

Proverbs in R. N. Phume's *Bohloko ba Maikutlo*

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Abstract

This article examines R. N. Phume's use of proverbs in his volume of Sesotho poems entitled *Bohloko ba Maikutlo*. The proverbs to be considered are found in the poems: 'Bohloko ba maikutlo', 'Motho', 'Re ka kgona', 'Moshanyana' and 'Ihlo la moya', which are found in the said volume. The proverbs to be discussed, as found in the poems, are *nnete re entse letsoho la monna* (truly

we've done a man's hand), *ha ho tume feela di melala* (it's not only the fat necks that gain fame), *kgakgi o kgakga se ya beng se sa o kgakge* (care about a person who does not care about you), *moaha moriti ruri ha a o dule* (the creator of a shade does not sit in it), *ihlo la kgutsana ke lebone* (the eye of an orphan is a light), and *monate o utlwa ke moetsi, athe bohloko bo utlwa ke moetsuwa* (happiness is felt by the doer, while pain is felt by the victim). The concept of 'proverb' will be defined as part of the introductory section of this study. The different sections of the article are the introduction and discussion. A concluding remark will be included towards the end of the discourse. Keywords: Proverbs, R. N. Phume, Bohloko ba Maikutlo

Introduction

R. N. Phume uses proverbs in an artistic manner in his poems contained in the volume *Bohloko ba Maikutlo*. So far, no academic research has been conducted, analysing this aspect in his work. It is this absence of research conducted on this aspect in Phume's poetry and Phume's beautiful use of proverbs in his poetry that have inspired the undertaking of this research. This article, then, aims at studying the proverbs used by this poet in his compositions.

A proverb is "a bare statement of fact and is usually a short and simple sentence consisting of a subject and predicate which may be either positive or negative" (Guma, 1967: 81). Proverbs are a rich

source of imagery and succinct expressions on which more elaborate forms can draw. As Nketia, quoted by Finnegan (1970: 389), puts it in his comment on proverbs:

The value to us ... does not lie only in what it reveals of thoughts of the past. For the poet today or indeed the speaker who is some sort of an artist in the use of words, the proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language.

Canonici (1996: 16) defines proverbs as:

Pithy sayings that constitute

complete sentences, with no grammatical links with the context. They often make use of abbreviations and elisions. In spite of its brevity, the proverb contains a full meaning and expresses a truth evident to anyone with some common sense.

A proverb is viewed as a short popular saying embodying a general truth, sometimes in metaphorical language. Proverbs seem common to most cultures and ages. They represent homely wisdom, when they are transmitted orally (Gray, 1984: 167).

Guma (1967: 99) maintains that “proverbs draw freely from the people’s culture and history. They also describe human disposition and abstract ideas in a very graphic and realistic manner”.

Lenake (1984: 40) views Sesotho proverbs as:

the treasure of the Southern Sotho language. They are based on the history of the ancestors, the wars they waged and the poverty they experienced as a result of such wars. They contain similes as well as metaphors.

Sesotho proverbs also constitute the philosophy of life of

the Basotho. The life and thoughts of the Basotho is reflected in them.

From the above definitions and explanations, one may realise that proverbs represent people's daily life experiences and are applied differently in different situations. Sesotho proverbs then are words of wisdom showing some truth derived from human nature or people's daily experiences. They are regarded as words of advice teaching people morals (Mosese, 1990: 92).

Discussion

This discussion will analyse the use of proverbs in the poems 'Bohloko ba maikutlo', 'Motho', 'Re ka kgona', 'Moshanyana' and 'Ihlo la moya'. For instance, in the

poem 'Re ka kgona', the poet uses the proverb: *Nnete re entse letsoho la monna* (Truly we've done a man's hand) (Phume, 1995: 8). The poem from which the above proverb is drawn is about a person who encourages his fellow human beings to help each other in all aspects of life. This is evident in the words *Nnete re entse letsoho la monna* (Truly we have done a man's hand).

Man is expected to give and extend a helping hand to others. In the poem, this proverb is used to illustrate how people can uplift each other to avoid poverty within their community. People can be capable of doing well if they help each other. With this proverb, the poet encourages communal living among people.

Another example of a proverb is evident in the same

poem, where the poet says: *Ha ho tume feela di melala* (It's not only the fat necks that gain fame) (Phume, 1995: 9). The poem from which the above line is drawn is about the effect of perseverance. The original form of this proverb is *ha ho tume di melala*, whose literal translation is not only those who are well built or the big necks gain fame. The title of the poem, which is 'Re ka kgona', means that we can be able. Therefore, this proverb strengthens the fact that everyone is capable. The poet uses it to motivate people to have courage and not to look down upon themselves.

Capability and strength are not only associated with powerful, wealthy and great people. Also, less powerful and ordinary people are capable of great things, if they have courage. This proverb can be linked to the story of David and Goliath in the Bible,

where David wanted to fight Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, and Saul denied him, saying: “Thou art not able to go and fight against this Philistine: for thou art but youth and he a man of war”. David said unto Saul: “Thy servant slew the lion and the bear, and this uncircumcised Philistine be as one of them” (Samuel, 17: 33 – 51). David was a small boy while Goliath was a huge man (a giant). However, David defeated and killed Goliath.

In the poem ‘Ihlo la moya’, the poet uses the proverb:

Kgakgi o kgakga

Se ya beng se sa o kgakge.

(Care about a person

Who does not care about you.)

(Phume, 1995: 15)

Within the context of the above poem, which emphasises imagination and day dreaming, this proverb is alerting people to take care of their own feelings. With the theme of the poem 'Ihlo la moya' which refers to insight or imagination, the poet is alerting people that, at times one can feel emotional and passionate about a person who does not share the same sentiments about them. The manner in which this proverb is employed in the poem proves that people's feelings must not lead them to acting in an irresponsible manner. People must then act responsibly at all times, even when one is passionate

about someone who does not manifest the same feeling about them. The moral of this proverb can be especially beneficial for people who are in romantic relationships. When one partner feels passionate about the other, while the latter does not share the same feelings, some people tend to commit suicide or eliminate their partners. This is one of the irresponsible acts people can practice, only to regret later. In a country that is riddled by with domestic violence, the proverb and the moral of the poem are very pertinent. When love and feelings are not reciprocated in a way that the other hopes, one should not resort to irresponsible acts that they will later regret.

Another use of a proverb is apparent in the poem 'Bohloko ba maikutlo', where the poet says: *Marabe a*

jewa ke bana hle! (Parents sacrifice on behalf of their children!) (Phume, 1995: 3). The literal translation of the proverb above is 'Serpents are eaten up by their children). The serpent is generally known as a snake that becomes helpless when giving birth. The pain of giving birth becomes unbearable for this snake that it eventually dies. When it dies, its own offsprings eat it up. The general meaning of this proverb is that the legacy of parents remains with their children when they (parents) pass away, everything that they worked hard for is enjoyed by their children when they depart. Parents can suffer for the sake of their children. They can give up their happiness for that of their children. A clear instance of this situation is when the last food left in the household is often given to children by parents. Because parents care about their children, they can starve for their sake.

In the poem 'Motho', the poet uses the proverb: *Moaha Moriti ruri ha a o dule* (The creator of a shade does not sit in it) (Phume, 1995: 43). Within the context of the poem, the poet encourages people to have courage and work hard in all aspects of life. This proverb then is strengthening and reinforcing hard work. This should be done to preserve a valuable treasure for the children, when parents pass away.

Among the Basotho, a shade is generally a significant phenomenon for resting and protection against the heat of the sun. On a hot sunny day, people tend to rest in it. This is particularly true after a long hot day's work, when one may feel tired and exhausted, and therefore needs a shade to lie and rest. In the same manner, after many years of working,

one needs rest to enjoy the results of one's services. This proverb implies that people who normally do good things often do not enjoy them.

