The Poetics of Laughter: Visiting Humorous Proverbs in African Literary Fiction

Youssoupha MANE
Université Assane Seck de Ziguinchor, Sénégal
Correspondance: y.m6@univ-zig.sn
Article soumis le 01/11/2022 et accepté le 12/12/2022

Abstract: This paper aims to display the way verbal humor manifests itself in African literary fiction through proverbial expressions that populate the narratives. African proverbs intervene in discourse to air a thought, sum up public opinion, clarify a point, spur a debate, or bring humor to serious matters both in the oral and written genre. Basing this study on some Global Theories of Verbal Humor (GTVH) which include the relief theory, the superiority theory, and the incongruity theory..., — corresponding as well to the different motives, explanations, and mechanisms that urge characters and readers to laugh, this work analyses humor that stems from proverbs, the way vulgar proverbs provoke laughter, and how African literary wellerism is an exhaustible source of laughter.

Keywords: proverb, laughter, Black humor, African literature, wellerism,

Résumé: L’objectif de cet article est de montrer la manière dont l’humour verbal se manifeste dans la fiction littéraire africaine à travers les expressions proverbiales qui peuplent les récits. Il va sans dire que les proverbes africains interviennent dans le discours pour exprimer une pensée, résumer une opinion publique, éclairer un point, susciter un débat ou apporter de l’humour sur des sujets sérieux tant à l’oral qu’à l’écrit. Fondant cette étude sur des Théories Globales de l’Humour Verbal (TGHV) qui englobent la théorie du soulagement, de la supériorité, de l’incongruité …, — correspondant de surcroît aux différents motifs, explications et mécanismes qui incitent les personnages et les lecteurs à rire, cette contribution analyse l’humour qui découle des proverbes, la façon dont les proverbes vulgaires provoquent le rire et comment le wellerisme littéraire africain est une source épuisable de rire.

Mots-clefs : proverbe, rire, l’humour noir, littérature africaine, wellerisme
**Introduction**

To stlaughter that laughter or the comical emanates naturally from everything that is properly human seems to be a relevant assertion inasmuch as lifeless beings and animals that are liable to arouse laughter possess nothing but human behavioral patterns or expressions that unleash laughter (Bergson, 1993:2). If jesting is witty and human beings are the sole creatures endowed with such wittiness, they are indeed the unique beings that laugh. This aspect of life appears to be central in African folk literature, especially in its proverbial literature. The wisdom of proverbs has always fostered African people in their daily social interactions for thousands of years. Although African proverbs encompass everyday experiences and common observations where drolleries are used to spring up in the didactic of the proverbial utterances, the paremiological phenomenon that deals with honor are unfortunately allocated little consideration among the myriad critics in African literature. Maik Nwosu’s *The Comic Imagination in Modern African Literature and Cinema* (2016) is dedicated to comics in the African context. Hence, the few studies devoted to proverbs have been geared toward their musicality and imagery composure. However, the African novelists who find themselves at the cross-road of orality and writing have effectively reproduced either consciously or unconsciously in their literary fiction, black populace humor that blossoms in proverbs, condiments of speech that represent a major form of collective consciousness through African communicative ideas and opinions.

In the African cultural context, the implementation of humor in the written text is somewhat exhumed directly from occasional oral genres like the nightly tales spinning sessions by a high-qualified storyteller or grandmothers where characters’ bliss and blunder are a source of laughter and children’s socialization as well. Laughing emerges also in a verbal duel in the palaver, a spot
where wording both comical and pedagogical dominate the environment. It also pops up when songs are hummed which generally disclose the communities’ merriment after flourishing harvest campaigns to alleviate the hardships of the fieldwork. Laughter also breaks through the rural folk opera or when celebrating a birth or a wedding. It is probably in this vein that (Bergson, 1993, p.24) argues that “laughter has a social function”.

