

## ***Class Struggle in Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah***

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### **Abstract**

*Chinua Achebe arose as one of the African's most influential and most admired writer of the post- colonial era. Achebe's reputation originated from his strong achievement in literature especially in novels. His first novel Things Fall Apart examined traditional Igbo society prior to and during the European colonialism. In Arrow of God, the author displayed the same Igbo society as it attempted to accommodate the European system. No Longer At Ease examined the life in Nigeria during the era of national independence when the traditional values of the Igbo society suffered greatly as different cultures met and clashed. His last two novels, A Man of the people and Anthills of the Savannah were mainly concerned with contemporary domestic issues of corruption despotism and military dictatorship in Nigeria. The present paper attempts to highlight the message that Achebe wanted to transmit in one of his novels Anthills of the Savannah. The novel was mainly concerned with the struggle among various social classes in contemporary West African society.*

Achebe's political interest was rooted in the nationalist movement that spread in Africa after years of nationalist protest. Achebe witnessed Nigeria's achievement of independence in 1960, thereafter serving as the first Director of External Broadcasting (Voice of Nigeria) in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. During the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), he served as president of the People Republican Party. In addition to his commitment to political affairs, what inspired Achebe's creative writing was the denigration of Africa and African people in some colonialist writings, such as Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1960). The latter had long been

regarded as a master piece of early twentieth century literature<sup>8</sup>. According to Achebe, the novel was no more than a piece of imperialist writing which examined Africa and Africans from the perspective of the colonizers. In Achebe's own words, it simply “projects the image of Africa as " the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality”.<sup>9</sup>

Achebe used his work to call for an end to oppression and a return to order and

integrity. He combined his role as a storyteller with a sense of responsibility to write with purpose and to instruct his readers. In fact, he considered the role of the African writer to be that of a teacher:

*I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past-with all its imperfections-was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on Gold's behalf delivered them.*<sup>10</sup>

One of the important lessons that Achebe attempted to teach his people was to secure their dignity. In his work Anthills of the Savannah, the ideas stemmed from the perspective of social class. The ruling class of Kangan

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<sup>8</sup> C.L. **Innes**, Chinua Achebe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Chinua **Achebe**, “An Image of Africa”, Research in African Literatures, vol. 9, n° 1, (Spring, 1978), p. 03.

<sup>10</sup>Chinua **Achebe**, “Novelist as a teacher”, in G.D **Killam**, African Writers on African Writings (London: Heinemann, 1973), p.02.

society, representatives of which were his Excellency and his cabinet members functioned as a social elite. Its main objective was to use political power to exploit the oppressed class of the poor for its own interests. As a result, the struggle and conflict among various social classes became evident. The hybrid class of intellectuals – representatives of which were Christopher, Ikem and Beatrice- take on the responsibility of playing a redemptive role in their society. They consciously abandoned their social status as members of the ruling class and aligned themselves with the oppressed class.

In the novel, different social classes were treated. Kangan society, that was the setting of *Anthills of the Savannah*, an imaginary country in West Africa, was divided into two main opposing social classes: the ruling class and ruled oppressed class. The representatives of the former were the president of Kangan, Sam known as his Excellency and his cabinet members. The latter included the work force messengers, taxi drivers and students, and the rural workers, such as peasants and market women. There was a hybrid class of intellectuals who belonged to the ruling class, but it acted as intermediary between the ruling class and the oppressed class. This hybrid class opposed the dictatorship of the ruling class, and adopted reconciliation among various social classes.

His Excellency, Sam, was a military dictator and inept leader, who relied on brute force, hegemony and violence to consolidate his leadership and power. He considered the state machinery as “a private estate -- that ought to be used for the institutionalization of mediocrity, private interest, and above, all materialist pursuits”<sup>11</sup>. His Excellency and his cabinet members were totally alienated from the exploited class. They possessed most of the wealth that ordinary people had produced. They held meetings

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<sup>11</sup> Uzoechi Nwagbara, “Sexist Matters: Power Play and Gendered Space in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*”, *IRWLE*, Vol.6, N° II (July 2010), p. 02.

inside the Council Chamber with the luxury of air-conditioners, whereas ordinary people suffered from the “violent wave of the heat”<sup>12</sup> in the country. The ruling class squandered the national wealth by building the President Retreat at a cost of forty-five million dollars, and its refurnishment was said to be twenty million dollars<sup>13</sup>. It is ironic in a country like Kangan, where poor people did not have access to clean water, shelter or food, the rulers enjoyed such a luxurious life. The main concern of his Excellency and his ministers was to maintain their social status so they could continue even though they had driven away the European colonists, they had stepped into the shoes of their white masters. Viney Kirpal asserted that the ruling class of Kangan was “Completely alienated from the people and insular in their privileges... They love the trappings of power, are weak and bourgeois in their mentality”.<sup>14</sup>