In the poem, the proverb is used to encourage people never to get tired of doing good things. It must be in their minds that one does not normally enjoy the good that one has done, but others do. If one is engaged in good work one may not enjoy it, but gain fame instead. Even after one has passed away, one's legacy will live long and his deeds will never cease to exist.

It is apparent that in the olden days, during the *Difaqane*, warriors would rest after fighting. The *Difaqane* is regarded as an upheaval that took place in the south eastern Africa in the early 1800s. It is believed to have been caused by increasing population pressures and

dwindling resources, and leading to internecine warfare among various African groups (Oaks, 1995: 535). They would normally rest during the day while the sun was hot. While resting, they would protect their king from the heat of the sun. They would build him a shade, using their weapons and blankets. The king would enjoy the coolness of the shade while the warriors lie in the hot sun. Passers-by would apparently look at this instance and utter the words *moaha moriti ha a o dule* (the creator of a shade does not sit in it). It is from this saying that this proverb is derived.

In the poem 'Kodi ya malla lebitsong la Sello Phokojwe Kobontsho (1942 – 1992)', the poet uses the proverb: *Ihlo la kgutsana ke lebone* (The eye of an orphan is a light) Phume, 1995: 67). The poem from which the above line is drawn is about the death of Kobontsho, who was

a distinguished chief among the people of Tlhakwaneng. People are paying tribute to him and promise to take care of the things he left behind. Their promise also includes looking well after orphans. The words *ihlo la kgutsana ke lebone* (an orphan's eye is a light) are uttered by mourners at Kobontsho's funeral. They want him to know that he has left his orphans in their safe and capable hands.

With this proverb, the poet encourages people to look well after orphans when their parents or guardians have passed away. He also strengthens the fact that orphans are often sensitive. A person taking care of them is expected to treat them with special care, as they are often never satisfied. The original form of this proverb is *leihlo la kgutsana ke lebone*, whose literal translation is an orphan's eye is sharp at looking things. It also shows

that orphans can easily notice when they are not treated well by their caregivers. An orphan is normally regarded to be viewing and seeing things with a different perspective from that of other people.

Another use of a proverb is evident in the poem 'Bohloko ba maikutlo', where the poet says:

Monate o utlwa ke moetsi,

Athe bohloko bo utlwa ke moetsuwa.

(Happiness is felt by the doer,

While pains are felt by the victim.)

(Phume, 1995: 2)

The poem from which the above lines are drawn is about the behaviour of an ill-mannered heart-breaker, where a heart-broken person emphasises how this behaviour affects feelings. The phrases *Monate o utlwa ke moetsi* (Happiness is felt by the doer) and *Athe bohloko bo utlwa ke moetsuwa* (While pain is felt by the victim) are uttered by an affected person, who apparently wants to highlight how he is badly affected by the negative behaviour. They are also used to remind the doer that normally, the infliction of pain is enjoyed by the inflictor while the victim is the one suffering the pain. Phume uses this idiom to discourage people's self-centred and egocentric behaviour amongst each other. He advises people to often think of the repercussions of their actions in all aspects of life.

The original form of the above proverb is *ho lebala moetsi, moetsuwa ha a lebale*, whose literal meaning is the one who is inflicting pain forgets but the one in pain does not forget. This implies that everyone must think before taking any action against another person. This goes well with the general saying that think before you leap.

The use of proverbs in Phume's poetry arouses the reader's interest in reading the poetry. The language of the poetry is enriched by the proverbs. The use of these proverbs appeals to the reader's mind to get to what the poet is actually expressing through imagination. In his use of proverbs, Phume shares words of wisdom, showing certain truths derived from human culture and experiences, with the reader.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the use of idioms and proverbs as idiomatic expressions and stylistic techniques in Phume poetry. These devices enrich the language of the poetry. They also evoke the reader to use his imagination to get to the actual meaning of the poet's expressions. They serve to challenge the reader's mental capacity on what is presented in R. N. Phume's poetry. The reader is also challenged to engage his mental skills in order to apprehend the meaning of the expressions. All this proves the success with which Phume uses idiomatic expressions as stylistic techniques in his poetry.

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