In these circumstances which almost gather all the members pertaining to the same kindred or vicinity, humor hardly fails to rough itself out. Even on these multiple occasions laughing code is something that differs from one community to another. What is laughable in a given cultural area may leave another person aloof. Consequently, the comical is inextricably related to the cultural and linguistic codes that the characters share. It is necessary to be familiar with the culture’s values and restrictions to enjoy the joke. Humorous proverbial expressions in African literary fiction are more often than not found in the sexual lexicon, and in the political and religious parodies that show the ‘Global Theory of Verbal Humor’ developed by Abastado & Raskin (1991). Such a theory on verbal humor will be essential for this study in that proverbs are by essence words of mouth. Thus, the aim of this research is to demonstrate the essence of laughter about proverbs that flow in the framework of some African literary fiction.

1) Black Humour in Proverbs

The concept “Black humor” is derived from French (humour noir) and coined by the surrealist theoretician André Breton in his Anthology of Black Humour (1935). The term also known as gallows humor designates a sub-genre of comedy and satire in which laughter emanates from cynicism and skepticism. Black humor is all-pervading in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross (1982). The novel is set in a postcolonial era where foreign capitalists and their Black associates take great pleasure in taking
humanity as a mere means rather than as an end. In the middle of this conflictual situation, appears Mwaura, a character whose memory is whetted with witty proverbs, prone to rebuff vehemently the social conventions, the moral principles that uphold life in the community. Hence, he comes to the gloomy decision to live according to the laws of nature and at the same time strives to fit in his surroundings overwhelmed by gluttony and malice. Through a song duel between the *matatu* driver and the passengers, the narrator displays the ideology and the guiding principles of each other. Muturi and Wangari, the embodiment of the Kenyan lower and working-class improvise that the imperialists must pack up and go because the owner of the homestead is on his way (47). Mwaura, instead of humming a melody is satisfied with meta-proverbial ideas that go along with his conviction. Mwaura just wants to live life by following exactly the natural order of nature. With words similar to maxims that let the reader burst out laughing, he says:

As for me, there was no song I would not have sung then. Even today there is no song I wouldn’t sing. I say this world is round. If it leans that way I lean that way with it. If it stumbles, I stumble with it. If it bends I bend with it. If it stays upright, I stay upright with it. If it growls, I growl with it. If it is silent, I am silent too [...] If I find myself among the members of the Akurinu sect, I become one of them; when I am with those who have been saved, I too am saved; when I’m with Muslims, I embrace Islam; when I am among pagans, I too become pagan. (*Wa Thiong’o*, 1982, p.47)

From these lines which Mwaura has summed up in this proverbial and pragmatical expression: “Don’t be choosy, eat what is available” (*Wa Thiong’o*, 1982, p.47) as it is the first law of hyena, it seems obvious that the reader who is profoundly rooted in the communal values of morality and uprightness will be experiencing hereby both laughter and discomfort. In a society where the chameleon’s double standards attitude is rebuked,
hypocrisy wrapped up in a lugubrious loincloth of greed, becomes straightforward a taboo, a vice to be set aside. The Black humor that this proverb contains springs from the seriousness of the tone and its inward perversity and lewdness. In this way, it can be noted that in Black humor, the denial of reality, the grandiose affirmation of the pleasure principle is the mortal enemy of sensibility and sentimentality. It is an obscene and risible proverb that offends morality and all of ethics. The character of the proverb, hyena, in many African oral traditions, is labeled as worthless, impudent non-intelligent, and ugly. Consequently, it becomes an anti-social character like Mwaura who is not ugly outwardly but inwardly and does not fully grasp it: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines his being, but, on the contrary, his social being that determines his consciousness” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993,p.70). This quotation unfolds an intellectual contrast or a palpable absurdity and the moral deformity which generally generates laughter.