To such an alienated and power-seeking government, people in the province of Abazon said "No" to the proposal of life-long presidency. His Excellency responded immediately by ordering closed all the water bore-holes that were being dug. The Abazon people had brought a petition to his Excellency. The north-western province of Abazon had been in the grip of severe drought for the last two years. Therefore, they asked the leader of Kangan to visit their province and solved their problem. His Excellency hated the masses. He refused to visit them or to listen to their grievances because he was still annoyed with the people in Abazon who did not support him in the referendum for life presidency. Like his former colonial masters, he was more obsessed with

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<sup>12</sup> Chiuna **Achebe**, *Anthills of the Savannah*. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), p. 09.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Viney **Kirpal**, “Anthills of the Savannah: Post-modern or Post-colonial Novel?» In *South Asian Response to Chinua Achebe*. Ed. B. **Lindfors** and I. Bala Kathandaraman. (New Delhi: Prestige, 1993), p.130.

questions, of his own dignity and status, and he was unwilling to identify himself with the people.

Sam, Chris and Ikem were former classmates and friends at Lord Lugard College. They occupied the leading positions in Kangan after a military coup. Sam, now a colonel, became the new president of the military regime in power following a military coup. He insisted on being called 'Your Excellency' and seeking to be elected "president for life". Chris, during the days of the coup his closest advisor became Minister of Information, and Ikem was the outspoken and reform-minded editor of the state-owned National Gazette. The three old friends aimed at constituting effective power within the leadership of Kangan, but they did not. The arrogance and despotism of his Excellency were the cause of disagreement.

His Excellency aimed at keeping his position as the paramount leader of Kangan. Instead of choosing his cabinet members through democratic means, he adopted the policy of despotism by hand-picking twelve intelligent and well educated men to his cabinet of government. However, his deep anxiety derived from the advice of old president Ngongo, who once said "your greatest risk is your boyhood friends, those who grew up with your village, keep them the arm's length and you will live long"<sup>15</sup>. With this advice in mind, Sam found it hard to trust Chris and Ikem, his boyhood friends. Professor Reginald Okong, previously a religious Minister, who now became Minister for Home Affairs, was the person who made his Excellency satisfied. The professor told his Excellency: "Your Excellency is not only our leader but also our teacher... we are always ready to learn"<sup>16</sup>. Professor Okong and many other members cabinet, who supported his Excellency, accused Chris and Ikem groundlessly of disloyalty.

In Anthills of the Savannah, apart from the ruling class, workers and peasants were presented as another social class. It was the class

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<sup>15</sup> Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah, op.cit., p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.18.

of the oppressed that had strongest urge to initiate social changes. It was unwilling to remain oppressed, but would rather choose to fight consciously against the lies, corruption and despotism of the ruling class in order to protect its interests. However, this class had its own limitations. Though it had great potential and fighting spirit, it needed intellectual guidance and inspiration. The hybrid class of intellectuals; representatives of which were Ikem and Chris, was qualified for this social tasks. This hybrid class had to abandon their social status as members of the ruling elite. Furthermore, they needed to immerse themselves in the mass of ordinary people.

Chris and Ikem were members of the hybrid intellectual class. These characters were depicted by Achebe as "Sheer- foil to his Excellency's persona as well as his coteries"<sup>17</sup>. Chris became disillusioned with the bureaucracy and despotism of His Excellency and the government. He realized that the well-educated men or " the cream of our society and the hope of the black race", who actually had a hand in the poor management of the country. Chris did not care too much about the security of his social position as the Minister of Information. He suggested that His Excellency visited people in Abazon, which no ministers in the government dare to do. He even refused to cooperate with the paramount leader who told Chris to issue a letter to suspend Ikem as Editor of the National Gazette. When pressed and threatened, Chris resigned from his post.

Like Chris, Ikem was against the dictatorship of the president. He wrote various articles revealing the bad living conditions of the poor people in Abazon. His editorials were often harsh in their criticism of the new ruling regime, which made Sam regarded him as treacherous. Speaking to a group of students, Ikem discussed the role of the storyteller in depth, insisting that it was "the role of the writer to ask questions and make challenges... writers don't give prescriptions. They give

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<sup>17</sup> Nwagbara, op.cit., p.02.

headaches!”<sup>18</sup>. Ikem was taken in the night by government secret police and killed after being suspended by Sam from his post.

