. Within a literary context paremias allow for a variety of applications, ranging from those in which a proverb is used with exactly the same meaning and function to uses where a proverb's meaning(s) and function(s) are manipulated to serve a particular purpose. In consequence the meaning and the function can be differently assessed. Obviously this is nothing new as we know well enough that proverbs do not contain universal truths which can never be challenged, rather (they contain) relative truths (Mieder, Litovkina 1993: 1). Additionally, it seems that at present paremias exist primarily in twisted forms which by definition distort the proverb's message and influence its function in communication (cf. Mieder 1993: 58).

On considering the scale let us start with the two extremes first, one of which represents the canonical use of proverbs, the other its total opposite. Canonical use is the occurrence of a proverb in its unaltered form with its ascribed function. The form of the proverb need not be complete; indeed, the full content is very often signalled by a part of the canonical form, or the complete paremia may be signalled in an allusive way, in which case the full structure is evoked by means of a surface marker or via a different more complex allusive device. To illustrate the case in point we may quote the following extracts:

'This from the woman who lives with Archibald Jones!' scoffed Samad. 'I might remind you that people in glass houses –' (Smith, "White Teeth", p. 439)

'I don't know about God,' he told the interviewer, 'but certainly I believe in the Devil.' 'Oh yes, one always needed a long spoon to sup with Querell'. (Banville, "The Untouchable", p. 34)

Mr Jones smiled crookedly – 'My dear fellow, he said, never look a gift horse in the mouth.' (Rushdie, "Grimus", p. 62)

He had a sincere way with a platitude which he made resonate like hard-worn wisdom in his tight-buttoned chest: it never rained but it poured, the devil made work for idle hands, one rotten apple spoiled the barrel. (McEwan, "Atonement", p. 146)

The examples show that the ways in which proverbial wisdom is conveyed are also in themselves scalar, the scale referring to the formal aspect in the first place, that is the ways in which it is signaled and put across to the characters/readers of the novel. Obviously, the ways in which proverbs are used may influence their decoding, which may or may not have a bearing on the ways we approach their message as how proverbs manifest themselves in literature mirror their usage in communication in general. Thus they should be studied with reference to their formal use in the contemporary world.

The truth of the proverb may be emphasized also by extraparemic means, that is the quotation of the proverb is accompanied by a comment on its validity as is the case in:

(4) *But absence, as is well known, makes hearts grow fonder [...].*

(Rushdie, "East, West", p. 74)

(5) *You laugh at my desperation. Ha. Go tell a drowning man not to clutch at straws.* (Rushdie, "East, West", p. 98)

Such around-the-proverb commentaries on the part of the narrator/character eloquently demonstrate that the use of proverbs with their universally applicable messages is accompanied by the consciousness of an experienced assessor – the proverb user. It shows that while deploying proverbs one mentally adheres to or spurns them. This refers as well to the potential opinions of others, as in the following example,

(6) *I must confess that I never completely accepted the passport/foreign exchange explanation of Ormus Cama's non-pursuit of Vina. Where there's a will, etc.* (Rushdie, "The Ground Beneath Her Feet", p. 189)

in which the behaviour of another character may hint at his doubting the usefulness of the proverbial truth.

It is worth noting at this juncture that although some proverbs may seem to be altered and paraphrased so that a new meaning is formed, the novel form does not become an anti-proverb as such, rather the new form extends the proverb's applicability, which may be limited otherwise, deriving its authoritative and persuasive strength from the very relationship with the original and the categorial character it acquires. Therefore,

the truth of a particular proverb is not ridiculed, mocked and in consequence rejected. Cf.

(7) *'I suppose this means the houses of Kipps and Belsey are once again at war.' 'No... I don't see why that should be so. All's fair in love and ... and academia.' Monty smiled again.* (Smith, "On Beauty", p. 366)

in which the proverb, whose full form is easily and fully recovered from the linguistic context, gives rise to as if another proverb, whose coming into being justifies the engendering power of proverbial structures as such and which by virtue of claiming authority for itself in the process affirms the truth of the original paremia.

The other pole of the scale, as has already been mentioned, is represented by those paremic loci in which the proverbial wisdom of a particular saying is denied. Again the rejection of the proverb truth and the denigration of its function may be differently expressed on the surface structure, in the same way as the affirmative attitude to proverbs is expressed.

