Idioms And Proverbs: A Philosophical Standoff

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It is to be acknowledged that the domains of idioms and proverbs in English are somewhat overlapping. There could be reasons as to why the demarcation between the two is so slender that sometimes it ends up in confusion. Idioms and proverbs have some identical qualities as they both emanate from the experiences of everyday life. They do not usually originate from mere imagination without real-life underpinnings. We find in them the individual as well as collective experience of a people fossilized in particular syntactic patterns left to grow in currency. Both idioms and proverbs have an anonymous nature—barring quotations from individuals that are sometimes treated as proverbs. They, I believe, like colloquialism, local speech form, rustic speech, and dialect forms may be treated as part of the "subaltern usage" (Hasnain 196) as against the standard language. They developed by oral tradition as it was centuries before man thought the "Experience untranscribed was experience unlived" (Keefe 128). Often they are metaphorically rich with unusual images as the use of metaphors in them aims not only to adorn the discourse with a poetic charm but also "to make the meaning simple and immediate" (Hannabuss 51). Besides this poetic flavor with figuration and even rhyming they sometimes exude a dark humor (Idioms e.g. *Fall between two stools, Jump out of one's skin, Pot calling kettle black* and Proverbs e.g. *Ignorance is bliss, Never insult an alligator until after you have crossed the river, The believer is happy; the doubter is wise*) that serves as a sugar coat over the bitter pill of human predicament. Both these modes of expression recognize the challenges and poignancies of life and posses different attitudes toward the same. This attitudinal discrepancy that forms the basis of the philosophical standoff between the two is the focus of this paper.

With due respect to the post-modern conviction to overcome any form of binarism and stereotyping this paper tries to study some of the fundamental differences between idioms and proverbs in an effort to interpret one with the aid of the other. I hope this brief comparison of these two linguistic elements will help us only to recognize the perceived negativism of the former as against the positivism of the latter. Defining idioms, The *Longman Idioms Dictionary* says:

An idiom is a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understood each word separately. Idioms add colour to the language, helping us to emphasise meaning and to make out observations, judgments and explanations lively and interesting. They are also very useful for communicating a great deal of meaning in just a few words" (vii-viii).

And the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* reads: "A proverb is a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner… We would normally expect a proverb to be cast in the form of a sentence" (ix).

Idioms versus Proverbs:

(i) To enumerate the differences between idioms and proverbs we can start with the view that *idioms are simply representational and non-ethical as against proverbs that are didactical and ethical*. Idioms represent someone's experience or emotion in a given situation. They do it as such, which may suggest their attitude to life, but deliver no message or advice to anyone. They describe a problem with its intensity without trying to offer any solution. They articulate a perceived Existential *Angst* or "existential understanding [that] is essentially private" (Pribram 1980). By doing so, they represent the absurdity of a human situation without any ethical posturing. Expression of emotions probably helps the communicator rather than the communicated by offering a vent. Perhaps we can fruitfully interpret the role of idioms in the light of Camus' observation on the absurdity of life and the role of art in that: **"For the absurd man it is not a matter of explaining and solving but of experiencing and describing… Explanation is useless and sensation remains… The place of work of art can be understood at this point" (87).** For instance, the following idioms also explain the absurdity of life simply by presenting a predicamental situation each.

1. *A fish out of water*

2. *A wet blanket*

3. *A wild goose chase*

4. *Back to square one*

5. *Into the fire from the frying pan*

But, proverbs while acknowledging the darker side of human life attempt to *show a way out through their message*—thanks to their access to the collective wisdom of the past. They have an authoritative and judgmental tone marked by a *moral dimension*. They always tell us, either explicitly or implicitly, the *Dos* and *Don'ts*; the *right* and the *wrong*. They own an apparent religiosity in ordering people on how to live; assume a prophetic authority to forewarn them of apocalypse if they go wrong; and, play the arbiter to applaud or denounce them for their actions. However, in doing so, they even suggest raw survival tactics that at times may apparently contravene their general ethical tenor.

1. *All's fair in love and war.*

2. *As you sow so you reap.*

3. *Do in Rome as Romans do.*

4. *Time and tide waits for none.*

5. *Punishment is lame, but it comes.*

(ii) *Idioms perceive life as a collage of experiences* and present each human situation like a tableau. Such experiences are encountered by the individuals concerned who simply express them without trying to fix them into a rational scheme. Probably one major difference between idioms and proverbs is that the former respond to life's challenges with emotion and the latter with reason. Idioms, as perceived, reflect the individual's feeling of "not-being-at-home" (Heidegger 233) in the world that forms the core of the Existential *Angst* / anxiety. They, through describing predicamental situations of one sort or other, convey the absurdity of life, alongside the unrest, pain, and pessimism on the part of the individuals in strife.

Proverbs on the other hand arguably perceive life as a geometrical pattern such as a square or a triangle with closed ends and cognizable finesse. As they approach *bios* (life) through *logos* (reason) they tend to define human experience in terms of arithmetical equations or algebraic postulates such as $2 + 2 = 4$ or $a + (b + c) = (a + b) + c$. That perhaps is the idea behind their assertions such as: *As you sow so you reap; Tell me your friend and I tell who you are*; and *Love begets love*. It is such rationalizing that possibly graduates into a comforting illusion, of an Apollonian kind, that helps us to convince ourselves that the tragic hero courts catastrophe only through a wrongful act stemming from his own 'tragic flaw': a punishable deviance from the agreed ethical ordering. As proverbs respond to life's challenges with the help of reason they are mute in the face of life's ironies in which 'one sows one thing and reaps another' or 'love begets hate; ingratitude; betrayal; or, anything but love.' Thus, when idioms accommodate life's mystery, irrationality, unpredictability, and absurdity just by describing real-life experiences without endeavoring to fit them into a cause-and-effect framework, proverbs at large uphold reason and free-will, and view life mainly from the logical plane.

(iii) Idioms, at large, appear to be devoid of positive sentiments and ideas such as faith, hope, and God that are associated with the realm of transcendence. They are more *Existentialist and Absurdist* than anything else in conveying the Existentialist "anxiety, boredom, and nausea" (Macquarrie 18) through negative feelings such as fear, anger, hate, disgust, and the like as experienced by humans in their attempt to find meaning in the world that is meaningless and indifferent (163). They employ metaphors and symbols laced with hyperbolic strokes of depiction and suggestiveness, as they endeavor to express not just a trivial kind of disappointment over something but beyond—arguably the Existential "*Angst"* or "dread." It may help in this context to recall Patka's definition of the "dread" in *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought* as follows:

Dread is not a fear of definite object or event. Dread is fear of something indefinite and indefinable, not related to any concrete object or event…In dread man hovers dizzily over the bottomless emptiness of nothing…Man becomes "homeless" (*unheimlich*). We dread being-in-the-world itself…. (104)

The following idioms, with their themes given in brackets, articulate the Existential anxiety undergone by individuals as they clash with their hostile environment:

1. *Cat and dog life (disharmony)*
2. *Damocles' sword (danger)*
3. *Left with the baby (helplessness)*
4. *Slip between the cup and the lip (possible failure)*
5. *Wild goose chase (futility)*

However, *this absurdist and atheistic-existentialist trait of idioms is juxtaposed by the utilitarian and pragmatist slant manifest in proverbs that very well accommodate faith*. Probably it is on the similar lines of Bentham's principle of attaining "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (*Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy* 50). By reconciling reason with faith and hope proverbs in a way uphold a *recta ratio* or "the right reason". While acknowledging the darker aspects of life proverbs also suggest a hope which is similar to the "leap of faith" (Raynolds 4) attributed to Kierkegaard. Though disapproved by Camus as "philosophical suicide" (43) it helps humans—arguably in the greatest number called the 'society' besides individuals—

to overcome or cope with the 'darkness' of life. The following proverbs illustrate the faith that they promulgate:

1. God helps those who help themselves.
2. God is great.
3. God stays long but strikes at last.
4. God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.
5. God's mill grinds slow but sure.

(iv) As metaphorical phrases idioms are non-sentential, grammatically incomplete and suggestively poetic. Their syntactic non-compliance with tradition in conveying an unpleasant feeling possibly depicts the "human revolt" (Camus 29) in the face of the absurd. Idioms are not only non-sentential but also open ended and fluid as an idiom can be appropriated in any sentence which provides a contextual compatibility. This unusual form, in addition to its depiction of suffering and sentimentality with no operational provision for reason, hope, faith, or God can be very loosely termed *feminist*. The primacy that idioms accord on emotion over reason—just as many women novelists including Virginia Woolf did—alongside their unconventional structure, their defiance against established order and convention, and a frequent dark humor contribute to their feminist semblance. Particularly their tendencies to defy order and to evoke laughter [through dark humor] make them strike a parallel with the "laugh"—of Medhusa which is made into a feminist metaphor by Helen Cixous—with its potential "to redeem woman, to liberate her from her degraded status in the history of male mythology" (Habib 703).

But proverbs are grammatically complete sentences and they are closed rather than open ended. Committed to helping humans in the larger context of community-living through infusing in individuals the ethos of obeying law and adhering to tradition, proverbs comply with the grammatical rules themselves. They mostly respect rule—be it grammatical or ethical. They with their closed, linear and conventional grammatical structure; their depiction of the tricky side of human life and the way to counter it; alongside an operational provision for reason, faith, hope and God seem masculine—even in an anachronistically traditional sense. Their thrust on reason rather than emotion, their reflective symmetry and the profundity of professed worldly wisdom with a penchant to show us the way for a life of orderliness, prosperity, and happiness as prescribed in their relatively traditional structure make us associate them with philosophy—the guiding light of the Platonic "guardians". However, proverbs with their claims of "enduring wisdom", "popular wisdom", and "collective wisdom" (Ridout 8-9) in addition to their status as "universal truths" (Speake x) are often explicitly patriarchal and cynically uncharitable to women. Proverbs consider women as "mischief creators, treacherous and wicked… [and also] irrational, willful and stubborn..." (Sharma 37) who need to be constantly oppressed for the common good.

1. A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be.
2. A woman and a ship ever want mending.
3. A woman's place is in the home.
4. Women are necessary evils.
5. A secret is something a woman tells everybody not to tell anybody.

The gender chauvinism in the English proverbs and their hostile attitude toward women, to an extent, may be ascribed to the Bible, especially the Book of Proverbs, that is replete with phrases such as "strange woman" (Pro 2:16), "evil woman" (6:24),"whorish woman" (6:26), "foolish woman" (9:13), "brawling woman" (21:9, 25:24), "angry woman" (21:19), "contentious woman" (27:15), "adulterous woman" (30:20), and "odious woman" (30:23) in addition to the general description of woman as "the weaker vessel" (1Pe3:7) which includes even the "virtuous woman" (Pro 12:4).

(v) Described as "anomalies of language, [and] mavericks of the linguistic world" (Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins 6), idioms with their unconventional (non-sentential) structure and the theme of existential *Angst* seem to represent the revolting individual; the one who is probably caught in the Paul Weissian "four-fold bond" i.e. every individual is in conflict with their own body, past, environment, and society (qtd. in Titus 103-4). It is presumable that it becomes a five-fold bond in the case of women and more with those from the marginal groups. These idioms, as perceived, echo the "phenomenological experiences and moods" (Reynolds 2) through which the Heideggerian *Dasien*—the "Self" (Heidegger 150) of the individual expresses itself. The Self's "facticity" (82) or the state of "thownness" (174) which means "thrown into existence" (321) alongside its inevitable collision with the environment can be traced in idioms. As grammar has profound sociological implications with its innate regard for rules, conventions and the past besides the dogmatic insistence on the same, the breach of grammatical rules by idioms is to be seen as the individuals' strife against the society in which they find themselves caged.

But proverbs, with their regard for tradition, through a grammatically complete structure and the messages encapsulated in them seem to represent orderliness and aspirations toward the common good. Society, and the elders who are considered to be its custodians, seem to share the Hobbesian "diffidence" (Leviathan 69) which is deemed inescapable. They are obviously of the view that men, prompted by an inherent urge for 'preservation of his own Nature" (72) are vying with one another for the same things. A society survives if only there is such machinery to exert control over them and shape their thinking toward compliance of its imperatives. Proverbs with their message for mankind do their best to instill, retain, and perpetuate orderliness in societies and hence they represent the society in general and a mature mindset in particular as against the young individuals who are considered impetuous and belligerent.

(vi) In tune with these observations we can also add that idioms have a horizontal and sideward trajectory as they are conveyed by one individual to another. They are in the form of sharing; the listener cannot understand an idiom without knowing what it means and how being in the situation feels like. This sociological aspect of idioms—leave alone the psychological— testifies to Bakhtin's assertion in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* that "verbal discourse is a social phenomenon" (259). An idiom appeals to the listener by heightening the core meaning with the help of images, symbols, music and sometimes a wry humor as well.

Even if proverbs also are equally sociological as idioms they are still different as they have a vertical and downward trajectory. They at large are presumed to be handed down by one generation to the other; or, by the elder to the younger. Proverbs are handed down by the generations passing by to those forthcoming not simply for sharing one's suffering but also the wisdom and hope that show the way out. One may find a religious touch in them as they impart

judgment that is often associated with the Divine. The "Proverbs" that we find in the Bible belongs to such category and it can be regarded as one of the specimens available for proverbs. They are generally attributed to King Solomon who was known as "the wise". Perhaps owing to their association with religion and scriptures, proverbs exude an authority that hinges on the wisdom similar to that of the sacred texts. Meanings of proverbs are also the messages for us that could be deciphered in terms of dogmatic essentials. The articulated or implied advice that we find in several proverbs sounds after the fashion of the "Ten commandments" with their *Do's* and *Don'ts*. Despite their negative outset we find that mostly proverbs play a positive role by showing us the way for a happy life.

(vii) Idioms are essentially centered on the present. They do not seem to make direct reference to the past or future. Even if the past can be arguably traced in them, no such pointer toward the future can be found. Idioms such as between *the devil and the deep sea, a fish out of water, keep the wolf away from the door*, *hang in the balance, walk the tight rope* and the like which simply project the darker side of life seem to correlate—even in a roundabout way—with the "myths of the eternal return" (Cf. Eliade): the cycle of births, rebirths, creations, destructions, and re-creations. Suffering as the defining element of human life profusely repeats itself in idioms on a circular mode. With the absence of hope and faith the possible reference to future is missing in idioms. The sufferer behind every negative idiom seems submerged in his / her own suffering of one kind or other and reflects an inability to transcend the present. Such is the hopelessness and pessimism they convey.

On the other hand, proverbs with their ways to overcome the negative side of life and to move toward the positive have a focus on future. This is analogous to Buber's idea of "turning to the future" (96) which forms the fulcrum of the Judaic-Christian tradition. The Christian ethos negates the mythological mindset based on the myth of the eternal returns just mentioned and upholds the conviction to travel on a linear direction toward future. Proverbs also share this scheme of thought and pointedness toward the future through their characteristic didacticism. Their view of time, as I perceive, is similar to the Western idea of time as "rectilineal rather than cyclical" (Conkin 4). But the destination or redemption that proverbs depict is more in terms of worldly success than spiritual fulfillment. Proverbs promote the belief that human suffering can be precluded, mitigated, or overcome by prudence. To impart such good sense and thereby to equip one to learn from the past, live the present, and face the future is the purpose of the proverbial wisdom.

(viii) Probably idioms serve a psychological purpose as they express the sufferer's unease. By venting the same they provide a cathartic effect on the part of the subject. If reckoned as an art form by their imagery, music, and humor sometimes, they may carry the stamp of *art for my sake.* Permeated with the human *Angst* and pessimism they may relate themselves with existentialism and absurdism.

Whereas, social good as well as individual happiness forms the goal of proverbs and a practical prudence is the means to achieve it. This aspect makes them intensely sociological but especially pragmatist and utilitarian rather than existential. Proverbs, if considered as an art form on the same criteria as mentioned above, may uphold the dictum of *art for life's sake.* Rooted in worldly wisdom and the conviction to serve the common man as a success-guide, proverbs

apparently contain the seeds of (economic) materialism, pragmatism, empiricism and even ethical relativism.

While arguing that proverbs are generally positive we cannot ignore those that sound negative. The proverbs that are given below reflect the futility of human endeavor and the inevitability of suffering and defeat—at one point or other. Though it is hard to consider them positive none can deny that they too offer a clue to happiness in life. They insist that many more things than our own plans and perseverance are at work in shaping our lives. They summon us to acknowledge that reality—as it will help us to take life as it comes to us—and keep moving by doing our best. Perhaps the positivism of proverbs lies in effectively reconciling reason and faith in a manner to guide humans to a content life.

Negative Proverbs:
1. Call no man happy till he is dead.
2. Man proposes. God disposes.
3. Only a fool tries to disperse a fog with a fan.
4. Suffering is the badge of humanity.
5. Without luck ability is nothing.

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