Therefore, by fighting for the interests of the people and against His Excellency and his government, both Chris and Ikem abandoned their social positions. They became conscious about the reality of the people of Kangan when they came into close contact with them. For instance, Chris who lived, as Commissioner for Information, in the comfort of the presidential Palace and his large suite with air-conditioners, heard that large families of the urban poor lived in single windowless rooms. Moreover, he saw the real life of the lower-class people when he was forced to flee Bassa accompanied by Emmanuel Obote, the student leader and Braimoh, the taxi driver<sup>19</sup>. During his hiding, he stayed in Braimoh's home. He shared with his five children one tiny room with frequent assault of mosquitoes and bedbugs. During his hiding also he noticed how lower-class suffered in their everyday lives. He became one member of the lower-class. He wore Braimoh's everyday clothes, spoke pidgin, a common language among this class, but he was ready to speak for the mass of the people. Chris was killed trying to save a girl from being raped by a police officer at a chaotic party.<sup>20</sup>

Like Chris, Ikem devoted his life for the people. As editor of the National Gazette, he spoke in the interest of the people. According to Beatrice<sup>21</sup>, Ikem had “the most profound respect

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<sup>18</sup> **Anthills of the Savannah**. Retrieved from <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-anthillssavannah/>.

<sup>19</sup> After the killing of Ikem, Chris realized how dangerous Sam had become and went into hiding after using his contacts in the international press to publicize the truth about Ikem's murder. Chris was able to escape the capital of Bassa and head for Abazon. Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Beatrice was well educated, having earned a degree with honors in English, from the University of London. She occupied an important civil

for three kinds of women, peasants, market women and intellectual women”<sup>22</sup>. Ikem made an eloquent speech admitting that :

*The women are, of course, the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world... but they are not the only ones- there are others- rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialized countries, black people everywhere including their own continent, ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries.*<sup>23</sup>

Although Ikem had deep sympathy for the lower-class people, he was a class-biased character. For instance, he had contrasting attitudes regarding Elewa and Beatrice. Elewa who belonged to a lower class, was shop sales girl and Ikem's girlfriend. Ikem sent Elewa by taxi to her home at midnight because he could not keep a lower-class woman in his house through the nights. Though semiliterate, Elewa realized that she was exploited by Ikem as a mere sexual object. She said to him “woman done chop sand for dis world...If Ino Kuku bring stupid nyarsh come dump for your bedroom you for de Kick me about like Ibe football”<sup>24</sup> (woman has had a hard

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service position as an administrator in a state office. She was also Chris's fiancée. Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, op.cit., p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.34.



time in this world... Had I not left my vagina at your disposal, you wouldn't have kicked me like a football).<sup>25</sup>

However Ikem's attitude to Beatrice, a well-educated girl of his own social class, was totally different. Beatrice recollected "one of the most humiliating evenings" of her life in London, when her boyfriend abandoned her at a dance in favor of a white girl. She phoned Ikem only for consolation. However, the latter "donned his wool cap and muffles and his coat and headed into the snow and caught the last train in a south-London station well after midnight"<sup>26</sup>. When he finally came to Beatrice's home, it was already half-past three in the morning and Ikem's lips were too frozen to speak"<sup>27</sup>. Beatrice viewed that Ikem was "considerate to a fault, and could go to great lengths to help lady in distress".<sup>28</sup>

In chapter nine, when Ikem met the Abazon delegation and listened to the actual suffering of the lower-class people, he began to change substantially. He realized that

*The prime failure of this government...can't be the massive corruption though its scale and pervasiveness are truly intolerable; it isn't the subservience to foreign manipulation degrading as it is; it isn't even this second-class, hand-me down capitalism, ludicrous and doomed; nor is it the damnable shooting of striking*

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<sup>25</sup> Translated by Ifi Amadinne. "Class and Gender in Anthills of the Savannah: a critique". PAL Platform, 1.1, 1989, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah, op.cit., p.92.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

*railway-workers and demonstrating students and the destruction and banning thereafter of independent unions and cooperatives. It is the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being.*<sup>29</sup>

Thus, after his direct contact with the people, Ikem became conscious. He was ready to eliminate all the important factors that hindered the development of the society, and to identify the true disease of the Kangan society—the failure of the ruling class of Kangan to communicate effectively with the country's citizens. Ikem changed even his attitudes towards Elewa. His sexual union represented reconciliation of the privileged class and the poor lower-class. Their relation gave birth to a child named "Amae China", which meant “may the path never close”.<sup>30</sup> . In Kirpal's words, this name also implied “the utopian vision of oneness between Nigeria's elite and her people”.<sup>31</sup>

The proletariat as a social class was even examined in the novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. Ikem suggested that peasants, workers and students belonged to the category of the proletariat. He pointed out their limitations as a social class. Peasants were powerless in the sense they did have formal education, and

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<sup>29</sup> Amadinne, op.cit., p.141.

<sup>30</sup> *Anthills of the Savannah*. Retrieved from <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-anthillssavannah/>.

<sup>31</sup> Kirpal, op.cit., p.132.

therefore their voices could not be heard by the rulers. To Ikem, workers were often selfish. They « got on strike when outdated and outrageous colonial privileges like motor vehicle advances and allowances are threatened»<sup>32</sup>. To Ikem, these so-called workers were no more than parasites. Thus, he refused to hand over his affairs to “a democratic dictatorship of parasites”<sup>33</sup>. But he suggested new radicalism, the political orientation of those who favored revolutionary change in government and society by looking for the means to combat capitalism and imperialism.

Though his novel, Achebe showed that economic factors had great impact on historical events as well as individuals. Achebe considered the workers as important agents who could bring about social change. However, because of their extravagance in the pursuit of material pleasure, their social status became distorted. In accordance with Marxist theory regarding social class, Achebe, by using Ikem as his spokesman, vehemently proposed that social transformation was necessary to reserve the effects of capitalism. Nevertheless, Achebe's ideas were different from Marxist theory in two ways: firstly, in the criticism of the proletariat as being able to initiate a revolution; and secondly, in the type of revolution he upheld. Therefore, Achebe did not advocate violent action but a lengthy process of reform enabling social transformation. Ikem viewed the role of students, as part of the proletariat, as being also limited. Like the politicians, students bought and sold votes, threatened and kidnapped their opponents. They needed to purify themselves, and clean up their act before they could have the moral authority to lecture the national leadership.

As a part of subjugated or ruled class, women were portrayed in Anthills of the Savannah as being respected and relevant members in contemporary Society. Their social status had been improved substantially compared with that in all of

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<sup>32</sup> Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah, op.cit., p.157.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.160.

Achebe's works before Anthills of the Savannah. There was violence starting with Okonkwo's beating of Ojiugo in Things Fall Apart to other crude and violent treatment of women by men in other works. In Anthills of the Savannah, Achebe envisioned an idea that settled respect for the women as well as recognition of their identity. In relation to this:

*It should be noted that Achebe moves from the peripheral role women assume in the earlier novels to playing a central role in shaping and mediating the realms of power in Anthills of the Savannah... Beatrice is the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of socio-political schema... the portrayal of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of changing the course of female emancipation.<sup>34</sup>*

Beatrice exemplified Achebe's commitment to giving meaning to womanhood as against what traditional values and arrangement offered. Through her actions in the novel, Beatrice renounced the fact that women are restricted to mere another-type role in the society<sup>35</sup>. Beatrice's crusading role began when she described in details her background, personality and relationship with Sam, Chris and Ikem. Notably, she was aware of the duty in her society: "I

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<sup>34</sup> Charles C. **Fonchingong**, "Unbending Gender Narrative in African Literature", Journal of International Women's Studies, 8.1 2006, p.145.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in **Nwagbara**, op.cit., p. 06.

was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every women wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like women's life”.<sup>36</sup>

The western education that Beatrice received enabled her to be far away from the lower-class people. (like Ikem and Chris, Beatrice was burdened with heavy social imperialism). Her alienation from the common people was clearly shown in her relationship with Agatha, her housemaid. It was a master-slave relationship. Instead of kindness and understanding, Beatrice displayed rudeness and meanness towards Agatha. It was after the death of Ikem that Beatrice gradually changed. Beatrice realized that she should be kinder to the poor girl. This fact was significant, according to Kipral: “because for the first time Beatrice consciously attempted to establish contact with a common person... She makes the same contact that Ikem (the intellectual) had made with Elewa”<sup>37</sup>.

The breakdown of class and gender distinction was especially highlighted in the naming ceremony usually presided over by men, but now taken over by the woman Beatrice. By naming Elewa's baby girl Amaechina, a boy's name, Beatrice attempted also at subverting the patriarchal ideology of man domination. Therefore, the women were perceived as subjects, not mere objects in the society. The aim of Achebe in the novel was to foreground women's subversion of man's ideals as well as educating the society about stopping violence directed toward women.

## Conclusion

On the heels of the above, and beyond exploration of corruption, mediocrity and injustice, Achebe identified a

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<sup>36</sup> Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, op.cit., p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Kipral, op.cit., p.133.

"failure of leadership as the foremost policy in his society. Accordingly, Achebe suggested reconciliation among the various social classes in order to readjust and improve human relationship, and especially seek stability of the nation. The ruling class should humble themselves in order to truly understand and care about the oppressed class. On the other hand, the ruled class also needed to make compromises while fighting to survive. Like the Marxist, Achebe acknowledged the incompatibility of social class and the inevitability of conflict and struggle. However, unlike Marxist critics who advocated revolution as a sole prescription for the illness of his society, Achebe recommended reconciliation and dialogue.

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