Beside the contrast that creates laughter in this proverb, there is also the mechanism of degradation, a process of laughter that expresses honestly a dishonest idea, before turning into a shocking situation. This covetous man like many others in the novel violated proverbially the principles of shamefulness and dignity which Muturi and Wangari regarded as sacred. Mwaura is an affront to justice and fair play, always ready to flout any norm or custom with impunity and impurity. He bents on proving that not only can evil triumph over good but that it can stay triumphant as long as possible, and the debauched need not pay his debauchery. It is what the theoretician of humor Thomas Veatch (1998) branded as the Benign Violation Theory, a model developed later by Peter McGraw & Caleb Warren (2010) claiming that laughter occurs when something is violated like morals, social codes, linguistic norms, or personal dignity and suggests that anything
that threatens the characters’ sense of how the world “ought to be” will always set off laughter.

When Mwireri wa Mukirai, the passenger who is heading toward Ilmorog to take part in the competition of modern theft and robbery, he tries out and succeeds in convincing the rest of the travelers. It is about the significance of the occurrence which has been the propping force of the Western power. Enlivened by greed, Mukiraai slyly assimilates democracy with the western political philosophy of liberalism, putting in circulation this following proverb.

“He who is able to grab should be allowed to grab. You allow me to grab, and I allow you to grab. You grab and I grab.” (Wa Thiong'o, 1982, p. 80). Even though part of the humor that comes out from this proverb springs from the violation of morality veiled under an impudence that eggs on the individuals to reap where they have not sowed, the other part of the risibility seems to emerge from the repetition of the verb “to grab” which runs in connection with the figure of speech named chiasmus whose function is not solely to bring out the musicality of the proverbs but also to highlight their funny aspect. In the first proverbial sentence, there are two repetitive verbs at the same time expressing two oppositional feelings. The first feeling aims at spreading the philosophy of greed and corruption, and the second one is somewhat a victim of compression.

Still in Devil on the Cross, when the competition of modern theft and robbery is held in a cave by foreign capitalists and their watchdogs, Black humorous proverbs in all their forms predominate the entire atmosphere. When it is the turn of Gitutu wa Gataanguru to recount his mileage from rags to gold, he first begins with the proverbial expression that hides nothing but dark comedy: “our saying is true: the young of a goat steals like its
mother (Wa Thiong’o, 1982, p.101) to hint ostensibly that he has inherited the profession from his father who worked in the High Court of Nairobi and never dithered to suck the blood of his people. Here the risible is captured directly from mimicry, one of the most prominent methods liable to provoke laughter by copying the behaviors or gestures as is the case between Mother-goat and its offspring. Consequently, in this “Monkey see, monkey do” proverbial expression “mimicry influences social behavior and judgment” (Gueguen & al, 2009, p.256) and can be explained by the longing, as it is alluded to the trivializing proverb, to create affiliation and connection. Alongside the imitation as a source of humor, the somber, depraved facet of the proverb resides in the art of parsimony the two characters’ share. They are trained by foreign capitalists to ignore the beautiful faces of their children, of their parents, of their brothers and sisters, and to look solely at the splendid face of money by all necessary means. In so doing, they will never go wrong. It’s a proverb that seeks to take slightly or even delegalize the horrible crime of theft by the longing to take it as something normal within a society that despises briskly this misdemeanor.

When Gitutu is tracing back his career as a businessman whose salary could not get around the needs of his large family, he evokes before the audience the proverbial councils of a twisted father in these terms: “on a journey nobody carries food for anyone else, each traveler carries his own. (Wa Thiong’o, 1982, p.102). Once again Gitutu has not failed to follow fatherly injunctions.

The distressing tone that oozes from this proverbial utterance is undoubtedly the struggle against the total extinguishment of the value of solidarity, a morality and a pillar upon which African societies have built themselves. Solidarity has hallowed out the wells of knowledge, languages, tools, and values which ensure and
guarantees the continuity of civilization. It is this humanity that Gitutu and his begetter strive to tidy up in the dustbin, showcasing the undesirable ideology of individualism and cunning which they think are more profitable than toiling away. And the laughable aspect of this piece of proverb stems from a tautology, a statement that uses different words to say the same thing twice.

In other words, there is, here something like a void in the figure of speech that unveils the idea of uttering many words to say nothing— treading several miles to go nowhere inadvertently. Accordingly, laughter, in this particular context is a “mark of an effort that immediately encounters the void” (Bergson, 1993, p.65).

Among the numerous and gruesome proverbial expressions that overwhelm African literary fiction, the following one appears: ‘if a man grows older, he eats veal’. This saying extracted from Devil on the Cross can also be found in Wizard of the Crow and is mentioned several times. The main observation that may graze the reader’s mind is that the proverb is uttered by some inconvenient and whimsical male characters who take great pleasure in outraging sexually innocent young women — using as bait their devilish power of money. In this way, the Ruler and Boss Kihara, the Rich Old Man from Ngoriko, and the competitors in Devil on the Cross are never ashamed to sleep with schoolgirls, shattering the latter’s prospect and project. The male chauvinism that this proverb encloses, symbolizes immorality and inhumanity. The laughing ability or the comical effect of this proverb may be explained by the fact that the word encompasses a literal and a figurative or metaphorical meaning. The proverb is laughable because the listener does not take the word ‘veal’ in the proper way — the term is a victim of a semantic slide or is employed metaphorically. At whatever time the reader or the listener deeply pays attention to the figurative representation of the word “veal” which means
the youth and the coolness of young women’s skin, the expressed idea becomes risible. Hence, language is probably the dominant medium of humorous expression, notwithstanding the linguistic game of wit through the use of metaphor as a wonderfully versatile conceptual tool “which can do more than provide cognitive insights in the work of humor via a level of conceptualization” (Veale, 2003, p.16).

It can be argued that in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross where the narrator engages his characters in proverbs as a form or type of linguistic tool, the great majority of proverbs used by the characters epitomize the Black humor, except those uttered by the benevolent characters who have done their utmost to redress verbally and physically the social, political, and economic depreciation which keep on grimming African peoples. Devil on the Cross is par excellence the African novel that can be labeled as the garret of Black humorous proverbs or funny violation proverbs.

2) Humour in Vulgar Proverbs

In African oral literature as well as in written one, proverbs bring to mind off-color jokes and offensive epithets without losing their artistic quality woven in literary fiction. In The Crippled Dancer (1986) by the Nigerian novelist, T. Obinkaram Echewa has resorted to rude proverbial remarks that refer to sex and other bodily functions. When the boys in the village come to the decision to organize a masquerade dance band and go around from compound to compound dancing for people and receiving money as premiums, the rowdy and boisterous Radio, the strongest among the boys proclaims himself the managing director and the treasurer of the occasion.

At the end of the performance, Radio, after having taken the lion’s share announced to the rest of the members that his pockets had a hole and the money had fallen out. Despite his hypocritical
Youssoupha MANE, *The Poetics of Laughter: Visiting Humorous Proverbs in African Literary Fiction*

... apologies, he does not allow anyone to frisk him and check out. But Ajuzia the protagonist can not bear such treachery and reports it to his grandmother, breaking into a passion of tears. To console his grandson, the wisecracking old woman through this following narrative proverb applies herself to repress the wrongdoer’s misdemeanor:

> There is a saying that the poor man eats his crusty overnight fufu and his soup has no fish, and the rich man’s soup is full of meat and fish. However, when they both go to the latrine, the rich man’s shit does not smell any better than the poor man’s. (Echewa, 1986, p.10)