(8) *My view is that not only does lightning not strike twice, it usually doesn't strike once.* (Rushdie, "Fury", p. 173)

Besides these two well-defined categories of acceptance or rejection of proverbial wisdom, we encounter paremias in contemporary novels in which the proverb's applicability in particular situations is in one way or another limited, that is the relation between the proverbial truth and the actual circumstances is not interpreted in either 'yes' or 'no' terms. Paremias may be seen as 'true-but', or 'untrue-but'. For example, in Barnes's novel *Arthur & George*, the proverb *You cannot make bricks without straw* is not rejected as inapplicable, for its usefulness is stressed by the very fact of quoting it in the novel, although its meaning, the truth of the proverb referring to the likelihood of something happening is seriously doubted as inapplicable with reference to one of the novel's characters. At the same time, if we read it closely, we see that the very specific meaning of the proverb is not denied. Let me quote the relevant fragments:

(9) *Mr Meek, now it is my turn to put heart into you. A barrister, however competent, cannot make bricks without straw.*

Litchfield Meek gave George a worldly smile. 'In my years in the courts, Mr Edalji, I've seen bricks made from all sorts of materials. Some you didn't even know existed. Lack of straw will be no hardship to Mr Disturnal.

As for the prosecution: Mr Disturnal had put his case cleverly and antagonistically, but this had been expected; and yes, Mr Meek had been correct about the fellow's skill at making bricks despite the unavailability of straw. (Barnes, "Arthur&George", p. 164, 2001)

Similar vacillation as to the truth of the proverbial wisdom can be observed in the following two examples from Rushdie's novels:

(10) *Love does not conquer all, except in the Bombay talkies; rip tear crunch will not be defeated by a mere ceremony; and optimism is a disease.* (Rushdie, "Midnight's Children", p. 444)

(11) *'Good-bye Iskander,' she told him, 'and do not forget that the love of some women is not blind.'* (Rushdie, "Shame", p. 111)

In both fragments the proverbs are eloquently inapplicable in the given circumstances; however, the paremias are not deprived of some truthfulness and therefore they are not automatically rejected. These fragments are examples of the limitations of proverbial truth, its generalizing nature and its all-encompassing applicability. In the former case, the proverbial truth is limited to a very specific domain of human activities: Bollywood films, in the latter, the exceptional *some* suggests only a minor departure from the rule. Similarly in:

(12) *Honesty is not the best policy in life. Only, perhaps, in art.* (Rushdie, "The Ground Beneath Her Feet", p. 213)

(13) *Half a loaf is not always better than no bread.* (Rushdie, "Grimus", p. 191)

To finish, the aim of this short report was not to analyse in detail any sample of contemporary English prose with reference to the deployment of proverbs within it but to show how proverbial truth, its applicability, universal nature and generalized validity can be approached. This should be part and parcel of the analysis of proverb use in literature in general. The selected examples show the major approaches to paremic wisdom, namely, its acceptance, its rejection, as well as the various degrees to which proverbs are deemed to be limited in their universal appeal. To do justice to the use of paremias in literature we must go considerably further and incorporate into the investigation all the necessary tools of paremiostylistic analysis to characterize fully the literary uses of proverbs.

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Առածը որպես ճշմարտության մարմնավորում ժամանակակից անգլիական գրականության մեջ

Սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է առածաբանության հիմնահարցերից մեկին, որն առնչվում է առածի օգտագործմանը գրական համատեքստում: Ուսումնասիրվում է այն խնդիրը, թե ինչ վերաբերմունք ունեն առածում մարմնավորված ճշմարտության նկատմամբ գրական երկի հեղինակն ու հերոսները: Առածի ավանդական իմաստությունը կարող է կամ ամբողջապես ընդունվել, կամ կտրականապես մերժվել: Այդ երկու բևեռային մոտեցումներից բացի նկարագրվում է նաև այնպիսի իրավիճակ, երբ գրական ստեղծագործության կերպարները և / կամ հեղինակը ընդունում են առածում արտահայտված ճշմարտությունը այս կամ այն չափով: Գրական համատեքստում առածը կիրառվում է ամենատարբեր եղանակներով, սկսած նրա ավանդական մեկնաբանությունից և վերջացած այն գրական վերաիմաստավորումներով, որոնք ծառայում են հեղինակի հատուկ նպատակներին: