

Achebe's regenerative vision of a broad and egalitarian society in the novel "Anthills of the Savannah"

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe uses his interpretation of African history in the novel "Anthills of the Savannah" to reinvent Africa and restore his country's lost honor. Africans envision a new, enlightened homeland where their perverted natural values and civilization will once again flourish, following their independence in 1960. Nevertheless, the indigenous leaders are unable to reinstate the nation's honor. In this way, this paper explores Achebe's regenerative vision of a broad and egalitarian society where the marginalized people find their space and time to have their say, and it also paints a true picture of the post-colonial African predicament marked by disillusionment and frustration.

Key words: *The post-colonial African predicament*

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe uses his interpretation of African history in the novel "Anthills of the Savannah" to reinvent Africa and restore his country's lost honor. Africans envision a new, enlightened homeland where their perverted natural values and civilization will once again flourish, following their independence in 1960. Nevertheless, the indigenous leaders are unable to reinstate the nation's honor. Rather than mending the psychological injury, they imitate the colonizer undermining the afflicted people's hope. An array of neo-colonial problems that have beset Africa since independence are depicted by Achebe in order to give structure to such a warped African history. In this way, the novel explores Achebe's regenerative vision of a broad and egalitarian society where the marginalized people find their space and time to have their say, and it also paints a true picture of the post-colonial African predicament marked by disillusionment and frustration.

The story takes place in the 1980s in the imaginary African state of Kangan, and it revolves around four well-educated Western friends: Sam Okoli, Ikem Osodi, Christopher Oriko, and Beatrice Okoh. These friends hold the key to Kangan's destiny. The people welcome Sam's military dictatorship as an alternative to the corrupt politicians and educated elite who believe that Sam, as the leader of the coup, can end the current crisis. However, it appears that his administration is only a copy of the colonial one. The only obvious shift is that the indigenous leaders now act like colonial masters, taking advantage of the masses and using domestication as an excuse for their actions: "They have the animal capacity to endure the pain of, shall we say, domestication." The exact remarks that the white master had spoken about the black race in general throughout his period. We now speak of the impoverished (40). In the book, Achebe focuses on indigenous leaders like Sam who are unable to eradicate the effects of colonialism. According to him, the failure of leaders such as Sam—who usurps authority for personal benefit and denigrates the masses—is the reason behind the nation's downfall. He notes in *The Trouble with Nigeria*:

Nigeria's issues stem directly from a lack of effective leadership. Fundamentally, there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian character. Nothing about the land, weather, water, air, or anything else in Nigeria is flawed. The issue facing Nigeria is its leader's reluctance or incapacity to accept accountability and the task of setting a positive personal example, which are qualities of great leadership. Achebe uses Sam's character to mock the local rulers who cause many neo-colonial problems in the country, forcing the educated elite to take the lead in raising national awareness and educating the general public.

Prior to Sam's offer of the Life Presidency, Kangan has a calm and serene existence. But Sam's insatiable desire for power upends Kangan, and Kangan's upheaval highlights the disintegration of African communities in the 1960s. Three of Kangan's four provinces have voted in favor of Sam, while the Abazonians are against his proposition. He orders the closing of "all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area so

that you will know what it means to offend the sun" as retaliation for the Abazonians' hostile stance against him. You will go through so much suffering that you won't need anyone to tell you to say "yes" in your next incarnation, regardless of whether you understand the situation or not (127). Two years later, "a peaceful and goodwill delegation" (16) from Abazon travels to Bassa to visit Sam in an attempt to make up for their error. The Abazonians' submission to Sam is a reflection of both the need to adjust to changes and the futility of the old ways. Sam, though, declines to answer the delegate. He closes himself up inside his presidential mansion, a move symbolic of many in positions of authority who believe that isolation serves only to preserve their prestige. The delegation leader makes fun of his concept of the Life Presidency, stating that "a man is not married to a woman for life, even if he marries her." The marriage will terminate when one of them passes away one day (126). In order to provide future generations with direction, sustenance, and moral support, the delegate has come to share their story of resistance and struggle to checkmate power through the parable of the "tortoise and the leopard." Achebe also draws on the story of Idemili, in which feminine resistance (embodied by Beatrice) checks and restrains power, to highlight his motif of struggle. It is important to acknowledge Achebe's return to storytelling and historical models, which he feels have the power to influence the present and mold the future. One may quote him on this observation:

A writer who feels compelled to make this right cannot avoid the realization that historical accounts must be written, if only for our own education and the benefit of our critics. Because the past, for all its flaws, never lacked dignity, as I have stated...We can't act as though the past was a continuous, vibrant paradise. We must acknowledge that, like the pasts of others, ours had its share of positive and negative aspects.