It is obvious that any person with access to this hilarious and long proverb based on human attributes will inevitably giggle because of its increasing vulgarity and abusive words. However, this does not imply that all vulgar words are generating laughter. The other source of the amusing effect is the nature of an expectation that stumbles on an emptiness. Whatever endeavor Radio may provide to swindle his fellow boys, no matter how enriched with vitamins the food he may buy with the ripped-off money, his excrement will be as fetid as the others’. And there will be no pecking order in terms of stink. In addition, in this humorous proverb, the hilarity and laughter are reactions the individuals like the grandmother produce to release aggressive tension, and at the same time, the protagonist’s grandmother turns to a proverb that contains insults or vulgarities to liberate herself and Ajuzia to say the truth. In this regard, Robert Sutherland Rattray states: “Africans have discovered for themselves the truth of the psychoanalysts’ theory of ‘repressions’ (1969, p.9). If anger makes human beings look little, the one related to putting forward vulgar and risible proverbs required a necessary presence of wit. Such verbal aggression is epitomized in the very use of vulgar and hilarious words.
Arrow of God is a novel described by some critics as the dictionary of Igbo proverbial sayings that concretizes the African psycho-cultural crisis (Nwadike, 1989, p.36). It is deeply entrenched in the African proverbial folio by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. The latter “has carved out a niche for himself as an African Proverbialist” (Aguoru, 2012, p.1) — a novel regarded as crumbs of humorous popular wisdom which stormed in his narrative framework. During the performance of the funeral ceremony of Ogbuefi Amalu, a well-revered man of titles, Obika, Ezeulu’s son is asked by his friend Eneto to carry the mask of the spirit of the night, the ogbazulobodo to assure the transition of the deceased to the land of the benevolent ancestors. From the ritual, emerged a profusion of proverbs on behalf of the spirit which is certainly an embodiment of wisdom. Among the proverbs voiced by Obika, the one that encompasses humor through the naming of vulgarities, there is the following: “He who will swallow udala seeds must consider the size of his anus” (Achebe, 1984, p.226). This risible proverb like the one mentioned in The Crippled Dancer pawns itself to berate the bold and proud attitude of Ezeulu to whom, the proverb alludes as it unveils the idea that the priest has not weighed up the dramatic consequences of his vengeful action which consists in postponing the harvest of the new yams.

This heavy responsibility is represented here by the vegetal image of “udala”, a seed big enough to cause danger to whoever swallows it. Unfortunately, the priest of Ulu crossed the line. The drawback of such a situation is the death of his beloved son which pushed him to the threshold of madness. The humor emerging from the proverb is obviously due to this coarse lexicon “anus”. Vulgar proverbs make the hearer or the reader laugh at whatever time the latter is taken by surprise, that is to say when the receiver is not expecting that the editor will resort to proverbs that embody such rough vocabularies. Sometimes, people usually burst out
laughing when a proverb that contains vulgarities is uttered by a virtuous person. In such a situation, the amusing effects of the proverbs is produced both by the very nature of the term and by the unforeseeable occurrence which is an incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens.

On the basis of the analysis of the above two risible proverbs, it is safe to hold that all of the characters that fell back upon these kinds of proverbs are more often than not in an unfavorable, powerless, and oppressive situation. Consequently, emitting coarse and hilarious proverbs is somewhat an effective and efficient means for the wretched, and the lower class to take the great weight off their minds of domination and suffering, so that they can survive. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o in the introduction of Hama Tuma’s *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and other stories* (1993), had put it in terse and pithy words: “one of the greatest weapons of survival is humor.” (1993, p.2). Such survival thanks to laughter also appears in the course of Soviet Union history wherein between 1929-1932, when famine roamed the countryside and the embittered peasantry rose up against the government’s carelessness and callousness. To secure his reign against the rebellious masses that resorted to satirical jokes about the Party, Stalin ordered all potential threats to be treated with the utmost severity including joker-tellers under the infamous article 58 of the Stalinist criminal code for involvement in anti-Soviet conversations. (Lauchlan, 2009, p.10). Likewise in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), satirical laughter is used both by the narrator and the kind-hearted characters to fight against and survive the tyranny of the Ruler and his puppet-like ministers.
3) Wellerism in African Literary Fiction

