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The Social Relevance of Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah

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Abstract

Among the works of Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* stands out as a radical approach to a lot of social issues. These issues range from the problem of leadership to the role of women in a society dominated by patriarchy. Many scholars have looked at this novel as a deviation from what "Achebe and sons" are known for, others see it as Achebe's attempt to exonerate himself from the blackmail of anti female writing based on his novels before *Anthills of the Savannah*. This researcher while considering whatever has been said about the novel is poised to explore the social relevance of such novel as *Anthills of the Savannah* which mirrors the beginning to the end of all the chauvinistic approaches to the act of leadership by men with an overwhelming nepotism, greed, and avarice that practically destroyed the gains of the young nation Kangan after their hard earned independence as nation. Notwithstanding that this nation has both human and material resources to sustain the independence and grow all facets as a nation yet the internal heat generated by the leadership personae destroy both the men and all they laboured for. The paper carefully declares that everyone is important in nation building and should be given equal opportunity to develop and participate in the processes of national development. For nation building is all embracing.

Keywords: Literary writer, Women, Nationhood and Social Change.

Introduction

The creative writer of the work of literature may have his intention, which is called intended objective yet, there is conglomeration of meanings which readers, critics and literary scholars make out of the literary piece immediately it leaves the shores of the creative pen and ink of the writer. Wellek and Warren without ambivalence have observed that literature has usually arisen in close connection with particular social institution. In other words, literature has a social function or use which cannot be purely individualized. (94) The literature of a society does not only influence the society it also interpret their actions and inactions, but the literary artist is influenced to a great extent by the society because no literature emanates from a vacuum. This invariably makes the

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works of literature, a tool in the judgment and analysis of the societal actions of the society, because the works of literature are social document. The society supplies the literary raw materials and it is also the first consumer of the literary product as observes by Priscilla Clark in *The comparative method: Sociology and the study literature* (1974) what the literary writer does is to convert the social equation to the literary equation.

Chinua Achebe's career as a novelist is dated from 1958 with the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, this novel unequivocally tells the world that the Africans are not without history or structure when their colonizers came. Kofi Awoonor in his celebrated book *The Breast of the Earth* (1975) sees, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as, "a novel that can be described as having achieved a remarkable assimilation of African and European features. It not only brought into fiction in English an integrated African world, but also achieved the feat of presenting that world in its entirety in an unrelated language" (251). Other novels of Chinua Achebe like: *No longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, and *A Man of the People* are set completely within the African world and society with her complexities as a result the European influences and development within and after colonization. Achebe's interest in his early novels was to recreate out of the despised history of Africa, the story of her dignity and integrity: Achebe acknowledges the same in an interview, on "The Role of the African Writer in a New Nation" published in *Nigeria Magazine* that,

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, they had poetry, and, above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this they must regain. (164)

Among his objectives was to establish the facts of African history perverted by Western documentaries. Achebe tries to set the records straight. Hence he says, "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 Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them"(204).

Anthills of the Savannah otherwise called *Anthills* in this paper is among the works of Chinua Achebe that has attracted as many voices as are shades of views and interpretations to its relevance in African society and the new Nigerian nation in particular. However, each of the views agree that the novel in totality addresses a society in very crucial and critical transformation, hence it is

properly positioned to re-address issues on use and misuse of political authorities, as well as to re-direct priorities in the emerging nation. As David Ker has opined, “in a period of conflict, priorities changes and people tend to reinterpret their lives and roles in new lights” (87). The literary writer captures these changes as well as the reaction the changes elicit on the people. The Social change ranges from political, economical, scientific and others. It may be as a result of society’s response to roles and challenges of new development. In this paper, we are going to assess the social relevance of *Anthills of the Savannah* in the light of the changing times of the post independent Nigerian nation.

African writers of no doubt have been very much influenced by politics, probably because; the African intellectuals are integral part of the political elite (Ker, 83). This is vividly illustrated in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, writings of Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, Semebene Ousmane, T.M Aluko, Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark to mention but a few. Ngugi Wa Thiongo addressing this sense of African writers’ Commitment to social development acknowledges that:

A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. Thus the same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism and even world view. For the writer himself lives in and is shaped by history. (*Home Coming*, 47)

Thus Ngugi maintains that the literary fluid flows across all situations that can be called human conditions. Often time the creative writer creates utopic world in order to convey his message to a chaotic situation.

Chinua Achebe on his own part sees the role of the African writer as that of a social transformer and revolutionary. In his article “the duty and involvement of the African writer” David Ker, is of the view that, “African writers are committed to a new society which will affirm the validity and accord them identity as Africans, as people”. (Ker, 87) Unlike his previous works that criticize the complaisance of the African society *Anthill...* challenges the elites into contributing to the re-building of the new African society. Although Achebe has consistently been of the view that, the writer has a function in his society, that he could and should as a matter of necessity influence and change his society for the better.

The novel *Anthills of the Savannah* is a factual socio-political commentary set on a fictitious nation of Kangan. The story starts with the reader brought into the presidential cabinet of a young but promising independent African nation Kangan. The caliber of the cabinet members and their level of education and exposure in matters of the state and international politics anticipate a great future for the nation in spite of her two years of shaky chaotic existence under a dictator. *Anthills of the Savannah* is a novel with three major characters; the protagonist Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Sam, all these died before the end of the novel. Chris is the head of the Ministry of Information; Ikem is the editor-in-chief of the *National Gazette* a national newspaper, while Sam is the de facto leader, the President of the Republic of Kangan.

In the development of *Anthills of the Savannah*, the three men towered so high in the affairs of the state. They are the planners and implementers of Government decisions. Their prominence in the management and administration of state affairs were so pronounced, that one will hardly differentiate between the affairs of the state and their private affairs. Like the elephant grass of the Savannah they grow above the shrubs, anthills and other vegetation within the threshes of the savannah. But out of mere carelessness, they lost their life to the higgledy-piggledy of the system they created. As Udumukwu has observed, “the death of the three major male protagonists to Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* has been acknowledged as an index to a new vision encapsulated in the novel”. (311)

This is not an ordinary vision, but a sort of rejuvenation, in which the old covering of the society will give way for the emerging new body in which male and female will be part of the building process complementarily. This may seem new in the patriarchy orientated African society which Achebe’s earlier novels reflect. However, careful observation reveals a visionary redirection on the status and role of women in the African polity. *Anthills* showcases an end to all the beclouding political turmoil, greed, avarice and uncultured quest for wealth to the detriment of the state, the effect of misrule, abuses of political privileges in Africa countries and the need for women to step out from their complaisance to active participation in the politics of the nation. These and more stand out to be the social contribution of *Anthills of the Savannah* to the society.

Many critics see Achebe *Anthills of the Savannah* as a deviation from what they know of Achebe. Acholonu in “Outsiders or Insiders Women in *Anthills of the Savannah*” observes a sharp change between the status of the female characters of Chinua Achebe’s earlier novels and the female characters of *Anthills of the Savannah*. She notes that, “in Achebe’s earlier works whether set in

the urban or rural environments, the women are invariably made to wine, be seen and appreciated essentially through their husbands, lovers or children". (312) In *Things Fall Apart*, Ekwefi has no contribution to the guarded and unguarded decisions of Okonkwo, also in *Arrow of Gods* and *Man of the People*, the women are only seen and never heard.

Achebe is not alone in this form of representation of "the Woman" in African novel, but this trend has been noted in the works of T.M Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Cyprian Ekwensi and others classified as Achebe's sons. Cyprian Ekwensi in his bid creates women that are wayward and only good for good time. Awuogu-Maduagwu observes this deviation hence she notes that,

Achebe creates Beatrice, Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance as a strong independent minded and politically empowered Nigerian woman... by creating Beatrice as a woman who has 'an honours degree from Queen Mary college University of London in *Anthills* Achebe launches projects vision of women's role as Beatrice gives Ikem greater understanding into feminist ideology of femaleness(66)

Although Ezenwa-Ohaeto's research has proved that these authors are influenced by Chinua Achebe (107). Nevertheless, *Anthills of the Savannah* reveals a sharp change in Achebe's Woman. This new social and political roles and recognitions given to the woman is a reflection of change in the society which as well affect the writers and their literary production. Ezenwa-Ohaeto acknowledges that Achebe shares a vision in which he believes that;

Literature, whether hand down by word of mouth or in mint, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life, and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts, a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within our problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us. (248)

In *Anthills*, Beatrice and Elewa are the major female characters. Beatrice the heroine is a replica of genius with brain and beauty. In addition to the above, she possesses such courage and clear vision, and sensibility needed to interpret the time as well as take the most appropriate actions as required. Elewa on her part even though without Western education possesses the astute and solid sensibility of a traditionally made woman. She does not show any deformity in intelligence and

sense of focus even without Western influences. These women combined show the new image and challenge of the African woman in the emerging African society. The most important aspect is that, they complement themselves as they work out solutions to the problems of their environment.

Awuogu-Maduagwu maintains that, "By breaking with tradition, Beatrice action suggests a new beginning, symbolizing a subversion of western and African traditions Beatrice leads the change, forcing the others to adapt with what is present". (66) This can be illustrated with the imagery created by the demise of the men via their greed and domineering avarice. Which can be likened to the wide fire that devoured the savannah, these women like the anthills stand out to be the ones left to warn and fore warn the upcoming grasses and trees with the fate and experiences of their predecessors. The men also acknowledge the new status of the women. Chris adores Beatrice thus: "Beatrice is a perfect embodiment of my ideal woman; beautiful without being glamorous, peaceful but very strong, very very strong I love her and will go at whatever pace she dictates" (64). Acholonu has also noted that, in all the relationship, Elewa in spite of her background presents herself as an intelligent, solid and sensible woman who takes great delight in her role as a man's comforter and source of pleasure (313).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Asuzu build the emphasis on the transformation of Beatrice from a silence heroine to the major hero of the novel, they opine that;

Beatrice is portrayed as the most dominant female character in the novel. Unlike Achebe's novels, Beatrice role and relevance becomes increasingly pronounced as the action progresses. Indeed, from the moment of Ikem's murder and Chris's going into hiding, Beatrice takes centre-stage and dictates the pace of action which is sustained even after the death of Chris. Beatrice though, a heroine, was not at the fore of event when Chris and Ikem were at the scene. She did not function until Chris and Ikem were no more in the scene. Achebe silenced his hero. (30)

The two women in the novel are transformed from the state of complaisance to active major role in the entire polity. Their social values and relevance to the society increase with the unfolding of events in the development of the novel. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, and Asuzu maintain that:

By her role and conduct, Beatrice becomes a champion of feminism and women's liberation. This is brought about by her solitary nature and independence of mind

which are attributes cultivated from childhood. Furthermore, Beatrice demonstrates a prophetic insight into future events and is now and again referred to as a 'priestess' (pp.114 & 116) with a 'goddessy' personality (p.199). The author at the end made his heroine play demeaning role but Beatrice remains firm in her conviction that women should not be limited to such capacities (30).

The climax of this, is societal change and change in the status of women which is clearly pronounced at the birth of Elewa's child, Beatrice and Elewa take it upon themselves to play the roles traditional reserved for the men. At the naming ceremony of the baby, haven waited so long for the invited elders from the village to no avail, and it is obvious that the baby must have a name; Beatrice assumed the position of both the man, the father and the elder and echoes thus:

In our traditional society, resumed Beatrice, the father named the child. But the man who should have done it today is absent... stop that sniffing, Elewa! The man is not here although I know he is floating around us now, watching with that small-boy smile of his. I am used to teasing him and I will tease him now. What does a man know about a child anyway that he should presume to give it a name... (222).

Another important message in this episode is the name given to the baby girl: "May the path never close" this name traditionally is made for male child, but they gave it to the child, who is female. This can simply be interpreted as whether man or woman who so ever is available should not allow the path to be close. The change which *Anthills* prophesy does not only consider the part but it affects the status of the woman. This also is an interpretation to the waves of change in the entire era, especially in the Igbo society. It is the herald of awareness to the wind of change and the prevailing circumstance which the society in question must prepare to adapt to or be swept off by it. In this vein, the writer is an interpreter of events, a watchman and a prophet to the society and it is only in the stool of creative writing does the writer harnesses his relevance to his society irrespective of the generation.

In addition, *Anthills* as a novel of social changes weighs the new African nations in the midst of her political quagmires, and shows both the key players and observers the end point of them all. It is a visionary novel that reveals the end of all the political turmoil of the post independence. Elewa's uncle summarizes it thus: "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). Interpreting this saying Abdul, Emmanuel puts it thus; “I say there is too much fighting in Kangan, too much killing. But fighting will not begin unless there is first a thrusting of finger into eyes, anybody who wants to outlaw fighting must first outlaw the provocation of finger thrust into eyes” (228). The above statement is both a fore warning and an explanation to the various political violence and unrest in the post independence Africa. The novelist is not only a preacher of goodness, but also an interpreter of the events in the society so that each player will evaluate his roles. Beatrice before the crisis foretells the situation. She notes:

This letter here and all this new theatre of the absurd that Sam is directing to get rid of me and to intimidate Chris, what's it in aid of? Diversion, pure and simple. Even the danger I see looming ahead when the play gets out of hand, what has any of this to do with the life and the concerns and the reality of ninety-nine percent of the people of Kangan? Nothing whatsoever (146).

Hence she emphatically says, “Well, I still think that if you and Chris had listened to me and stopped your running battles as you call them earlier enough, he would not now be trying to disgrace you” (147).

One important aspect of literature is that, it grants man the opportunity to watch the theatre in which he is an actor and to view his life in the mirror. The clashes of ego and quest for power to the detriment of the masses have been noted among the destroying elements of the post independence Africa. In most cases it has emptied into a civil war in which many innocent lives and properties have been lost. Achebe in “The Novelist as Teacher” echoes.

The writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all-as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his *African Image*-the sensitive point of his community-perhaps what I write applied to art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. (162)

Anthills of the Savannah like other novels of Achebe educates and regenerates the new African leaders on the way and manner to pilot the national affairs or otherwise earn the fate of Sam, Chris and Ikem, who carelessly destroyed themselves. This goes a long way to show the effect of misrule and abuse of political privileges which cannot be overemphasized as an essential contribution of

Anthills... to African Society. Ogungbesan's article, "The Modern Writer and Commitment" notes that, "the literary artists, having worked together with the politician to create the new nation, cannot completely resign the direction of that nation to the hands of the politician" (10).

The African society immediately after independence was hijacked by politicians whose interests are only in looting the wealth of the nations at all cost. Wilfred Carty in *Whispers from a Continent: the Interactive of Contemporary Black Africa* notes that,

Those who enter politics do so mainly out of self-interests. Those who actively comment on the political scene, the journalists are also clearly seeking their interests in their manner of reporting political incidents. The mass of the people who are caught in the turbulence of politics are easily swayed and are easily erupt into violence action. The press is resented but has to be still by bribery (160).

In the midst of these, it is the literary writer without bias that has the privileged to set the equation straight. Wastberg in "The Writer in Modern Africa" maintains that;

When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon. But there can be no further distractions with universal concerns whose balm is spread on abstract wounds, not on the gaping yaw of black inhumanity. A concern with culture strengthens society, but not a concern with mythology. The artist has always functioned in African Society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself (21).

Furthermore, the disastrous effect of greed, avarice and misuse or abuse of political privileges has become the order of post independent Africa. The saying goes that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Corruption has remained a canker worm in the politics and affairs of African society, but this can be guarded against to some extent. But where it is otherwise, the consequence is not only hazardous but is capable of ruining a nation, and destroying their elite, and possible talents. This is an important aspect to note in the overall message and development of *Anthills* both as a post colonial African novel and as Achebe's contribution in the consolidation of the post independence governance. The unguarded political wild fire ended up swallowing the

finest of the society's talent in politics. In *Anthills* brains and talents like Chris, Sam and Ikem unconsciously raise the wild fire that burned them in the nation they supposed to build up to greatness. *Anthills...* is a veritable and handy tool in the analysis of the attitude and social situation of the post independence society of most African nation. It carries with it all the facets of the emerging social structures and polity, thus addresses the ambitions and the complaints of the African post colonial society.

Most important in *Anthills* is that all the characters get as much repercussion as they bargain, they reap what they sow, thus revealing the price for human actions in the society as a warning to both those that intend to join and those who are already in the business of exploiting their society with unguarded quest for wealth as a pointer. Chris, Ikem and Sam found themselves at the helm of governmental affairs and in the bid to aggrandize their selfish interest over and above the interest of the people and the common good, they ended up destroying themselves.

In conclusion, literature at any instance mirrors the society's changes, it can interpretatively expose the extends of decay a nation has gone as well as predict the possible end points to all the human struggles. Literature creates occasions that replicate the human society in order to forecast the future and reveal the end of each line of action, anyone subscribes to in the society. The literature of any society like a town carrier and watchman, fore warns the inmates of the possible dangers of their actions, as well as redirects them to the part of virtues. Chinua Achebe in *Anthills* carefully replicates the end of the political crisis in the Kangan nation, the need to in-corporate women in the national affairs and the gains of peaceful co-existence and tolerance in the emerging post colonial nation and others. These and more has *Anthills of the Savannah* taken time to contribute to be socially relevant to the society that produced it and any other that receives it.

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