At the Bassa Maximum Security Prison, Sam arrests the six Abazonian leaders rather than listening to the people's voice. Ikem will get fresh motivation to oppose Sam's military dictatorship, though, as a result of their incarceration. Hence, Sam's cabinet separates from the general public and takes over the position left by the colonizer. The removal of Sam and his cabinet, who were intellectuals and considered "the cream of our society and the hope of the black race" (2), from the masses further exacerbates the socioeconomic ills and casts doubt on the possibility of a social and political renaissance. They serve as catalysts for change, although a negative one, rather than trying to undermine and regain the unpleasant past.

Chris, Ikem, and Beatrice empathize with the people and become involved in their concerns later on, if not initially, while Sam is completely enmeshed in the web of power. Ikem is the first character to feel "the pain of the wound in our soul" and to recognize the corrupt ways of the power-hungry leaders, such as Sam in his nude state. Ikem is a revolutionary and editor for the *National Gazette*. He views himself as the fervent protector of the impoverished and dispossessed, or the less fortunate class and the miserable people of the world, despite the fact that he "had no solid contact with the ordinary people of Kangan" (39). He starts editorial crusades against the military government and joins the masses in their movement because he is unable to stand the excesses of the policies in place. He truly becomes the sole figure to voice opposition to all forms of authority, including social, political, and sexual ones. Because "no man can understand another whose language he does not speak" (and "language" here does not mean simply words, but a man's entire world view), Achebe uses his character to illustrate the role of the writer in the new nation, which is to give "re-education and regeneration," as well as to present the native as subjects or makers of history to present difference, originality, and heterogeneity.

Ikem is suspected of encouraging the delegation because he is an Abazonian. Sam suspends Ikem from his position as editor of the *National Gazette* because he believes he is connected to the Abazon agitators in an effort to curb and counteract Ikem's revolutionary activities through editorials. Ikem becomes aware of the issue his country is currently facing after the six leaders are arrested and a taxi driver he had harassed in a traffic congestion pays him a visit. He truly acquires understanding of the shortcomings of those in authority and concludes that the reason behind the new nation's failure is "the inability of our rulers to restore essential inner connections with the underprivileged and destitute in his nation, with the wounded heart that aches intensely at the center of the nation's existence" (141). Here, Achebe's position is clearly stated. Afterwards, Ikem helps the people of his draught-stricken hometown of Abazon, bridging the gap between the king and the ruled. His attitudes on women likewise change from being patriarchal to being more conventional. As a result, he separates himself from the majority and joins them in realizing that the movement for change needs to be multifaceted and cohesive rather than one-sided. He argues that the oppressive ruling class in Nigeria, not the external threat of colonization, is the root of the country's problems in his lecture "The Tortoise and the Leopard—a political meditation on the imperative of struggle" (153). Ikem's perspective captures the post-colonial situation as a whole. He attacks the elite for allowing governmental corruption to continue while ignoring the demands of the populace. Additionally, he declares that "as a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self examination" (158), rejecting the conventional textbook revolutionary. He suggests that in order to end the social and political

ills, it should be strengthened from within and "re-formed around what it is, its core of reality, not around an intellectual abstraction" (100). In the current context, revolution might be required, but the best way to eradicate the social and political evils of neo-colonialism is through reformation that depends more on experience than theory.

Ikem is later labeled an NTBB (Not to be Broadcast; "anything inconvenient to those in government is NTBB" [Not to be Broadcast] [61]) for his revolutionary efforts and speaking out against the military administration. As a result, he is jailed and then killed. But the government fabricates a report claiming that Ikem is killed in a confrontation. Not even his corpse is given to his buddies to be buried. Ikem does, in fact, fall prey to state persecution. However, he is able to inspire hope in the populace, which motivates them to take action and becomes more explosive in their disobedience. Chris is also changed by Ikem's passing in that he realizes that proactive action is necessary. To strengthen the campaign, Chris leaves his work and goes to a hideout with Immanuel, the President of the University Student's Union of Bassa and Braihmoh, the leader of the taxi driver's union. To open the eyes of the public and also to enable people acquire insight into the faults of the administration, he reveals the genuine tale of Ikem's murder in cold-blood through the media.

Chris, Braimoh, and Emmanuel depart for Abazon in search of protection as well as to honor the martyred Ikem. Chris becomes a member of the masses on the eve of his departure for Abazon as a result of his relationships with the locals, who help him grow up and understand the harsh reality and appalling conditions of the underprivileged. As they are moving from Bassa, a young nurse named Adamma is traveling with them. On the way, Chris is shot dead by a soldier. Chris takes action and becomes a hero instead of being indifferent. His attempt to undermine the brutality of male authority within the neo-colonial setting is indicative of his resistance.

Sam is abducted from his Presidential Palace in Bassa, where the state crisis reaches a climax when he is "shot in the head, tortured, and buried under one foot of soil in the bush" (219). Following Sam's death, the Army Chief of Staff assumes command, and the Director of SRC disappears as well. It's true that anarchy is about to break out throughout the nation: "This is our country, na waa! I had never before heard of the likeness. A whole President de miss; for village gossip, elderly woman de waka call him goat de miss! This is Africa na waa! (213).

To carry on the unfinished task left behind by Ikem and Chris, Achebe employs a woman character, Beatrice, who becomes a harbinger of a new hope to delineate and "appease an embittered history" (220). Through her character, he presents the new enlightened woman who would be the companion to man in this continual historic struggle towards change. Despite her anguish and suffering, Beatrice carries on the struggle. Her home becomes the shelter of Emmanuel, Braimoh and Adamma, members of the common people and a group signifying more varied in class and ethnic origin. In this group, the barriers of class and gender are erased and a new alliance is formed to mould the embittered history around its "core of reality". Indeed, the people, the real victims of the callous system who are sidelined and silenced must be included and made visible for social regeneration and progress because it is only when they voice their depraved and wretched condition that an inclusive vision of a new and enlightened society could emerge. "The group that coheres around Beatrice is to be the catalyst of the future...In this small group, the tendencies to nepotism and corruption which have compromised elite rulers in the past, will presumably be mitigated by the advent of women's salubrious force". Finally, Achebe's vision of a cross-class unity is made visible in the naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa's child, where people from different strata come together to bless the newly born child bridging the wide chasm of ethnic classes and gender differences. It heralds a new beginning disrupting and subverting not only Western tradition but also the African. In naming the child, Beatrice herself takes the role of the patriarch. Truly, she serves as a source of inspiration and passion to re-write as well adapt her culture for a better future. She chooses a boy's name for the girl child and expounds: "AMAECHINA: May-the-path-never-close. Ama for short" (222). Here, Beatrice's "our own version of hope" coincides with Achebe's insistence on the need of "a new set of values—a new frame of reference, a new definition of stranger and enemy" 8 to eradicate the confusion of values which afflicts the new nation and also to explore the human condition. Ikem's vision is further reiterated by Elewa's uncle who unites the hope for Kangan with the future of his niece: May this child be the daughter of all of us...

May these young people here when they make the plans for their world not forget her. And all other children...

May they also remember useless old people like myself and Elewa's mother when they are making their plans...

We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families (228)

The child born in a period of social unrest through the union between a middle class intellectual and an illiterate working class woman thus represents a new brave world and also symbolizes hope for a better future. The toast at the end is to "People and Ideas" (223) and the all-inclusive vision of a new nation is what is evident at the end of the novel: "This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented..." (232). The traditional proverb, "Don't give up, whatever is hot will become cold" (199) substantiates the people's struggle and hope for a better future. Indeed, the story of the people's struggle and resistance will always remain as reminders like the anthills "surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah, about the year's brush fires" (31). Achebe's optimistic and regenerative vision is explicitly stated here.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Achebe constructs an image of women as crucial in the new social and historical context of the post-colonial period and attributes the failure of post-colonial Kangan society, a symbol of Africa in general, to the leaders who distance themselves from the public cause and problems of the masses. In order to stop the assault of authority on human dignity and liberty, he suggests that fight and vigilance are necessary. Additionally, he inspires his compatriots to rebuild a socialist and egalitarian society. Any society's ability to remain cohesive and morally sound depends on the combined efforts of its common men and women. In fact, Africa's true enemy may be defeated by collective awareness and hard work. Therefore, it is up to the enlightened people, who have a strong sense of empathy and a harmonious relationship with the populace, to develop new meanings and values for a brand-new social and political structure. The issue that Kangan is dealing with stems from the marginalization of women and lower socioeconomic classes inside society's mainstream. Men and women alike must be treated as subjects of a new nation in order to heal the ailment and restore the dignity of the country. As a result, Achebe gives the marginalized people heroic streaks, highlighting the fact that the people are the real liberators and saviors. As the story draws to a close, the people take center stage and their significance equals that of the enlightened elite. Reconciliation is made feasible by expanding interpersonal connections across class, gender, and political hierarchies, which rejects the notion of European cultural and political dominance. By learning from the mistakes from the past, the Africans can avoid repetition of those tragedies which have overtaken their societies. Out of the distorted past, the Africans must create a glorious future, not in terms of war and pomp, but in terms of social progress and cultural growth. Achebe thus heralds the coming of a messianic age and the establishment of a worthy place for all citizens.

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