Wellerism is a paremiological parlance that can also be regarded as being part and parcel of The Global Theory of Verbal Humour insofar as it tends to be based on laughter thanks to the characters or the narrator’s oral literary artifacts that depart from the acceptance of a general proverbial truth. It is also a cynical way like in the Black humor that scoffs morality but a witty and intelligent game of mind essentially based on sentence adjunction or omission and the verbal substitution of old words by new ones so that the reader or the hearer cannot help laughing about the witticism. Actually, the etymology of the concept of Wellerism took its name from Charles Dicken’s main protagonist, Samuel Weller in the Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club. Wellerism unquestionably reveals the humor this phenomenon confines. In this way, Mieder (2004) in his Proverbs: A Handbook pinpoints:

It should be noted at this place that there exists a folk tradition of adding humorous comments to proverbs and proverbial expressions in a typically triadic structural pattern, as for example in “Everyone to his own state” as the farmer said, when he kissed the cow” or “Like will to like’ as the devil said to the collier.” Normally these sayings consist of three parts: a statement (quite often a proverb, proverbial expression, quotation, exclamation, exclamation, etc.), a speaker who makes the remarks, and a phrase or a clause that places the utterance in a new light or an incompatible setting. Charles Dickens made much use of these traditional structures and he placed many of them in the mouth of his character Samuel Weller in the Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club. In fact, scholars to name these unique sayings ‘wellerisms’ in direct association with Sam Weller’s frequent use of them. After Dickens have popularized such humorous, ironic and satirical sayings as elements of literary works, there follows a wave of imitations both in Great Britain and in the United States. The wellerisms in the novel give Charles Dickens as social critic an opportunity to make ironic, detached, and entertaining comments on sociopolitical issues and conflicts of the day. (Mieder, p.190)
Unlike a proverb, Wellerism is hardly ever an impersonal entity but a recognizable one that an individual can create and leave in the arcane of history thanks to his/her ingenuity. In Gorgui Dieng’s (2002) *Leap out of the dark*, an African novel jam-packed with Wolof metaphors and proverbial expressions that sustain and enrich the arguments of the narrator and the characters. In the course of the Senegalese novel, the protagonist Moodu randomly attended a dramatic episode in which an unfortunate robber is undergoing physical atrocities for snatching 500 CFA from a young woman. To prevent the raging crowd from torturing the thief and to remind them that the dignity of a human being is sacred and priceless, he awkwardly put forward the anecdote of the wealthy Englishman who gave all his heritage to a cat-protection fund so that his kin did not get any farthing when he passed away. In so saying, Moodu expected to touch the throng’s deep feelings, but he failed. One of the members of the crowd who loathed vehemently the rich man’s mindset, poured filth on it in this proverbial expression: “A mad man’s ship never accosts a harbor.” (Dieng, 2002, p.22). Another unknown character adds entertainingly this proverbial comment to point out a finger to the English gentleman’s attitude and also to consider wittily the proverbial wisdom: “on second thought one among the mob added: “it does man” but never to the harbor profitable to his kin…” (Dieng, 2002, p.22). Hence, the other amusing effects of wellerism can be searched in the words of wits and in the deviation of some rules or a general acceptance of things, as everything that is subversive from an established order is a source of laughter.

Also, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*, the use of wellerisms is also noticed in the narrative frameworks. When Machokali welcomes foreign dignitaries for dinner in the Paradise
one of the biggest hotels, the surrounding of the area is swarmed with journalists and beggars who heard from rumor mongers that visiting members of the Global Bank have brought with them money to give out to the underprivileged. But among the myriad beggars, there were also the infiltrated supporters of the Movement for the Voice of the People who go beyond the mere art of begging by humming revolutionary songs: “Marching to Heaven Is Marching to Hell. Your Strings of Loans Are Chains of Slavery. Your Loans Are the Cause of Begging. We beggar Beg the End of Begging. The March to Heaven Is Led by Dangerous Snakes. (Wa Thiong’o, 2006, p.74). Here, the police did not react until the mention of the word “snakes” which immediately cast the memory of state representatives back to the spoilage of the anniversary of the Ruler by fake snakes. And as soon as the M5 informed Sikiokuu, the home minister about the happening, the latter does not dither to mandate the policemen to scatter violently the threatening and portentous beggars. Here the narrator comes up with a wellerism. The wretched who gather at the same spot to do their begging are represented by this proverbial expression: “birds of the same features flock together”. (Wa Thiong’o, 2006, p.75). But to show that such a proverb has its limits in terms of veracity and the context that predominates, the narrator has artfully and astutely included a comment: “in time of peace, when there is danger each flies alone”. (Wa Thiong’o, 2006, p.75). Such wellerism like many others has brought about laughter in that the feigned blind beggars had recovered their sight, and the legless and the armless gained their limbs and hands as they left the gates of Paradise.

Even though proverbs are sometimes defined as words of wit, wellerisms outstrip them in terms of witticism in that real proverbs
are informative and useful linguistic signs of cultural values and thought that require the use of a sense of observation of nature which is tagged by the configuration of the proverb and it is immediately used by the entire community. Hence, its fixity and the non-authorship of the inventor can no longer be an identifiable person who can be searched in the arcane of history for the unique and solemn power of the community. Thus, wellerism is a field in which the verbal art of the speaker encounters some restrictions for the perfect blooming of verbal creativity as he/she always feels free to handle the proverb which does not fit the situation he/she wants to epitomize, and consequently the use of witticism is very rife in wellerisms than in pure proverbs.

In Wizard of the Crow, a powerfully funny novel, wellerism is used to criticize greed and corruption, a prevailing socio-political situation in the Imaginary Aburirian Republic. When Kaniuru makes up his mind to go to the shrine of the Wizard of the Crow, his sole aspiration is to find some magic potions to protect the embezzled money and to set aside all his enemies driven by envy so he might recover his peace of mind and enjoy in total discretion his money. Kaniuru, the covetous man tells Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow, that he is mindful of the danger of eating alone, and utters the wellerism: “there is a saying that he who eats alone dies alone, but there are some delicacies that a person should eat alone even at the risk of dying alone. (Wa Thiong’o, 2006, p.356). Readers of Ngugi’s fiction know and fathom the matrix of the proverb which is summed up as: “He who eats alone dies alone”. But Kaniuru has ingeniously and laughably used his verbal skill to redirect the proverb whose preliminary norms and injunctions are the appeal to the virtue of solidarity. He cynically tries to find a limitation to the original proverb which is signaled by the restrictive preposition
‘but’. From this demonstration, wellerisms contain the necessary witticisms, and all witticisms are par excellence laughable.

**Conclusion**

The study of laughter in the African proverbial expressions found in the literary texts has been overlooked, and thus, unobserved by many African critics. Maybe, laughter, a phenomenon proper to human beings is for them something trivial and trite so that it does not deserve full attention. Of course, it is commonplace as humans can burst out laughing without being able to explain in plausible terms their hilarities. Consequently, the risibility of the proverbial expression is just trivial in the amusing effects, but not in theory. In the African literary proverbs, laughter is displayed in humor that sends offense to morality, in a vulgar lexicon in which the release of psychological burden, anger, and oppression is noticed among the characters who are victims of a disintegrated personality, especially in African wellerisms where words of wit constitute the fountain of laughter. African proverbs are a mirror through which a community can look at itself and reveal itself to others. Proverbs highlight the values, aspirations, behavior of people, and the angle from which they see and appreciate laughter.

**References**


Youssoupha MANE, The Poetics of Laughter: Visiting Humorous Proverbs in African Literary Fiction


